

*M*MAGIC
WITHOUT
MIRRORS
THE MAKING OF A MAGICIAN
DAVID CONWAY

FOR
P. J. K

*"Gwisgir fi mewn amdo purwyn
Cyn y peidiaf garu Rhywun."*

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FOREWORD

One little book changed my life. Writing it was easy but finding a suitable title was not. In the end I settled for *Magic: an occult primer*, not because I particularly liked it, but because I could think of nothing better.

The book appeared in 1972, within a few days of my birthday, and I was not yet thirty when I finished it, something commented on by several reviewers. Despite having done lots of other things since then, I am known even today as the man who wrote *Magic: an occult primer*. Indeed, many people overlook the intervening years and still refer to the *young* man who wrote *Magic: an occult primer*. That always makes me feel better about the rather awkward title.

A review in the *Sunday Telegraph* predicted I would become a cult figure among the young. I had not reckoned on that. My only aim was to promote the cause of magic – real magic, that is, rather than the smoke and mirrors kind – by showing how its practice was compatible with common sense and reason. In those halcyon days, our minds filled with loving thoughts and gently fuelled by dope, there was much talk about occultism, most of it ill informed, with astrology, runes, tarot cards and crystals as popular as the long hair, flowered shirts and flared trousers, not to mention the patchouli, I used to wear to go to work each day, one of Her Majesty's less conventional Civil Servants. What information there was on magic tended to be vague and often strangely coy, with authors, perhaps eager to conceal their ignorance, hinting at secrets impossible to divulge to the uninitiated. Sadly, they admitted this only after you'd spent a fiver on the book and waded through page after page of cumbersome prose. People deserved something better. Magic deserved something better.

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The result was *Magic: an occult primer*, a title changed some twenty years later to *The Complete Magician* when a new paperback edition appeared, though the new title never caught on. From the outset my aim was both to provide helpful information to people already committed to magic and to persuade sceptical readers that magic made sense. I also hoped to show that magicians, myself included, were neither mad nor bad, even if there had been notable exceptions in the past. The subsequent reviews allowed me to hope I'd succeeded.

What was altogether new was the practical advice on offer, something rarely, if ever, found in popular books on the topic, which is odd because magic is nothing if not practical. I may have been right therefore to include the word "primer" in the book's title for that is precisely what it was. (One reviewer compared it to a manual in the popular Teach Yourself series.) At the heart of the book were two complete rituals, one based on the Kabbalah and the other Egyptian, as well as full and detailed instructions on how to set about performing them. This enabled any reader willing to invest the necessary time and effort, to try his or her hand at magic. And many of them did. Within a week of the book's publication scores of letters reached me from people who reported with delight (and sometimes incredulity) that this or that had worked for them. The editor of a famous magazine even confessed that after using one of the oils mentioned in the Appendix, she and her partner had enjoyed sex that was – in every sense – out of this world. Sadly, I never asked her which of the several oils listed they had used.

By then I was probably too busy enjoying my new celebrity. There were television appearances and radio interviews, several with Jack de Manio, a well-known broadcaster who liked having me on his afternoon show because I prattled on effortlessly while he had a snooze, the effect of too much wine at lunchtime. An American television network even turned up once to film me in a derelict graveyard, the setting presumably chosen because of a perceived connection between tombstones and magic, the black sort in particular. (The fee persuaded me to stifle my objections.) And then there were the press interviews, so frequent that back home in Wales my mother spent hours pasting cuttings in a smart new album she had bought for that purpose. Her one complaint was that I looked scruffy in most of the photographs.

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For a long time I remained flattered, even dazzled, by the limelight, my only grumble being that Maxine and Alex Sanders, at the time witchcraft's most glamorous couple, sometimes edged me out of it. (Even magicians are human, especially when they've only just turned thirty.) What eventually coaxed me away from its glow was a move to the Foreign Office and the chance to live abroad. ("With full diplomatic status" I was assured when offered the post.) It did not take me long to work out that as First Secretary in Brussels my daily meal allowance would be three times what the BBC paid me for spouting nonsense – and by then it was little more than that – into a microphone while Jack de Manio enjoyed his forty winks. Even cult figures need to eat.

What I did not realise until recently was that after my departure abroad, *Magic: an occult primer* continued to influence people keen on magic, as well as arouse the interest of others who had never previously given it much thought. Only when I chanced one day to type "David Conway" and "Magic" into Google, did I realise how popular the book had become. I was more touched than flattered, especially as many contributors spoke of it with evident affection. (I noted, too, that American Evangelicals quoted extensively, almost lasciviously, from parts of it.) "What happened to David Conway?" was a question often asked. "He died", was the answer just as often given.

Not true, happily, and the present book is proof of it, written not merely to confirm my survival but also to pick up where I left off after the final sentence of *Magic: an occult primer* was penned one October afternoon on a cold and empty Spanish beach. (A sudden squall later blew the pages away, forcing me to race off after them, pursued by wild dogs and forlorn cries of "Helados" from an ice-cream salesman desperate for custom.) The fact is of course that the magic in my life did not end when the book appeared almost forty years ago, any more than it started with its appearance. It has been with me all the time, but I hitherto chose to keep the story to myself. Now, with my days of flowered shirts and patchouli long past – happily, I still have my hair, albeit greying at the temples – the time seems right to put it down on paper, enabling a new generation of readers, as well as those who once read and, I hope, enjoyed *Magic an occult primer*, to discover what went into the making of it and into the making of its author. While this book is by no means a primer, I hope that it, too, will inform as well as entertain. It is the story of my life, magical and otherwise – though in reality both have

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always been one and the same.

Finally, what I do need to stress is that nothing you will read here is imagined or invented. "All is true", proclaimed the French writer Honoré de Balzac – in English – at the start of one of his best-known works, though as the book in question was a novel, then clearly all was *not* true. (By pretending otherwise, even in jest, the author doubtless hoped to make the story seem more credible.) Because much of what follows may beggar belief, I had better imitate Balzac and declare formally that everything you are about to read is true. By this I mean that the events described did happen and that the people mentioned were (and in some cases still are) every bit as real as you and me. I am not sure which is the greater challenge, to attempt what Balzac did and make fiction take on the appearance of fact or, as I must do, prevent fact from reading like fiction, the task made more difficult because the type of fiction my story resembles is not the sort that imitates life, at least not life as most people know it, but something more fanciful and seemingly far fetched.

By promising that all is true, I hope to keep your disbelief at bay long enough to persuade you I am neither deluded nor dishonest. Sadly many of those engaged in occultism have in the past been one or the other, at times even both, but then so have people involved in most other types of activity, no matter how respectable, the only difference being that when occultists go wrong they do so more spectacularly or at least with more panache than anybody else. (Only religion offers serious competition, with false prophets generally more fun than fraudulent mediums, even if both cause equal damage to those who put their trust in them.) Anyway, so far as honesty is concerned, I am willing to place my right hand on whatever book of spells you suggest or even on the collected works of Madame Blavatsky and swear that what you are about to read is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but that. What I cannot guarantee is that I am not deluded. It is something I am not equipped to decide. Only you can do that.

And even you may get it wrong.

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There are pretty babies and then there are the rest of us.

“Are you sure that’s mine?” my father is alleged to have asked the midwife when permitted to see me shortly after my birth, to the understandable annoyance of my mother. Fortunately within weeks his paternity could no longer be doubted for my ears stuck out with the same proud defiance as his own, though a piece of sticking plaster behind each soon taught them better manners. (A threepenny-bit and a piece of bandage did much the same thing for a rebellious belly button.) Whatever my shortcomings, the wonder was that I had turned up in person to exhibit them, for as my mother told anyone stopping to admire me – and she defied people not to – as she wheeled me down Aberystwyth promenade in my pram, she had lost no fewer than six previous babies.

“All of them boys” she would add.

When I grew older she explained that this made me a seventh child. Better still, thanks to six older siblings of her own, I was the seventh child of a seventh child so I must have second-sight.

The news was unwelcome. Apart from doubting whether six miscarriages really count, I never relished the notion of being different from everybody else. My mother, however, maintained that I was. So did her friend Mrs. Caradoc Evans, an expert in matters of this kind.

“Of course he’s got second sight,” insisted Mrs. Evans. As for my six unborn brothers, these were thriving in the spirit world despite never having drawn a breath in this one. She had once seen two infants just like them in the arms of a Scottish medium named Mrs. Duncan, and though made

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of ectoplasm, both were indisputably alive. In fact the tiny mites never stopped bawling their lungs out. It struck me afterwards that Mrs Duncan must be terribly psychic, seventh child or not, to produce, miracles of this kind. According to Mrs. Evans, she could extrude – no one enquired how or from where – such quantities of ectoplasm that hordes of dead people took on form and substance in her presence, all every bit as real as they had been in the flesh. She also extruded pet rabbits and a parrot that answered to the name of Bronco.



Ears in Place: the author at four months

There was something ectoplasmic about Mrs. Evans as well. She did not so much wear clothes as envelop herself in yards of taffeta and silk, over which hung diaphanous layers of pastel coloured chiffon. These multi-coloured draperies, like her dainty silver sandals and the rings on every finger, brought to mind some gaudy tropical bird blown off course by the wind and dumped among us dowdy sparrows. Rather like Bronco in fact. Meanwhile bracelets crawled sinuously up her bare arms, while beneath her generous chin hung row upon row of shiny coloured beads. Had it not been for a large floppy hat, black but enlivened with brooches and worn “to hide her grey roots”, claimed my mother, she might have stepped out of a

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painting by Alma Tadema, part Roman matron and, with her nut-brown arms and bangles, part Nubian slave.

Before marriage turned her into plain Mrs. Evans, she had been known as Countess Barcynska. The name suited her better. It may be why she still used it when writing the romantic novels for which she was famous. Her late husband, too, had been a writer, though much disliked in his native Wales because of the unpleasantness of his characters and the robustness of his language. "Pestilential" was the epithet applied to his best-known novel, *My People*, though my father rather liked his short stories and it was a supportive letter sent after publication of a book called *Pilgrims in a Foreign Land*, which had led to their acquaintance. After the author's death in 1945 his widow took to calling on us often.



Countess Barcynska (1886-1964)

The Aberystwyth I grew up in was a cheerless place. Not that this deterred the local guidebook, obtainable from the Town Hall in return for a large stamped-addressed envelope, from calling it "Queen of the Welsh Riviera". Other resorts along the coast were understandably miffed on account of it and Llandudno, not to be outdone, promptly dubbed itself "The Naples of the North".

To be fair, the seafront was not unattractive. It curved pleasantly enough, though the beach it curved around was composed entirely of shingle. At

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one end stood Constitution Hill, a rocky outcrop whose summit was accessible by funicular railway, while at the other rose a greener elevation known as Pen Dinas, a prehistoric hill fort crowned by a structure resembling a factory chimney but meant to represent the upturned barrel of a canon. Erected to commemorate the Duke of Wellington's triumph at Waterloo, the intention had been to top it with a likeness of the Iron Duke seated on his charger but the statue got lost at sea while being shipped from Italy, and the local squire who commissioned it never got around to ordering a replacement.

Even as a boy the town struck me as gloomy, at least on all but the sunniest of days. The ubiquitous grey stone and slate were probably to blame, they and the many non-Conformist chapels. People said the chapels outnumbered the public houses – and there was no shortage of either – which for the pious meant the Devil, though a force still to be reckoned with, had not yet gained the upper hand. Throughout the nineteen-fifties the influence of the chapels remained strong, certainly strong enough to see off every secular challenge. It was this, I remember, that forced the Principal of the University to quit both his job and the town when I was a boy. Already suspect on account of his fondness for strong drink, suede shoes and an extravagant camel hair coat, what did for him in the end was a series of articles he wrote for a Sunday newspaper about his friendship with the spies Burgess and MacLean, newly defected to Moscow. Worse, one of these, Guy Burgess, had been a homosexual. Aberystwyth had a thing about unnatural vice.

To fit in you had to conform. That is why I resented being told I was psychic. It made me different. Only later did I realise it didn't matter. By then I didn't even want to fit in.

By then, too, I was reconciled to the thought that there might be some truth in what my mother kept saying. Not in all that seventh child rubbish but in the possibility, and to me it was never more than that, of having access under certain conditions to information outside my normal empirical experience. The first sign of it came just after my fourth birthday.

What happened was that every night after my mother had put me to bed, tucked me in and gone downstairs, two elderly ladies would appear in the room beside me. There was nothing remotely sinister about them. On the

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contrary they seemed as real as anybody else, far more real, I suspect, than Mrs. Duncan's materialisations. The one was tall, dressed in a long navy-blue skirt and cream coloured blouse, with a cameo brooch at her throat, her grey hair tied severely back in a bun. The other was a great deal shorter, her eyes were livelier and her hair was whiter and more wavy. She, too, wore a similar brooch. To begin with, the taller one would stand back a little, while her companion made a big show of nodding and smiling and blowing kisses in my direction. She seemed to be the nicer by far.

Over successive nights I took in more about them, noting small differences between the two brooches, at first glance identical, as well as the incongruous black hairpins the shorter woman used, to keep her white hair tidy. Their old-fashioned clothes looked a bit odd but that worried me less than it might have done as an elderly aunt of my mother's lived with us and dressed in much the same way. For that reason long skirts and high-necked blouses with lace cuffs and leg-of-mutton sleeves caused me no undue surprise.

Had my two visitors left it at that I might have dropped off to sleep. I might even have consented to greet them by the silly names they pressed me to address them by. But their interest in me did not finish there. At some point – and I soon came to dread it – one of them, usually the taller of the pair, would lean over and tickle me. I know that sounds harmless enough but to me it was nothing of the sort. Every evening without fail, thin, bony fingers reached down and began the same relentless tickling while I, powerless to stop it, thrashed about in my bed. Throughout it all their expression stayed blank, disconcertingly so, with no hint of a smirk or a scowl, just a mindless, unflinching resolve. Apparently my screams could be heard outside in the street.

Night after night my parents, usually my mother, would try to persuade me it was all a bad dream. I was urged to say my prayers all over again and put the whole thing out of my head. When I insisted I had not been asleep, that I *had* seen, while fully awake, two elderly women standing in the room, she would assure me there was no one, opening the wardrobe door to show it contained only clothes (as if I expected anything else) and having me look under the bed to satisfy myself there was nothing there either except my slippers, a few toys and a potty.

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Some weeks later she took me to see old Dr. Ellis. Her confidence in him knew no bounds. It was he who had ended the succession of miscarriages, ensuring my safe arrival in the world, by prescribing a new drug named Antuitrin S, as I would discover fifty years later when I came across a leaflet among my mother's papers, addressed "To the Medical Profession" and describing how the treatment worked.

"You say they talk to you?"

I told him they did. I also went on to describe their clothes, the cameo brooches, the mismatched hairpins and, new to my mother, the tendency of one woman, the taller of the two, to smother an intermittent cough with the back of her hand. I even provided him with their names, as well as the diminutives, preceded by "Auntie", they encouraged me to use.

When I finished, Dr. Ellis asked the nurse to take me outside while he had a word with my mother. That night, on his recommendation, my bed was moved to another room and the mischief never recurred. Within days I lost all fear that my tormentors might return, but I never forgot them.

Several years were to pass before my mother disclosed what Dr. Ellis told her after I left the room. It seems that a long time earlier, at the start of his professional life, he had attended two patients in what was now our house, elderly sisters long since dead. Not only had I described them in remarkable detail – the hair, the clothes, even the consumptive cough the older woman had – but had also given him their names and the pet names each used for the other. A mystery, Dr. Ellis said it was, but to the tall, well-built man who called at our house shortly after this episode, it was nothing of the sort.

Himself a doctor, Thomas Penry Evans had got to know my father through a friend they had in common, an elderly sheep farmer who would later play an important part in my life. What united Dr. Evans and my father was a fondness for music, red-and-white Springer spaniels and a family connection to Llanelli, the only industrial town in Wales where our native language is still widely spoken. With him when he came to visit us was his wife, Ann, a jolly, down-to-earth woman. I still have the mug depicting one of the seven dwarves, "Happy", I think it was, that she gave me to keep my toothbrush in.

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By one of those coincidences that mean much to the people they affect but, as statisticians remind us, are in fact unremarkable, my mother's parents had known those of Dr. Evans' first wife. The two families then lived in Llandudno, though at opposite end of the bay, and it was there that Violet Evans (née Firth) was born in 1890. At the time her father ran, possibly owned, the most prestigious hotel on the seafront, the Craigside Hydro, though his roots lay in Yorkshire. Based in Sheffield, the Firths were among the most important steel producers in the land, it being said that by the mid-nineteenth century every piece of artillery used by the British Army was manufactured by them. Recently I noticed that several of the knives in my kitchen drawer at home still bear the words "Firth Stainless" on the blade.

If Arthur Firth could boast – and by all accounts he frequently did – of being one of the Firths of Sheffield, then my grandmother could match him by proclaiming her kinship with the Wilsons of Hull. Such things meant a lot in those days. Her mother had been the sister or, possibly, niece of Thomas Wilson who made his fortune in the shipping industry. Owner of his first vessel at the age of twenty-seven, he soon went on to acquire a fleet of them, profiting from the boom in trade between Britain and the rest of the world that followed the Industrial Revolution. At the end of the century the Wilson Line comprised no fewer than one hundred steamers, making it by far the largest private shipping company of its day, though by then the business had passed to two of his sons – he had fifteen children in all – who built considerably on their father's success. My great-grandmother called her first son Arthur after the younger of them.

She met her future husband, a sea captain, when his ship docked in Hull. Born and bred in North Wales, my great-grandfather, Robert Jones had also owned ships but in his case never more than two or three at a time and these more sloop than steamer. Perhaps that is why the wedding took place, not with great pomp in Sheffield but quietly in Pwllheli, with official records giving the bride's address as one of the local hotels. According to family legend, the bridegroom spoke no English at the time of the marriage and his wife, less improbably, not a single word of Welsh.

I have heard it said that the Wilsons, particularly Arthur, sent the couple money from time to time. They could certainly afford it. Unlike his older

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brother, committed to good works and Liberal politics, having served briefly as a Member of Parliament before being given a peerage, Arthur's chief ambition was to be accepted by the landed gentry of his native Yorkshire. To that end he purchased over 3000 acres of land, built himself a grand house, and got appointed Master of the Holderness Hunt. It was a measure of his success that in 1890 the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, consented to stay at his home, Tranby Croft, during the St. Leger week at Doncaster Races and it was here, after a late-night game of baccarat, that one of the royal party, Lieutenant-Colonel Gordon-Cumming, who listed Charlemagne among his forbears, was accused of cheating. Despite attempts to hush up the scandal, news of it spread quickly to London, obliging Gordon-Cumming to take his accusers to Court in an attempt to retrieve his good name. The subsequent trial, at which the Prince of Wales was called to testify, drew widespread attention and was excitedly reported in the national press. In the event Gordon-Cumming lost the case. His honour irreparably damaged, he spent the remainder of his life, some forty years of it, ostracised by polite society, dying in 1930 at his home in Scotland. Two generations later amends were discreetly made by Buckingham Palace, lending credence to my grandmother's claim that Gordon-Cumming was innocent all along, the real culprit being none other than the future king himself.

The Firth family motto was *Deo, et non fortuna*. (I am not certain the Wilsons ever had one.) It was to provide Violet Firth with her pseudonym, Dion Fortune, when she began writing the books for which she is revered in occult circles up to this day. It was also the name she adopted for the practice of magic, real magic, that is, in which supernatural forces are evoked and made subservient to the will of the practitioner. Throughout their twelve-year marriage her partner in the rituals she performed was Thomas Penry Evans, referred to by her and by others, but not in his hearing, as Merl, short for Merlin. Looking at him and hearing him talk to my father about gun dogs or the nutritional value of soya, another of his interests, one would never have associated him with the court of King Arthur. My parents never did. Neither, I suspect, did the second Mrs. Evans.

Dion Fortune has defined magic as "the art of causing changes to occur in consciousness". It does not tell us a great deal. After all, changes in consciousness can be brought about by other means, among them drugs, meditation and fasting, none of which requires us to put on fancy dress

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and evoke a crowd of pagan deities. A few gin and tonics do the trick for me. Moreover changes in consciousness have no impact on the world about us, only on the way we perceive it. Yet magic, if it means anything at all, is ultimately about objective results, not altered mental states. Even the magic performed by “Professor” Humo on Aberystwyth bandstand during the summer months could rustle up a rabbit from a seemingly empty top hat. Its arrival had no evident cause, even if we five-year-olds guessed it had been there all along, so the end-result was magical, while our state of consciousness remained intact throughout.



Mr and Mrs Penry Evans
(Dion Fortune and “Merl”)

A better definition of magic – he called it magick to distinguish it from Professor Humo’s sort – was offered by the notorious Aleister Crowley. According to him it is the art of causing change to occur in accordance with the will. And by “change” he meant more than a state of awareness different from our normal one. Rumour has it, by the way, that he and Dion Fortune once performed an act of sex magic together, though what it was or what changes it produced is not known. The rumour was no doubt mischievous and started by Crowley himself.

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For Dr. Ellis my encounter with the two old ladies was a mystery. For Dr. Penry Evans it was closer to the realm of magic, involving, as it did, a change in consciousness like the changes referred to by his first spouse. (Had there been any “art” involved it would have fitted her definition even better.) This change had made me aware of something outside the material reality in which my mind normally functioned.

With the matter-of-factness he showed when discussing the breed standard for Welsh Springer Spaniels, he went on to explain how reality was more, far more, than what we routinely perceive. It was presumptuous on our part to think otherwise. According to him, the smallest components of matter – molecular physics have in the meantime partly confirmed it – straddle a frontier between the spatial-temporal world we occupy and another, no less real, in which neither space nor time exists. The latter is not only beyond our understanding but beyond our imagining as well, nourished as our imagination is, by the four dimensional environment we occupy. Only by analogy can we attempt to grasp what lies outside it since, though manifestly different, the two are essentially related, being but parts of a single whole. It is this unity and, more particularly, the subtle relationships among its constituent elements, that magic attempts to exploit. In words attributed to the legendary Hermes Trismegistus, linked by the Neoplatonists to the Egyptian god, Thoth, and said to be the author of over two thousand books on the principles of Nature: “that which is above, is like that which is below, to perpetrate the miracles of the One thing.”

As for my two old ladies, these were but a tiny fragment of the world’s collective memory, a relic of the impact they once made on the reality they occupied and, by their presence, helped to shape. Some experts refer to this as the akashic record, alleging that it contains the “echo” of every past event since the universe was formed. (In Hinduism *akasha*, subtlest of the five elements, means all-pervading space and, significantly, is linked to our sense of hearing.) As a five year-old, my mind still free from those “shades of the prison house” that deny our adult selves any awareness of realities other than the most immediate ones, I had somehow glimpsed a memory trace of the former occupants of my bedroom and in doing so subjectively invested them with life.

“But the tickling?” I asked my father years later on learning what Dr. Ev-

ans had told him.

That, too, was subjective. The appearance of two strangers and a suspicion, though unacknowledged, that neither might be what she seemed, had given me goose flesh. And the prickly feeling accompanying it then made me imagine that my visitors were tickling me. In other words I unwittingly created the scenario and became the author of my subsequent distress.

“He’s a seventh child.” my mother had reminded Dr. Evans, “In fact he’s the seventh child of a seventh child.”

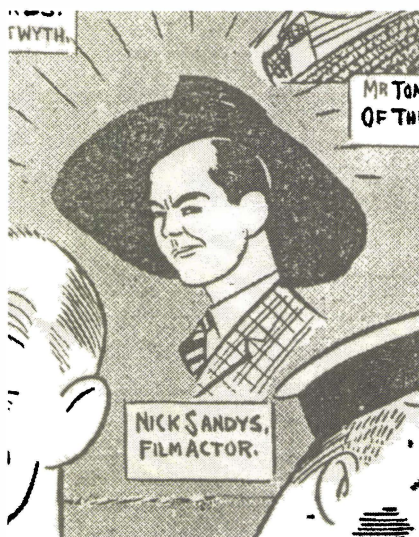
“This boy will end up a magician,” he predicted.

That must have gone down badly. Second sight I might have, but in terms of a career she had something more respectable in mind, a doctor perhaps or a lawyer, at a pinch even a teacher. Neither can his wife have been too pleased. Talk of magic was a reminder of her predecessor, the first Mrs. Evans, Priestess of Isis and, some claimed, a reincarnation of Morgan le Fay. It was not easy to compete with all that.

Had I known that being tickled half to death was a form of magic, then I would have opted for the variety being peddled, weather permitting, by Professor Humo on Aberystwyth bandstand. His conjuring tricks were not our only source of entertainment. The town had for instance no fewer than three cinemas. One was on the Pier where on stormy nights the attention of the audience would be distracted by the pounding of the waves beneath their seats, while another, our local flea pit, occupied a run-down building in Bath Street. Here it was the rats that made a noise beneath the seats as they scavenged for discarded crisps or chocolates. Finally there was the Coliseum, an edifice no less imposing than its proprietress, Olive Gale, but like her, now long past its prime. Resplendent in black evening dress and lots of diamanté, even for the five o’clock performance, Mrs. Gail stood next to the box-office, beaming at patrons as they filed in. To the affluent few who turned to climb the stairs leading to the two-and-threepennies, she would growl “I hope you enjoy the programme”, sounding, my father said, just like Hermoine Gingold on the wireless. In 1939 the entire building was officially condemned as unsafe but granted a reprieve once the war came and, with it, a need to keep the Home Front happy. Like Mrs. Gail, the reprieve endured long after peace was restored.

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But for me films were like the akashic record, never quite the real thing. Only the theatre provided that. It seems, though I was too young to remember, that Mrs. Caradoc Evans had once assembled a small company of actors, calling themselves "Rogues and Vagabonds", who put on plays in a converted shed behind the Queen's Hotel. The juvenile lead was her son Nicky Sandys, born of a previous marriage, who by all accounts was the image of his mother. He even wore a big floppy hat just like hers. Combined with a fondness for long scarves and cigarette holders this helped give him the slightly raffish air he doubtless set out to achieve. When I came to know his mother, he had long ago decamped to London which no doubt suited him better.



Nick Sandys

But it is the Little Theatre in Bath Street, next to the rat-infested cinema, I remember best. Every Saturday night my mother would take me to see whatever play was on that week. First, however, we would call at the Bonbon, a better class of sweet shop in Terrace Road, to buy our box of Black Magic chocolates, the business owned by two sisters, the two Miss Toyes, one of whom had a thyroid problem that caused her eyes to bulge out of their sockets. (I was warned never to stare.) The poor woman made matters worse by owning a pekingese dog that went everywhere with her and

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whose eyes bulged no less alarmingly than hers. A third Miss Toye reputedly kept house for them but was never seen in public.

For a couple of years the repertory company was run by a handsome young man named Jack Bradley, assisted by his father, known, presumably for professional reasons, as Maurice Neville. Mark you, some people doubted they were father and son but, surprisingly enough, no fuss was ever made of it, possibly because both were "artistes" and therefore different from the rest of us.

The weekly productions were of a high standard. Only Mrs. Caradoc Evans thought otherwise. Forced by dwindling audiences to disband her own little troupe, she was understandably resentful of Mr. Bradley's success, her ill feeling compounded by his refusal or, rather, that of Mr. Neville, of whom she expected better, to stage a play she had written called *Hell Freezes*. It involved a group of unsympathetic people, all dead but confined to some kind of post-mortem waiting room, who talked and bickered pointlessly for a full two hours, among them the manageress of a nightclub, a company boss and a fox-hunting aristocrat. On reading it, my father said it reminded him of the lounge bar of the Belle View Hotel out of season, while Mr. Neville told her Jean-Paul Sartre had done the same thing better.

Shortly afterwards Mr. Bradley got into his first spot of bother, having taken to sun bathing in the nude on a secluded riverbank just outside the town, his modesty, such as it was, protected by the reeds and rushes that grew there in abundance. One afternoon, however, he chose to stretch out on a patch of grass which, unknown to him or so he claimed, lay within a few yards of the railway line. As a result the driver and fireman on the three o'clock train from Shrewsbury were treated to the sight of his manhood, as were several dozen affronted passengers in the carriages behind. To make matters worse, though I never fathomed out why, he had with him a small pekingese dog, which, like Miss Toye, he was seldom without. The town was understandably shocked, the more so when the culprit showed no sign of remorse. On the contrary he made light of the episode, even referring to it in the play being performed that week.

"Did those snaps we took by the river come out?" enquired the leading lady.

"Afraid not" replied Mr. Bradley, "Over-exposed."

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I remember my mother was among the few who laughed.

What got him into more serious trouble, however, was an incident that happened in the gentlemen's lavatories on the corner of Bath Street. Weeks earlier a mysterious hole had appeared half way up the partition separating two of the cubicles. And in one of these Mr. Bradley discreetly installed himself during the forty-five minutes between that Saturday's matinée and evening performances. What he did not realise, having presumably been encouraged to think otherwise, was that next door two police constables were lying in wait. That was his undoing. For as the Magistrates Court heard in due course, one of these seized Mr. Bradley's vital member as it emerged through the hole and held on to it while his colleague clambered over the dividing wall to apprehend its owner. This time there was no joking on his part. And the town (or at least that part of it able to work out what had been going on) took enormous pleasure in the scandal that ensued.

But not for long. For in court the defendant's lawyer was able to argue and, one assumes, demonstrate to the satisfaction of the Bench, that the actor's appendage, even when not in a state of tumescence, was too large to pass through the hole, as alleged. To many, Jack Bradley became a hero overnight. But the damage was irreparable and shortly afterwards he, the enigmatic Mr. Neville and the entire company absconded to Tunbridge Wells. We all missed them. Needless to say, the toilets in Bath Street were busier than ever.

Not long afterwards I came to realise that in their involvement with the supernatural there were important differences between Mrs. Caradoc Evans and Dr. Penry Evans. For her part Countess Barcynska – by referring to her thus we shall avoid a confusion of Evanses – was above all a spiritualist, while professing also to be a follower of Mme. Blavatsky, occultist and co-founder of the Theosophical Society, who, despite having been a medium in her younger days, condemned all trivial commerce with the dead. In conversation, the Countess would often refer us to the utterances of deceased Red Indians with names like Silver Birch, White Eagle, Black Feather, and Red Cloud, though the last of these, spirit guide of a certain Mrs. Estelle Roberts, fell abruptly from favour after cutting short his talk with her the instant the medium's daughter banged on the door to signal time was up. She had demanded the return of her two guineas but never

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got it.

Like Mme. Blavatsky, Dr. Evans would have viewed such goings-on with disdain, even if his former wife – they separated in 1941 – did go around a blacked-out London during World War II demonstrating clairvoyance in the capital's more fashionable Spiritualist churches. I expect her performance was better, but not all that much better, than the one I witnessed when I visited such a church for the first time. This was in Colwyn Bay on the North Wales coast and I must have been about fourteen.

“I have a gentleman here”, declared the medium, a middle-aged woman in twin-set and pearls, whereupon she began to nod vigorously, as if acknowledging some further piece of information being imparted to her.

“He’s giving me the name ‘John’. Does anybody have a John in spirit?”

Judging by the hands that shot up, three-quarters of the congregation did.

“This John is a tall gentleman, very tall, with a gorgeous smile. And he’s wearing glasses.”

Down came half the hands, their owners acquainted presumably with Johns who were short or grumpy, possibly both, and blessed with perfect eyesight.

“Now he’s giving me an M. I think it’s M for Mary. Yes, that’s it. John’s given me a thumbs up sign. Thank you for that, dear.”

Only two hands stayed aloft.

“He tells me Mary – “my lovely Mary” he says – has put some flowers in front of his picture. They’re on the sideboard.”

If by this detail the speaker hoped to eliminate one of the two rival claimants, she was disappointed.

“He liked his glass of beer,” she ventured next.

Good try, but neither Mary yielded to the other.

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"No, not beer," the medium suggested, going for broke, "it was stout. A nice drop of stout"

At last only one hand stayed up. A middle-aged couple in the same row as me started clapping but stopped when nobody joined in.

"Yes, I can hear you, John. He says he was always partial to his Guinness. Now he's offering me a bottle of the stuff, the naughty boy."

"Mackeson", murmured John's widow, "He hated Guinness .Too bitter, he said."

A quick change of tack brought with it news that the deceased had died suddenly and this time, to universal relief, his widow concurred.

Hand resting where the twin-set covered her heart, the medium began to gasp dramatically.

"Perforated ulcer" said Mary quietly, "That's what got him."

"Exactly!"

The hand had moved from heart to solar plexus.

Of course there were then and doubtless still are, far slicker performers than this. And, to be fair, many of them may genuinely believe that the information they purvey is not clever guesswork but imparted to them by people who have died. I feel confident, however, that in her heart of hearts Dion Fortune never believed it. True, she maintained that companionship between the living and the "living dead", as she called the dear departed, was possible, even a source of comfort to both, but she would have understood also that whatever information she gleaned from outside herself was, like my two old ladies, the flotsam and jetsam of the akashic record. I feel confident, too, that unlike the lady in Colwyn Bay, the Priestess of Isis would never, ever, have shown up in a baby pink twin-set and two rows of artificial pearls.

As for her husband, he would have had no time for it at all. Or for the White

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Eagles, Silver Birches, Grey Hawks and Red Clouds that so beguiled (and, so far as concerns the last of them, short-changed) Countess Barcynska. Instead, Penry Evans preferred the gods of Ancient Egypt, though he also had a close affinity, being Welsh, with those of Celtic mythology, generally identified in the magical system favoured by his first wife, with something called the Green Ray. This is but one of several rays – some say five but most opt for seven – that are held to represent facets of God's self awareness or, more pompously, the "Logoidal Consciousness". (The first Mrs. Evans had a weakness for highfalutin language.) The notion is reminiscent, indeed may be derived from, the teachings of the kabbalists for whom manifested reality (*Shekinah*) was the product of a sequence of emanations from the Infinite and Absolute (*Ein Sof*) or, in plain English, from God. For the record it should be mentioned that the seven (or five) rays are not set out in parallel lines but form a kind of arc. Like their kabbalistic equivalents, the *sefiroth* or stations on the Tree of Life, they are neither separate from one another nor merged into one. Rather, they interact together and by so doing bring about the totality of existence (the macrocosm) and, importantly, that part of it which is ourselves (the microcosm). Magic, as we noted earlier, operates by exploiting the dynamic relationship between the two.

Though a dominant factor in the cultural tradition of the Celts, as well as in their character and archetypal heritage, the Green Ray is not exclusive to them. Another of its manifestations was in ancient Greece where it played a conspicuous role in the Orphic Mysteries. Pythagoras, himself an initiate, was allegedly influenced by it, as were Pindar and Plato, though none more so than the Neoplatonists who came after them. It is no bad thing perhaps that another of the rays active in the Classical world, the Hermetic, governed rational thought. By encouraging the use of reason it may have ensured that philosophical conjecture among the Athenians stopped short, well short, of mystical self-indulgence.

Prominent in speculation about the Green Ray is the figure of Merlin, depicted by Gerald of Monmouth (notably in his *Vita Merlini*) and Sir Thomas Malory (*Morte d'Arthur*, all twenty-one books of it) as the court wizard of King Arthur. Dr. Evans, like many of his compatriots, would have known that if Merlin, derived from the Latinised version of the Welsh Myrddyn, has any historical validity, it is more likely to be found in a 9th Century *History of the Britons* by a certain Nennius, written a good

two hundred years before Gerald and five before Malory. In it the young Myrddyn is described as being a court poet in the old British kingdom of Rheged (now Cumberland). The same or, possibly, a different Myrddyn, one closer to the popular version, turns up again in the 12th Century *Black Book of Carmarthen* in which the author recounts how, after the Battle of Arfderydd in AD 575, a soldier named Myrddyn found refuge in the Wood of Celyddon (Caledonia). There he dwelt for fifty years, victim of a “divine madness” that enabled him to discover the secrets of nature and acquire the gift of prophecy. Whatever the truth, to his wife and her acolytes, Penry Evans was a latter day Merlin and as such well qualified to work with the Green Ray, whose power, once evoked, is held by experts to be notoriously capricious and hard to control.

The Green Ray had links also to another tradition cherished by Dion Fortune after her marriage, a union never consummated, according to some. Prior to meeting her husband she had engaged in a rather wishy-washy kind of “esoteric” Christianity, running the Christian Mystic Lodge of the Theosophical Society before leaving to start her own organisation, the Community of the Inner Light. Now she transferred her spiritual allegiance from the Jordan to the banks of the Nile, always a happy hunting ground for occultists and mountebanks alike. There the Green Ray was linked to Osiris, routinely depicted in greenish hues, though that may have more to do with his role as a fertility god than anything else. Of Osiris it is said that having been tricked into entering a lavishly ornamented trunk by his arch-enemy, Set (called Typhon by the Greeks, a name dear to some contemporary followers of Aleister Crowley) he was hurled into the river lock, stock and casket and subsequently borne out to sea. Later his corpse was found – it had been deposited among the branches of a tree – in the Lebanese port of Byblos by his loyal wife, Isis, who had journeyed far and wide in search of it. No sooner did she bring it home, however, than it was discovered by Set who, anticipating what the Maenads would do to Orpheus, cut it up into pieces which he then proceeded to scatter all over Egypt.

Undeterred, Isis went about retrieving the bits, reassembled them and after anointing the body with oil, watched it assume a semblance of life. Whether Osiris came back to life or the Sun God, Ra, served as proxy – accounts differ – Isis later bore a son, Horus, whom she concealed among the reed beds along the Nile delta. Years later Horus would avenge his father

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by killing Set, thereby establishing himself as the Champion of Light over Darkness and ruler of the daytime sky.

As for Isis, she ended up regarded as the greatest of magicians, a woman totally dedicated to the service of life. It is a role that must have appealed to Dion Fortune for not only did she see herself as a latter-day Priestess of Isis, but in magical rituals conducted on the Bayswater premises that served both as her home and as headquarters of the society she headed, *she became the goddess herself*. It was not megalomania (or not entirely) since an apotheosis of this kind is the aim of every magician. By re-enacting events, however mythical, in the life of a particular deity, the magician believes the god or goddess invoked will honour the occasion with his or her presence. That belief is universal. Indeed, it has its parallel in the Mass, itself a dramatic re-enactment of the sacrifice on Calvary during which the divine victim becomes really and actually present under the appearance of bread and wine. Not surprisingly, someone like Aleister Crowley was never slow to take advantage of any exalted beings that condescended to show up: "the God came to us in human form," he reports of one such occasion, adding that participants enjoyed "intimate contact with His divine person". I cannot imagine the Evanses getting up to hanky-panky of that sort. Jack Bradley perhaps, but not them.

And not, certainly not, the man who began teaching me about occultism soon after my twelfth birthday. It is now time for us to meet him.

2

It was by the bread counter at my Great-Uncle Davy's corner shop that I first saw Mr. James. Established in 1860, as a sign above the entrance informed everyone passing under it, Thos. Powell and Co. was a large shop even by the standards of more important towns than Aberystwyth. It stood where Market Street joins Eastgate and had windows in both. Large though it was, Mr. James managed somehow to fill it, the effect no doubt of his personality rather than his size, even if his dimensions far exceeded those of ordinary men. No sooner had he stepped across the threshold than he became the centre of attention, furtively glanced at by the few who did not know him, usually strangers to the town, and respectfully, at times fulsomely, acknowledged by everyone else.

His rough tweed suit, its colour an unsettling shade of ginger, helped somehow to exaggerate his size. Taller than my father, himself fully six feet, and impressively broad shouldered, his head rested on a neck that always put me in mind of a stocky young heifer. On top of it was a brown bowler hat, which might have looked comical on anybody else but on him looked strangely touching. His hands, coarsened and reddened by working out of doors in all seasons, were disproportionately huge even for someone as solidly built as himself, as were his feet in their smartly polished boots. Whatever the weather he carried on his arm a neatly rolled up umbrella. And rolled up it stayed even on days when the rain was pelting down in buckets. Like the bowler hat, the brilliance of his polished toecaps and the silk handkerchief overflowing from his pocket, it was part of a disguise put together years earlier for his weekly trips into town and he saw no reason afterwards to change it.

My father got on well with him. My mother, too, quite liked him and would always bake an apple tart or sponge cake for him to take home after he had

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finished his shopping. The plate would be returned the following week, not always properly washed. Only his use of bad language upset her, as it did Uncle Davy, a staunch Methodist, though he was less upset than he would have been, had he understood what the offending words meant. Understood or not, they were impossible to overlook, being the only bits of English in an otherwise mellifluous torrent of Welsh.

“Are they rude, Jim?” my great-uncle once asked my father.

“Let’s say, I wouldn’t use them.”

“But you do know what they mean?”

“I was in the army, remember. You hear words like that.”

My mother also claimed not to understand them, only to know they were not very nice.

“Put your hands over your ears when he swears,” she recommended years later when it was agreed I should spend my Saturdays helping Mr. James on his farm. Had I followed her advice, my ears would have stayed covered most of the time.

By then my great-uncle was dead. In accordance with his wishes, my father had taken over the business. Some years earlier and before I was born, Uncle Davy’s son, my father’s cousin and also named Jim, had died of a heart attack while still in his twenties, his death the more tragic because it occurred during the first night of his honeymoon, though no one was tactless enough to enquire about the exact circumstances. By the time I got to know him, Uncle Davy had retreated to a cramped little office above the bacon counter, with a small window looking out onto the shop that enabled him to keep an eye on things. Much of his time, however, was spent dreaming up new slogans for the firm’s stationery. “Our bread can be buttered, not bettered” was one, as well as “Our cream can be whipped but not beaten”, though I suspect they were not as original as he liked to pretend, which may be why my father never sent them off to be printed.

One afternoon I was with him in his office when the telephone rang. A customer was keen to know if she had left her umbrella behind in the shop.

“Is this the one, Mrs. Davies?” asked Uncle Davy, holding up a broly found abandoned earlier that day.

“She can’t see it, Uncle Davy,” I whispered.

He turned to me and beamed.

“Mrs. Davies, I’ve got here one umbrella, navy blue with red spots. Is that yours? Good. And I’ve got with me Jim’s little boy. I’ll tell you this much, Mrs. Davies *fach*, the little chap will go far. He’s only seven and much cleverer than me.” I was his favourite after that.

Clever I might have been, but I was also very puny. And that is what struck Mr. James one Saturday afternoon when he saw me stacking bars of soap on some shelves at the back of the shop. This was one job I really enjoyed, having become addicted to the scent not only of the toilet soaps – the sumptuous likes of Palmolive, Lux (“Used by Nine out of Ten Film Stars”) Knight’s Castille, Roberts’ Windsor and Pear’s Transparent (a disappointment this, being only translucent at best) – but also of more vulgar household brands, especially the aromatic rows of pungent pink carbolics.

Anyway, it was agreed I should leave early on Saturday mornings and cycle the twelve or so miles to the isolated farm on Pumlumon, a bleak mountain range behind Aberystwyth, where Mr. James lived on his own. If in the course of the day the weather turned nasty or my parents fancied an outing, they would drive up to collect me in the car that same evening. Otherwise I would return home on my bike, the ride back a great deal easier as the road went downhill all the way.

“We’ll soon build him up” Mr. James promised my mother. She was not entirely convinced. Still, it was better than letting me join the Boy Scouts. For her there was something not quite right about middle-aged men in shorts cavorting with a crowd of adolescent boys.

Some of the deference people showed towards Mr. James was due to his reputation as a magician or *dyn hysbys*, though few, if asked, would have been able to explain precisely what the term involved. For most it probably had to do with his knowledge of plants and their medicinal virtues. Anyone

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with shingles, for instance, would lose no time getting their hands on a pot of the muddy brown ointment – the sooner applied, the more effective it was – he supplied to treat that condition. It was also said to cure certain types of skin cancer, the patient being forbidden to touch the affected area except when applying the ointment, until finally the malignancy dropped off – “roots and all”, as sufferers often reported. When I was small he cured me of worms, caught my mother believed from the family cat, and his cough mixture, a combination of coltsfoot, elder flowers, ground ivy and horehound, was a standby in our household throughout the winter months. It did not taste at all bad.

Governing his choice of herbs in any particular case, was what can best be described as an “integrated” approach to the natural world. (A similar approach lay behind his practice of magic, though several months were to pass before I learned anything of that.) What I mean by integrated is that for Mr. James the profusion of things in the world around him was always a reminder of the unity implicit among them. This meant, for instance, that beyond the multitude of plants growing near his farm, he discerned a common archetype, described by Goethe as the *Urpflanze*. (The German writer went on to say that this botanical prototype was perceptible and not just to the mind’s eye, something his contemporary, Schiller, otherwise sympathetic to the notion, strenuously denied.) Meanwhile the origin of all plants, as of everything else, was that single bundle of energy, which erupted to become the Big Bang. Because of it, the stars in the sky, the flowers of the hedgerow and the skin at the tips of our noses are today derived from those very same bits of matter that were present at the birth of the cosmos. Mr. James saw the task of the herbalist, no less than the magician, as involving a search for the relationships prevailing among these sundry parts, especially those that impact on one another, referred to by him as “correspondences”.

Two examples will show how such correspondences were put to practical use by traditional herbalists. The first involves the bark of the willow tree, long favoured by them as an effective treatment for rheumatism, a condition aggravated, if not caused, by dampness or a damp atmosphere. Their preference sprang from the observation that willow trees have a special affinity with water, flourishing on riverbanks or wherever the ground happens to be wet. This was the correspondence that persuaded them of its therapeutic value. And, oddly enough, it worked. Odder still is that when

scientists got around to investigating why, they discovered that willow bark contains a glucoside, which, under the name of salicin (from Latin *salix* = willow) would become an important resource in the treatment of rheumatic conditions. (The Royal Society published a study on it in the 18th Century.) Later a derivative of salicin, salicylic acid, became the main constituent of aspirin.

A second example is mistletoe. Here, it was the Austrian esoteric philosopher and self-styled “spiritual scientist”, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), founder of the movement known as Anthroposophy and, as it happens, first to edit Goethe’s scientific writings, who did much to promote the use of mistletoe in the treatment of cancer, though its role in herbal medicine goes back more than two thousand years. Not only was it revered by the Druids, as reported by Pliny in his *Natural History*, but cherished also by the Romans themselves who, despite the plant’s traditional association with Venus, scattered it on altars dedicated to Jupiter, mindful perhaps that the oak, a host tree much favoured by the plant, was sacred to that deity. For the Druids, mistletoe was seen above all as a cure for infertility, the correspondence in this case being the plant’s ability to flourish throughout the winter months while the tree to which it is attached gives every sign of being dead.

For Steiner and others it was the plant’s semi-parasitic nature that pointed to its role in the treatment of cancer, itself an accumulation of rogue cells, which, though attached to, and to some extent dependent on, a host organ, remain indifferent to its welfare. Such perverse behaviour is reflected in the way mistletoe grows perpendicularly to the branch it clings to, its leaves forming no discernible pattern and its berries appearing in the very depths of winter. All of which alerted Steiner, as well as others, to the “correspondence” between mistletoe and cancer. Here again after scientific tests were carried out, the plant was found to have cytotoxic properties that suggest it may arrest the growth of cancerous cells, as well as immuno-modulatory compounds likely to inhibit their wider diffusion to other parts of the body.

Mr. James maintained that recognising correspondences depended as much on intuition as observation. Others have said much the same thing, though most authorities refer to the “signature” carried by certain plants rather than their “correspondence”. Among these was Paracelsus (1493-1541), said to be the first person to recognise the medicinal value of foxgloves,

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source of another glucoside, *digitalin*, which for years remained the standard treatment for malfunctioning of the heart. He was at pains to insist that the physician should not be over-preoccupied with the physical constitution of plants but seek instead to “recognise their powers and virtues thanks to the signatures they carry within them”. Two hundred years later, George Fox, founder of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), recounted in his *Journal* how, at the age of twenty-four, he had been privileged to see the natural world “open up”, enabling him to recognise intuitively how plants had “names” or signatures given to them “according to their nature and virtue,” an experience that briefly tempted him to study medicine.



Pumlumon

Not that Mr. James spoke about any of this on the first few Saturdays I spent at Tanrallt Farm. (The name means “Under the Hill”.) To get there I had first to cycle five miles beyond Aberystwyth, the road agreeably flat since it followed the course of the river, to reach the small hamlet of Capel Bangor. (Thirty years after her husband expired on their wedding night, the widow of Uncle Davy’s son settled there after marrying the minister of the village chapel.) From then on it was uphill all the way, though only in two or three places was the ascent so steep that I had to get off my bike and push it. Around me stretched the barren wilderness that is Pumlumon, its bleak slopes possessed of an austere beauty, which is at once beguiling and yet filled with subtle menace. Here, the rocks are said to be older than the Alps, the Andes and the Himalayas. True, its green escarpments lack the rugged grandeur of Snowdon or Cader Idris to the North, having to struggle to reach a relatively modest 2000 feet, but even so they appear

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more daunting than their rivals. Craggier and higher these may be but they can be conquered by anyone suitably equipped and determined enough to make it to the top. Here by contrast there is no summit to conquer, for beyond every hill waits another and beyond that there are still more.

After a further strenuous climb the road went downhill again, past a deserted lead mine and the George Borrow Inn, before descending steeply into the village of Ponterwyd, a cluster of stone cottages huddled by a small ravine. After that it was back into low gear and a further arduous climb until suddenly, between two bends in the road, a narrow gully opened up on the right. Into it plunged a rough farm track, grassed over but sturdy enough, just, for a car to venture down. Hugging the side of the slope, with rushes, ferns and purple loosestrife bunched along its edge, it looked set to finish in the middle of a frothy mountain brook, but then quite unexpectedly it swerved sharply to the right. There, beyond a gash in the hillside, lay another valley, narrower even than the first, while straight ahead, sheltered by a few bedraggled larches, stood Tanrallt.

It was not easy to find or to get to. Yet by another of those coincidences that were to punctuate my early life, uncanny but devoid of significance, my mother's friend, Mrs. Caradoc Evans may have called on Mr. James a good many years before I did. Or if not on him then on another sheep farmer who, a coincidence in itself, happened to be as notorious a magician as he was.

Around my fifteenth birthday a change had come over Mrs. Evans. Disposed until then to shun things she deemed mundane or frivolous, she enjoyed nothing better than talking earnestly and at length about Life and Death – one could almost hear the capital letters in her voice – or, more accurately, about Life after Death. Rarely did she call on us without bringing new tidings from the Afterlife, mainly imparted to her by her late husband. It was a huge surprise therefore when one day she turned up on the arm of an elderly gentleman, introduced as Captain Hewitt, with her habitual seriousness replaced by girlish smiles and lots of tinkling laughter. The change was disconcerting but not entirely unwelcome. My father put it down, no doubt correctly, to the advent of the Captain. Being of the view that that only majors and above enjoy a courtesy title in civilian life, he took the opportunity when he next saw Mrs. Evans on her own, to enquire if Captain Hewitt had served in the Navy.

“No, he grew tea in Kenya,” she replied, missing the point completely.

Within a short time Mrs Evans went off to live with her new friend in Aberdyfi, a good twenty miles away. From then on we saw her less often. When we did, we could only marvel at how her metaphysical leanings had been replaced by a preoccupation with tea and the demands of running a viable plantation. Instead of ectoplasm and astral bodies, her conversation was filled with practical matters such as pruning, plucking and tipping, delivered with the authority of someone who has spent years pruning, plucking and tipping under a hot tropical sun. No less impressive was her knowledge of minimum soil temperatures, humidity levels and optimum rainfall. Once she even showed us how to encourage more “laterals” to grow, without really explaining what these were, by nipping off the primary shoots above them. Most of all, however, she never stopped telling us how Captain Hewitt had endeared himself to his native workforce during the years he spent in Africa, respected and liked in equal measure. A Moses-like figure, was how she put it.

Especially cordial were relations between him and his foreman, someone called Songora. Indeed, so close were they that one day the captain was invited by Songora to accompany him to his home on the slopes of Mount Elgon, an extinct volcano close to the border with neighbouring Uganda. There the *bwana* was feted by tribesmen who, Mrs. Evans was keen to point out, were tall, slender and exceptionally fine featured. Apparently Carl Gustav Jung similarly commented on their appearance after travelling through the area in 1925.

“We may conclude” she assured us “that their forefathers came from an ancient civilization to the west of Africa that now lies drowned beneath the waves.”

And to be sure we got the point, she added, “This was of course Atlantis;”

At which point Captain Hewitt intervened.

“East, my dear. The natives say their ancestors came from where the sun rises over Lake Baringo. That’s east not west.” He was not the sort of man to muddle up his compass points.

“Better still!” chirruped Mrs Evans; “They came from the island of Lemuria. It sank in the Pacific – that’s east – long before Atlantis. You can read about it in Madame Blavatsky.” (Here was a name we’d not heard for a very long time.)

Captain Hewitt’s association with Mrs. Evans similarly had roots in the past, though neither could be certain in which previous life they first met. In this one these roots stretched back to the nineteen-thirties and to a period when Countess Barcynska, normally so prolific, found herself afflicted with writer’s block. To make matters worse, her husband had succumbed to a prolonged bout of depression. One afternoon the two decided to seek help from a sheep farmer on Pumlumon whose reputation as a magician had recently come to their notice, the account she gave, particularly her description of a remote farmhouse and its burly occupant, putting us all in mind of Mr. James.

According to her, the first thing she noticed on entering the house was a large piece of rock, blue in colour, multi-faceted and with the vitreous appearance of quartz, which had pride of place on the hearth. When questioned about it, their host told her it had come from Palestine centuries before and been entrusted to one of his ancestors for safekeeping. It was, he maintained, endowed with magical and talismanic properties. Whether on account of these or the advice they received, the Evanses were in far better spirits when the time came for them to climb into their Morris 8 and begin the perilous ascent back to the main road. With them in the car was a bottle containing a distillation of heather, chervil, woodruff and bog myrtle, to be taken twice daily for a week, though the problems that led them to Plumlumon were happily gone well before then.

A further twenty years would pass before Mrs. Evans, now widowed, met her tea-planter for the first time at the home of some friends in Knightsbridge, just behind Harrods. Both would maintain they were immediately aware of a mysterious bond between them, though not until later was the reason for it made clear.

It went back to 1939 when the farmer-magician the Evanses had visited twelve months earlier suddenly died. Or so Mrs. Evans maintained. She further claimed that he unexpectedly bequeathed to her the blue stone she

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had admired so much, having interpreted her fascination with it as a sign she was destined to be its future custodian. Of special interest to her had been some jagged marks along one of its surfaces, caused possibly when it was hacked away from a larger piece of rock. Old Griff – the name she gave its previous owner, by coincidence that of another local wise man, Evan Griffiths – could offer no explanation for them. Which was not surprising for, as would later emerge, that explanation lay not on Pumlumon or even in Palestine, but deep inside Africa and, more precisely, deep inside a cave on Kenya's Mount Elgon.

It is a place where caves are plentiful. Some provide the natives with shelter, while others run deep inside the mountain and are sacred places, accessible only to those initiated into the Mysteries associated with them. At least that was how Mrs Evans, speaking on Captain Hewitt's behalf and in the manner of Countess Barcynska, put it to us.

She went on to tell, and this time her companion did not contradict her, how towards the end of Captain Hewitt's visit to Mount Elgon, Sonora persuaded the elders of his tribe to let him take his boss inside the holiest of these caves, its entrance festooned with the tusks of mastodons or, possibly, mammoths, but certainly not common-or-garden elephants. As they passed through it, he warned the Captain not to utter a word until both were safely out again. Advancing slowly and in anxious silence, they had walked for what seemed like several miles until finally they emerged into a vast underground chamber, its roof so high that Hewitt was inclined at first to think they had reached the hollow core of the volcano. Before them, illuminated by fiery torches set against the walls, was the Mahenge Mzuri, a curious blue rock that sparkled in the flickering light like a giant piece of sapphire. Songora dropped to his knees and reverently touched the stone before signalling to his companion to do likewise. As he did so, the Captain noticed that a sizeable chunk of it was missing.

Unaware of this, at least according to the account she later published, Mrs. Evans took it into her head one day to show her new friend the blue stone Old Griff had entrusted to her. At the sight of it Captain Hewitt blurted out the tale of his encounter with the Mahenge Mzuri, adding in an oddly stilted way, "I looked at the stone and it seems to be the like of the Blue Stone which is yours." Countess Barcynska could not have invented anything better.

By then I had got to know Mr. James well. Not well enough, however, to ask him outright if he was Old Griff, supposedly deceased, or whether a shiny blue stone ever graced the spot by his fireplace where a pile of old *Farmers' Weeklies* now rested. (He used to plait their pages to get the fire going.) In any case Mr. James never talked about his patients. If one called when I was there, he made sure I stayed well clear until he or she had gone.

This does not mean that curiosity did not get the better of me sometimes. By keeping a respectful distance but still within earshot, I learned that my Latin teacher at school, the redoubtable Mrs. Winkler, still had hot flushes even though by then she should have been past them. (She was given a bag of raspberry leaf tea.) I heard also that Tom Millichip who regularly drove the London-bound train from Aberystwyth as far as Birmingham, suffered from a dodgy heart. He went away with a mixture of heartsease (the name says it all), wild pansy and vervain, as well as strict orders to start losing weight.

I was fast becoming something of a herbalist myself. As we trudged around the arable fields at the back of the house, demarcated from the barren slopes above them by dry-stone walls, Mr. James taught me about any plants we came across. Plants like the deceptively innocent sundew, the fragile red hairs on its leaves a trap for unwary insects and source of the clear, viscid droplets that “correspond” with its knack of loosening phlegm and curing stubborn coughs. Also there, were the lesser celandine, which, as hinted by the tiny nodules on its root, is an effective treatment for piles, and, nearby some clumps of wild pansy, its heart-shaped leaves a cardiac tonic second to none.

But it was occultism I wanted to learn from Mr. James, not which particular plant cured what. By then I had heard a great deal more about his paranormal abilities. It was rumoured that he could read people's minds, influence the weather, peer into the future, change people's luck and communicate with angels and demons, creatures far more exciting than the loquacious Red Indians formerly so dear to Countess Barcynska. One afternoon I summoned up enough courage to ask if I might be his pupil. It was raining hard, I remember, not that there was anything unusual about that. We were walking back home, the two of us, after treating an ewe afflicted with foot rot. The fact that that the patient seemed set to make a full

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recovery had put Mr. James in the jolliest of moods so it seemed a good time to tackle him.

“Why?” he asked me, pausing to look at me.

“Why do I want to learn magic?”

He nodded. The rain had got worse. I felt it trickling down the back of my neck. But Mr. James, a man who never unfurled, let alone opened, an umbrella, remained indifferent to it. He just stood there, waiting for my answer.

And when it emerged, it caught me unawares. Not so Mr. James. He looked as if he half expected it. By this I do not mean he expected it that afternoon as we faced each other on the side of the mountain. Rather, I had the impression, unsettling but by no means unpleasant, that he had been expecting it for a long time.

A very long time indeed.

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3

Before going any further, let me admit that science and magic are fundamentally incompatible. This does not mean the one invalidates the other. Rather it implies that because both deal with different things, each is competent only in its own particular field. Sir James Frazer, in *The Golden Bough*, supposed otherwise, describing magic as “a spurious system of natural law”. This overlooks the fact that magic does not presume to investigate, still less comment on, natural law. Science alone is equipped to do that.

Earlier I said that “magic” is commonly used to describe an effect with no discernible cause. Professor Humo and his long-suffering rabbit were offered by way of example. In their case, however, the animal’s sudden appearance, if investigated, would reveal a cause fully consistent with natural law, its owner having secreted it inside the top hat minutes before the performance began. The effect would be magical only if, in defiance of natural law, the rabbit had turned up out of thin air, in which case science, committed to observable causes, would not be able, because not equipped, to provide an explanation.

Not that it should concede defeat until all other, non-magical, explanations have been considered and found wanting. Any magician worth his salt would do likewise. I am not sure if Mr. James had heard of David Hume but he favoured a sceptical approach every bit as rigorous. It was the author of *On Miracles* who famously advised anyone confronted by a seemingly inexplicable event to discount a paranormal cause until fully satisfied that the evidence on offer was not, as he put it, wrongly interpreted or falsely reported or put forward with the intention to deceive. “No testimony” Hume went on to write, “is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact which it endeavours to establish.” A similar approach is necessary

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when the event in question springs from one's own immediate experience. In such a case one ought to be more sceptical than ever.

To merit even passing consideration the supernatural option has nevertheless to be plausible. My first task, therefore, is to persuade you that it is, for unless I succeed in making out a persuasive case for it, none of the experiences described later will be remotely credible. Worse, my honesty, if not my sanity, risks being called into question.

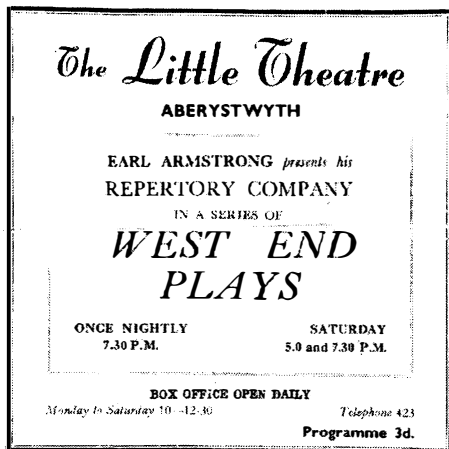
In preparing such a case one cannot entirely avoid the findings of experimental science, if only because it has by now established itself as sole arbiter of what is true and what is false. And a reliable arbiter it has turned out to be when operating in the physical world where it is properly at home. The trouble is that by definition the "supernatural" does not belong to that world. Instead it supposes the existence of *another* world beyond empirical investigation. This is why science and magic are fundamentally incompatible. Fortunately, that does not diminish the validity of either.

You may remember that before Mr. James agreed to teach me the rudiments of magic, Dr. Penry Evans had already tried to persuade my father of a supra-sensible reality that would account for the two phantom ladies who turned up at my bedside. His argument rested on the premise that the totality of existence cannot be confined to whatever bits of it we happen to know. If such were the case, he suggested, we might argue that North America did not exist until Columbus chanced upon it. The analogy is defective, however, for America was always part and parcel of the world Columbus and the rest of us inhabit, as is whatever else may still await discovery today. By contrast the reality proposed by Dr. Evans lies totally outside it. Because of that, our experience of this world is irrelevant and no reason to give it our assent. By positing another reality to explain mysterious events in this one, poor Dr. Evans was like the story-teller who, having declared that the world reposed on the back of a tortoise, was asked what the tortoise stood on. He suggested that it rested on an elephant.

Happily for Dr. Evans, modern physics has now made the possibility, even the probability, of the elephant a little more appealing. For many years scientists hankered after a universe that functioned, however quirkily, like a huge machine, its complex operation subject to laws of general application. It would seem, however, that the more we learn about the workings

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of matter, the more grounds for uncertainty there are. Elementary particles, for instance, appear intent on mocking laws of causality hitherto held sacrosanct, as if determined to provoke effects that anticipate their causes or else sponsor causes and effects independent of each another. So capricious is their behaviour that even their identity is difficult to establish at any given moment. As for the manner of that behaviour, only by reference to statistical probabilities can one aspire to keep track of it, while as for making sense of it, this may demand a complete reappraisal of our current notions of space and time. Only then can we hope to accommodate the observed properties of matter within a conceptual framework that broadly matches what is happening. Prevalent throughout the system is an indeterminacy suggestive of wilful independence, one best expressed in terms of mentation. Almost eighty years have passed since the physicist, Sir James Jeans, observed that "the stream of knowledge is leading towards a non-mechanical reality; the universe begins to look more like a great thought than like a great machine." A new generation of scientists is proving him right.



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What the evidence suggests is the existence of realities other than our own, realities over which the laws that by and large govern our three-dimensional environment (four-dimensions if we include Time) no longer

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hold sway. There is currently talk of “alternative” universes and multi-dimensional realities. Even time travel, formerly the stuff of science fiction, has become a theoretical possibility that merits serious attention. None of which proves the existence of the supra-physical reality postulated by Dr. Evans, home to those ancient gods and goddesses he and Dion Fortune welcomed into their drawing room at 3 Queensborough Terrace, London, W2. But such proof was unlikely to be forthcoming. As we conceded earlier, science and magic are mutually incompatible. Because of that, neither should be forced to testify in defence of the other. Modern physics may render the elephant slightly more credible but it cannot prove it exists. Experience alone can do that.

For me that experience began on the afternoon I asked Mr. James to allow me to become his pupil. He had said nothing more on the subject as we trudged down the hill towards Tanrallt, battling the icy rain and the wind. And no sooner did we reach the farm than my parents turned up to take me back home in the car.

That evening, as on most Saturdays, I went with my mother to the Little Theatre in Bath Street. (My father preferred to watch football on television.) Following the ignominious departure of Jack Bradley and his troupe of “West End Artistes”, as the posters mendaciously called them, a new repertory company had taken over, run by a respectably married couple, Earl Armstrong and his wife, Catherine. Their two daughters, improbably named Fern Seymour and Pearl Cynthia, were also with them, as had been the parents-in-law of Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister shortly before.

Whatever the play, the Armstrong family saw to it that they kept the best parts for themselves, to the understandable resentment of their fellow Thespians. In the case of Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong the results could be mildly embarrassing, for both were past, well past, the first flush of youth, yet insisted on playing roles they had filled when still in their prime. Vanity may have partly been to blame but there was also the reassurance that lines once learned were easier to memorise the umpteenth time around. One week Mr. Armstrong, by then nudging sixty, played the teenage villain in Emlyn Williams' *Night Must Fall*, but despite several layers of Leichner No.9 and mahogany coloured hair, he fooled no one. Incidentally, the hair stayed the same both on and off stage, as, come to think of it, did his com-

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plexion.

That night before dropping off to sleep – the play had been forgettable – I reflected on the answer I gave Mr. James when he asked why I wished to learn magic. My words had taken me by surprise.

“I want to remember,” I said, “all the things I’ve forgotten.”

“You shall,” promised Mr. James, though in the noise of the wind I may have imagined it.

As if I had not done enough climbing for one day, that same night I dreamt I was clambering up another steep hillside, this time with the sea behind me and dense bracken underfoot. Suddenly, beyond a patch of yellow gorse, I came across a path, a sheep track possibly, that appeared to lead to the summit. For what seemed like several minutes I proceeded along it before pausing to look back. Behind me no trace of a path could be seen. Ahead, even under my feet, it was indisputably there but when I turned around, it had gone. I took a few more steps then glanced over my shoulder. Just to be sure. Nothing, only grass and bracken and brittle patches of heather. It was as if the path were being erased with every step I took. For a second or two I feared its disappearance might mean I would never find my way back but then told myself I had but to scramble down the slope to reach the spot I must have started from. Only then need I start worrying about where I was and how I got there.

In the meantime I continued my climb. At the top I came across several standing stones grouped in a circle, the sort of megalithic monument not at all uncommon in some parts of Wales. Nothing about it struck me as particularly mysterious but what did cause me a flicker of unease was the discovery that I was no longer alone, though this puzzled me more than it disturbed me, and that on account of the old-fashioned, slightly quaint, appearance of the two men standing a few yards in front of me. One of them seemed to be doing all the talking. There was something of the schoolmaster about him, observable also in the way he paused every now and then to point with his walking stick at various features of the landscape, while his companion listened respectfully. I could hear, but not make out, what he said.

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Hours must have passed without my noticing for after what seemed like no time at all I saw that the two men had gone. Meanwhile the sun, directly overhead a few minutes earlier, was by now hovering above the charcoal smudge on my right where sea and sky converged on the horizon. This marked the point – and it happens sooner or later in most dreams – when I realised nothing around me was real, at least not real in the way things are real when we're fully awake. It was the last thing I took note of before lapsing into a profound and dreamless sleep.

I decided to tell Mr. James about it the following Saturday. Before I could begin, however, he was asking if I had managed to hear what the man with the stick had been telling his companion.

“But you wouldn't have made sense of it,” he continued without pausing, “because he was speaking German. Now, that's a language you should learn. With German you can say things, abstract things, that aren't easy to put into words. Things you can't say in Welsh. Or in English.”

“They don't teach German at school.”

“Ask Mrs. Winkler. She's lived there. She'll be only too happy to teach you. Suggest a time when neither of you've got any lessons. Or else dodge games. You're hopeless at games anyway, from what your father says, so no one's going to miss you. Later on in life you'll find you need German.”

With that his attention switched back to my dream.

“Another thing, next time you're on a footpath like the one last week, keep an image in your head of the bit you've just walked along. Picture it behind you. It's there for a reason. Make it as real as the path in front of you. That way you'll always see it when you look back. Last Saturday it didn't matter but once you get more adventurous you'll need to make sure your route home stays intact. Otherwise you'll be stuck in cloud cuckoo land for ever.”

At that point he instructed me to hold tight to a fence post while he hammered it into the ground. When I flinched as the hammer came down, he called me every foul name under the sun. (I have been careful to spare you his bad language.) Had my mother heard what came out of his mouth, she'd have opted for the Scouts and their short trousers after all.

By cloud-cuckoo land Mr. James was referring of course to that other reality Dr. Evans had discussed with my father. Except that he would have given it a more dignified name. For some it is the Astral World and for others the Etheric Realm, though neither term is particularly helpful. The Egyptians called it the Perfect Land, while for kabbalists it was Yesod on the Tree of Life, imperceptible foundation of Malkuth, the material kingdom in which the soul is temporarily exiled. For Dion Fortune the name of choice had been the Inner Planes, which is probably as good as any, given that no name will ever be right. What is being defined, after all, lies beyond the remit of language, nourished as that is by our experience of the world around us, nothing else.

And the problem, I soon discovered, was the same even in German. For as Mr. James had predicted, Mrs. Winkler was only too pleased to teach me the language once it emerged that she had an hour to herself on Wednesday afternoons that coincided with one of my free periods. As soon as the headmaster gave his approval, I was ready to face the challenges of *der, die* and *das*.

Brought up outside Aberystwyth, Gwyneth Winkler had settled in Germany following her marriage, not returning to Wales until the war was over in 1945. With elderly parents to look after, her husband stayed behind in what was to become the German Democratic Republic so that only fifteen years later, with both parents dead and himself turned sixty, was he able to leave and rejoin his wife and children. White haired, with a penetrating gaze and aquiline features, she had a complexion so pink and glowing that it seemed freshly buffed, though the lingering hot flushes might have partly been to blame. Her temper was notorious. The most trivial misdemeanour provoked her wrath. When this happened she would hurl any book or piece of chalk within reach at the culprit and dispense 500 lines on the spot, far in excess of the norm. Sometimes, gown flapping in her wake, she strode into the body of the classroom dispensing blows to left and right, regardless of the victim's sex or culpability. I have seen the toughest boys, heroes of the rugby field, cower over their desks at her turbulent approach, heads cradled in their arms.

I escaped her fury. So did a girl named Phyllis Manning. Both of us were judged to have good speaking voices, my own, she said, reminding her of

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Lloyd George whom she greatly admired and talked about often. Better still, when we read a Latin text aloud, we spoke exactly as the Romans did – or at least as Mrs. Winkler thought they might have done – with every final syllable stressed, every vowel open and every c and g hard, just as in Welsh and, for that reason, just as Lloyd George might have uttered them. During each lesson it was Mrs. Winkler's practice to check I had grasped whatever grammatical point she was trying to explain, then once satisfied I had, move on to something new. This might have made sense, had I been a backward pupil instead of one that normally managed to keep up. As it was, she and I advanced through the Latin primer with relative ease while most of the class lagged sullenly behind. Only once, when tackling the comparison of adjectives did I let her down by giving the wrong answer. "Oh well," she sighed, "if you can't understand it, nobody else can. We'll go through it one more time."

For German there were no others to fret about, just the two of us, usually sharing a desk for we had only one textbook between us. Our new intimacy allowed me to note with satisfaction that she smelt faintly of carbolic soap.

"Twenty-five years from now you'll be glad you stuck at it," predicted Mr. James, delighted with my progress. As things turned out, he was right. And in Berlin, within days of the Wall coming down, Mrs. Winkler, by then dead, contrived to show that she, too, was no less pleased.

Before going further, I need to stress the enormous difficulty facing anyone who tries, as I must, to talk about the Inner Planes, given the absence of words to describe what is found there. This leaves one with the choice of either saying nothing or trying to make do with such words as we have, all of them relevant to this world, not to one that is intrinsically, perhaps inconceivably, different.

The difficulty extends also to how we *experience* this other reality because habit has led us to verbalise our thinking to such an extent that our thoughts, even our feelings, make themselves known to us in words. It is thus important to allow supra-sensible realities, whenever encountered, to impinge directly on our consciousness rather than process them beforehand. To help me do this Mr. James recommended I inject what he called "warmth" into my everyday thinking, by which he meant I should strive to become emotionally involved in my thoughts and invest them ("illumine"

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them, is how Spinoza put it) with feeling. Given time, he promised, this would facilitate a kind of “immediate” knowing, a fusion of intellect and feeling similar to the *amor intellectus* of the mystics.

In order properly to grasp what he meant by “feeling”, one needs to bear in mind that our experience of the world about us is real only at the moment we experience it. As part of a dynamic, three-dimensional environment, we function only in the present, with everything that has gone before no longer real because no longer actual. Fortunately, this spatial awareness, born of the interaction between our surroundings and us, is complemented by an inner feeling for time. Without that, we would find ourselves living only in the present, deprived of any sense of continuity and on that account deprived of our identity as well. It is what enables us to conserve the past by persuading memory to restore it to the here and now. In other words, by allowing us to transcend the present moment, our feeling for time liberates us from our three-dimensional condition. The same or a similar manner of feeling is what provides us with our means of access to what we have agreed to call the Inner Planes, enabling us to grasp intuitively the supra-physical realities we meet there.

The important thing to remember, Mr. James repeatedly told me, is that none of this requires us to abandon our critical judgement. And at no point is the exercise of reason suspended. Rather, as the 17th Century Flemish scholar, Jan van Ruysbroek, put it, we need to place feeling *above* reason but never, ever, abandon reason completely.

Nowhere is the need for reason greater than in our approach to that part of the Inner Planes closest, in terms of “substance” rather than geography, to “visible nature”, as the *Bhagavad-Gita* calls our material world, contrasting it with another, “unseen and eternal, which when all created things perish, itself perishes not”. As with international frontiers, the border between these two realities is in practice blurred, with relationships defiantly straddling it and with traffic flowing in either direction. It is an area where the visitor’s mind is capable not just of misinterpreting the evidence presented to it but of influencing, even distorting, what it encounters, just as in physics the form (wave or particle) and location of the smallest units of matter are determined by the mere act of observing them. This subjective element clearly needs to be taken into account and due allowance made for it. And, as if that were not enough, there is also a mischievous tendency

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among some of the forces active in this region to deceive the unwary on purpose. (The fickleness traditionally imputed to the faerie kingdom is a folk memory of this.) All these dangers are real enough but awareness of them, coupled with a dose of old-fashioned common sense, is normally sufficient to see them off.

A further complication is that for us, time is a function of space, yet on the Inner Planes we enter a reality that lies outside both, one in which the separation of past, present and future no longer exists. One might say that all three are contemporaneous, were that not to imply that they still occupy time, albeit a time without duration. (This is not the place to speculate whether time without duration ceases to be time.) Anyway Mr. James made the concept easier to grasp by suggesting I imagine myself seated in a railway carriage watching telegraph poles go past the window as the train hurtled along. At ten seconds to eleven there would be one pole, at eleven o'clock another, while a third would go by at ten seconds past the hour. From my vantage point inside the carriage, the pole observed at, say, eleven o'clock constituted the present, its predecessor ten seconds earlier the past, while the third, yet to appear, lay ahead in the future. But had I been outside the confines of the carriage, I would have seen all these poles – past, present and future – at one and the same time. This, he implied, was as good a way as any of imagining the non-sequential “time” prevailing on the Inner Planes. That I had by then had my first encounter with it became evident only much later.

It happened when I was in my thirties and had found a job in Munich, itself reason enough to be grateful to Mr. James for encouraging me to learn German. At the head of the organisation I worked for, was a Dutchman, Bob van Benthem who shortly after my arrival invited some of us newcomers out for a meal. Towards the end of it, he suddenly let drop the name of Rudolf Steiner, though I forget in connection with what. Now, at the time my knowledge of Steiner was slight but still a lot greater than that of my colleagues. And so presented with a chance to impress the new boss, I made the most of the little I knew. Within a month I was accompanying Mr. van Benthem and his wife, both keen disciples of Steiner, to meetings of the Anthroposophical Society at its headquarters in the Leopoldstrasse.

So far as I recall, it was there that I first came across a portrait of “*der liebe Doktor*”, as his German followers affectionately called him. At once some-

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thing about his features struck me as indefinably familiar but only after being shown a second photograph did I realise his was the face, no less clear in my mind than when I first glimpsed it, of the man I had dreamt about twenty-five years earlier. Here was the little schoolmaster I had watched giving his companion a commentary on their surroundings as both stood on what I took to be a mountain top in Wales. The commentary I now realised was in German, just as Mr. James had said.

The significance of this would emerge only after I read an account of Steiner's life lent to me by the van Benthems, There I learned how in 1923 Steiner had travelled from Switzerland to attend a summer school of the Anthroposophical Society in the small seaside town of Penmaenmawr in North Wales. His biographer, Guenther Wachsmuth, goes on to describe how one afternoon he accompanied Steiner to the summit of a nearby mountain to see the "Druids' Circle" situated there. Like all such monuments, it was built long before the time of the Druids, but this need not mean they did not subsequently use it for their own ceremonial purposes. Steiner at least was convinced of it. For as Wachsmuth reports, his companion was able to gaze into the past and perceive clairvoyantly how Druidic astronomers had plotted the movements of the stars from this very spot, using the surrounding mountain peaks for reference.

Now, it so happens that by the time I moved to Munich my parents had gone to live in Llandudno, only a few miles away from Penmaenmawr. And so on my next trip to see them I drove there one afternoon and set off on foot up the mountain that dominates the small town, already knowing what awaited me. And sure enough, scarcely had I gone half way before I stumbled on the now familiar sheep track, but with no sign of the gorse bush it had started from when I last saw it. (And yes, I did look over my shoulder to make sure the track was still there as I walked along.) At the summit, too, the stone circle looked exactly as it had done in my dream, though this time no one else stood beside it and no words in German were carried on the breeze.

That I had never been there before is certain. Indeed, when I dreamt about it twenty-five years earlier I had never been to Penmaenmawr. True, I had often driven through it in the time since then, had even stopped there once to buy something, but never had I known of a stone circle high above the town. Neither was I aware, at least not to my knowledge, that Rudolf

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Steiner had visited these parts until I read about it in Munich. (Its only other visitor of note was William Gladstone who, when Prime Minister, used to spend his holidays there.) Some might of course argue that on discovering the unexpected link between Steiner and a part of Wales familiar to me, I unconsciously adapted a childhood dream, one featuring mountaintops and stone circles, to fit the facts I had discovered. It is an argument I would be inclined to accept, had Mr. James not encouraged me from the start of our acquaintance to record every morning all I could I remember from my dreams the night before. Beside me as I write are the exercise books I dutifully filled over a period of five years. A few of the entries, notably those following the onset of puberty, are written in a long forgotten code, its asterisks, dots, dashes and frantic exclamation marks concealing adolescent lusts that encroached upon my slumber, but most are easy to read. Among them is my account of the dream I described earlier. It matches that description exactly.

Did I revisit the past and observe Steiner and Wachsmuth as they were in the summer of 1923? Not according to Dr. Penry Evans. He would suggest that what I saw was but the imprint of that episode which, like the memory of everything that happens, is preserved in the akashic record. For him, you will recall, that record was home also to the two elderly sisters who had made my bedtimes so wretched. If he is right, then it must be said that my first peep into the archives yielded pretty slim pickings, certainly compared with what I have since discovered in the accounts of more energetic investigators, some of whom have attracted considerable public attention.

Prominent among these are several pious women who claim to have observed events surrounding the Crucifixion. One of them, Therese Neumann (1898-1962) from Konnersreuth in Germany, is said to have repeated Aramaic words she overheard in the streets of Jerusalem during that first Eastertide, many unknown to scholars at the time she uttered them but later confirmed as authentic. (Mel Gibson would draw upon her "eye-witness" descriptions before filming *The Passion of the Christ* in 2003.) An earlier visionary – both women bore the stigmata – was Anna Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824), beatified by Pope John Paul II in 2004, whose descriptions of life in 1st Century Ephesus, were detailed enough to lead archaeologists to the spot where the Virgin Mary purportedly spent her last years. (Pope Benedict XVI visited it in 2006.) Nothing if not intrepid, the same Blessed Catherine ventured even farther back in time, right up to what she took to

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be Garden of Eden. In it she reported seeing “gigantic white beasts” which, because of their similarity to remains later found in the frozen wastes of Siberia, her supporters have been quick to identify as mammoths. Today, Judith von Halle (born 1972), another stigmatic but this time a follower of Rudolf Steiner, also claims to have revisited the scene of the Crucifixion and, like her predecessors, is alleged to have disclosed information hitherto unknown to orthodox scholarship. For all that, opinion of her within the Anthroposophical Society remains divided, at times bitterly so.

As for Steiner himself, we have noted that he, too, had half an eye on the akashic record (or “chronicle”, as he preferred to call it) when explaining to his friend, Wachsmuth, what the Druids had been up to above Penmaenmawr two thousand years before. But only half an eye, for had he been a little more vigilant he would have observed that in AD61, within sight of where he stood, the Roman army, under Suetonius Paulinus, put to the sword the last of the British Druids, together with a throng of their fanatical supporters, along the banks of the Menai Straits. It is recorded that on this dreadful day the air “was rent with screams and fearsome curses”. Strange, *der liebe Doktor* never heard them.

Stranger still when one reads the extremely detailed accounts he provides of what he purportedly witnessed in Lemuria and Atlantis, those vanished continents that so intrigued Mrs. Caradoc Evans. As it happens, the pages of the akashic record dealing with these lost civilisations are more well-thumbed than any of the rest. Someone else who consulted them frequently was the American psychic Edward Cayce (1877-1945) renowned for his ability to diagnose illnesses and prescribe appropriate remedies while in a self-induced hypnotic trance. According to him, it was the greed and self-indulgence of the population, together with their abuse of technology that precipitated the cataclysms which sank both continents. As for Cayce’s other excursions into the past, here he outdid even Catherine Emmerich, for while she had to settle for “gigantic white beasts” when vouchsafed a glimpse of Eden, he beheld there his own previous self, one of a spiritual élite that predated Adam and Eve.

Cayce’s wife Gertrude was an Evans prior to her marriage. Of the several others already mentioned, Mrs. Penry Evans (Dion Fortune) scrutinised the same akashic pages as Steiner and Cayce, doing so from a very tender age. She once offered her followers a description of the Atlantean coastline

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“seen” by her when barely four years old, accompanying it with comments by her grown-up self. In it much is made of “the sandy foreshore” and “the level plain behind it”, with “mountains rising abruptly in the distance”. Jelly fish and porpoises and a copper coloured sun feature there as well. One day I read the article aloud to my mother who promptly said what I had thought all along: “She’s describing Llandudno! As a child that age might see it”. And when we moved on to the “queer looking trees like feather dusters straggled at intervals”, which, the commentary helpfully suggests, were “the tree-ferns of primaeval times, before the hard-wooded timber-forest had evolved,” my mother recognised the pampas grass that grew in front of the Craigside Hydro Hotel, formerly owned by Dion Fortune’s family. Indeed, I remember a few clumps still there when the building was demolished in the late nineteen-sixties. None of them struck me as the least bit Atlantean.

Mr. James had no time for accounts of this sort. His view was that people claiming to witness events in the far distant past, especially those associated with a past life, were almost certainly deluded. Drawing on information previously, if unconsciously, acquired, they elaborated a narrative that had no source outside themselves. You had to be especially wary, he maintained, if ancient Egypt featured in such tales – and it usually did.

One rather touching case involves an Englishwoman, Dorothy Eady who was born in 1904. The story goes that when she was three, she badly injured herself after falling downstairs but soon made a remarkable recovery, only to discover that from then on she felt increasingly alienated from her family and her surroundings, dreaming at night of a temple, set in beautiful gardens, which she insisted was her true home. A year later, taken by her parents to the British Museum, she astonished them by kneeling before the statue of every pharaoh in the Egyptian Room and reverently kissing its feet.

Her enthusiasm for Egypt never deserted her and before she was thirty she moved with her husband to Cairo where she found a job in the Egyptian Antiquities Department, possibly the first woman ever to do so. In 1959 she moved to the small town of Abydos in Upper Egypt, determined to spend the rest of her days close to the ruined temple of Sety I (1306B.C -1290B.C), the building she had dreamed about as a child. Long convinced that she and Sety were lovers in a previous life, she now disclosed that in

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her former incarnation she was Bentrechy, a fourteen-year old priestess who met the young pharaoh while both were strolling in the temple gardens. Months later, discovering she was pregnant by him, she sought to forestall any scandal by committing suicide. Now, three thousand years on, a tenant in the body of a middle-aged English woman, she looked forward only to the day when she and Sety would be reunited upon her death.

By all accounts a modest, self-effacing person, she enjoyed acting as a guide to people visiting the temple ruins and her first-hand knowledge, whether acquired in this life or a previous one, often provided archaeologists working at the site with valuable assistance. As with Catherine Emmerich at Ephesus, her "memories" are said to have helped them unearth evidence they might otherwise have missed. She died or, as she would maintain, was reunited with Sety, in 1981.

Mr. James, not romantically inclined at the best of times, would have been sceptical. And it is undeniable that ancient Egypt does appear to hold a sentimental, even mildly erotic, appeal for English middle class ladies with leanings towards the supernatural. Another seduced by it was Joan Grant (1907-1987), who revisited many previous lives thanks to what she called "far memory", a faculty acquired in a prior incarnation while she was training to become a healer or "winged pharaoh". This was also the title of her first book, published in 1937, which describes how she had formerly been Sekeeta who, since priestly status or noble birth are *de rigueur* in reminiscences of this kind, was the daughter of a pharaoh.

But even Mrs. Grant's religious and social antecedents fall well below those of her contemporary, Mrs. Grace Cook (1904 -1979) whose popularity survives to this day. What Sety I had been to Dorothy Eady, a Native American called White Eagle was to Mrs Cooke, though theirs was a more staid, almost sacerdotal, kind of relationship. Here we meet not one of those talkative old braves that chatted to Countess Barcynska in return for two guineas, but someone far grander, senior member, no less, of the Great White Brotherhood and the Brotherhood of the Cross of Light within the Circle of Light. Indeed, White Eagle was merely the identity this enlightened soul had assumed for his final earthly incarnation, though even then he styled himself "Mohawk Chief of the League of Six Nations of the Iroquois", whatever that means. Mrs. Cooke suspected he was Hiawatha.

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In 1936 he authorised her to found an organisation called the White Eagle Brotherhood at Burstow Manor in Surrey, though not long afterwards was urging her to transfer its headquarters to Pembroke Hall, just off the Cromwell Road in West London. Bad move. For no one in the Great White Brotherhood of the Cross of Light foresaw, let alone thought to deflect, the German bomb that laid the premises to waste a year or so later. (The fickle Isis similarly neglected to protect Dion Fortune's headquarters in Bayswater, though she and her followers were back on the premises within a fortnight.) Since 1945 the Brotherhood, now renamed White Eagle Lodge, has prudently stayed out of town.

Investigation of the akashic record would in due course reveal to Mrs. Cooke that White Eagle had flourished in ancient Egypt as the high priest Is-Ra, mentor to a beautiful priestess called Ra-min-ati who – need you be told? – was none other than Mrs. Cooke in a previous life. It was he that initiated her into the Mysteries of Osiris, though soon afterwards she went off and bettered herself by marrying Ra-Hotep, later becoming Queen of Egypt when her new husband was crowned Pharaoh of the Two Lands.

Earlier still, White Eagle had gone by the name of Hah-Wah-Tah, again a high priest, this time Mayan, who lived somewhere in the foothills of the Andes. That was 10,000 years ago, which is at least 7000 years earlier than the earliest Mayan remains hitherto uncovered. Once again teacher and cherished pupil were soon reunited for in no time at all Mrs. Cooke, now known as Minesta, was being initiated into various secret societies, among them the Brotherhood of White Magic, by an ever-obliging Hah-Wah-Tah. Afterwards she went off to marry her brother, To-Wan, having perhaps taken the notion of brotherhood too much to heart.

“All nonsense” thundered Mr. James after telling me about Mrs. Cooke and others like her. If my assent was over-emphatic, this was partly to hide my regret that there was no hint of ancient Egypt in Tanrallt. One tiny touch of the exotic would have been enough, an ibis, say, instead of the bad-tempered cockerel that pecked at my heels every time I crossed the yard in front of the house, perhaps a camel or two. As for poor Mr. James, even when dressed to the nines to go into town, he was no Is-Ra, let alone a Hah-Wah-Tah. But when I thought about it properly, I could see he was right. It was nonsense. The nonsense might have sounded a little less nonsensical, but only a little, had the narrators admitted to being fishwives or

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washerwomen, even ordinary housewives, in their previous lives. Anything but priestesses or princesses or, even worse, both. And, yes, anywhere but Egypt.

To be fair, Mr. James, never one to mince his words, stopped short of calling them fibbers. For him the stories they narrated merely showed how cautious one had to be when dealing with the Inner Planes. His conviction was that only the kind of “immediate knowing” he advocated, free from the discursive thought processes we unwittingly indulge in, can preserve us from being misinformed or succumbing to delusion. In other words whatever we come across in these supra-sensible dimensions should be left to impinge directly on our consciousness and not be subliminally processed beforehand. Failure to do this accounts for the self-aggrandising fantasies just described.

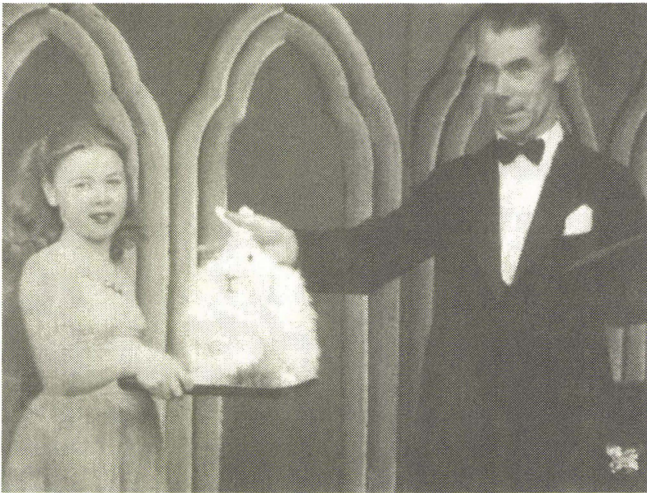
I was reminded of this years later when I came upon Marcel Proust’s notion of involuntary memory, comparable in some ways to the “direct knowing” Mr. James kept urging me to cultivate. For the narrator of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, a few musical notes, the scent of hawthorn, even an uneven step and, most famously of all, the taste of a madeleine dipped in tea, could restore to the present an experience once lived in the past. On such occasions the event was not so much remembered, as relived, endowed with an immediacy, as well as an accuracy, denied to the neatly packaged memories we store inside our heads. Above all it again affirms that time is non-linear, even if we routinely experience it as such, with past and present fused together and already containing the future. Only our situation in three-dimensional space, inside the railway carriage Mr. James spoke of, compels us to view time as a continuum, spatially extended just like us. Involuntary memories, like those described in Proust’s novel, remind us it is not. The book’s final passage even suggests they may offer us an immortality of sorts:

“But when a noise once heard or a scent once smelt is heard or smelt again in the present and at the same time in the past, real without being actual, ideal without being abstract, then at once the permanent essence of things, normally hidden, is liberated and the true “I” which seemed, often over a long period, to be dead, awakens and is revived as it partakes of the celestial nourishment offered to it.”

(This long but not untypical sentence demonstrates that while time may be non-linear, the author’s prose is anything but.)

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What is certain is that by enabling us to grasp that the present is both a recapitulation of the past and, at least implicitly, a projection into the future, involuntary memories are an effective preparation for the timelessness or, better still, the non-temporality, prevailing on the Inner Planes. By accustoming ourselves to spontaneous memories of this kind we vastly increase our chances of perceiving timeless reality as it *is*, not as it *becomes* after we subconsciously adapt it to our space-related environment. That means there is less danger of reshaping it into some fanciful past life involving temples, pharaohs, handsome young princes and nubile priestesses. A shame, but there you are.



Professor Humo, his daughter Pearl
and the famous white rabbit

Yet when all is said and done, we are still talking of what is essentially *subjective* experience whereas for the magician the Inner Planes are not a state of mind but an objective, if intangible, reality, one that can be made to impinge upon the here and now. That, after all, is what magic is about, even Professor Humo's sort: had he merely assured us there was a rabbit concealed inside his hat but stopped short of pulling the animal out by its ears, it would not have been magic. (And we kids would have pelted him

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with empty ice-cream tubs.) In the same way speculation about “composite” time wherein past, present and future are one, would be meaningless in practical terms, with or without the help of Marcel Proust, unless the past could be shown on occasion to *anticipate the future by becoming manifestly real in the here and now*. One occasion when that happened was during my time in Germany.

Though based in Munich, I was often required to travel to Berlin, a city divided into eastern and western sectors throughout most of that period. The Wall had just come down, however, when I found myself walking down the Kurfürstendamm one afternoon with a friend whose passion in life, not shared by me, was rooting about in junk shops. As we made our way towards the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church we passed a rather shabby arcade which had an even shabbier gallery on the first floor packed with stalls and small shops selling second-hand furniture, vintage clothing and bric-a-brac. Naturally my companion insisted we go inside, he to search for a bargain and me, equipped with better German, to haggle over the price, should he come across one. By way of commission he promised me a beer, a genuine *Berliner Weisse*, at the Café Kranzler just across the road.

While he was rummaging about, I drifted off to a corner where there were some shelves packed with second-hand books. Having seldom found anything of interest in such places, I was not too disappointed when this turned out again to be the case. About to move on, I surprised myself by reaching up for a book, nondescript and all but indistinguishable from the rest, on the very top shelf. As I tried to wrest it from its neighbours – they were all tightly wedged together – I saw it was a manual of banking or accounting practice, certainly a subject that held no appeal for me whatsoever. Anyway, no sooner had I yanked it free than out fell several bits of paper, yellow with age.

My first thought was to retrieve them from the floor, put them back where they belonged, then return the volume to its shelf. But as I stooped to pick them up I noticed they were newspaper cuttings, one of them printed in old-fashioned gothic script, which at once aroused my curiosity. What I was holding turned out to be an extract from the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the Nazi Party newspaper, but not until I turned it over did I find the article whoever cut it out, had been so eager to preserve. With the by-line “Prague: 16 May” it reported the stir caused in that city by remarks made

by David Lloyd George in the House of Commons one week earlier. In a speech, described by the reporter as “devastating”, the speaker had condemned the former Czech President, Eduard Benesch, for renegeing on a promise made at the time of the Versailles treaty that Sudeten Germans would enjoy full autonomy in the newly created state of Czechoslovakia. Had that promise been kept, argued Lloyd George, and had similar rights been granted to ethnic minorities in Poland, the Second World War might never have started. This was said in 1940.



Völkischer Beobachter, May 1939

The second cutting was from the same newspaper, its print now switched to roman, but this time from a date in March 1945. On one side it described fierce fighting taking place in the Rhineland and all along the Ruhr, a situation which the army, though heavily outnumbered, would soon get the better of, if only because it had to. (“Eine Lage...die ermeister werden wird, weil sie gemeistert werden muss.” - in German, Mr. James would have noted, the message has a magical resonance that belies its vacuity.) Again only on turning the paper over did I see why it had been preserved. Here again

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was a second piece about Lloyd George, this time by the paper's Stockholm correspondent who reported the former statesman's death at the age of 82. Less sympathetic than the first, it claimed that history would hold him and other signatories to the Versailles Treaty accountable for the hostilities "now about to reach their climax". It even referred to him as *der schlaue walisische Fuchs* or the crafty Welsh fox.

Lloyd George gestorben

Von unserem Berichterstatter

Dr. Th. B. Stockholm, 27. März.

Im Alter von 82 Jahren ist David Lloyd George, zuletzt Earl of Dwyfor, gestorben. Als Mitverantwortlicher für das Diktat von Versailles und damit auch als Mitverantwortlicher für diesen Krieg, der jetzt seinem entscheidenden Höhepunkt entgegengeht, wird er in die Geschichte eingehen.

Der Mann, den seine Landsleute 1918 als Sieger feierten, erlebte den Ausbruch und die längste Zeit des Zweiten Weltkrieges, aber nicht sein Ende. Er wird diesem Ende, soviel wird man sagen können, mit einigen Bedenken entgegensehen haben. Denn es bedarf kaum der Schleichheit dieses walisischen Fuchses, um zu erkennen, wahn die Politik seines alten Rivales Churchill England in diesem Zweiten Weltkrieg geführt hat. Alles Triumphgeschrei, das jetzt jenseits des Kanals über die Schlacht um den Rhein angestimmt wird, kann nicht darüber hinwegtäuschen, daß die Politik der bedingungslosen Kapitulation und der Zustimmung zu allen sowjetischen Machtansprüchen England letztes Endes zum Verderben anschlagen muß.

Lloyd George hatte diese Entwicklung kommen sehen. Seit 1928 erhob er seine warnende Stimme. Besonders kritisch beurteilte er die Blankovollmacht, die England 1939 den Polen gegeben hatte, dessen Polen, deren maßlose Gebietsansprüche ihm schon in Versailles auf die Nerven gegangen waren, weil er hier den Keim zu einem neuen Krieg erahnte. Er hat nach 1933 wiederholt Deutschland besucht und zeigte trotz seines Alters eine für einen Briten be-

merkenswerte Aufgeschlossenheit für die Leistungen und Ziele des Nationalsozialismus. Aber er war ein Politiker ohne Anhang, seit er 1922 nach sechsjähriger Ministerpräsidentenschaft durch die Carlton-Club-Revolution seiner konservativen Widersacher gestürzt worden und im Grunde ein gebrochener Mann war. Für die jüngere Generation in England, für Leute wie Eden, war er schon damals eine historische Mumie, reif für das Wachstückerkabinett der Madame Tessaud.

Ich sah ihn an einem Frühlingstag des Jahres 1937 müde und gebeugt vor dem Heidentum der Stadt München stehen, vor jenem schlafenden Soldaten unter den großen Granitblöcken. Welche Gedanken mochten durch das Haupt mit den langen weißen Haaren gegangen sein? Daß sich überall in allen Ländern Europas, in jeder Stadt und in jedem Dorf Gefallenenreihen erheben, trotz er an dieser Tatsache nicht auch Schuld, sogar schwere Schuld? Als im Sommer 1914 an ihn, den ehemals glühenden Pazifisten, die Frage herantrat, ob er den Krieg gutheißen solle, da entschied er sich für den Krieg. Sein Nein hätte damals schwer in der Waagschale der Entscheidung gelegen. Aber Folgerichtigkeit ist niemals seine Stärke gewesen. Er war Pazifist, bedankte sich als solcher erbittert den Burenkrieg und gab 12 Jahre später die Parole „hängt den Kaiser“ und „quetscht Deutschland aus, bis die Kerne quetschen“ heraus. Er nahm als Finanzminister in den Jahren 1906 bis 1910 durch seine scharfe Steuergesetzgebung dem Oberhaus seine Machtstellung und ließ sich trotzdem zum Lord erheben.

Völkischer Beobachter, May 1939

Who in Nazi Germany, I wondered, cared so much about Lloyd George that he or she bothered to cut out these two pieces, the second published at a time when most Germans thought of little else but how to stay alive until the end of the war. Back in a flash came the answer. And that was before I noticed the dates pencilled in the margin of each cutting, both written in a hand I was all too familiar with.

Unwatched by whoever ran the bookstall – there was nobody in sight – I shoved the cuttings, together with a smaller scrap of paper, inside my pocket and put the book back where I had found it or, possibly, where it found me.

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Coincidence it certainly was. An example perhaps of the synchronicity talked about by Jung, a non-causal relationship which unites two unconnected events in a way so meaningful that the likelihood of chance is too remote, far too remote, to be taken seriously. According to him, synchronicity endowed time with the same relativity Einstein attributed to space. It was, he also suggested, the equivalent of that non-local causality identified by the physicist Wolfgang Pauli, Jung's patient and subsequently his collaborator in a book called *The Interpretation and Nature of the Psyche*, the second part of which consists of an essay called *Synchronicity*.

Where my experience in Berlin went beyond Jung, as it went beyond Proust, is that the conjunction of events was of more than psychological (or even para-psychological) significance. For in my pocket as I walked out into the bright sunlight of the Kurfürstendamm was *tangible* evidence of a coincidence too improbable to be dismissed as mere chance. To me it was proof that the past had somehow collaborated with the future in order to manifest in the present – my present – a recognisable part of itself.

But, the sceptical David Hume might ask, how could I be sure that it was my former teacher who had reached for a pair of scissors some forty years earlier and cut out the two bits of paper now in my possession? True, the writing on them resembled hers and yes there was the Lloyd George connection, though Mrs. Winkler cannot have been the only person in wartime Germany interested in the former statesman. True, her husband had worked for a bank and the cuttings were inside an East German book about finance, but umpteen other Germans worked in banks and a large number might have owned the same book. Fortunately, there was also a third bit of paper. No more than the ragged corner of an old envelope, possibly torn off for use as a bookmark, it bore an East German postage stamp, its value 24 Pfennigs, commemorating the second winter sports championships at East Oberhof. Visible, too, was the postmark, the date shown as "16 . 8 . 51", and above it "Nordhausen", a small town which, I later discovered, lay not far from the border with West Germany. I discovered also, this time from Mrs. Winkler's son Eddie, that it was the town his grandparents lived in.

None of which may have been enough for the sceptical Mr. Hume, but it was enough for me. Enough, too, for Mr. James, I hope.

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4

By the time October is upon us, Pumlumon seems already resigned to the impending hardships of winter, its slopes deserted by the sheep that graze there in the summer months but are moved to gentler, more sheltered, pastures as the days grow short. Mr. James used to bring his flock into the fields at the back of the house and one of my regular jobs was to carry bales of hay to them when the grass grew sparse or the ground was covered by snow. I remember being told how in the terrible winter of 1947, the snow arrived early, well before the last few stragglers were brought down to safety. Off in search of them went Mr. James with two of the dogs and a spade to dig out any they came across buried under the drifts. In one place after clearing away the snow, he had found a young ewe and a vixen snuggled up together for warmth, the two reconciled by a mutual need to survive. Welsh foxes are nothing if not crafty.

For me the onset of Winter meant the journey to Tanrallt was more arduous than ever, a cold wind perversely intent on pushing against me every inch of the way as I pedalled uphill through sleet or fine rain, with the lowest of my bike's three gears doing little to make the climb any easier. I might have felt less like giving up and staying home, had Mr. James begun to teach me the kind of magic I was impatient to learn. But, no, all he had done over six months was give me mental exercises to perform, with precious little magic about them, as well as require me to keep a daily record of my no less unmagical dreams.

The exercises were meant to teach me what Mr. James called creative visualisation. That sounded impressive when I first heard it but turned out to mean precious little. Or so I thought at the time. In the beginning it required me to look at a given object, close my eyes and then create a mental image of it in as much detail as I could muster. Having done so, I was to

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open my eyes and check how successful my efforts had been. A matchbox was what Mr. James chose for my first attempt, with him listening as I described, eyes tight shut, what it looked like. I think we then progressed to the pipe and a packet of Ringer's shag tobacco lying next to it on the kitchen table. Afterwards it was back to the matchbox but this time the challenge was stiffer, for now I had to visualise it from whatever angle Mr. James suggested, telling him what I saw – or might have seen – were I looking at it from above or from below or from any one of its four sides. I even had to imagine myself viewing it from all sides at the same time and even from inside the box itself.

To accustom me to the mental displacement involved in such exercises, in other words to accustom me to viewing things from a position other than the one I occupied, Mr. James recommended I imagine myself in different parts of the room whenever I felt bored at school or during the sermon on Sunday night in chapel. That way I would soon learn how to view my surroundings from all directions without moving an inch. "Stay calm, be patient and take deep breaths" were his final words before I set off home, with orders to stick at it throughout the coming week.

As I later discovered, what he was trying to do by all this was revive in me that pictorial, rather than verbal, way of thinking which comes naturally to small infants whose mind effortlessly forms what psychologists call eidetic images. It is a knack I acquired within a few weeks, admittedly not without practice, possibly because it was a knack I had possessed like most children and lost only a short time before. It might have been harder to recover, had I been older. The technique did not involve visual images alone. Within a couple of months Mr. James was encouraging me to involve all five of my senses so that if I imagined myself eating – I don't know – a handful of crisps, say, not only had I to "see" them but also "smell" them, "taste" them, "feel" them inside my mouth and "hear" my molars crunching them. A more dignified example proposed by Mr. James was to imagine myself walking along the seafront at Aberystwyth on a breezy afternoon at high tide, something I frequently did, and inwardly see and hear the pounding of the waves, feel the wind upon my face and smell the salt spray, as well as taste the brine upon my lips. Most importantly, I had to create these sensations in an instant.

I had also to objectify them, so to speak, by transferring what was inside

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my head to the world around me. For example when visualising a sleek Austin Healey Sprite, complete with “frog-eye” headlamps – Mr. James had simply requested a car but I knew the one I fancied – I needed to project it from my head into the world outside, lending apparent form and substance to what existed only in my imagination, a kind of voluntary hallucination, if you like. Its chief purpose was to enable me at a later date to translate into the vernacular of everyday experience whatever I might discover on the Inner Planes, even, if appropriate, render it accessible to other people as well. It was the same technique that enabled Dion Fortune and her followers to “see” the gods and goddesses that dropped in on them from time to time for an hour of sedate ceremonial in Queensborough Terrace.

What it also did was facilitate the creation of thought forms, artificial entities that might, once created, take on every appearance of independent life. Because such creatures may impinge on their physical surroundings, as I was shortly to discover, it is legitimate to suppose they can briefly acquire a corporality of sorts. To revert to the language of physics, they seem temporarily to manifest themselves as particle rather than wave, the latter being their natural condition. This change allows them to cross the frontier between their own habitat and ours and, as such, it differs fundamentally from what was described in the previous chapter. There, you will remember, the transition was in the other direction, enabling us to penetrate (and participate in) a supra-physical reality we agreed to call the Inner Planes. Here, by contrast, part of that reality slips over into ours and, initially submissive to our will, allows our thoughts to acquire substance and thus become objectively perceptible. It must be stressed, however, that the entities resulting from this collaboration, though *in* this world are never totally *of* it, hence the quasi-independence which, as we shall see, they are not slow to assume.

There is nothing fanciful about them. In 1972 under the auspices of the Toronto Society for Psychical Research an experiment was conducted in which a group of investigators set about creating their own artificial entity, imagining for their purpose a character named Philip Aylesford, supposedly a 17th Century landowner whose fictional biography included fighting for the Royalist cause in the Civil War, as well as having a jealous wife and a gipsy mistress later burned at the stake as a witch. Thereafter the group met weekly in the hope that by concentrating their thoughts on this narrative, their fictional hero might deign to put in an appearance.

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He never did. After a year they stopped trying so hard and instead just sat around a table chatting informally and having an occasional singsong. Still no spectral appearance but, unexpectedly, the table began to tilt and move independently around the room, while loud raps were heard coming from it. A code was soon agreed upon and the agency responsible for the raps, calling itself Philip, went on to narrate a life history matching the one previously thought up on its behalf. Over time Philip seemed to function independently of his creators. On one occasion a member of the group Dr. (later Professor) George Owen asked him if he had ever met Prince Rupert of Bohemia, commander of the Royalist cavalry in the Civil War. Philip said he had not. Knowing that the pseudo-biography included a grand tour of Europe, the questioner then asked him if he had ever visited Bohemia. The exchange, recorded by Owen's wife, Iris, went as follows:

“(Rap) “Yes?”

“Did you know Elizabeth, the Winter Queen?” Dr. Owen asked.

“Yes.”

“That's odd,” Dr. Owen said “He says he knew Elizabeth, and yet previously he never said he knew Rupert, her brother-in-law.”

Dr. Owen continued to assert that Rupert was Elizabeth's brother-in-law, and 'Philip' continued, by a series of double raps, to deny that he was. Nobody else could recollect hearing of Elizabeth and Rupert together, nor of their relationship to each other. Dr. Owen retired to look the matter up in an encyclopaedia. He discovered that Rupert was not Elizabeth's brother-in-law.”

In fact Rupert was her son.

Meanwhile the movements of the table, by then accompanied by various other psychokinetic phenomena (technical terms like this make scientists feel more comfortable) had been recorded on camera by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and watched by thousands of television viewers, as well as by a studio audience. It was already evident that Philip had a touch of the diva about him, regarding himself, perhaps justifiably, as the star of the show. So determined was he to take centre stage that on one occasion the table tried to squeeze itself in among the panel of independent experts solemnly lined up on a platform in the studio.

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The experiment was not unique. Other researchers became curious to see if they could obtain similar effects, one group inventing a World War II heroine they dubbed Lilith and creating for her a life history that ended with her being shot by the Germans, while another group fabricated a mediaeval alchemist named Sebastian. Soon both characters were demonstrating the same verve and independence as the original Philip, though in fact there was nothing original about any of them. On the contrary thought forms like these are a common feature of magical practice all over the world.

A salutary example is provided by the French explorer, Alexandra David-Neel (1868-1969), in one of her books. There she recounts how on a journey through Tibet, native sorcerers or *ngagspas* taught her how to fabricate a *tulpa* or thought-creation of her choice. (In Sanskrit the process goes by the name of *kryashakti*.) She opted to concentrate on a fat and jolly monk who soon became visible not only to her but to others in her party as well. She alleges that he could even be persuaded to perform simple tasks when requested. As the days went by, however, the little chap's good humour diminished and instead of remaining sweet natured and meekly compliant, he became self-willed and menacing. Only with considerable effort was she finally able to "dismantle" her creation and despatch its elemental essence back to wherever it came from. "My mind-creature" she ruefully observes "was tenacious of life."

A similar experience awaited Dion Fortune, one that left her duly chastened as well. This time it involved not a synthetic human being but – Mrs. Evans could never resist a touch of drama – a fully-grown wolf that turned up one afternoon as she lay on her bed brooding over someone who had caused her offence. While still in the foulest of moods, she had started for no special reason to reflect on Norse mythology when, by her own account, Fenris, "Wolf-horror of the North" flopped down on the counterpane beside her "in well-materialised ectoplasmic form". Grey in colour, the animal had weight, she noted, for she could feel its back pressing against her "as a large dog might do." Very sensibly, she gave the intruder a poke in the ribs and, after a token snarl, down it jumped "as meek as a lamb", before retreating to a corner of the room. For several days it hung around the house, sometimes visible and sometimes not, until fearing it might turn nasty like Mme. David-Neel's *tulpa*, its creator – the beast had emerged from her solar plexus and was still joined to it by a subtle umbilical cord – valiantly decided to reabsorb it into her body, distasteful though the prospect must

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have been. Not that it promised to be fun for Fenris either.

On the day in question the animal was lying on the hearth like a big Alsatian dog when Mrs. Evans “began by an effort of will and imagination to draw the life out of it along the silver cord. The wolf form began to fade, the cord thickened and grew substantial. A violent emotional upheaval started in myself...The wolf form had now faded into a shapeless grey mist. This too was absorbed along the silver cord.”

Not surprisingly, the narrator found herself “bathed in perspiration” once the whole nasty business was over.

When I came across the story for the first time in a book borrowed from the public library, the reference to ectoplasm reminded me at once of Mrs. Caradoc Evans or, rather, of her friend, Mrs. Duncan whose spirit babies, as well as the parrot, were composed of that same mysterious substance. Not only had Mrs. Evans seen and touched ectoplasm but also been permitted on one occasion to cut off a small piece from some spirit drapery and take it home in her handbag. (She stored it overnight in a jam jar but found no trace of it next morning. She was later told she should have filled the jar with distilled water first.) Now, Mr. James had little time for Spiritualists. Healthy sceptic that he was, what annoyed him most about them was their naive acceptance of everything and anything as irrefutable proof of survival. His view was that even if a ‘spirit’ were to turn up in the séance room looking every inch like one’s dead Uncle Harry, there was no guarantee it was him. In any case, he argued, it was simplistic to believe that anyone’s earthly personality survived intact in a spirit world, which, judging by the descriptions offered by its garrulous residents, resembled any municipal park on a cloudless afternoon in May.

His biggest dislike was ectoplasm. Well, perhaps not ectoplasm as such, but the kind Mrs. Evans got so worked up about before she swapped Mrs. Duncan for the tea planting captain from Kenya (via Knightsbridge). Firmly of the view that the majority of séance room spirits were no more than dummies made of cheesecloth or papier-mâché, he tried to dissuade me from enquiring into them further. That I did so regardless, he probably knew, just as he knew of other things I got up to and chose not to tell him about, but in this case all he did was remind me how even the cleverest people had been fooled in the past. A particular story that amused him

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greatly, one he repeated so often I dreaded hearing it yet again, concerned the distinguished scientist, Sir William Crookes, who investigated the mediumistic powers of a young woman named Florence Cook. I think the case amused Mr. James all the more because the spirit conjured up by Miss Cooke, known as Katie King, was said in reality to be Annie Owen Morgan, daughter of Captain Henry Morgan (1636-1688), buccaneer and later Governor of Jamaica, who came from Llanrhymney in, South Wales. Mr. James' mother had formerly been a Morgan so that may have played a part in it as well.

Temporarily restored to life, young Katie was only too happy to walk about the séance room under the admiring gaze of everyone present and even be photographed, her appearance eliciting fulsome praise from Sir William in his report on these remarkable events:

“Photography is inadequate to depict the beauty of Katie's face; as words are powerless to describe her charms of manner. Photography may, indeed, give a map of her countenance, but how can it reproduce the brilliant purity of her complexion, or the ever-varying expression of her most mobile features, now over-shadowed with sadness when relating some of the bitter experiences of her past life, now smiling with all the happy innocence of happy girlhood...

“Round her she made an atmosphere of life,
The very air seemed lighter from her eyes,
They were so soft and beautiful, and rife
With all we can imagine of the skies,
Her overpowering presence made to feel
It would not be idolatory to kneel.”

So besotted was Sir William that not only did he kneel before the spirit Katie but more than once held her in his arms and lavished kisses on what he assured his scientific peers was a real person, not some “phantom of a disordered brain”.

He was right. There was nothing phantom-like about the delectable Miss King. Nothing ectoplasmic either, as a Mr. Volckman later discovered when, persuaded that she and the medium were one and the same, he grabbed hold of Katie's arm and refused to let go. In the tussle that followed he suffered a bloody nose and lost several of his whiskers, “a hirsute ornamentation upon which” we are informed, “the owner...prided himself considerably”. Years later Miss Cook would trade in Katie for another spirit, this time called Marie, but not long afterwards the new recruit suffered the same

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indignities as her predecessor, firstly at the hands of a Mr. William Tipp, later at those, no more gentlemanly, of Sir George Sitwell who grabbed her by the waist and, as he later testified, “felt her whalebone corset.”

Mrs. Duncan’s spirits, by contrast, were the genuine article or so Mrs. Evans would have us believe, adamant that while others might cheat, she was above any such chicanery. Perhaps she was, at least some of the time, but there were moments when even her ectoplasm was not quite what it seemed. One was during an engagement at the Edinburgh home of Miss Esson Maule, by all accounts an intimidating woman with short hair and a fondness for pin-striped suits, sturdy brogues and men’s ties. It involved a spirit child, Peggy Hazeldine, who was a loyal, if irksome, regular at Mrs. Duncan’s séances. (Her mother, invited to one of them, resignedly acknowledged that it was indeed her late daughter) Much given to showing off, this would-be Shirley Temple always insisted on entertaining the company with her nursery rhymes, her favourite songs (“Loch Lomond” and “Ah Sweet Mystery of Life”), her furious skipping and, her dancing. Whatever she was made of, she certainly livened things up. That evening, however, Miss Maule became increasingly convinced that little Peggy, barely visible as she performed an animated jig, was in reality a towel or dishcloth being waved about in the dark. Determined to get at the truth, she lunged at the tiny figure, only to find herself clutching wads of Mrs. Duncan’s all too solid flesh. When someone turned on the lights the medium was caught trying to stuff a piece of white stockingette, later identified as a lady’s “Outsize” vest, inside the bodice of her dress. To her credit, Mrs. Duncan, though seriously outnumbered, managed to floor several of her persecutors in the fracas that ensued but could not escape a £10 fine at the Sheriff Summary Court twelve months later.

Of course I knew nothing of her tendency to cheat when I became fascinated, even slightly obsessed, by ectoplasm. I had just turned thirteen and after a year of being told by Mr. James to concentrate on this or meditate on that, seemed no closer to the arcane truths I was impatient to discover than when I first began. One afternoon, standing by my wheelbarrow inside the cowshed, the rain beating down on its corrugated iron roof, it struck me I had done more mucking out than magic. It was all very well being assured that if I worked hard enough I would one day be made aware of the supernatural reality Mr. James felt so much at home in, but as I contemplated heaps of wet straw and stale cow dung, that happy day seemed as far away

as ever. At least ectoplasm was available here and now, not the real thing perhaps but certainly in photographs, while few were equipped to divulge more about its appearance and behaviour than Mrs. Caradoc Evans.

The opportunity for her to do precisely that came not long afterwards when she briefly re-entered our lives, having seldom been in them since her move to Aberdyfi. From an unexpected 'phone call to my mother we learned that she had taken it into her head to exploit the miraculous properties of her blue stone. For the first time she revealed that merely by touching it the sick were made whole, the dejected cheered up and those out of luck assured of better fortune. ("A wonder she didn't say it raised the dead," observed my father, forgetting this was Mrs. Duncan's department.) Anyway it appeared Mrs. Evans now judged these benefits too important to keep to herself, not when the world around her was filled with so much misery and pain.

Well, if not the world, then at least Aberystwyth. One has to start somewhere. And so after lunch at our house the following Saturday, off she set in search of Mr. Armstrong at the Little Theatre where she bullied him into letting her put the stone on display for a fortnight in a small room leading backstage from the foyer. She proposed an admission fee of two shillings but as this was the price of tickets to all but the front six rows of the theatre, Mr. Armstrong thought it risked devaluing the weekly plays his company put on. In any case, he remarked to my mother, two bob was nothing short of daylight robbery. The pair of them finally settled on a shilling, to be split fifty-fifty between them. Before leaving the theatre, Mrs. Evans left behind a copy of *Hell Freezes*, with a suggestion the company might wish to stage it while the stone was on the premises.

Next came the question of publicity. Still well regarded, even if her laurels were no longer fresh, Mrs. Evans felt confident of persuading the *Cambrian News* and *Welsh Gazette* to write favourably about the blue stone or, preferably, print a text submitted by her for publication. She asked my father who knew the editor of the former and a previous owner of the latter to put in a good word. Meanwhile an artist's easel with a hand-coloured poster showing the outline of Africa with a blue blob in the middle appeared outside the theatre, pushed tight against the door to stop the ink from running in the event of rain. The real treat, however, came the following Saturday when at the end of that night's performance Mr. Armstrong

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squeezed himself onto the stage between curtain and footlights to invite us all to remain in our seats. "Tabs" he called to someone in the wings and aside swept the curtains, all but sweeping him with them.

On stage, reclining in two bamboo armchairs last seen two weeks earlier in a production of Somerset Maugham's *Rain*, were Mrs. Evans, introduced by Mr. Armstrong as Countess Barcynska, and the captain, she for once hatless and relatively demure in lime green organza, he, more ill at ease, in a white dinner jacket with a jaunty red carnation in his buttonhole. Two artificial palms conveyed a hint of Africa.



Helen Duncan (1897-1956)

Prompted by Mr. Armstrong, Captain Hewitt began a long-winded description, part geographical, part anthropological, of western Kenya, until Mrs. Evans cut him short and launched into the story of the cave and her discovery of the blue stone. At this point the object itself, covered by a paisley shawl, was wheeled out from the wings on a tea trolley, prompting an anguished cry from its owner as Mr. Armstrong made as if to remove the shawl and so expose to view something we were meant to pay a shilling to see.

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“He really is a foolish man. And no great shakes as an actor,” complained Mrs. Evans over drinks and a sandwich after we got home. She and her captain had declined an invitation to stay overnight, to the secret relief of my mother who, not being privy to the arrangements at Aberdyfi, was unsure whether to put them together or in two separate rooms. For me her presence in the house was a chance to enquire about ectoplasm.

“Ah, Mrs. Duncan” she replied, “ with her it just billows out, yards and yards of it.”

She was right. By all accounts ectoplasm did flow copiously from Mrs. Duncan, its appearance variously described as “iridescent”, “pulsating”, “misty grey” and “pastel coloured”. It also had a slightly “iffy” smell. As soon as enough of it was available, it would assume the likeness of whoever it was intended to represent, often in considerable detail, as in the case of a former civic dignitary who turned up complete with chain of office or the Indian army captain who arrived still wearing his solar topee. Another visitor, this time an ex-policeman, even withdrew briefly to retrieve the helmet which, in his haste to materialise, he had forgotten to put on, while in South Wales (where Mrs. Duncan was always in demand) a group of dead colliers appeared one evening with coal dust still on their faces. They had delighted everyone by singing hymns. In Welsh.

“Party masks and cheesecloth” sneered the doubters. And almost certainly there were times when the ectoplasm was no more than regurgitated cheesecloth or masticated paper or, as in Miss Esson Maule’s home, items of ladies underwear. One psychological researcher, Harry Price, even suggested Mrs. Duncan might have a secondary stomach where she stored all her props before coughing them up in the dark, hence the iffy smell. The probability is that like other mediums under pressure to produce results to order, she sometimes cheated to ensure the punters got value for their money.

But even Mr. James conceded that no amount of cheesecloth could account for all of Mrs Duncan’s materialisations. Nowhere is this made plainer than in the evidence offered by defence witnesses at her Old Bailey trial in 1944. And whatever reservations he had about her mediumship, Mr. James never failed to voice sympathy when speaking of her ordeal in the courtroom, one of the last people in the country to be prosecuted under the Witchcraft Act of 1735. Years later it struck me that his sympathy might

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in part be due to the knowledge that he, too, could have fallen foul of this archaic piece of legislation, had the Chief Constable of Cardiganshire been disposed to press charges. It was the outcry that followed Mrs. Duncan's conviction, notably among Spiritualists, that would lead in 1951 to the repeal of the Witchcraft Act, making life less hazardous for all who dabble in occultism. If only for that reason, it may be worth remembering what the fuss was all about.

The affair began at the end of 1943 when police in Portsmouth raided an establishment known as the Master Temple Psychic Centre, a room above a chemist's shop in Copnor Road, run by the shop's owner Ernest Homer and his common law wife, Elizabeth Jones, originally from South Wales. Among those attending the Temple was twenty-eight year old Lieutenant Stanley Worth of the Royal Navy Reserve, who went there, he would later claim, because he felt uneasy about his mother's interest in Spiritualism and was curious to learn more about the subject. Unimpressed by what he saw and about to abandon his quest, he allowed himself to be persuaded to buy a ticket to a forthcoming demonstration by Mrs. Duncan, a popular attraction along the South Coast. A day later he returned to purchase a second ticket, this time for a fellow officer who, he admitted, was an out-and-out sceptic. On hearing it, Mrs. Homer, a veteran of World War I concert parties, promised to give him the fright of his life and allocated him a seat in the front row. It cost an exorbitant twelve shillings and sixpence.

At the subsequent demonstration Mrs. Duncan's spirit guide, Albert, turned up on cue, as did other regulars including the discredited Peggy and the ubiquitous parrot, the former managing two verses of 'Loch Lomond'. But Albert was not on form that afternoon, possibly because of Lieutenant Worth's unhelpful behaviour when, for reasons best known to himself, he falsely claimed acquaintance with several of the spirits, one of them an auntie he knew to be alive and well. Next day, feeling cheated of his twelve and six, Worth turned up at Portsmouth Police Station to lodge a complaint.

Now the plot thickens. While on the premises he was persuaded by a Detective Inspector Ford to attend a second séance at the Master Temple four days later, this time armed with a police whistle and a torch and in the company of another of his chums, War Reserve Constable Cross. The attendance that afternoon comprised thirty participants from this world

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and four, including a reinvigorated Albert, from the next. Scarcely had the fourth spirit visitor materialised, however, than Cross jumped from his seat in the second row, barged through the row in front and tore aside a curtain to reveal what he claimed was a flustered Mrs. Duncan struggling (yet again) to conceal a bed sheet she was using to impersonate the dead. If true, then this time she was too quick for her opponents, for as he made a grab for it, the sheet slipped through his fingers and was never again seen. If, that is, it existed in the first place.

By now Ernest Homer, his Master Temple desecrated, was lashing out at Cross, while the treacherous Worth, his torch still beamed on Mrs Duncan, observed struggling to get back into her shoes, blew his whistle to summon Detective Inspector Ford and three other policemen from the shop downstairs. The whole thing had been a set-up.

But why? One explanation is that it was part of a nationwide, if spasmodic, effort to deter fraudulent mediums from preying on vulnerable people in wartime. In this particular case, however, a different explanation was circulating within days of the police action. Its starting point is the sinking of a battleship, HMS Barham, by German torpedoes on 25 November 1941.

With the war not going well, the Admiralty, concerned for the nation's morale, had decided to withhold news of the ship's fate until the end of December, when relatives of those who perished, over 800 of them, were belatedly informed of their loss and, in the same letter, requested not to speak of it. A further month would elapse before the incident was officially announced. Yet already in November one of the drowned seamen had materialised in front of his wife (his mother according to one report) at a séance conducted by Mrs. Duncan, again, as it happens, in Portsmouth. Not only did the spirit visitor give a full account of the incident but visible on his cap, according to those present, was the name HMS Barham. (Sceptics have pointed out that in wartime no such identification was worn.)

When word of this reached a well-known Spiritualist, himself a civil servant in one of the Government Ministries, he immediately made enquiries about the fate of the vessel. The answer he got was that the ship had indeed been sunk but news of it was not being made public.

Whether or not reports of what took place at the séance are correct – and

they have not gone unchallenged – they must have caused alarm to officials, especially as the fate of another battleship, HMS Hood, had similarly been referred to, this time without naming the vessel, at one of Mrs. Duncan's séances earlier that year, in this case even before the authorities themselves had learned of its loss. With the country at war, 'spirit' messages of this kind risked compromising national security, a risk that must have caused still graver anxiety two years later when secret plans were being drawn up for the Normandy landings. What is known for certain is that by December 1943, Mrs Duncan was under police surveillance in Portsmouth and that the officer in charge of that operation was Detective Inspector Ford. There was even talk of her imminent arrest. All of which entitles us to think that more lay behind Lieutenant Worth's interest in the Master Temple than his mother's infatuation with her ouija board.

And the aftermath? Not, as might be expected, a routine appearance before the local Bench, a modest fine and an order to keep the peace. (The Vagrancy Act of 1824 was made for that purpose.) True, after several nights in Holloway, Mrs. Duncan did appear at Portsmouth Magistrates' Court on 25 January, but proceedings were suspended while the Director of Prosecutions, intent on securing a custodial sentence, examined the available options. Conspiracy to defraud was eventually chosen, at least until someone pointed out that to secure a conviction more substantial evidence was needed than a missing piece of bed linen.

Finally and in spite of widespread derision, recourse was had to the Witchcraft Act. On 23 March after a brief preliminary hearing, the trial opened at the Old Bailey and lasted seven days. At the end of it the jury found Mrs. Duncan guilty, an outcome not all that surprising given the catch-all provisions of the Act, and the Recorder of London, Sir Gerald Dobson duly sentenced her to nine months in jail.

By common agreement her cause was not helped by the strategy adopted by her leading Counsel, Charles Loseby, a committed Spiritualist. He had reckoned on securing an acquittal by persuading the jury that the spirits materialised by his client were not made of regurgitated cheesecloth, as her adversaries contended, but were the real McCoy. With that in mind Loseby called nearly fifty witnesses who, though unconnected to the goings-on in Portsmouth, were happy to testify that Mrs. Duncan had reunited them with deceased family members and friends. Deserving of mention,

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because typical, are two such instances described by a Mr. Alfred Dodd from Liverpool These relate to séances held four years apart, the first in Manchester during 1932:

"There came the living form of my grandfather. I knew it was him because he was a very big man. A very tall man, about six feet and one inch at least, very corpulent. He looked round the room very quizzically until his eyes met mine. He then strode across the room to where I was. He pushed the heads of two strangers that were before me on one side like that, and he put out his hand and grasped mine. He said as he grasped it, "I am very pleased to see you, Alfred, here in my native city." I was very surprised to see him and looked at him closely and said to him, "Why, you look just the same." He had on his smoking-cap that he used to wear. He was dressed in a dark suit. He had on his donkey fringe that I knew so well, having been brought up with him from five years of age. His face was brown and bronzed just in the same way; the same look in his eye; the same expression and tones I knew so well...He next said, "I am sorry you are having such a rough time." (This was true.) He then touched upon a very personal matter, and concluded, "Ban is here." Ban was the pet name of an old nurse. Holding my hand all the time, he used some rather characteristic expressions like "Keep your pecker up old boy", and "Never say die while there's a shot in the locker."

Quite a different sort of visitor turned up at a second séance, this time in Bootle:

"She stood there and she put up her hand to me, and waved in exactly the same way that she waved when I took her to her last social....She stood there, dressed in a flowing white robe and over it was a fine curtain of net. I was so astonished that I stood up in my seat, which I ought not to have done, and called out to my wife, "Why, it's Helen, it's Helen!" The girl did not come to me direct, she came right around the room from left to right, and she stood before me, a living, palpitating woman. The same that I had known so well, dark and ruddy hair, the same eyes, hazel; they shone with animation, her face the same ivory pallor on her cheeks. Then I heard her speak and she spoke with the same soft Scottish accent that I knew so well."

Helen had died in 1897. The question is, was the "Helen" who came and chatted to him some forty years later the person he took her to be, briefly endowed with form and speech? Or was she another Helen, the ungainly Mrs. Helen Duncan, all 17 stone of her, wrapped in a sheet? The jury opted for the latter.

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The trouble was that, no matter how impressive, even moving, were the testimonies offered to the Court, they remained much of a muchness and a pretty depressing muchness at that. The jury became bored and in the end disgruntled. Only Mr. Loseby failed to notice. And the judge dismissed his request, as did the jury when offered the chance, that Mrs. Duncan be allowed demonstrate her powers there and then. But still worse was to come. For by introducing character witnesses only too happy to reminisce about events prior to the débâcle in Portsmouth, Loseby enabled the Prosecution to divulge in Court that Mrs. Duncan had a previous conviction. The ladies "Outsize" vest had come back to haunt her.

Still, as Mr. James acknowledged, some good did emerge from it all when the Witchcraft Act of 1735 was repealed seven years later. As for Mrs. Duncan, following her release from prison she continued to entertain her customers with Albert and the hyperactive Peggy, as well as restore to them their dear departed, though Mrs. Evans conceded that her powers were by then in decline. As was her health. But the police were not through with her yet. In November 1956 they disrupted another séance, this time at a private house in Nottingham, but again no incriminating evidence was found, their heavy-handed behaviour widely blamed for the medium's death two months later.

All of which happened barely three months after the departure, sudden but less final, of Mrs. Caradoc Evans from our humdrum lives. By then her Blue Stone had been on display at the Little Theatre for the agreed two weeks. Shortly after the matinee performance that Saturday she presented herself at the box office to reclaim her property and pocket her share of the takings. Asked what these were, the girl selling tickets listlessly told her they came to a meagre fifteen shillings. "Are you telling me," shrieked Mrs. Evans into the hatch, "that only fifteen people came? Fifteen out of a population of ten thousand? Twice that many if you count the holiday visitors." Urgently summoned by telephone, Mr. Armstrong rushed to the front of the house, still in period costume (the play that week was Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon*) and a false moustache. According to a group of pensioners who had arrived early for the seven-thirty show, the ensuing exchanges were terrible to hear, ending only after Mr. Armstrong, his honesty impugned, handed over the full fifteen shillings. He then all but bundled Mrs. Evans down the front steps to where the captain was struggling to fit the stone into the boot of his car. Before they drove off she made him go back

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twice, once for the easel and a second time for the copy of *Hell Freezes*.

"I know she's a friend of yours, but I didn't have the heart to charge," Mr. Armstrong admitted to my parents later, "not when the people who came looked so pathetic. I mean it's just a piece of bloody rock."

But the rock's owner was undeterred. Shortly afterwards she inveigled her way onto a television programme called *The Secret Arts*, telling viewers about the marvellous properties of her blue stone, though few beat a path to her door in the weeks that followed. The stone now rested in a grotto specially built for it by Captain Hewitt in his garden at Aberdyfi, the design said to incorporate several features he remembered from his visit to the cave on Mount Elgon, though elephant tusks were not among them. Meanwhile under another of her pen names, Oliver Sandys, Mrs. Evans set about writing a booklet, *The Miracle Stone of Wales*, in which she again described how contact with it comforted the bereaved, restored sight to the blind, cured deformities and returned the sick to health, even proposing that the Captain's grotto was Aberdyfi's answer to Lourdes. Outside the house an ever-growing number of crudely painted signs urging motorists to stop, despite a nasty bend close by, suggested that pilgrims were few and far between.

Mrs. Evans died in 1964. I am told she left the stone to the Welsh Folk Museum in Cardiff but nobody there knew what to do with it. Other people say it finished up in North America.

By then Mrs. Duncan had been dead for eight years. With her own departure to the spirit world, ectoplasm grew scarce and by now is as rare as snowflakes in the dog days of summer. According to sceptics this is because the development of more sophisticated surveillance techniques, including night-sight equipment, prevents mediums from getting up to trickery in the darkness they insist on, their excuse being that ectoplasm and light are mutually incompatible.

It is a good thing no one bothered to tell Fenris. But then despite claiming he was made of ectoplasm, Dion Fortune must have had in mind something more refined (in every sense) than whatever flowed from Mrs. Duncan's nose and mouth or other places too intimate to mention. For his part Mr. James believed that ectoplasm of the Duncan variety, when not fraudu-

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lently produced, was a cruder version of the “substance” acquired by Inner Plane impulses when operating within space and time. Its probable source was the medium herself, being a product of her mind and, more precisely, her emotions. Parapsychologists call it psychotronic or bioplasmatic energy, which sounds impressive but leaves us none the wiser. Psychologists, too, speak of something similar and, perhaps not surprisingly, its operation captured the attention of Carl Gustav Jung who tried in the nineteen-thirties to demonstrate its existence by collaborating with Professor Farny of the Zurich Polytechnicum, inventor of an apparatus said to register an unknown type of energy, dubbed “anthropoflux” and emitted by the finger tips and palms of the hands.

Others conducting similar research were Julian Krmessky in Prague and, perhaps best known of all, the Russian Semyon Kirlian but today few scientists believe the results obtained show anything other than natural variations in the moisture level of the skin. This may also be true of the apparatus devised by Victor Adamenko, another Russian, in the nineteen-seventies, though the technique he favoured – placing electrodes at known acupuncture points along the feet and hands – had already been developed by Dr. Reinhold Voll (1909-1989) who used it for the diagnosis and treatment of illness. Today it is extensively used by practitioners of complementary medicine, especially in Germany.

More relevant may be the work of the Swiss scientist, Auguste Henri Forel who coined yet another new word – ideoplastic – to describe physiological changes induced by the mind, whether consciously or not. Such changes are by now taken for granted, with terms like ‘psychosomatic’ and ‘placebo effect’ already part of everyday language. Parapsychologists, however, take things a step further by suggesting that similar effects may occur *outside* the individual whose mind is responsible for causing them. One theory is that under certain conditions human beings can “exteriorise” protons and neutrons which will organise themselves into shapes suggested to them. Already there are reports of experiments in which images have been mentally projected onto blank sheets of paper, a kind of two-dimensional equivalent of the materialisations described by Alfred Dodd at Mrs. Duncan’s trial. The antics of the table in the “Philip” experiment may likewise be attributable to molecular energy unconsciously supplied by those present.

In Mrs. Duncan's case and in similar cases, it would mean that the energy generated was somehow converted into ectoplasm, which, given its peculiar consistency, then assumed whatever likeness she or others in the room might unconsciously impose on it. Not without significance was the tendency of such likenesses to match the observer's recollection of the persons they purported to represent. Thus, far from being restored to his prime, Mr. Dodd's deceased grandfather was the elderly gentleman, complete with smoking cap, he remembered as a boy, while the lovely Helen had remained her former youthful self. Another witness called to testify in Court, a nurse by the name of Jane Rust, even reported feeling the bumps on her late husband's arthritic fingers, as well as recognising two familiar moles on her dead mother's face. The bumps and birthmarks were presumably there because she expected them to be, not because our imperfections necessarily accompany us to wherever we go after dying.

Such an explanation is at least plausible, even if it fails to answer everything. It does not, for instance, entirely account for the personal information frequently imparted by what in effect are three-dimensional hallucinations, some of it, in Miss Rust's case, delivered by an aunt who not only addressed her in Spanish but with the Gibraltarian accent she had when alive. Neither does it explain the hymn-singing miners.

Which again suggests that in the end we are better off not appealing to science for answers or rummaging about for psychotronic or bioplasmatic forces, not to mention the unsavoury-sounding anthropoflux, but, rather, should accept that under certain conditions mind and matter may be interchangeable. This is what Mr. James, like every other magician believed. To him matter, like space, was permeated by a subtle form of energy, comparable to the *prana* of Hinduism or what Taoists hold to be the all-pervading *chi*. Called the *Anima Mundi* by Paracelsus, it was, in Mr. James' own words, the glue that kept everything together and, since we live in a dynamic universe, gave it direction as well. Like the *élan vital* postulated by Henri Bergson it is the engine that drives created things towards their ultimate fulfilment or, if you like, the Omega point proposed by Teilhard de Chardin.

Such grandiose themes had not yet been touched upon by Mr. James in my presence. This would happen only later. After all it was not long since I had graduated from the tedious job of visualising matchboxes and describing to him what I saw. Even now a major part of my Saturday afternoons still

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consisted of mucking out the cowshed. As I said before, there was nothing magical about that.

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Neither was there anything magical about my first meeting with a “materialised” entity of the kind just described, one that, in the language of occultism, had been “conjured to visible appearance”. This quaint expression refers to somebody who is impelled – and in my case it was a “somebody” rather than a “something” – to quit the Inner Planes and briefly occupy the same universe as us. The word “impelled” may not be entirely apt in this case, however, suggesting something rather more forceful and dramatic than what actually happened, just as the conjuration, if it took place, was so discreetly managed that it fully escaped my notice. For unlike many of his fellow magicians Mr. James was not one for ceremony or any kind of fuss. Neither did he dress up for such occasions: that was an indulgence reserved for his weekly trips into Aberystwyth. He would definitely have felt out of place in the company of Dion Fortune and her acolytes amidst the mock-Egyptian pageantry of Queensborough Terrace.

He admitted as much to me shortly before he died. Home after finishing my first term at University, I had arrived at Tanrallt to find him and the two Miss Davieses, ladies renowned for their Sabbath observance (neither had missed Sunday School in fifty years and each had a medal to prove it), about to start feathering a heap of freshly killed geese. Here was an annual event I had taken part in many times before and always with relish – the old ladies came laden with home-made fudge and mince pies – provided it fell on a Saturday or on any other day once the school holidays had started. This year, however, the three of them were watching me closely, curious to see if I would join them as usual or regard the job as beneath me now that I had grown up and gone away to college. They need not have worried. Within minutes all four of us were hard at work.

In alchemy the word “goose” is applied to an item of equipment, essen-

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tially a kind of retort, which owes the name to its distinctive shape, being a round, glass vessel with a long, slender neck. Known also as the *Ovum Philosophicum* or Philosophical Egg, it is where transmuted metal, usually liquid gold, is said to gather whenever an alchemical operation has ended in success. Whenever, that is, the goose has laid a golden egg.

Mr. James had his own version of the alchemical goose. In fact he had three, one of them a gander, and the trio were so reliably productive that he often boasted how each bird was worth its weight in gold. All year, filled with self-importance, they strutted about in the yard as if they owned it, tolerating Mr. James because he fed them twice a day but fiercely resentful of anybody else. More terrifying than the irascible cockerel – he just pecked at my feet but never drew blood – the gander would charge towards me every Saturday, wings flapping, neck stretched forward like a battering ram, before I even had time to jump off my bike. On our first confrontation I resolved to stand firm, not because I felt all that brave but because I wanted Mr. James to think I was. In any case I knew birds have no teeth so reckoned my assailant's honking had to be worse than his bite. A nip on the shin taught me better. "He'll get used to you" Mr. James kept murmuring as he dabbed a home-brewed tincture of marigold on the wound, which helped staunch the bleeding but made it sting like mad. It took only days to heal but the bruise stayed with me for over two weeks, while the gander never did get used to me. I just learned to keep out of his way.

Never was the risk of attack higher than in April when his female companions, equally ill-disposed but quite not so belligerent, would suddenly appear with some two-dozen fluffy gosling in their wake. Mr. James tried always to ensure that the chicks hatched on or as near as possible to the Vernal Equinox, believing the date to be auspicious. (Alchemists, too, liked to commence the Great Work on that day.) Over preceding weeks, he would convey any eggs he found – each bird could be relied on to lay three or four a week – to the dresser next to the fireplace and carefully place them in one of the drawers. By the time there were twenty-six of them, usually around the end of February and beginning of March, he would give each goose thirteen eggs, another detail he regarded as auspicious, on which he persuaded them to sit. And once they were hatched, a regime of fresh air and exercise but above all a generous supply of whole wheat would ensure that when December came, the gosling had metamorphosed into plump young adults, ready for the table.

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Once, over a cup of tea and a mince pie, the Miss Davieses confided to me that before killing each bird, a sight I was glad to be spared, Mr. James made a point of murmuring a few words over it, possibly a blessing or demand for forgiveness. Whatever the motive, it never made me feel any less sorry for the dishevelled corpses piled high on a big trestle table deep inside the barn.

The secret to feathering a goose is first to pour boiling water over it in order to soften the skin, then hang it up and start pulling its feathers sharply downwards. That way they come out cleanly and easily. Before allowing us to start, however, Mr. James took care to remove the wings from each bird. These he would later give away to his more favoured customers for use as feather dusters throughout the following year, receiving from them in return a colourful assortment of hand-knitted jumpers, mittens, bed socks, and scarves. One day Bronwen Humphreys, who lived with her mother on the road to Devil's Bridge and was said to have her eye on Mr. James, turned up with a full set of chintz curtains she had made for the house. "What does she think I need curtains for?" its owner had asked when she left, "There's no one around to look in."

"You never know" cackled the younger Miss Davies, "Miss Humphries might come back after dark!"

Earlier the same afternoon her sister had reminded Mr. James of the hamper that used to arrive every year all the way from London.

"I've kept the bowl you gave me, the one the Christmas pudding came in. It's got the name of the shop on it."

"Fortnum and Mason," volunteered the second Miss Davies, "Isn't that right, Mr James?"

"It is indeed. A present from Lord Tredegar."

"Very posh," the pair chorused in English.

As it happened, my father had a distant cousin living in Tredegar, someone referred to by the family as "Poor Auntie Sal". (I still remember her

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address: 28 Charles Street.) Rumoured to have fallen in love with him as a young girl but knowing her feelings, like those of Bronwen Humphries towards Mr. James, were not reciprocated, she had vowed never to marry. Years later I came across a box of oil paints she had given him on his twenty-first birthday, with the words "To Jim, may your life never lack tenderness" inscribed on the lid. At the time she probably still hoped she was the person destined to provide it. That evening when Mr. James and I were on our own I mentioned her to him.

Tredegar House, he gently explained, home of Evan Morgan, 2nd Viscount Tredegar, was not to be found in the small mining town where Auntie Sal, like Aneurin Bevan two doors away, was born, but is set in a thousand acres of parkland on the edge of Newport, some twenty-five miles distant. Here the Viscount – he inherited the title in 1934 – kept a menagerie of exotic fauna including a kangaroo he taught how to box. There was also a macaw that accompanied its owner everywhere but, contrary to popular legend, is unlikely to have climbed up the inside of his trouser leg so as to frighten lady visitors by peeping out from between the buttons of his flies. A budgerigar might manage it, but certainly not a macaw. Unless, that is, Evan Morgan's trousers were every bit as voluminous as Mrs Duncan's vest.

She, by the way, is said to have visited Tredegar House on several occasions. On one of them her spirit helpers produced an ectoplasmic owl instead of the usual parrot, there presumably being enough of these on the premises already. Indeed, the Morgan family had quite a thing about birds, with Evan's mother, the former Lady Katherine Carnegie, from time to time persuaded she was one herself. When that happened, she would go out into the grounds and build a large nest of sticks and mud then install herself inside it, cooing prettily at all who chanced to stroll by. Among them, for they are known to have attended Evan Morgan's weekend parties, might have been H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley and Augustus John.

And even Mr. James. To my surprise, having always believed he had never ventured far beyond Aberystwyth, I learned that afternoon how in the summer of 1943 he travelled by train to South Wales to spend a couple of nights at Tredegar House. A fellow guest on one of them was Aleister Crowley, though according to Mr. James, the Great Beast had calmed down a lot by then and, despite being rather standoffish to start with, turned out to be good company. For several hours the two of them discussed the

elemental kingdom and how best to cope with its more intractable inhabitants, a topic of special interest to their host, for though nominally Roman Catholic, even a Knight of the Sovereign Order of Malta and of the Grand Cross of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, not to mention Privy Chamberlain of Sword and Cape to Popes Benedict XV and Pius XI, the twice-married Evan Morgan dabbled also in magic. Indeed, Crowley once described him as the Adept of Adepts, though the old rogue may have been trying to butter him up at the time, being as usual desperately short of money.

At this point Mr. James got up and fetched a book from the dresser, possibly from the very same drawer he used for storing his goose eggs, carefully removing the piece of black silk in which it was wrapped. The book's cover was deep blue with red lettering. I seem also to recollect that it had a coloured frontispiece, as well as more illustrations inside, mainly black and white but with at least one again in full colour. From its pages Mr. James now proceeded to read aloud to me the *Hymn to Pan*, composed by Crowley in 1929, his rich baritone voice doing full justice to the poem's incantatory, even magical, force:

“Thrill with me lissom lust of the light
O man! My man!
O Pan! Io Pan!
Io Pan! Io Pan! Come over the sea
From Sicily and from Arcady
Roaming as Bacchus; with fauns and pards
And nymphs and satyrs for thy guards...
Thee I invoke, abiding one
Thee, centre and secret of the Sun,
And that most holy mystery
Of which the vehicle am I.”

When he reached the end, neither of us spoke, the words of the final invocation still ringing in my head long after he had uttered them.

“Don't believe all you hear about Crowley,” murmured Mr. James at last, “He was bad enough but not as bad as people make out. Not even as bad as he liked to pretend. And what I've just read out isn't too bad either.”

“You made it sound very good.”

“Not as good as it did at the old boy’s cremation. People tell me you’d have heard a pin drop that afternoon. The chap they got to read it, Wilkinson his name was, I met once. He used to call on Cowper Powys in Blaenau Ffestiniog, skinny chap with dark hair. I think he put boot polish on it. Very black, it was.”

For a while neither of us spoke. I was starting to think Mr. James might be day-dreaming when suddenly he closed the book and replaced it without a word inside the drawer. On the table lay the piece of silk it had earlier been wrapped in but before I could draw it to his attention he was speaking again.

“You shall have this book when I’m gone. There’s an essay by Mme. Blavatsky in it as well, *The Voice of the Silence*. Best thing she ever wrote, if you ask me.”

Until that day Mr. James had seldom mentioned Aleister Crowley. Come to think of it, I can recollect hearing his name only once before and that, appropriately enough, was around the time I found myself, to my surprise, in the presence of a being “conjured to visible appearance”. Before describing how this came about, I should mention that conjuring to visible appearance is not an exercise magicians, even the most accomplished among them, undertake lightly. And the risks involved became plain to me when Mr. James described with mischievous relish how Aleister Crowley, then only in his twenties but never one to duck a challenge, made his first attempt. For this purpose he used a ritual found in the *Book of Abramelin*, a German work composed half way through the 15th century, probably in 1458, in which the author, identified as Abraham of Worms, describes to his son, Lamech, how he travelled to Egypt – where else? – in pursuit of magical knowledge, eventually coming upon the secret teachings of Abramelin the Mage. Among these were helpful instructions on how to become acquainted with one’s Holy Guardian Angel.

Or perhaps not so helpful for the whole process is pretty cumbersome and requires a full eighteen months of preparation, though in the corrupted version familiar to Crowley, based on a French text preserved at the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal in Paris, these preliminaries are reduced to one third of that time. In his *Confessions* Crowley describes how he quit London for

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Scotland in pursuit of the recommended solitude, acquiring a house called Boleskine (“secure from observation and interference”) on the shores of Loch Ness. As instructed, he converted one of the north facing rooms, with a window to the east, into an Oratory, carefully sprinkling fine sand over the terrace outside and erecting at one end a “lodge” where the demons that are a by-product of the operation might safely be confined pending the arrival of the Holy Guardian Angel. (Once he turns up, they become more biddable and better behaved.) But Crowley had not yet fully mastered his trade and the spirits evoked, principally the four regents of the nether world, together with a large retinue of servants, escaped from the lodge and, literally, caused pandemonium. Worse, their malign influence lingered on after their departure, causing the Boleskine coachman, hitherto teetotal, to take to the bottle, while a lady guest of impeccable morals departed for London and took to the streets. Even more unfortunate was the local butcher who inadvertently cut his arm with a cleaver some days later and bled to death on the floor of his shop.

“Take it all with a pinch of salt” cautioned Mr. James, noting my alarm, “In any case Crowley got to meet his Guardian Angel in the end.”

More successful was another famous magician who, according to Crowley, was none other than himself in a previous incarnation. This was the French occultist, Alphonse Louis-Constant, better known as Eliphas Lévi, the hebraized version of his name, who died in 1875, a few months before Crowley’s birth. Intended for the Church, Lévi quit the seminary of St. Sulpice at the age of twenty-six after falling in love with one of his young catechists and in 1841 was sentenced to eight months in prison for publishing a socialist tract, *La Bible de la Liberté*. Although he went on to write other political pamphlets and spent more time in jail on account of them, he is today remembered for his books on magic, their subject matter better suited to the rich purple tinge of his prose. In what many regard as his finest book, *Le Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie* (1856), he sought to persuade his contemporaries that the sacred writings of ancient civilizations such as India, Egypt, Assyria and Israel represent a common tradition that embodies the esoteric meaning of the world’s great religions, one and the same in every age and in every place.

Lévi’s greatest enthusiasm, however, was for the Kabbalah, its methods according to him, as exact as mathematics and its speculation more profound

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than all other systems of philosophy put together. It not only offered the serious student privileged insight into the cryptic teachings of Abraham, Enoch, Hermes and Solomon but invested in him the power to control unseen forces active in what Lévi termed the Astral Light, another name for what we agreed earlier to call the Inner Planes. Although in later books, written after an ambiguous reconciliation with the Church, he warned readers against the actual practice of magic, he himself tried his hand at it in the early summer of 1854 during a visit to London, possibly at the invitation of the novelist and occult enthusiast, Edward Bulwer Lytton.

In his account of the affair Lévi describes how he returned to his hotel one evening to find waiting for him the torn-off half of a visiting card, with the seal of Solomon drawn on one of its sides and on the other an undertaking that the missing portion would be restored to him outside Westminster Abbey at a certain hour the next day. His curiosity aroused he kept the appointment and duly found himself invited to step into a carriage where a well-spoken woman, her face hidden by a veil, handed him the other half of the card. She then went on to offer him all the facilities he needed – temple, robes and specialist equipment – should he consent to perform a magical operation on her behalf. Its purpose was to conjure up the shade of Apollonius of Tyana so that she could put to it a question of special importance to her. It would be an opportunity for him to do the same, should he wish.

As Lévi would have known, Apollonius, a near contemporary of Jesus, was a Pythagorean philosopher whose biography, composed by Flavius Philostratus in 200AD, tells how he journeyed to Egypt and India in quest of secret knowledge. It goes on to describe not only the many wonders he performed upon his return, among them healing the sick and, on at least one occasion, raising the dead, but also his insistence on repentance, love and forgiveness of one's enemies. This account provoked a great deal of bickering between pagans and early Christians, the latter uneasy about its similarity to the narrative contained in their Gospels. It also established its hero's reputation as a miracle worker, one that held a special appeal to 19th Century occultists. Among them was Mme. Blavatsky who, relishing the unease of the Church, made much of him.

Over the next three weeks Eliphas Lévi (not, it must be said, a huge favourite of Mme. Blavatsky who claimed he overcharged an aunt of hers for a brief lesson on how to read the Tarot cards) reflected constantly on the

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life of Apollonius, even holding imaginary conversations with him, while for the final seven days he observed a strict fast, having eaten no meat throughout the previous fortnight. When the big day came – it was July 24th – he repaired to the temple, its walls covered with four concave mirrors, to begin the proceedings, though his hostess was forced to withdraw from them at the last minute. Undeterred, Lévi donned a white alb and crown of vervain leaves, then placed himself before a marble altar covered in lambskin, his magical textbooks, the *Philosophia Magica* of Patricius and the *Nuctemeron*, traditionally attributed to Apollonius, within easy reach.

As the appointed hour struck, the necromancer, eyes shut tight, offered a solemn invocation, while struggling to dispel the giddiness already threatening to engulf him. When at last he found the courage to look around the room, he briefly glimpsed an apparition in one of the mirrors but two further imprecations were needed before it emerged to stand in front of him, a lean and somewhat melancholy figure, its beardless features every bit as grey as the shroud in which its body was wrapped. At some point he managed to put to it two specific questions, the one requested by his patroness, the other of interest to himself. No further commerce was possible between them for the apparition reached out and touched Lévi's ritual sword, causing his arm to go numb. With that, he fell to the ground in a faint. "Death" had been the answer to the lady's question, while his own, repeated twice, brought about the disclosure of certain secrets which, he later boasted "might change, in a short space of time, the foundations and laws of society at large, if they came to be known generally."

What these secrets were, he never disclosed. Or so it is maintained. Yet a rumour persists that before leaving London, Lévi visited an address in Soho, where he divulged them to a political theorist and part-time contributor to the *New York Herald Tribune* who, like him, had been influenced by the French utopian socialist, Charles Fourier (1772 - 1837). This man – whose two sons-in-law would be compatriots of Lévi's – was Karl Marx.

Do we owe the Communist Manifesto, at least in part, to Eliphas Lévi? Or even to Apollonius of Tyana? Probably not. In any case the former was never entirely convinced he "really invoked, saw and touched" the great Apollonius. "I am not so hallucinated" he maintained "to affirm or so un-serious as to believe it", his suspicion being, that "the preparations, the perfumes the mirrors, the pentacles" he had employed were enough to induce

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“a drunkenness of the imagination”. At the same time he conceded that, while unable to explain the “the physical laws” that enabled him to see and touch the apparition, see and touch it he indubitably did “and this”, he concludes, “is sufficient to establish the real efficacy of magical ceremonies.”

It is prudent to bear this in mind when considering my own first encounter with an entity, which I, too, saw and touched but which, like the mournful Apollonius, differed fundamentally from the things we routinely see and touch in the world around us.

By then I was fourteen and for the first time permission had been granted by my parents for me to stay overnight at Tanrallt. A classmate, Colin Samuel, was due to accompany me, the pair of us sleeping outside in a tent I had bought for £7, post and packing free, from Gamages store in High Holborn. What I neglected to do, however, was order a groundsheet to go with it, doubtless because the money I had managed to save didn't stretch that far. And without a groundsheet under him there was no way Mrs. Samuel would allow her Colin to sleep out of doors, especially in a place as notoriously damp as Pumlumon. He was in any case prone to coughs, was Colin, so much so that Mr. James had urged his mother – she possessed the face of a Madonna, he once confided to my father – to smear goose grease on his chest in cold weather “just to keep the heat in”, as his own mother did when he was small. Mrs. Samuel stuck to Friar's Balsam and a jar of embrocation.

And so I left one Saturday to spend my first ever night at Tanrallt, without Colin and without my brand new tent. Instead I took with me two sheets and a pillowcase, ostensibly because my mother wished to spare Mr. James the chore of washing bedclothes after my visit, but in truth because she feared his own, even if clean, might not be properly aired.

“I don't want you catching rheumatic fever,” she muttered, as she helped me secure the package to the crossbar of the bike. And a poor job we made of it, the pair of us, for no sooner had I left Aberystwyth than the parcel began tipping from one side to the other, nearly causing me to fall off more than once. The bother of keeping one hand on the sheets and trying not to wobble meant the journey took almost twice as long as normal so that even the geese seemed relieved to see me when I arrived, not that it made them any more docile.

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With supper over and the dishes washed, Mr. James settled into his wing chair by the fire while I sat upright on the settle opposite. Nance, the older of the sheepdogs was snuggled up beside me, while Bet, her daughter, endowed with one brown eye and another of the palest forget-me-not blue, lay at my feet, opening one or other eye from time to time, as if to check I was still there, my usual time for heading home by then long, long past.

To my right on the table burned an oil lamp, its glow too weak to light up every corner of the room but enough for me to read the advertisements in an old copy of the *Farmer's Weekly* discarded in the hearth – Bibby's Cattle Cake, Massey-Harris Tractors, Carter's Tested Seeds and, my favourite, Alfa Laval, a name far more exotic than the milking machines it referred to.

Mr. James, meanwhile, was talking softly about the sacred plants of the Druids, the most important of them mistletoe. A symbol of wisdom, its juice, extracted at the Winter solstice, was guaranteed to confer immortality on anyone who drank it in combination with five out of the ten other medicinal plants favoured by the old Celtic priesthood. (These were wormwood, burdock, sage, heather, chamomile, wild orchid, ground ivy, couch grass, club-moss, and pimpernel.) The trouble, said Mr. James, was that nobody knew any longer which five were the right ones. Worse, even if these were correctly identified, either by luck or by a process of elimination, there remained the need to combine them in exactly the right proportions.

"You'd be gone long before you found the recipe," noted Mr. James, adding that immortality was in any case more likely to be a curse than a blessing.

What prompted this conversation was a question I put to him earlier that evening about the medicinal uses of vervain, its leaves, you will recollect, making up the crown worn by Eliphas Lévy to summon up the shade of Apollonius. This, too, was a plant the Druids held in high regard. Good at calming nervous tension, like other herbs with blue or purplish flowers, it would, Mr. James suggested, be worth taking before my school exams at the end of the month for not only did it soothe the nerves but, equally welcome, sharpened the wits while about it.

At this point Mr. James lit the oil lamp. Before settling back in his chair, he went over to the dresser and put a match to some charcoal in a small

incense burner. Standing between a Staffordshire dog and a copper kettle in urgent need of a polish, it had always struck me as just another ornament but now, once the charcoal was glowing, he scattered over it some concoction removed from one of the drawers.

“Frankincense, lemon grass, agalloch resin and storax – that’s *real* storax, remember, not the stuff they use nowadays,” he muttered, as if expecting me to commit the list to memory. Frankincense I had heard of but not the rest. And never would I have known how to tell real storax from any other kind.

“Vervain and mistletoe weren’t the only herbs the Druids held sacred,” continued Mr. James after a silence during which I thought he might have nodded off. “No, they had eight others as well. For a start there was blackbane and what people call thorn apple, though it’s too near bedtime to talk about those. We don’t want you having nasty dreams. Now, clover, that’s a nice one, they liked clover a lot, especially if they came across a five-leaved one. That guaranteed you good luck. Then there’s belladonna and a plant called Lady’s Slipper – *esgid Mair* in Welsh - and of course St. John’s Wort. Best thing for depression, St. John’s Wort.

“That’s only six, “ I ventured, “You’ve forgotten two.”

“At my age you forget a lot of things.”

I never found out what the missing two were, though meaning to look them up.

Fifty years on, I forget a lot of things as well.

The Druids, continued Mr. James, believed the sun had two faces. One was familiar to us as the celestial body that is our source of light, while a second, concealed from view, illuminates the Other World. There, like the akashic record, it mirrors everything that happens within time and space but, just as importantly, reflects also the perfected state reality is slowly moving towards. Subsisting outside Time, it is able to contemplate both the progress of history and its ultimate consummation.

Yet Mr. James maintained that despite knowing the outcome of the pro-

cess to which our universe is subject, the sun's hidden aspect was in no way superior to its visible or "mundane" equivalent. On the contrary the reality presided over by the latter possessed a quality absent from the Inner Planes. For implicit in our unfinished and imperfect environment is a type of freedom not found elsewhere, one that empowers us to exercise our will by making choices that affect ourselves, other people and the world at large. According to Mr. James, freedom of this kind stands in contrast to, say, the single-mindedness of the angels, their total commitment to their allotted function, however admirable, devoid of moral worth because determined by their nature rather than by choice.

That same choice, Mr. James maintained, explained why the natural world was as cruel as it was beautiful. Sometimes, with us both out of doors and him not in the happiest of moods, he would tell me what a blessing it was to be deaf to the cries of the living creatures around us. Like our unhappiness, theirs was a consequence of the freedom prevailing everywhere, its purpose, though knowing it is scant consolation, to allow the human race to collaborate in bringing things to their ultimate perfection. With that completed, time would end and the sun's two faces merge into one.

"Why does God let bad things happen?" I asked him, too young to know the question was not new.

"Because we're free to do what we like. If God interfered when things went wrong, trying to help here and there, where would he stop? There'd be no end to his meddling. So only by staying out of it can God make us responsible for what we get up to. That's why bad things happen. It's the price we pay for being free. What's sad is that other living things pay the same price. And all because of us."

By then my eyelids felt heavy. A dose of metaphysics on top of a cheese and pickle supper, plus the warmth from the fire and the smell of incense, made it hard to stay awake. The two dogs were asleep, the one next to me whimpering from time to time as it dreamt of chasing rabbits, neither animal the least bit troubled by the wind which, restive throughout the afternoon, had now erupted into a terrible rage, beating against the walls of the house and rattling the window frame behind me. I felt glad to be indoors, warm and dry, rather than outside in my Gamages tent which, once unpacked, looked a lot less sturdy than it did in the catalogue. Already I was sorry I'd

bought it.

Whether because of the racket outside or just plain tiredness I suddenly found myself unable to make out what Mr. James was saying. Only by listening carefully, did I realise he was no longer speaking Welsh or, as he sometimes did, English, but a language I couldn't understand. He reminded me a little of Uncle Davy who suffered a stroke three months before he died and, though well enough to come into the shop every day, was unable to do more than make strange gurgling noises no one understood. My mother, keen for me to stay in his good books, had urged me to let on I knew what he was saying and, depending on his expression, nod or shake my head accordingly. The trouble was Uncle Davy's face stayed the same at all times, another effect of the stroke, so in the end I did neither and it was the housekeeper, Miss Morris who inherited his house, his money and his Unilever shares, even the car promised to my father – and Miss Morris couldn't even drive. But Mr. James betrayed no sign of a stroke. Whatever their meaning and purpose, the words issuing from his mouth were most definitely those he intended to say.

No sooner had he stopped speaking than there came a loud bang on the front door. It took three further bangs before I realised they were caused not by the wind but by someone outside impatient to find refuge from the storm. So far off the beaten track was Tanrallt that the chance of anyone turning up there in the dead of night and on such a wicked night as this, was unlikely and I began to feel ill at ease. As did the dogs. At the first knock, the one next to me leapt to the floor and slunk off to the far end of the room, while the other disappeared beneath the settle. Normally, both stood their ground and barked whenever visitors called. Only Mr. James seemed unperturbed.

“Come in” he shouted.

Now, not even a voice as powerful as his would have been heard by someone on the other side of the heavy oak door, let alone above the racket of the wind and the rain. Yet heard it must have been, just as the door must have opened, though I never noticed it, to admit the man now standing in the middle of the room. With the assurance of someone familiar with the house and completely at home, he moved towards the hearth, drew up a bentwood chair and sat himself down between the two of us.

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“We were discussing the Druids” said Mr. James without preamble, “I can’t remember why.”

“Vervain” I heard myself suggesting, “You’d gone on to talk about mistletoe, how the Druids cut it down with a golden scythe. On the sixth day of the new moon”

“According to Pliny” murmured the stranger, “It’s in his *Natural History*.”

“Volume sixteen. I’d already told him that. He’s doing Latin at school.” Mr. James sounded tetchy.

“We’re reading Caesar’s *Gallic Wars*”, I specified.

“Have you ever seen vervain?” the visitor enquired, his features more distinct now that Mr. James had turned the lamp up a little. I admitted I had not.

“There can’t be much in these parts,” he went on, “the ground’s too wet.”

“There’s plenty on the hill behind the house. A place called Domen Bedwyr.”

Though still on the defensive, Mr. James seemed slightly less peeved.

Thought to be a prehistoric burial site, Domen Bedwyr lay above the road leading to Llangurig. Like many places of its kind, it was rumoured to be haunted.

“Have you been there?”

With these words our visitor turned to face me. Only then did I think there was something odd, something not quite right about him. His eyes gave him away. With an intensity of colour I had not seen before, they struck me as not just blue but archetypally so, as if in them or, rather, beyond them, there stretched an infinity of blueness which I risked getting lost in, were I to stare at it too long.

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“No, I’ve never been to Domen Bedwyr.”

“Then you shall”, promised our visitor.

I was disappointed yet also relieved when at this point Mr. James announced it was time for me to go to bed. Having lit a candle stub and satisfied himself it was stuck fast to its saucer, he handed it to me, with a warning not to set the house alight. I remember walking to the bottom of the stairs before turning, well brought-up little chap that I was, to bid him and the other man goodnight. What sticks most in my mind, however, is how unsurprised I was to find only Mr. James in the room. Well, him and the two dogs. There was no sign of the stranger with the disconcerting blue eyes. Even the bentwood chair was back in its usual place against the wall.

Before my head touched the pillow, I noticed that the wind had dropped to a whisper.

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What I took to be a whisper must have been a dying breath, as I later found out. For no sooner was I asleep than I woke up again to discover the room bathed in moonlight and myself standing by the tiny dormer window, eyes drawn to where someone who looked suspiciously like me, lay quietly sleeping. Within seconds that suspicion was confirmed when I found myself transported, though there was no movement as such, just an involuntary displacement, to the end of the bed and there compelled to acknowledge that the person lying in it was no trick of the moonlight but the genuine me.

No less genuine, however, was the other me that stood calmly taking stock of it. Indeed, of the two it seemed the more real, having somehow become the custodian of my self-awareness. At the same time the sleeping figure was also unquestionably me, not some clever impostor, even if my consciousness had for the moment chosen to desert it. No doubt the situation would have alarmed me far more, had it not been for those dream experiences Mr. James sought to encourage as part of my magical training, one of the earliest being the long hike to the top of Penmaenmawr mountain. Because of them I was accustomed to what seemed to all intents and purposes like a temporary dislocation of mind and body. What was novel this time, not to say disconcerting, was to find myself contemplating the body my mind had unexpectedly abandoned.

Even so, the detached but fully conscious me was not deprived, like some ever-smiling Cheshire cat, of all vestige of corporality. Looking down I saw I now inhabited a less solid version, indistinct and strangely translucent, of the body I had recently vacated, though this might well have been an illusion designed to make me feel more at ease, especially as I appeared

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to be wearing a duplicate set of pyjamas as well. Possibly what I saw was ectoplasm, the stuff of Mrs. Duncan's parrot, though I rather hoped it was not. Whatever its nature, it seemed indifferent to the limitations to which physical objects are subject, as I discovered when, perhaps because it was the last thing on my mind before going to sleep, I remembered Domen Bedwyr and the vervain said to flourish there. The thought had no sooner entered my head (or whatever now functioned in its place) than I found myself standing on an unfamiliar hillside where clumps of sparsely leaved plants, more grey than green, perhaps an effect of the moonlight, were scattered about. From them rose tiny spikes bearing purplish or, rather, mauve flowers, not unlike heather but less densely clustered. I did not need to be told what they were.

But told I was all the same.

"Vervain. Doesn't look much, does it?"

By my side and seemingly a great deal more solid than me, stood the man I had seen or thought I had seen, earlier that night in Tanrallt.

"You know where you are, don't you?"

I believe I told him I did. I know I meant to.

With that he proceeded to talk about the journey which, according to him, I had embarked upon since meeting Mr. James, one that would lead me to what he called the innermost part of my being. It was not a destination that appealed to me greatly, at least not then, despite his further assurance that I would discover there a portion of me, which, though *in* the world, was not *of* it. By accepting it or, as he put it, by integrating it into myself, I would experience a wider reality – eternal, immoveable and timeless – with which I had always been one, while never being less than myself. Spoken in the kind of elegant Welsh I heard from the pulpit in chapel every Sunday night, his words were to stay forever lodged in my mind, though I barely understood them at the time and may not fully understand them even now.

When he had finished my companion turned to me and smiled.

"Go on", he said, giving me a nudge with his elbow, "pick some to take back

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with you. You might as well, after coming all this way.”

This reminder of Tanrallt was again translated into action, propelling me back to the tiny bedroom where I had just enough time to take in the iron bedstead, the rose-bedecked wallpaper, even the damp patch in the middle of the ceiling, before being reunited with my body and falling sound asleep. The next thing I remember was waking up next day, contented and refreshed, as the morning sunshine spilled generously in through the window.....

“An Out of the Body Experience. OBE for short. They’re not at all uncommon.”

The judgement was delivered by a softly spoken but unmistakably bored-looking woman I had latched onto at a Freshers’ party within days of arriving in London, my attention drawn to her by a medical student, one of several Welsh expatriates I’d already got to know, who admitted to finding her attractive. In telling me this, he chanced also to mention her interest in the paranormal, for me incentive enough to approach her and, after very little time, tell her what happened that night in Tanrallt.

Nowadays a well-known expert in her field, she was then a junior lecturer in the Psychology Department of a London college, though already beginning to make a name for herself following an investigation she had conducted into poltergeist activity on a council estate in Hammersmith. (Her findings received lots of coverage in the London press, with her picture appearing in, I think, the *Evening News*.) Anyway, she struck me as the ideal person to tell about my trip to Domen Bedwyr, though with hindsight, I can see how naive I was to have thought so. What I now clearly see also is that people like me, each with a far-fetched story to relate, must have accounted in large part for the boredom written all over her face.

Suddenly aware of it, I was stupid enough to make matters worse by trying to impress her with how much I knew, comparing my childhood adventure with something I’d come across in a book on Tibetan Buddhism. In it reference was made to a ghostly duplicate of our physical body, known as the Bardo-body, into which consciousness travels after death and sometimes during sleep, though the latter happens rarely and is soon forgotten. I explained also how a similar experience could be induced by certain types of

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meditation, adding that traditional Buddhism disapproved of such practices, dismissing them as trivial and, worse, an obstacle to enlightenment.

“Yes, yes,” murmured my listener once I stopped showing off, “and while you’re at it, why not mention the Egyptians? They believed in a subtle body as well. Their word for it was “ka” or “khu”. That doesn’t make the experience any more real.”

“Mine seemed real enough”

“It may have *seemed* real but it was totally subjective, a matter of the self looking in at itself. Were you drunk? I got drunk once and the detached me ended up all over the place.”

It struck me that her attention was about to do the same. I did not altogether blame her.

By then Tanrallt seemed a very long way behind me, another world almost, even a different life. So did Aberystwyth, so did my parents and so did all my old friends. It was not just a matter of geography. Over the previous week I had grown up, all of a sudden and much to my surprise, but growing up meant growing away from things that once had meant so much to me. Now, unexpectedly, these had become, if not unimportant, then a great deal less important than they used to be. It was exciting, certainly, but it also made me sad.

The process must have started in my final year at school when I was lucky enough, or so people kept telling me, to be offered a place at one of the Oxford colleges. By June, however, after a second, more critical look at what life promised to be like among the dreaming spires, I decided not to go there. Instead I found myself dashing off a late application to King’s College in London, partly because its French Honours course was highly regarded, but chiefly because, after consulting the *A to Z*, I worked out it would take me under fifteen minutes to walk from there to Regent Street.

Regent Street? Its sudden and unexpected attraction stemmed from an article I had come across one Sunday in the *News of the World* about a police raid on a club called The Mousehole, which, the paper went on to say, was located “off Regent street” and patronised by men in thrall to the most

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unspeakable debauchery and vice. (Worse, some of them copied Mr. Armstrong and wore make-up.) For by then, despite, if not partly because of, Aberystwyth's fascination with such wayward inclinations, I knew I was gay, though not as yet familiar with the term, and found myself perfectly happy to be so, proof that the unrepentant Jack Bradley had been a good role model to have throughout my adolescence.

My original intention after finding my feet in London was to share a flat with two or three others from my year but then, with barely a week to go before the start of term, my mother took fright, alert suddenly to the immorality rampant, if not through London as a whole – bits of it were quite respectable, she conceded – then at least in those parts undergraduates were likely to favour. (A local girl, daughter of a chapel deacon, had recently moved from Blackheath to Chelsea, epicentre of the *vie bohème*, and within a month stopped writing home every Friday.) In the end she managed, with the help of friends with a dairy on the corner of Harrow Road and Elgin Avenue, to find a respectable Welsh-speaking family in Clapham, staunch chapel-goers, who undertook to provide me with a room, breakfast and evening meal, plus full board at weekends and all my washing done, for only £3 a week. Clapham, she noted, was far enough from Chelsea.

Kindly and hospitable though my hosts turned out to be, I did not stay with them long. Within a couple of months I found myself a tiny bed-sitter, really no more than a box room, on the top floor of a grand house in Onslow Gardens which, being South Kensington, qualified – just – as one of those respectable bits of London my mother approved of. A gas ring compensated for the absence of breakfast, evening meal and weekend board, while a launderette on Brompton Road took sporadic care of my washing. It wasn't quite *la vie bohème* but near enough.

Before leaving home I saw Mrs. Caradoc Evans for what must have been the last or last-but-one time, when on the eve of my departure she landed in our house with the gift of a Ronson cigarette lighter, no longer new but restored to its box and neatly wrapped in tissue paper, together with a card bearing the address of the United Lodge of Theosophists (“they’ll make you very welcome at their Sunday evening talks”). She also brought with her a bottle of champagne she insisted we empty there and then. Slightly squiffy, as she put it, by the time Captain Hewitt came to fetch her – “Masonic business” she’d murmured earlier to justify his absence – she paused

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on leaving to warn me never to sit on the seat in public lavatories either in London or anywhere else. A maiden lady of her acquaintance had caught something unmentionable by doing precisely that on Wolverhampton station. I have followed the advice ever since.

The train that conveyed me to London next day was the Cambrian Coast Express, leaving Aberystwyth station at eleven o'clock and arriving in Paddington shortly after four, just in time, my mother pointed out, to avoid the start of the rush hour. Driving it, at least as far as Shrewsbury, was Mr. Millichip, now rid of the chest pains that brought him to Tanrallt but still overweight, who took the trouble to climb down from the footplate and amble over to wish me good luck. "One minute and we'll be off", he called out on his way back to the engine, but the one minute passed, the guard blew his whistle, even waved his green flag, yet still nothing budged, leaving my parents and me, our goodbyes spent, to suppose that Mr. Millichip wanted to give us a few extra seconds together, little realising we had nothing left to say. My mother took out her hankie and wiped away a tear, but was rebuked by my father.

"When I left home, my mother never cried. That was 1916 and I was off to war."

"It wasn't the same. There were eight of you. I've only got him."

"I'll be fine" I assured them.

And I was. By the day of the Freshers' Party I had the feeling I'd been in London for months. Already I no longer needed to look at the map when travelling by Tube.

"I'm convinced my OBE was real, not something I imagined"

Still looking bored but willing to indulge me, the lady parapsychologist asked what made me so sure.

With that I proceeded to tell her how in bed at Tanrallt the next morning, I, too, had tried to persuade myself that my adventure of the previous night was just a silly dream, a moon-struck fantasy brought on by the cheese and pickle supper or, more probably, the incense Mr. James had lit to

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make the room smell sweet. And, yes, when the time came for me to push back the bedclothes I was all but sure of it. But something put paid to that.

For as the sunshine spilled across the little bamboo table next to the bed, passing over the stub of candle in its china saucer, it appeared suddenly to pause. And there, in the candid light of day, not in fickle moonlight, lay the few sprigs of vervain I had picked the night before, their grey-green leaves still wet with dew, their purple-lidded flowers only just half open.

My listener gave a patronising smile. The bored look suited her better.

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For the sake of Mrs. Caradoc Evans and the second-hand lighter (fake tortoise-shell and fired by gas), not to mention the prophylactic advice she volunteered, it would be gratifying to report that after finding my feet in London I made straight for the United Lodge of Theosophists. Instead I went off in search of The Mousehole.

Yet time and time again, despite forays into every side street and alley between Oxford Circus and Piccadilly Circus, I never managed to find it. Neither the phone book nor Kelly's Directory was of any help and it seemed unwise, even reckless, to ask a policeman. (Already the turbaned Sikh doorman outside Veeraswami's Restaurant was eyeing me suspiciously every time I cut through Swallow Street.) On the other hand I did get to find every other gay club in the West End so my expeditions were not entirely fruitless.

And soon I was familiar with them all. Up a narrow staircase close to Saint Martin's Lane was the A and B, short for Arts and Battledress, where the piano was white, the patrons more artistic than soldierly, and the walls bedecked in deep crimson flock. (I think the lighting was also red, though that might have been the Apollo, just as popular but a little seedier, two or three streets away.) Behind Charing Cross Road, on the edge of Soho, were the Pink Elephant and, scruffiest of all, the Cross Keys, popular with crooks and all the more appealing on that account. One of my favourites, partly because its decorative young barman came to live with me in Onslow Gardens, was the Toros in Panton Street, a reincarnation of what had once been Le Boeuf sur le Toit. Located on the first floor of a rather shabby building opposite the Comedy Theatre, its immediate neighbour was a rival establishment, rather prim but far from proper, called The Music Box. Most prestigious – and pretentious – of all, however, was The Rockingham

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in Soho, which aspired to be a gentlemen's club, not anything so grand as its rivals in Pall Mall but tastefully done out all the same, with fitted carpet, beige sofas and a large mahogany table bearing copies of *The Tatler*, *Country Life* and *The Field*, as well as that day's edition of *The Times* and *Daily Telegraph*, while its walls were papered in Black Watch tartan, possibly a reference to some Scottish connection I knew nothing about. Unsurprisingly, it tended to attract an older and more affluent clientèle, with a sprinkling of younger men, all enviably good-looking, who were happy to pay court to their better-off seniors, though their services, unlike *The Tatler* and *The Field*, were seldom free of charge.

In those less tolerant times, when homosexuality was still proscribed by law, establishments such as these were forever at risk of being raided by the police, as had happened to the Mousehole, so stepping into them, usually through an anonymous doorway and up (or, in the case of The Rockingham, down) a shabby flight of stairs, gave one an agreeable twinge of excitement. In theory admission was restricted to members and their guests but in practice nobody got turned away, at least no one who was male, young, and passably good-looking. All that was needed was a signature in the Membership Book kept by the entrance, it being tacitly understood that the name you provided would be either fictitious or completely indecipherable. To be safe, I ensured mine was both.

Towards the end of my first month in London a letter from home reported that Mrs Evans, who, my mother wrote, had reverted to calling herself Countess Barcynska, was pressing to know if I had yet been to visit the Theosophists. (She had asked me to pass on her regards to the woman in charge.) And so, following this reminder and with nothing better to do with a Saturday afternoon, I found myself walking along Bayswater Road on my way to their headquarters in Queen's Gardens, just around the corner as it happens from the house Dr. Penry Evans once shared with his Priestess of Isis, though this was not known to me at the time.

Nowadays the stretch of pavement from Marble Arch to Kensington Gardens is busy at all hours of the day, never more so than at weekends when amateur painters exhibit their work along the park wall, row upon row of woodland vistas, graceless nudes and dire seascapes with the waves oddly static and the sunsets too vermilion to be true. Things were less busy in my time at college, but every bit as colourful thanks to the streetwalkers

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who lined up there from noon to the advent of dusk, weather and Vice Squad permitting. (Most carried elegant umbrellas but, like Mr. James, never unfurled them.) Listless and indifferent though they seemed, these women had about them an edginess, a kind of proud defiance, that today's weekend painters, with their Volvo estates and comforting flasks of tea, never quite manage. In reality they did very little walking, their movements confined to shifting their weight from one foot to the other, each careful not to budge too far from where she stood in case she trespassed on her neighbour's pitch. As a rule they left you alone unless you happened to slow down or show a flicker of interest but usually a scruffy, duffel-coated student like me could expect to walk by without being accosted, as I did that fine October afternoon.



Madame Blavatsky: portrait by Enrico Resta

My destination turned out to be a substantial, double-fronted mansion with steps leading up to a pillared entrance. Number sixty-two had the same down-at-heel look as its neighbours, its walls in need of fresh paint and bits of stucco peeling resignedly from them. The building might have looked unoccupied, were it not for a small notice board that assured the public they were welcome at the meetings listed underneath. By no means reassured, I rang the bell.

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It took several minutes for anyone to answer but eventually the door opened a few distrustful inches and there came a curt, interrogatory “Yes?”

The speaker revealed herself only after I mentioned the name of Mrs. Evans or, rather, Countess Barcynska. She was an elderly woman dressed all in grey and looked every bit as dilapidated as the building she took care of. On her feet were bedroom slippers, likewise grey but with a defiant red pom-pom on each. After allowing me inside, she closed the door behind us and turned the key to lock it.

“You can’t be too careful. This area went down once the war came. People left and never came back. Now it’s all bed-sitters and”, she nodded in the direction of Bayswater Road, “that sort of thing.”

Facing me in the hall was a larger than life portrait of Madame Blavatsky, a scarf covering the back of her head and a centre parting through what was visible of her short, crinkly hair. Peering straight ahead, with one long-fingered hand cupping her chin, she looked thoroughly fed up.

“Taken in 1888” I was told, “by Enrico Resta, the court photographer. He’s managed to capture something of her mystery.”

As I knew by then, the only mystery surrounding Madame Blavatsky was whether she was truly a miracle worker and “the mouthpiece of hidden seers” as a report published by the Committee of the Society for Psychical Research put it, or merely a “vulgar adventuress”. The same report, published in 1885, concluded she was neither but, instead, had “achieved a title to permanent remembrance as one of the most accomplished, ingenious, and interesting impostors in history.”

The recipient of this dubious accolade was born Helena von Hahn in Southern Russia on 31 July 1831. Her maternal grandmother, Princess Dolgorukova (like Barcynska a name to be savoured) had been a noted botanist, while her mother wrote romantic novels whose mildly feminist themes were considered ahead of their time. A precocious self-willed child, Helena is said to have amused her playmates with her psychic powers and caused consternation among the superstitious servants charged with looking after her.

In 1849 she married Nikifor Blavatsky, eighteen years her senior and so by no means the doddering old man she subsequently liked to suggest, probably in an attempt to justify having left him within a year while “still”, as she tactfully put it, “a complete woman”. First she travelled to Egypt where by her account she became the pupil of a Coptic magician named Paulos Mentamon but it was not until 1851 while visiting England, that she met her true mentor, a Rajput nobleman called Morya and one of the “hidden sages” referred to by the Society for Psychical Research. At the time she and her father, in London for the Great Exhibition, were strolling through Hyde Park, though with consistency not among her strong points, she also claimed that her first encounter with the “Master of my dreams” took place one moonlit evening in Ramsgate. Wherever it was, Morya invited her to visit him in Tibet.

According to her, the Master M, as she later called him, was someone “so great that he towers above the rest of humanity, for he has already attained the summit of ordinary human evolution”. As such he belonged to a secret fraternity whose members, no longer subject to the physical limitations the rest of us put up with, are active in promoting the moral and spiritual welfare of our race. Others engaged in this enterprise include Confucius, Moses, Jesus, Cagliostro and even John King (alias Captain Henry Morgan), father of the enigmatic Katie King who so beguiled Sir William Crookes. Assisting Morya in his work was another Master and fellow Sikh, Kuthumi Lal Singh, familiarly known as Koot Hoomi, who would later play a significant role in Madame’s life, though his day job was official “guardian of an Occult Museum in vast subterranean halls near His house”. This, by the way, was the same house Madame Blavatsky claimed to have stayed in when she did finally make it into Tibet. Also in residence was Koot Hoomi’s sister, thus ensuring the proprieties were duly observed.

Following her meeting with the Master M, Madame Blavatsky spent the next seven years of her life travelling all over the world, returning briefly to London in 1853 after an unsuccessful attempt to enter Tibet from neighbouring Nepal. From there she journeyed to America, Japan and India before managing, now with luck on her side, to penetrate a few miles, but no more, over the border into Tibet. Or so she maintained. More sceptical biographers contend that the only travelling she did was around provincial opera houses, having by then become the mistress of an ageing bass

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named Agardi Metrovitch. She is even rumoured to have borne him a child, a sadly deformed little boy, who died in 1867, though throughout her life she would insist she had remained the “complete woman” she was when she deserted her husband. What followed next is also disputed, with those sympathetic to her (and, to be fair, it is sometimes hard not to be) willing to accept her claim that in 1867 she was injured while fighting at Garibaldi’s side in the Battle of Mentana, leaving shortly afterwards for yet another excursion to the Mystic East. On this occasion she claimed to have finally secured permission to enter Tibet where she remained for several months.

One sympathetic biographer (who would later switch his allegiance to Sai Baba) has offered this idyllic account of a typical day she spent there:

“Helena lifted her eyes from the old manuscript of Senzar characters that she was struggling to translate into English, and looked through the window. She never failed to get a wonderful lifting of the heart from the mass of snow-capped mountains guarding the peaceful valley, from which no sound came save the occasional tingle of a distant cowbell or the warble of a bird in the trees behind the house. This, she thought, must be the abode of perfect peace and happiness. Sometimes she had to pinch herself to prove that she was really there in the flesh, and not suffering another of those double personality experiences, that she was actually near Shigatze, Tibet, living in the house of the Kashmiri adept, Kuthumi Lal Singh. His sister and his sister’s child were there too, and, wonder of wonders, most of the time under the same roof as herself was the great Protector of her visions, the Master Morya.”

Alas, the harsh reality – even biographers need to pinch themselves from time to time – was that during this period Madame Blavatsky was traipsing with Metrovitch from one seedy hotel to the next, the pair of them landing finally in Odessa where some of her kinsfolk were living. An observer noted that the couple looked “a rather sorry sight, he a toothless lion perpetually at the feet of his mistress, an aged lady, stout and slovenly”. Stout she certainly was, as the picture in front of me that afternoon suggested, perhaps a little slovenly, too, but certainly not “aged”. After all, she had not yet turned forty.

However much she might boast of meeting oriental sages not quite of this world or visiting Tibet, the truth is that Madame Blavatsky began her occult career as an ordinary Spiritualist medium, even running her own *Société Spirite* in Cairo for almost two years before being forced to close it down when evidence of wholesale fraud was uncovered. She had set sail

for Egypt, still with Metrovitch in tow, in 1871 but her companion was not one of the sixteen out of four hundred passengers, herself among them, rescued when their ship went down in the Eastern Mediterranean, although she would always maintain he was poisoned by Jesuits after they disembarked in Alexandria.

Nobody's fool, Madame rapidly became disillusioned with Spiritualism, as I would do some eighty years later. In my case it followed more visits to the church in Colwyn Bay and to others dotted up and down the North Wales coast, all as disappointing as the first, so much so that in the end I wrote a pompous letter (but then I was only fifteen, though in it I professed to be older) to the editor of the *Psychic News*. The clairvoyance I had so far come across, I huffily declared, was "an insult to the sacred nature of this faculty". "Anyone", I continued "could stand on the platform, point vaguely into the congregation and describe little old ladies in shawls, with as much success as the "mediums", and receive the same number of tolerant grunts. I do not question the sincerity of these Spiritualists. I am merely describing the impressions that I, as a young person, have gained on attending provincial churches."

Whether because it touched a raw nerve or because so few schoolboys read the *Psychic News*, still less wrote letters to its editor, mine was published two weeks later. Its appearance prompted no fewer than thirty readers to take the trouble to write to me, all but one sympathetic and bent on offering encouragement. The exception was a man in Brighton who used so much bad language my parents sent his letter off for the editor to see. Apart from this last one I dutifully replied to them all. Most welcome of the lot, however, was a note that came from the editor himself, Maurice Barbanell, tactfully addressed to my parents but clearly intended for me. It contained an invitation to contact him, were I ever to find myself in London. That hugely impressed Mrs. Evans.

In Madame Blavatsky's day Spiritualism was still relatively new, though reports of poltergeists and hauntings were abundant long before that. The craze started in 1848 when the parents of two young girls, Margaretta (Maggie) and Catherine (Katie) Fox, of Hydesville, a small town in Wayne County, New York, first heard rapping sounds coming from the room in which their daughters were sleeping. On going upstairs, they discovered them sitting up in bed and conversing with the "spirit" which, the children

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claimed, was responsible for making all the noise. The new spread rapidly and, now joined by curious neighbours, the adults devised a way for the spirit to answer questions by giving an appropriate number of knocks. By these means it identified itself as that of a pedlar murdered on the premises some years before. (Human remains were reportedly unearthed under the cellar some years later.)

Within a short time the two girls were playing to packed houses in theatres and concert halls throughout the North East, now supported by an older sister, Leah, who, not to be outdone, had discovered that she, too, shared their lucrative talent. This being America, competition was not slow in coming and soon, with imitators springing up everywhere, the nation was gripped by a frenzy of knocking, rapping and table-turning. The craze spread "like a prairie fire", as one commentator put it, yet in the eighteenth-fifties, while the flames were still unquenched, Maggie Fox dismayed her admirers by confessing that the manifestations had been a hoax all along. The raps, she divulged, were produced when the girls cracked small joints in their fingers and toes. But far from ending their career, this admission gave it a boost. Now, the crowds that once had flocked to marvel at the spirits, could marvel at the dexterity with which the ladies clicked their joints on command.

Until, that is, one sister declared that the earlier confession had been false and that the spirits did after all do the rapping. There followed a confusing series of confessions, retractions and still more confessions until, with two of the sisters hopelessly addicted to drink, it became impossible to determine where the truth lay. Not that it mattered, for rival mediums had in the meantime engineered phenomena more spectacular than anything so far accomplished by the Foxes, among them levitation, spirit photography, transfiguration (where the medium's features take on those of the departed) and, what would later become Mrs. Duncan's *forte*, full form materialisations, though to her credit, Katie Fox did have a valiant stab at these.

Mired in controversy it might be, but the advent of Spiritualism was soon being proclaimed a turning point for humanity by supporters and spirits alike. Leah Fox called it "the dawning of a new era", anticipating by over half a century Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, for whom it constituted the "New Revelation". In 1853, five years before his death, the eminent social reformer, Robert Owen, born fewer than thirty miles from the home of Mr.

James, was equally enthusiastic. His own conversion followed a visit he paid to Mrs. Hayden, an American medium who took London by storm despite the tedium of her *modus operandi*: she handed clients a card on which the alphabet was printed, then after putting a question to the spirits, they had to run a pencil down the letters until there came a rap. The corresponding letter was dutifully noted and after umpteen repetitions a reply of sorts would emerge.

Understandably, the big question wanted answered by those stampeding to make contact with the spirit world was what conditions over there were like. In the event, few were disappointed, even if in Mrs. Hayden's case it took an awfully long time to find out. For virtually without exception they were introduced to a world reassuringly similar to the one they inhabited but with none of its imperfections. The spirits, too, seemed much the same as they had always been in life.

Typical was Michalko Guegidse, a Georgian manservant of one of Madame Blavatsky's relations back home in Russia. By then living in New York, having left England for America in 1874, she had travelled one day to a farmhouse in Chittenden, Vermont after reading in the press about the mediumistic prowess of the farmer's two sons, William and Horatio Eddy. Their séances were nothing if not rumbustious and the visiting spirits more plentiful and certainly more colourful than anything later managed by Mrs. Duncan, herself no slouch in such matters. Prior to Mr. Guegidse's appearance, dressed in national costume and happy to play Caucasian dances on a guitar, participants were entertained by a Red Indian named Santum and his squaw Honto, a splendidly attired Kurdish warrior and an African witch-doctor sporting a golden head-dress but precious little else. Unfortunately the impact made by the Georgian manservant turned out to be brief when, shortly afterwards, news reached Madame Blavatsky that he was very much alive and well back home in Russia.

Still, some good did come out of her visit to the Eddy homestead for it was during a break in the entertainment that she struck up an acquaintance with another spectator, there to write an article for the *Daily Graphic*, who was to become her closest collaborator and, despite an estrangement some years later, her lifelong friend. It started when he offered her a light for the cigarette she had just rolled. ("*Permettez-moi, Madame*" he had murmured chivalrously, all but exhausting his knowledge of French.) Theirs, he later

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recorded, was an acquaintance which, though “it began in smoke...stirred up a great and permanent fire.”

The man so ready with the matches was a lawyer named Colonel Henry Olcott, his army rank awarded for his success in uncovering fraud within the New York Mustering and Disbursing Office. Like Countess Barcynska's tea-planting Captain, he continued to use his title in civilian life and, also like him, had an interest in plant husbandry, having written a book on the cultivation of two types of sugar cane. Married and the father of two boys, he was, in the words of Madame Blavatsky, “a gay dog” who, after his wife left him, spent his nights in drinking clubs, none of them, it must be said, “gay” in the Rockingham sense but not entirely respectable for all that.

By now I had been staring at Madame Blavatsky's portrait for a good two minutes, struck for the first time by the way her eyes reminded me of the stranger I had met on Domen Bedwyr. Pleased by the interest I was showing, the woman beside me suggested we take a tour of the premises or at least of what she called the public rooms. Largest of these, it turned out, was a lecture hall on the first floor, just to the left of the staircase. An austere room filled with rows of plain wooden chairs and with walls painted an institutional eau-de-nil green, its only interesting feature was a row of life-sized portraits behind the lectern.

“This” my guide made a point of telling me, with something of the deference she had shown towards Madame Blavatsky, “is Mr. Judge.” The man in the picture, bearded and wearing a corduroy jacket, had his chin cupped in his hand as if wanting to imitate the pose Signor Resta had demanded of his subject. Who the other people were, I forget, but Colonel Olcott was definitely not among them.

From here we proceeded to the library on the other side of the landing, my guide's voice dropping to a whisper as we entered the room even though it contained nobody and, to all appearances, had been empty, not to say undusted, for the past thirty years. At one end, facing the window, hung a portrait of Koot Hoomi, the work of a German artist who, I was told, perceived his sitter clairvoyantly. Madame Blavatsky had nevertheless declared it a perfect likeness and ordered a companion portrait of Morya, also in the library but less conspicuously displayed. It struck me that both men – it was hard to tell them apart – were dead ringers for the doorman

outside Veeraswami's.

There was no sign of either Mahatma on the evening of September 7, 1875, when the idea came to Madame Blavatsky or to Colonel Olcott – neither could agree to whom it came first – of founding what would become the Theosophical Society, its purpose “to diffuse information concerning those secret laws of nature which were so familiar to the Chaldeans and Egyptians, but are totally unknown by our modern world of science.”

They and a group of friends, seventeen in all, had gathered in Madame's apartment at 46 Irving Place, Lower Manhattan to hear a talk on “The Lost Canon of Proportion of the Ancient Egyptians” by someone named George E. Felt, an architect and engineer with occult leanings. Professing to be familiar with the secret laws the society aspired to make better known, Felt undertook to return at a later date to teach his listeners how to evoke elementals, pocketing 100 dollars to cover his expenses. But the elementals declined to be evoked and Felt, too, quickly scarppered.

By then Madame Blavatsky, her attention focussed more on Ancient Egypt than Tibet, claimed to be receiving messages, either telepathically or by letter (in gold ink on dark green paper) from a certain Tuitit Bey, Grand Master of the Brotherhood of Luxor, as well as from a colleague of his named Serapis, the majority of them addressed to Olcott. Flattered though he was to be the object of such attention, he found the communications so banal that even he voiced doubts about them every now and then. But Madame was already too busy to care, having commenced work on her first book, *Isis Unveiled*, its expressed purpose to “prove that underlying every ancient popular religion was the same wisdom-doctrine, one and identical, professed and practised by the initiates of ever country, who alone were aware of its existence and importance.” By way of evidence, she pointed to “the prevalence of a system of initiation; in the secret sacerdotal castes who had the guardianship of mystical words of power, and a public display of a phenomenal control over natural forces, indicating association with preterhuman beings”. Prominent among these “preterhuman beings”, not unnaturally, were Tuitit Bey and Serapis, as well as the – as yet unannounced – Morya and Koot Hoomi. All of them, the author would maintain, had collaborated extensively in the book's production, though one critic, Emmette Coleman, identified no fewer than two thousand examples of plagiarism in the finished text. Original or not, the first edition sold out

within ten days.

The turning point in Madame's fortunes came in 1877 when she and Colonel Olcott moved to India and eventually settled in Madras. Within a short time the society (which more or less moved with them) had amassed a large membership thanks to Olcott's missionary zeal and, even more, Madame Blavatsky's ability to produce signs and wonders in profusion. Most common were the so-called "Mahatma" letters, ostensibly written by the Tibetan Masters, notably Koot Hoomi, either on demand after being telepathically requested by Madame Blavatsky, or on their own initiative. Sometimes these missives arrived by post or, more impressively, turned up in unexpected places, even dropping from the ceiling onto the head of their intended recipient.

But letters were not the only things turning up out of nowhere. Once, on a picnic attended by Madame Blavatsky while a guest at Rothney Castle near Simla, it was found there were only six cups and saucers for seven people, an extra guest having joined the group at the last minute, but our heroine calmly told a member of the party to dig nearby and there, sure enough, he unearthed a cup and saucer perfectly matching the six others. A second miracle occurred at a dinner party shortly afterwards when Madame Blavatsky urged her hostess to name a missing object, anything at all, that she would like to have restored to her. This turned out to be a brooch which had passed out of the family's possession some time earlier. "It will not be brought into the house but into the garden – I am told by a Brother", declared the mouthpiece of the Masters, leaving most of those at table to rush outside in search of it. And sure enough, there it was, neatly wrapped in white tissue paper, lying in a bed of nasturtiums. Only later would it emerge that Madame Blavatsky had retrieved the brooch from a Bombay pawnbroker some months previously, having bought the ticket from someone known to both its owner and herself.

In 1884 and now in poor health, Madame Blavatsky returned to Europe from India. Among those left behind to run the society's headquarters in the Madras suburb of Adyar – it is still there today – was an associate from her days with the *Société Spirite* in Cairo, Emma Coulomb and her carpenter husband. Resentful at not being put in sole charge of the premises, Emma turned up one morning at the home of a Rev. George Patterson, Presbyterian minister and editor of the *Madras Christian College Maga-*

zine, with a bundle of letters. In them Madame Blavatsky appeared to be soliciting the couple's help in faking the miracles which had made her so famous, help that included impersonating Koot Hoomi and fixing sliding panels behind a small wooden cabinet, respectfully known as the "shrine", that hung against a wall between the so-called Occult Room and Madame's bedroom next door. An aperture in the wall made it easy to smuggle into it letters and other small objects, encouraging visitors who had been shown the empty cabinet seconds earlier to think the Masters put them there. (Professor Humo would not have got away with it.)

As if publication of these documents in an article ("The Collapse of Koot Hoomi") Patterson wrote for his magazine and again in a subsequent pamphlet were not trouble enough, the newly formed Society for Psychical Research now dispatched one of its youngest and brightest members, Richard Hodgson, from London with a brief to investigate the wonders reportedly taking place in Adyar. It was his negative conclusions, some of which have since been called into question that led to Madame Blavatsky being described as "one of the most accomplished, ingenious and interesting impostors in history". She reacted by threatening to murder the Society's bosses but in the end contented herself with an irate letter to *The Times*, though the editor declined to publish it.

Still, it would take more than tribulations like these to finish off a woman who in her day had fought alongside Garibaldi, survived shipwrecks, travelled the world on her own and ventured deep inside the mountain fastness of Tibet. Indifferent even to the resignations pouring in from disaffected members of the Society, she pressed ahead with writing what her supporters rank as her crowning achievement, *The Secret Doctrine*, subtitled "The Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy" which appeared in 1888. And it is for this that many would like her to be remembered, not for the serendipitous teacups, missing brooches, the unexplained knockings that occurred in her presence or the invisible "astral bell" that tinkled on command. It is possible that early in her career she deemed it necessary to perform such sleight of hand, even to invent her Masters, Egyptian and Himalayan alike, then compose the letters attributed to them, inventing also the ancient texts in long dead languages she pretended her unseen Mahatmas had shown her. (*The Secret Doctrine* claims to be a commentary on one such text, the Book of Dzyan, written in an unknown language, precursor of Sanskrit, called Senzar). Such deceptions were possibly intended to give

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more weight to the message she craved to present to the world, done in the knowledge that without them few would have paid attention to a “stout and slovenly” Russian woman with a questionable past.

“What is one to do?” she is said to have asked her compatriot, Vsevolod Solovyoff, late in her life, though we only have his word for it, “when in order to rule men, you must deceive them, when in order to catch them, it is necessary to promise and show them playthings? Why, suppose my books and *The Theosophist* [the Society’s magazine] had been a thousand times more interesting and serious, do you imagine I should have anywhere to live and any degree of success unless behind all this there stood ‘phenomena’.”

Her final years were spent in London with Annie Besant, well-known free-thinker and social reformer, who became a convert after being asked by W. T. Stead to review *The Secret Doctrine* for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, though George Bernard Shaw would claim he passed it on to her after declining to review it himself. Her beloved Mahatmas, too, were still discreetly in attendance and the air around her, first in Holland Park, later at 19 Avenue Road, close to Regent’s Park, was often mysteriously filled with a fragrant scent of incense. Even the little astral bell still tinkled prettily from time to time. But her health was failing and she died, two months short of her sixtieth birthday, on the morning of 8 May 1891.

Downstairs again, our tour of the public rooms over, we had paused in front of Signor Resta’s portrait, the date of its subject’s death, like that of her birth, shown on a small hand-written card tucked into the base of the frame. Below it, on a table covered by a piece of green baize rested several books and an assortment of pamphlets, all looking as if they had lain there undisturbed for as long as the volumes in the library upstairs. Though I could ill afford it, I felt morally bound to make a purchase so ended up paying fourteen shillings for a history of the Theosophical movement from its 1875 to 1950.

“It’s a very balanced account,” the lady in the bedroom slippers assured me as she put it in a brown paper bag, adding a complimentary bookmark on which was depicted a painting by Paul Klee.

“Klee once described his work as taking a line for a walk,” I volunteered, keen to show I recognised the artist.

“And Madame showed him the path to follow,” came the pert reply, “and Kandinsky, too. She was an inspiration to them both. Have you heard of Piet Mondrian? He was indebted to her also.”

For what remained of the afternoon I sat by the Round Pond in Kensington Gardens quietly reading the book I had purchased. The day was sunny but none too warm. When the time came to make my way back to Onslow Gardens I felt rather sorry for Madame Blavatsky. With her ashes barely cold, her Theosophical lieutenants were soon bickering over the succession, though some of the blame was her own, as she had declined to name anyone to replace her after she died. Unsurprisingly Colonel Olcott felt the job should be his, having always been encouraged by her to believe so. The trouble was she had similarly encouraged others to believe the same thing with regard to themselves.

One of these was William Q. Judge, present, like Olcott, at the inaugural meeting in 1875. Entrusted with the thankless task of keeping the Society alive in New York after Madame and the Colonel set sail for India, he had not let them down. Never discouraged, despite coming close to it when his repeated pleas for a letter from the Mahatmas went unheeded, he had in those early days conducted meetings attended only by himself, going through the agenda point by point and dutifully writing up the minutes afterwards. But those lean years were now past. Already the American Section of which he became Permanent General Secretary was well on its way to the membership of six thousand, spread over 103 branches, as it proudly recorded in 1896.

Then, too, there was Mrs. Besant. Many had assumed she would become head of an elite group within the society known as the Esoteric Section, but Judge, drawn to London by news of Madame Blavatsky's death, suggested they divide this responsibility between them. And by happy chance he then came across a note urging precisely that, the initial M on its seal implying that its author was none other than the Master Morya himself. As if this were not enough, Mrs. Besant coincidentally found among some papers of her own a note bearing the same seal and, above the signature, the handwritten words “Judge's plan is right”.

But Colonel Olcott, sometime anti-fraud investigator for the War Depart-

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ment, was not so easily fooled. For a start he remembered how Judge, now suddenly the darling of the Mahatmas, had for years pleaded in vain for just one meagre word from them. More to the point he remembered receiving a letter from Judge in 1888 bearing the very same seal. That it was put there by the writer to boost whatever message the letter contained he had never once doubted, given that he himself had commissioned a Punjabi craftsman to make the seal some time earlier, intending to offer it as a present to the Master M. He had even asked Madame Blavatsky to “teleport” it to him in Shigatze but she refused after finding fault with the design. Put to one side, it somehow ended up in Judge’s hands.

There followed a welter of accusations and denials until in April 1895 the American branch voted to secede from the main body. Judge, still at its head, died within the year. His successor was Katherine Tingley, who ruled the Society for three decades and established a prosperous Theosophical community at Point Loma in California, though it later fell on hard times and the depleted membership ended up in Pasadena. Meanwhile Mrs. Besant effectively took charge of what remained of the parent organisation, helped after Colonel Olcott’s death, by another prominent Theosophist and former Anglican curate named C. W. Leadbeater. (Madame Blavatsky who disliked him, always changed his initials to W.C.) Under his influence Mrs. Besant embraced ideas that even Madame Blavatsky would have considered plain daft before going on to proclaim a Hindu boy living on the Adyar estate, Jiddu Krishnamurti, to be the coming World Teacher, an incarnation of the Lord Maitreya (the name of the next Buddha) and, as a sop to Western sensibilities, a vessel for the Christ impulse. Obligingly Leadbeater traced Krishnamurti’s ancestry through various incarnations all the way back to 40,000 BC, having already done the same for Mrs. Besant and himself. The pair even set up a new organisation, The Order of the Star in the East, to be put at the disposal of their young protégé, but in 1929 Krishnamurti disbanded it and publicly rejected the messianic role the two of them had foisted on him. He then left to teach his own path to self-fulfilment, prudently claiming to remember little, if anything, of his youthful adventures with the Theosophists.

Denied her role in the Second Coming, Mrs. Besant returned to her earlier commitment to good causes, campaigning for Indian Home Rule, women’s rights, children’s welfare and the abolition of capital punishment. Leadbeater, the former clergyman, also reverted to form, becoming a leading

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light of the Liberal Catholic Church, an organisation set up by his close friend, Charles Wedgwood, and affiliated to, but not officially part of, the Theosophical Society. As Bishop Leadbeater, he spent his days happily ordaining new clergy, designing sumptuous vestments and inventing ever more elaborate rituals. It was all very camp. In 1919 four of six Liberal Catholic priests in London were accused of sexual offences against adolescent boys, a charge Leadbeater himself had faced in 1906 when he resigned from the Theosophical Society because of it. (He was readmitted two years later, the whole business having been, according to the infatuated Mrs. Besant “ the symbolic crucifixion through which every candidate for the Arhat initiation must pass”.) He would later get into trouble with the police in Australia for similar behaviour, though never did he come close to matching the sexual excesses of the Church’s Presiding Bishop, despite inheriting the post after the onset of dementia, attributed to syphilis, forced Wedgwood to relinquish the post in 1923.

As I walked down Exhibition Road, it struck me both men would have felt quite at home in the Rockingham.

8

I never returned to Queen's Gardens, but I did get around to reading the five volumes of Madame Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* before the end of that first year at college. The first two purport to describe the creation of the universe while the rest chart human evolution after "the primal unity of unmanifest Being [has broken] up into differentiation and multiformity". For the book's author, the planets of our solar system, all ruled by planetary gods that were once human beings, are equipped with astral, mental and spiritual bodies – two of each in fact - as well as the material body familiar to us.

Meanwhile like every other planet ours is required to undergo seven stages of evolution, the first three leading to its "crystallisation" or consolidation in matter. After the present fourth stage has run its course – we are currently just over the half way mark - everything will go into reverse and the Earth, like us, will gradually become more spiritualised until finally reunited with the Absolute. So far as we're concerned, the process involves seven so-called root races, each dominant on a particular continent, the first of which occupied the "imperishable sacred land", wherever that was, while the second, known as the Hyperborean or, more off-putting, the "Sweat-Born", inhabited the Arctic Circle. Both were sexless, reproduction being achieved by a tasteful inter-action between spirit and matter. Only as the third race evolved on Lemuria, precursor to Atlantis, did our ancestors acquire physical bodies and so discover the joys of sex. The downside was that with it came knowledge of right and wrong.

Like their Lemurian predecessors the Atlanteans were destined to perish when their continent also came to a cataclysmic end, making way for the Aryan Race, originally from northern Asia, to which most of us belong. We are, to be precise, the fifth of seven successive sub-races within the

Aryan root race but our days, too, are numbered, for the author of *The Secret Doctrine* warns that members of the next sub-race have already started turning up in North America

What bothered me about all this was not my inability to take it seriously, try as I might, but its assumption that spirit and matter were radically different, with the first deigning on occasion to inhabit the second. The view of Mr. James, which I began by accepting on trust but later adopted as mine, was that spirit and matter are essentially one and the same. He would not have agreed with Mme. Blavatsky that human origins involve a transition and, by implication, a “descent” from spirit into matter, a mismatch due to be corrected when at some point the two would again grow asunder. For him matter was not inferior to spirit because both were essentially one and the same.

Such a view is far removed from the dualism that pervades much esoteric thinking and all religions except the more pantheistic kind. These make a distinction between “spirit” and “matter”, the one so radically – and qualitatively – different from the other that the Gnostics refused to believe that God had a hand in creation. Few go that far, with the majority content to acknowledge that God not only brought the universe into being (and made a fairly decent job of it) but is also present in it as well, though without compromise to his transcendence. As for us, we belong to the world of gross matter and so partake of its nature, but by way of exception, have been endowed with a spiritual component that permits us to have, as it were, the best of both worlds. Yes, we dwell in the here-and-now but, by special dispensation, partake also of a reality, yet to be experienced, that lies beyond it. And while Christian orthodoxy proposes a physical resurrection of the dead at the end of Time, it stresses that the bodies on offer will be “glorified” or spiritualised versions of those we currently inhabit, something half way between the Lemurians and the the Hyperboreans so dear to Mme Blavatsky.

By contrast the approach preferred by Mr. James, the only magical approach that makes sense, treats matter as the perceptible expression of a spiritual reality. We are able to recognise it, not because we are invested with a spiritual component uniquely ours but because, being composed of matter, we share its inherent spirituality. It is what we are. And it is what everything else is as well. It follows that access to this spiritual reality is

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accomplished not by denying matter but by traversing it and experiencing what lies beyond.

This is something our primitive ancestors well understood. Dismissed nowadays as simple-minded nature worshippers because they identified their gods and goddesses with specific places – islands, lakes, mountains and rivers – or with natural phenomena, they discerned in their environment the supernatural reality to which it bore witness. It is what enabled them, as it does contemporary magicians, to put into practice the hermetic principle of “above” and “below”, affording them access to a spiritual reality which, when all is said and done, is merely an extension of us.

During that first year in London I forgot none of this but I did start to think of it less often, agreeably caught up in the hurly-burly of city life. While college took up most of my time and the Toreador, as my friends now called the barman from the Toros, laid claim to the rest, there were still occasions when I felt homesick. I also missed going every week to Tanrallt and having the chance to talk *sensibly* about occultism, without getting lost in extravagant theories about root races and vanished continents. Thanks to Mr. James I had grown accustomed to taking the supernatural, if not for granted, then certainly as something to be approached, even experienced, without fuss or mystification. Theosophy struck me as interesting but too fanciful, and my one visit to Rudolf Steiner House on the edge of Regent’s Park was equally discouraging. And so, desperate for contact with people who accepted the reality of supra-sensible experience in a more homely, matter-of-fact way, I allowed my thoughts to turn again to Spiritualism. Mr. James would not have approved, but, I reckoned it was silly not to give it one more try just because of him or because my visits to Colwyn Bay had proved so disappointing. Remembering the letter from the editor of *Psychic News*, I got in touch, as he had suggested.

Maurice Barbanell wrote back by return, making a special point of thanking me for the stamped addressed envelope I had enclosed for his reply. He later told me he rarely answered correspondents who neglected this small courtesy. He and his paper had recently moved to the edge of Covent Garden, like Regent Street again within walking distance of college, where they occupied smart, cream-painted premises close to Freemasons’ Hall in Great Queen Street. On the ground floor was a shop offering biographies of prominent mediums, manuals on how to develop clairvoyance, and books

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about the afterlife, several of them, I noticed, by Air Chief Marshall Lord Dowding, head of Fighter Command during the Battle of Britain who later in the war dedicated himself to helping dead soldiers and airmen unable to find their bearings in the spirit world. Also on sale were the collected musings of deceased Red Indians, most prominent among them Silver Birch who communicated with the living through Mr. Barbanell himself, as well as crystal balls (two guineas for the medium size), Kilner goggles (for viewing the human aura) and ouija boards. Prominently displayed next to the door were hefty tomes with titles like *The Rock of Truth*, *The Unfolding Universe* and *On the Edge of the Etheric*, all from the pen of J. Arthur Findlay, a retired stock broker still esteemed by Spiritualists (mistakenly) for his erudition and (rightly) for his generosity in bequeathing to them his home, Stansted Hall, in Essex (now the Arthur Findlay College). Like Uncle Davy in Market Street, Mr. Barbanell, universally known as Barbie, occupied a small office over the shop.

He was a dapper little man with thick glasses, born into a poor Jewish family in London's East End where his father earned his living as a barber and, when required, as the neighbourhood dentist. So overcrowded was their home that as a boy he had often to sleep in the barber's chair, ready to be evicted briskly, should anyone call out of hours to have a troublesome tooth pulled. Eager to get on in the world he tried his hand at various businesses and at some point was offered the distribution rights for a novelty import from America, the brainchild of a Dr. Edwin Land. By then, however, Barbie, hitherto and out-and-out materialist, was about to commit himself fully to Spiritualism after receiving what he regarded as irrefutable evidence in its favour. He turned down the novelty invention and for the remainder of his life (he died in 1981) devoted his considerable energies to publishing Spiritualist literature, a decision he claimed never once to have regretted despite the fact that Dr. Land's invention, the Polaroid camera, would have made him a millionaire many times over.

When I arrived at his office he had just finished going through his post. As we chatted he kept fidgeting with the documents in front of him, as if unwilling to stay idle, and I watched him triumphantly remove any paper clips he came across and consign them to a small earthenware pot, one of a pair, standing on his desk. "Waste not, want not," he said primly when he caught me looking. With the pot already overflowing - its partner contained what looked like dressmaker's pins - it seemed unlikely he would

ever know want, not want of paper clips at least.

On the other hand he may have been pulling my leg. Those who knew him well have spoken of his mischievous sense of humour. On one occasion this induced him to play a trick on two of the best-known mediums of the day, Doris Stokes and Doris Collins, bitter rivals in life and, with both now dead, no doubt still at loggerheads in Heaven.

Throughout the nineteen-seventies and eighties both women, done up as if for a Ladies Night dinner-dance, would tour provincial theatres and even tread the boards in London, relaying spirit messages in a motherly sort of way, with lots of “loves”, “dears” and “sweethearts, to an uncritical and largely female audience. Apart from the long frocks and costume jewellery, their performance was not all that different from what I had come across in Colwyn Bay or, for that matter, from what goes on today in Spiritualist churches up and down the land. If Mrs. Stokes appeared to have the edge on her competitors, this was due less to her clairaudient prowess – she claimed to hear the spirits not see them clairvoyantly – than to her habit of chatting to audience members in the foyer before each performance or routinely donating front-row tickets to people who had previously been in touch with her, both useful sources of advance information. And although the other Doris was no shrinking violet, it was Mrs. Stokes who had the better eye for publicity or, possibly, the better agent. Reports of her successes are catalogued in the several books she wrote or, rather, had ghost written on her behalf, her only brush, sceptics might argue, with the supernatural. Not short of chutzpah herself, Mrs. Collins also wrote books but hers never sold quite so well.

Behind the folksy homeliness they were a pair of tough old birds, both of them famously vain, try as they might to conceal it. Their saving grace may be that each genuinely believed in what she was doing. At least it would be nice to think so. Anyway Barbie, co-founder, as well as long-term editor of *Psychic News*, had by then established a “Medium of the Year Award”, a prize much coveted within what has always been a fiercely competitive profession. One year there came to him the genial notion of awarding the honour jointly to Mesdames Collins and Stokes, news that sent waves of anticipatory schadenfreude through the Spiritualist community, if not the spirit world itself. (How Mrs. Duncan, not to mention Bronco, must have chuckled!) And so, despite their mutual loathing, the two laureates were

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forced to don their finery and share the same platform, with Mrs. Collins heard to complain loudly as she stepped up "That bloody woman HAUNTS me!" Made of sterner stuff, Mrs. Stokes kept her thoughts to herself but her face by all accounts spoke volumes. Barbie must have relished every second.

What the fastidious Silver Birch made of it, no one thought to ask. In any case his weekly talks dealt with loftier concerns. On such occasions Barbie, seemingly asleep, would be slumped on a sofa while the words of his spirit guide, described by Lord Beaverbrook as "some of the most beautiful in the English language", issued unchecked from his mouth. Silver Birch died 3000 years ago. Unlike Mrs. Cooke's White Eagle (Mohawk chieftain and, lest you may have forgotten, senior member of the Great White Brotherhood of the Circle of Light) Silver Birch cuts a more modest, even likeable, figure. And whereas in his portrait, White Eagle, like Koot Hoomi clairvoyantly perceived by the artist, wears an array of sumptuous plumage on his head, Silver Birch, in his, makes do with a few modest feathers. I developed a soft spot for him after discovering that Silver Birch was a name invented for him by his admirers. His real name, considered undignified and known only to a handful of people, was Big Stick.

Before I left him, Barbie handed me a copy of his book, *Modern Spiritualism*, drawing my attention to a series of illustrations showing the apparent materialisation of yet another Native American, female this time, called Silver Belle. I had asked him about Mrs. Duncan and, while his endorsement of her fell short of total, he confirmed that he had personally witnessed ectoplasm gushing from her mouth on more than one occasion. He had also, he recounted, sat with mediums who produced spirit lights, phantom knockings and the voices of the dead, as well as seen objects turn up in the séance room out of nowhere, just as the Mahatma letters once did at Madame Blavatsky's behest. And all, he maintained, were indisputably genuine.

"I've got a very sharp eye. Enough to spot a fraud a mile away."

As he spoke he was peering through his pebble glasses, nose all but touching the desk, trying in vain to find an errant paper clip.

Our chat nevertheless encouraged me to give Spiritualism another try but in the end nothing I came across persuaded me that mediums in London

were any better than their humbler counterparts in Colwyn Bay. This was every bit as true for top rankers who performed in the Royal Albert Hall – for years the Spiritualists booked it for an Armistice Day commemoration – as it was for their lesser known colleagues at work in more modest surroundings. One night in Ealing Town Hall I heard a medium newly arrived in this country from Cape Town and highly recommended by Barbie, inform his audience while ostensibly in a deep trance that, in his own words, “Spiritualism covers the whole scrotum of human experience.” No one tittered. The speaker was a long dead Chinaman, which may account for the slip but not the South African accent he had when he made it. For me, that about just about summed it all up – a load of two guinea crystal balls (medium size).

Like Theosophy, Spiritualism owed much of its early success to a growing acceptance of Darwinism. Many people no longer felt able to accept the Biblical account of Creation, yet were deeply uncomfortable with the notion that they might be descended from apes. What made the idea so unpalatable was the implication that there was nothing inherently special about humankind. And without that special something our chances of surviving physical death were no better than those of any other living creature inhabiting the planet. It was to overcome this problem that Madame Blavatsky, while acknowledging the fact of evolution, extended its scope to the spiritual realm and charted a fantastical process in which dynamic reality evolves through successive manifestations, from mineral to vegetable, then from vegetable to animal before finally emerging as human. In her scheme, however, becoming human did not mean we had evolved from some primordial monkey: she advertised her contempt for such a proposition by exhibiting a stuffed baboon, with white cravat and spectacles, in her New York apartment. Rather, our remotest ancestors were spiritual beings that gradually took on material form, evolving through root races such as the “self-born and “sweat-born” varieties mentioned earlier. And of course, being “spiritual” beings, their continued existence - or, rather, evolution - after death, like our own, was guaranteed.

For her, however, what survived the grave was not the personality each of us develops as we proceed from birth to death but the essential “I” – the ego – which inhabits that personality throughout its lifetime. After death this inextinguishable “I” withdraws to a spiritual realm where, after coming to terms with the lessons of its recent life, it patiently awaits its next

incarnation and the new personality destined to accommodate it.

None of this was new. Long before Madame Blavatsky seized on these ideas, after, it must be said, overlooking them in her first book *Isis Unveiled*, esoteric tradition has consistently proclaimed them. Her only contribution was to stick Sanskrit labels on what could just as easily have been said in plain English. But of course such labels, borrowed from Hinduism, helped suggest she had indeed come across them in those mysterious Stanzas of Dzyan ("the oldest book in the world") which her two favourite Mahatmas, Morya and Koot Hoomi, had shown her in Tibet. It was to distance himself from her, from the Mahatmas and from Theosophists generally that Rudolf Steiner, after being expelled from the Society by Mrs. Besant for not endorsing her messianic claims about Krishnamurti, set about expunging the Sanskrit terminology from his own early writings. His actions would later encourage his followers to pretend his thoughts were more original than they in fact are.

Most traditional occultists, among them Blavatsky and Steiner, not to mention Mr. James, attribute to matter four constituent "bodies". (The term is misleading but permissible if one understands by it a characteristic mode of manifestation or a particular force field.) These four are the physical, etheric, astral and spiritual bodies. In the mineral "kingdom", another term that is less than ideal, only the physical body is actively present, the other three not so much absent as dormant. Proceeding to the vegetable kingdom, we find that here the physical body is enlivened by its etheric counterpart, their collaboration ensuring the morphological integrity of plants, as well as their growth and decay. It is, however, only when the astral body, another misnomer as there is nothing star-like about it, becomes active in the animal kingdom that consciousness arises, though this does not progress to full self-consciousness until the spiritual element becomes active within human beings. That event not only distinguishes us from everything else, rendering us both conscious and conscious of being conscious, but also offers hope to those seeking a reason why we might survive death, albeit in a new set of conditions, whereas dogs, cats and, Bronco excepted, dead parrots do not.

Opposed to such a possibility are those who contend that our precious self-awareness is simply a product of physiological processes going on inside our brain, certainly not evidence of what the philosopher Gilbert Ryle dis-

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missively called a “ghost in the machine”. For them, brain function ceases upon death, bringing about the end of self-awareness and the end of us as well.

This supposes, however, that “mind”, the facilitator of our self-awareness, has its origin in the cells that comprise the brain. But as these cells are constitutionally no different from those in any other part of our body, we must qualify the supposition by adding that it is not the cells, as such, that account for the mind but a synergistic interaction going on among them. Our mind thus becomes an adventitious effect of intra-cellular activity, part electrical and part chemical, whose scope and complexity happen to be greater in human beings than in any other organism. From this it follows that when death puts a stop to such activity, the mind ceases to exist and so in turn do we.

Not true Mr. James would maintain. For him trying to explain the mind by examining the brain was as unhelpful as trying to explain sight by dissecting an eyeball. Yes, mentation may well occur in structures in the brain amenable to scientific investigation but these structures, like the energy released by their interaction, have a molecular constitution whereas the mind most certainly does not. (If it did, someone in a white coat would have shoved it under a microscope long before now.) Instead, the brain was for him an organ whose function is to mediate between the mind and us in terms compatible with the reality we occupy and of which we are physically part. In short the brain is not the source of consciousness but the agent responsible for its efficient operation in our daily lives.

Such is to some extent the case in animals as well, but in us consciousness has acquired an added dimension. Uniquely, as said earlier, we are conscious of being conscious. It is not to deny that animals, at least those closely related to us such as apes and monkeys (*pace* Madame Blavatsky) enjoy a rudimentary, self-awareness, but with them it is primarily a response to their environment. By contrast evolutionary gains peculiar to us – notably the development of language, culture and a sense of time (and, with it, knowledge of our own mortality) – enable our notion of selfhood, synonymous with mind, to transcend our environment. Just as the smallest units of matter permit the immaterial to express itself objectively within space, so does the brain permit our mind/self to function efficiently in the world about us. Brain damage may reduce this efficiency but does not mean that

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the self is correspondingly impaired. Neither does it mean that when death occurs our mind/self is extinguished when the brain stops functioning.

On the contrary, the post-mortem self is believed by occultists to adapt quickly to its new environment or, rather, to a different set of conditions. Most agree that at the moment of dying or, possibly, soon afterwards we observe, as in a film running backwards, our past life, something frequently reported by survivors of a Near Death Experience. (The fact that there may be a physiological explanation, perhaps involving chemical changes inside the brain, has no bearing on the validity of the event.) While this is happening or, opinions differ, at a second review of the life recently ended, we are made to experience the impact our actions have had on those affected by them, its purpose to compel us to acknowledge our shortcomings and feel suitably contrite for whatever mischief we have caused. In the Hindu or Buddhist terminology so beloved of Madame Blavatsky, it is a glimpse of our “karma” or the debt we have incurred in the course of the incarnation just ended. When added to liabilities outstanding from earlier incarnations, it is held to determine what awaits us when the time comes for us to return to a new life and in a new body.

Curiously enough, Spiritualists are divided on the issue of reincarnation. Some accept it wholeheartedly, in particular those loyal to the French medium Allan Kardec (1804-1860), generally known as Spiritists and currently most numerous in South America, but others vehemently deny it. To judge by the discordant messages emanating from the spirit world, its inhabitants, too, are equally divided or at best hedge their bets, even though on an issue as fundamental as this, one might have hoped for unanimity. For Silver Birch reincarnation is a fact, though his mouthpiece, Maurice Barbanell, rejected it wholeheartedly, adamant that we have only one stab at life and that’s it. This does not mean that deniers rule out further improvement for the deceased, since the last of the Seven Principles adopted by most Spiritualist churches promises that “eternal progress” remains “open to every soul”. Left unsaid is whether such progress occurs in the next world or back here in this one.

These Seven Principles – a board displaying them faced the congregation at the church in Colwyn Bay – were purportedly dictated in 1871 to a medium named Emma Hardinge Britten by that selfsame Robert Owen whose birthplace was close to Tanrallt. This happened thirteen years after

his death. Born in England, Mrs. Britten emigrated to America in 1855, by then in her early thirties. Vivacious, pretty and musically gifted, she worked in the theatre until her mediumistic prowess attracted the attention of New York's most influential Spiritualists. (Like Mrs. Duncan, she earned notoriety by disclosing the loss at sea of a vessel, in her case the steamship "Pacific", before news of it became public.) From then on she devoted herself to the Spiritualist cause, travelling with her husband all over North America, Europe and even as far as Australia and New Zealand. Particularly esteemed by her admirers were the public addresses she delivered while in trance on topics randomly proposed by a group of volunteers from the audience, though the *New York Times* described their content as "bunkum". She also found time to write several books, most notably a hefty tome called *Modern American Spiritualism* (1870). She was interested, too, in magic.

It is this last interest that brought her into the company of Madame Blavatsky, putting her among the seventeen people gathered in Irving Place on that evening in September 1875 to hear Dr. Felt talk about the architectural secrets of the ancient Egyptians. She thus became one of the founding members of the Theosophical Society when it came into being later the same night, and it was at her home on West Thirty-Fourth Street that two further meetings took place to decide on the aims and by-laws of the infant organisation.

It is unlikely that Madame Blavatsky, a woman who, like the Turk, brooked no brother, let alone sister, near the throne, welcomed Mrs. Britten's influence. Already a celebrity in occult circles thanks to her mediumship and her published works, Emma was currently writing a new book, *Art Magic*, which had less to do with Spiritualism than with those very topics – planetary spirits, angels, elementals, hermetic secrets and lost civilisations – that Theosophy (the name was agreed upon at the group's third meeting) was set up to investigate. Worse, Mrs. Britten had a habit of asserting, loudly and too often, that the true author of the book was a discarnate French adept, the Chevalier Louis – she may have had the newly deceased Eliphas Lévi in mind – who dictated the text to her telepathically and, one assumes, in his native tongue since she referred to herself as his "translator". Mention, too, was made of a secret organisation, cryptically referred to as the HB of L, whose disembodied leaders also had a hand in the affair. It was after these claims reached her ears that Madame Blavatsky, never one to be

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outshone, still less out-mastered, conjured up Tuitit Bay and his confrères from the Brotherhood of Luxor, making sure that unlike the garrulous Frenchman, they resorted to the finest quality stationery and gold ink for their communications. In the end Mrs. Britten, fed up with Madame's constant sniping, abandoned the Theosophists and went her own way, her defection, like the mockery later heaped on *Art Magic* by the press, unlikely to have caused her formidable rival any loss of sleep.

Although Mrs. Britten, with or without the posthumous help of Robert Owen, bequeathed to Spiritualists their Seven Principles, she appears to have distanced herself from their naïve acceptance of an afterlife that is but a sanitised version of the life we currently enjoy. Her writings suggest she was familiar with the traditional view among occultists that on death our consciousness continues to function but does so within the three subtle "bodies" which constitute every human being. What is held to occur is that with the advent of death, the etheric body, being the force field peculiar to each organism's genome or genetic structure, withdraws from its physical counterpart and allows it to start decomposing. With no longer any useful function to perform, it then surrenders to its astral and spiritual partners the memories it has retained of the life recently ended, thereby contributing to the panoramic retrospective just mentioned. Afterwards it, too, disintegrates. From here on, the personality manifests itself through the astral body and, inspired by a vivid recollection of the world it formerly inhabited, proceeds to impose a replica of it on its new surroundings, at the same time taking care to leave out all the nasty bits. This may explain why accounts of the afterlife offered by the spirits are so saccharine and so relentlessly banal.

They are also preposterous, their description of lakes, forests, and snow-capped mountains all too reminiscent of the Switzerland my mother used to dream about until a wet fortnight in Lucerne persuaded her that Wales was every bit as nice. This is a place where concert-goers gather to hear spirit orchestras play the classics, often under the baton of their composer, while for the less musically inclined there are libraries, art galleries, sports complexes, and cheerful public parks. Scientists even have laboratories in which to continue the research their earthly selves were formerly engaged in.

By far the most celebrated of such posthumous accounts is that purport-

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edly given to the eminent physicist Sir Oliver Lodge (1851-1940) by his youngest son Raymond, killed on the Western Front in 1915. Published in book form a year later, it went through no fewer than twelve editions before the war ended, having presumably brought comfort of sorts to the many thousands grieving for their fallen loved ones. While Sir Oliver's scientific credentials lent the book a certain authority, the descriptions of post-mortem life contained in its pages, no fewer than four hundred of them, are patently absurd unless we remember that the narrator was describing, had he but known it, a reality created by his own imagination. Take the passage where he tries to show that the dead want for nothing, even though their earthly environment has been replaced by its spiritual equivalent. "People here" he enthuses

"try to provide everything that is wanted. A chap came over to me the other day who would have a cigar. "That's finished them", he thought. He means he thought they would never be able to provide that. But there are laboratories over here and they manufacture all sorts of things in them. Not like you do out of solid matter, but out of essences and ethers and gases. It's not the same as on the earth plane, but they were able to manufacture what looked like a cigar...Some want meat and some strong drink; they call for whisky and sodas. Don't think I'm stretching it when I tell you they can manufacture that."

One hopes this longing for scotch, fillet steak and ersatz Havanas declines after a while, allowing the newly deceased to pause and admire the natural beauty of their surroundings, the flowers at their feet not only sweetly scented but emitting musical notes as well, provided, that is, they feel so inclined ("in gardens...the flowers turn towards you as you enter, or, in case they don't like you, turn away".) Meanwhile the ecologically minded will be pleased to learn that these same flowers have been manufactured from our own dead blooms, as Raymond helpfully explains: "You know flowers, how they decay. Well we have got flowers here, your flowers flower again with us – beautiful flowers." Indeed, it seems nothing gets wasted, with Raymond assuring us that even his tweed jacket "was made from damaged worsted on your side."

Not that Mr. James or Madame Blavatsky, perhaps not even Mrs. Britten, would have necessarily accepted that the Raymond speaking through the lips of Mrs. Gladys Osborne Leonard, the medium (and former professional actress) consulted by his father, was really the late Raymond Lodge, now immaterial but otherwise no different from his former earthly self. No,

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for them the Raymond who chatted so amiably about life beyond the grave was probably just a bundle of memories, still intact only because the astral body holding them together had yet to disintegrate.

By contrast the genuine Raymond, his “ego”, so to speak, might already be progressing to a condition beyond the personality it had assumed for the purpose of its most recent incarnation. “Astral shell” was how Madame Blavatsky labelled those entities which, like the “Raymond” decked out in his recycled tweeds, were a semblance, nothing more, of the person they pretended to be, a ghostly remnant composed of memories yet to disperse. This explains why anything new or original is seldom found in communications from the spirit world, even when those offering them profess to be individuals renowned for their wisdom or creative flair. Someone claiming to be Shakespeare, for instance, has returned to chat on several occasions but abstained from producing a single new sonnet, let alone a full-length play, just as the *soi-disant* Dickens has given the world nothing new, though a spirit purporting to be him did have a stab at completing *Edwin Drood* two years after he died. Equally dull and unforthcoming have been such diverse figures as Aristotle, Socrates, Napoleon, Gandhi, Rasputin and St. Paul, while current favourites like Princess Diana, Marilyn Monroe and Harry Houdini, once the bane of American Spiritualists, are no better. As a rule communications of this sort have less to do with spirit entities than with the medium’s own subconscious, their content reflecting his or her general culture and the famous names no more than self-indulgence, possibly by a secondary personality with ideas above its station.

And so at the end of the day it was the vacuity of the information purveyed by the spirits, however highfalutin’ their language, that finally persuaded me to abandon Spiritualism. I was by no means the first to be disappointed, as the reaction of the *New York Times* to Mrs. Britten’s trance addresses had shown or as a London journalist discovered in the nineteen-thirties after witnessing a similar performance by Mrs. Meurig Morris, a medium with an admirably Welsh name and impeccable dress sense, who gave public lectures while in a state of trance, usually on philosophical or religious topics. The speaker on these occasions was an entity known only as “Power” whose orotund style did full justice to the weighty subjects he dealt with. Even an arch-sceptic like the psychical researcher, Harry Price described Power’s performances as “striking”.

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Thus encouraged, Mrs Morris went on to hire the Fortune Theatre, admittedly not one of London's biggest, so that her many admirers could spend their Sunday evenings listening to Power's uplifting talks. (Doors opened at 6 o'clock but queues began to form well before lunchtime.) Unlike Harry Price, however, a reporter from the *Daily Mail* found these discourses anything but "striking" and dared say so in print. Worse, on news-vendors' boards throughout the capital, the words "Trance Medium Found Out" were daubed in bold letters, prompting an affronted Mrs. Morris to sue for damages. The case, something of a cause célèbre, was heard three months later, with Sir Oliver Lodge and Lady Conan Doyle among witnesses summoned on behalf of the plaintiff. Acting for the *Daily Mail* was a young Norman Birket, later Lord Justice Birket, High Court Judge and member of the International War Crimes Tribunal in Nuremberg.

In the event the decision of the jury went against Mrs. Morris, but its members did reject any imputation of fraud or dishonesty on her part, their view being that the newspaper had done no more than comment fairly on a matter of legitimate public interest. Subsequent appeals, including one to the House of Lords, changed nothing, though the sympathetic tone of reports later published in the *Law Journal* may have afforded Mrs. Morris, by now migrated to the Aeolian Hall in Baker Street, a small measure of consolation.

What is virtually certain is that "Power" was the product of the medium's subconscious mind, even if, as the jury conceded, she herself believed otherwise. But in fairness it is worth mentioning what happened in Court after the Judge chanced to point towards the plaintiff in the course of his summing up. As he did so, Mrs. Morris rose slowly to her feet and from her mouth, in Power's imperious baritone, came the words "Hearken to my voice, Brother Judge". Visibly shaken, Mr. Justice McCardie ordered officials to remove her from the room, but when they approached, the same voice warned "Do not touch her until I have left the body." After that Mrs. Morris remained unconscious for two hours.

As it happens, her husband, Meurig, was a cousin once, possibly several times, removed, of the Miss Morris who deprived me of my inheritance and my father of the promised Vauxhall 12 following Uncle Davy's demise. (The family, mainly farmers but including a few Methodist preachers, had their roots in an area around Ystrad Meurig, a village some miles east of

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Aberystwyth, hence their loyalty to that name.) I was told that Meurig had married the nineteen-year old, Louisa Ann, a West Country girl, in 1918, a marriage that lasted fifteen years. According to the version offered by Miss Morris, it had ended following Meurig's unexpected death in 1933, but my mother remembered being told that in reality the two had already separated by then, partly because of his failure to adapt to his wife's sudden fame and partly, if not mainly, because of her increasing dependence on an admirer who had taken charge of her professional affairs. Before then, however, and before "Power" had put in an appearance, the spirits in Mrs. Morris' life had been a pretty humdrum lot, not so very different from the regulars at Mrs. Duncan's séances. Among them was a winsome child named Sunshine who had reportedly delivered a message to Uncle Davy from his son Jim within days of his untimely death. Perhaps Sunshine had an eye on the inheritance as well.

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9

My on-off engagement with Spiritualism was no sooner over than I came across the person who would lead me back to the magical path Mr. James had started me off on ten years earlier.

It began one Sunday after the Toreador who, thanks to his job and his cheekbones, knew everyone who was anyone on the gay scene, took me to lunch at a vicarage in the East End. Our host, the euphoniously named Christopher Christian, was incumbent of nearby St. Anne's, built in 1723 and one of six London churches designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor. Prior to settling in Limehouse, he had served at another St. Anne's, this time in Soho, but been removed in the wake of a scandal, its nature never divulged but not hard to imagine. Also present that lunchtime were the actor Michael Redgrave, known to Father Christian since their days at Cambridge, Robin Maugham, the novelist, and two film producers, Brian Desmond Hurst and, in solicitous attendance, a vivacious, slightly portly little man named Vivian Cox, less well-known but responsible for *House of Secrets*, a piece of hokum even the ten year-old me found pretty dire after seeing it at the Coliseum in Aberystwyth. (By then Mrs. Gale was past caring what films she put on.)

These dignitaries sat at one end of a long table, together with an elderly gentleman who arrived in a Bentley but fell asleep half way through his soup. ("Just leave it in front of him" advised Mr. Cox, "he'll finish it when he wakes up. Alfred loves his vichyssoise.") Also there, was a man who, my neighbour respectfully informed me, lived in Half Moon street in Mayfair and owned most of Norfolk, the rest of it presumably owned by the Queen. Francis Bacon, the painter, had been expected but the guest deputed to collect him either forgot or had received no answer when he called to pick him up. This was the man who was destined to reawaken my interest in magic,

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again a member of the same Cambridge set as several of the others.

Seated well down the table were half a dozen burly young men, among them the Toreador and me, in my case with youth if not brawn in my favour. They were a merry, talkative bunch, confident and fully at their ease yet, to my surprise, so fastidiously well mannered that I kept wondering if the vicar might have been giving them lessons. From the chap on my right I learned that he worked as a stevedore on the Isle of Dogs from Monday to Friday but could earn more “up West” on a Saturday night than he took home in a week on the docks. Another, sitting opposite, said he lived on the premises and was half way through his first novel, news that struck me as improbable but turned out to be true. (Father Christian used to lock him in his room every day until a prescribed number of pages emerged from under the door.) Today he is a well-respected author.

At some point in the meal one of our seniors and betters north of the salt began telling a rather convoluted joke, much of it in French, though none of those around me paid much attention. What the joke was, I’ve forgotten but I do remember it involved a canary and that the punch line, when it arrived, was capable of improvement, sufficiently so for me, emboldened by wine, to provide it and to show off my French in the process. No sooner had the merriment died down than I was summoned to move up the table forthwith. And that is how I found myself next to the man destined to prise me away from the Spiritualists, with their Red Indian guides and Seven Principles, as well as from the Theosophists, Anthroposophists, Rosicrucians and every other group whose company I had restlessly sought up to then.

His name was Simon. From the outset this struck me as auspicious since I have always had a soft spot for another Simon, this one Simon Magus, the Samaritan wizard who lived in the 1st Century and was, according to St. Irenaeus, the “Father of all Heresies”. In the New Testament (Acts: 8) we learn that after seeing St. Philip going about exorcising demons and curing the sick with enviable flair, the first Simon converted there and then to Christianity. Such was his enthusiasm that he cast his magical books into the sea – one senses that he rather liked making grandiose gestures – but came to regret it when his conversion turned out to be short lived. Some Church Fathers, opposed to miracle workers other than their own, as we saw earlier with Apollonius, later tried to discredit him by claiming he died

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after jumping from a tower in the mistaken belief he could fly, brought down by the prayers of St. Peter as much as by gravity. Not at all, exulted Hippolytus in 230AD, the ambitious Simon, keen to out-do Jesus, had perished after instructing his followers to bury him alive and await his resurrection three days later. He never showed up.

Anyway, later that same afternoon, by then pleasantly drunk, I found myself telling my future teacher all about Mr. James, about me, about magic and about many of the people I have mentioned in these pages already.

“Meet me for lunch,” he said at last, adding mysteriously, “you’ll find most of them there. Is Tuesday all right? One o’clock?”

By accepting the invitation, had I but known it – and deep down I probably did – I was committing myself to the next stage of my magical career, all done without fuss on a balmy Sunday afternoon, over a geranium water ice, in the garden of a rather unattractive vicarage in Limehouse. (Built after the war, it replaced an earlier one flattened by German bombs.) What I was about to discover was magic of a very different kind from the version Mr. James had taught me or, rather, it was magic differently expressed, for the essentials stayed more or less the same. From then on, however, my knowledge began to deepen and in some ways to darken as well. Magically speaking, I was about to grow up.

As it turned out, the choice of restaurant fitted the occasion. For I discovered in the course of the meal that many of those who had contributed to my magical education up until then had a connection, even if in some cases no more than a tenuous one, with the building we were in. With one phase of my life coming to an end, it was as if they had gathered there to take their leave of me that Tuesday afternoon, just as my host had predicted, to take their leave but also wish me well.

Situated in West Halkyn Street, the Belfry was but a short walk from the then headquarters of the Spiritualist Association of Great Britain in nearby Belgrave Square. Built in 1870 and originally a Presbyterian Church, it had undergone some misguided prettification, as had the interior of St. Anne’s in Limehouse, when the craze for neo-Gothic trimmings reached its peak in the eighteen-eighties. By 1923, however, a diminishing congregation forced the church authorities to surrender the lease and within months

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the property, now renamed the Belfry, was acquired by Zoë Oakley Maund, a bosom pal of Mrs. Caradoc Evans. (Possibly because her own names were Marguerite Hélène, Mrs. Evans often called Zoë by her second name, likewise French, which was Désirée.) Once the lease was hers, Zoe/Désirée immediately set about converting it into a private residence. According to one account, these changes resulted in:

“eight bedrooms, six fitted baths, a new organ and, with the pews removed from what had been the nave of the chapel, space made for an unusually charming dining room, surmounted by the drawing room in the gallery. An old fireplace was brought from Derbyshire, and there was a remarkable collection of chiming and striking clocks. What had earlier been the chancel now housed nearly a thousand china birds. Aluminium leaf covered the ceiling of one room; the new owner’s bedroom was decorated with more birds, painted on aluminium panels.”



Lady Caillard (Zoe Oakley
Maund)

In 1927 Miss Oakley Maund, pretty and studiously fragile, married the seventy-nine year old Sir Vincent Caillard, a former diplomat, financier and the director of several important companies, a man Mrs. Evans disliked intensely (“too full of himself”) and who for his part had little time for her. Not surprisingly, given her ornithological tastes, Sir Vincent called his new wife “Bird”, while she called him “Big Fish”. Three years later he was dead.

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According to Mrs. Evans, quick to seize any credit going spare whether justified or not, it was she who introduced her friend to the joys of Spiritualism, enabling her to be reunited soon afterwards with the late Sir Vincent, more likeable in death than in life and now fully restored to the vim and vigour of his youth. Within no time at all, Maurice Barbanell, something of a social climber, had contrived to gain entry into Zoë's circle and it is to him we owe the account of a séance in which Sir Vincent materialised in a darkened room and, after summoning his wife from her chair, took her in his arms and kissed her. Such shows of affection were not unusual. Another would occur at a children's party – a *spirit* children's party, that is – organised by Lady Caillard at her husband's behest. It was again Barbie's *Psychic News* that printed her account of these remarkable festivities:

"A few days before Christmas I was asked by my husband to arrange for a Christmas party on Christmas eve. There was to be a Christmas tree for the spirit children, and I was to hang up my stocking. He said he would put something in it, even if it was only a clothes peg. The party was to be held at Mrs. L. E. Singleton's house, and only three of us were to be present – Mrs. Singleton, B. K. Kirkby and myself...After our usual prayer, and before we had finished laying a Christmas carol on the gramophone, little Ivy came and asked Kirby to stop it, meaning the gramophone. She told us that the room was full of spirit children who had come to the party. One of the most wonderful things happened at this party. I was not going to write about it, because I felt it is too sacred. But Sir Vincent says he is so proud of being able to do it that he wished me to add it. He was able to put his arms around me and kiss me three times. I think it was the most wonderful party I ever attended."

A good time was had also by the children, thanks to the "plated hand-bells" (which they dutifully rang), the "special crackers" and "masses of toys". Or at least things went well until a fight broke out over a doll their hostess had purchased for Ivy, a "negro spirit child" and one of her favourites:

"Jack Cornwell came and said: "That little black kid is awfully cheeky. She dug me in the ribs and told me to get out, because I touched her doll. I told her I would give her something when we got back this evening."

Poor Ivy.

By coincidence the Mr. Kirkby reported to have also been present on this occasion would resurface in 1944 as a witness in the Old Bailey trial of Mrs. Duncan, the medium Mrs. Evans admired most of all. In court he

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described how at a séance over the now familiar chemist's shop in Portsmouth, he was reunited with a deceased friend, George Dobson, formerly an engineer with the Graham Bell telephone company. Kirby had recognised him "by his mannerism and size and his voice, and by his way of speaking", as well as:

"his moustache and his nose and the shape of his face, and just his particular way of looking at me, a sort of smile that I always recognised when I visited him for many years when he lay paralysed in bed. He was paralysed by his x-ray experimental work. The way he chose to manifest was evocative of the period before he was most seriously taken ill. He was then still able to walk about in a bent-up, cramped position".

Now, before his death Dobson had by all accounts been fascinated, as Edison is said to have been, by the possibility of a telegraphic device that would link the world of the living with that of the dead, his own arrival in the spirit world bringing ample opportunity to investigate the technical implications at first hand. Without delay he contacted his old pal, Mr. Kirkby, and suggested they collaborate in building a suitable piece of equipment. The result was something called a reflectograph.

It looked like an elaborate typewriter and to do its job properly it required a competent typist. Not any ordinary Pitman-trained typist but one capable of generating the ectoplasm needed to depress its keys according to instructions from the spirit world. In the event the job went, not to Mrs. Duncan, judged not quite *comme-il-faut*, but to the more refined Mrs. Singleton at whose home Ivy and her companions spent a merry, if ultimately fractious, Christmas eve. Despite Mrs. Singleton's best efforts, however, the reflectograph did not live up to its inventors' high expectations.

But at least it was a start. And lessons were learned. These were to ensure that when its successor, the communi-graph, came into operation soon afterwards, it gave every satisfaction. A handsome piece of work, less typewriter than ouija board, it was mounted on an elegant stand and relied on the movements of a pendulum suspended above it. Such was its success that Mr. Kirkby's spirit guide, Chang, rashly predicted that soon every home in the country would have one. One home that did was Lady Caillard's Belfry.

Possibly the late Sir Vincent, sometime President of the Federation of British Industries, had posthumously recommended its purchase. Certainly

he expressed his complete approval, just as he approved of his wife's decision to have a prominent churchman, Archdeacon Wilberforce, come along to bless the apparatus before it swung into action. Within days Sir Vincent, assisted by a motley crowd of spirits known as the Trianon Band, was transmitting word for word (or, rather, letter by letter) the contents of a new book he wished to see published, its title *A New Conception of Love*. Week in, week out, usually on Wednesdays, Lady Caillard, the indispensable Mrs. Singleton and other high-minded persons would assemble in the drawing room at the top of the house, reverently called the Upper Room, and concentrate hard while the pendulum swayed back and forth obediently. From time to time some of Mrs. Singleton's more convivial familiars would drop in from the spirit world to jolly things up, among them a Sergeant Murphy who entertained the company with Irish comic songs.

Despite the optimistic predictions of the Trianon Band, Sir Vincent's magnum opus did not meet its avowed purpose of making the world a better place and winning over national leaders to the cause of peace and global amity. And it did little for Bird either. She fell ill and died on 17 January 1935. In next day's London papers there was a picture of the Belfry, the large cross on its roof picked out by neon lights. They stayed lit until after her funeral.

In her final weeks Lady Caillard had arranged for the lease of the premises to be passed on to someone she thought, mistakenly, as it turned out, would be sympathetic to her spiritualistic leanings. The new tenant's name was Evans., Mrs. Evans. No, this was not her friend Marguerite but Mrs. Penry Evans, alias Dion Fortune, recently come into some money left to her by one of her several female admirers. Needless to say, she had no time for the communigraph or the Trianon band, let alone Sergeant Murphy's comic songs. The Priestess of Isis assured her devotees that she'd thoroughly exorcised the property before moving in.

To hear all this over lunch was rather comforting in a funny sort of way. It reassured me to think that the room we were sitting in had associations with the two Mrs. Evanses and, indirectly, with Dr. Penry as well, not to speak of Mrs. Duncan, Barbie and, as I later discovered, Viscount Tredegar (whose mother must have felt thoroughly at home among the china birds that once nested in the chancel). Behind them all I even sensed the imposing figure of Mr. James, dressed in his "Aberystwyth" suit, boots well

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polished and his umbrella immaculately furled. In reality of course there were just the two of us at our table that Tuesday lunchtime, but as magicians know, there is more to reality than first meets the eye.

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10

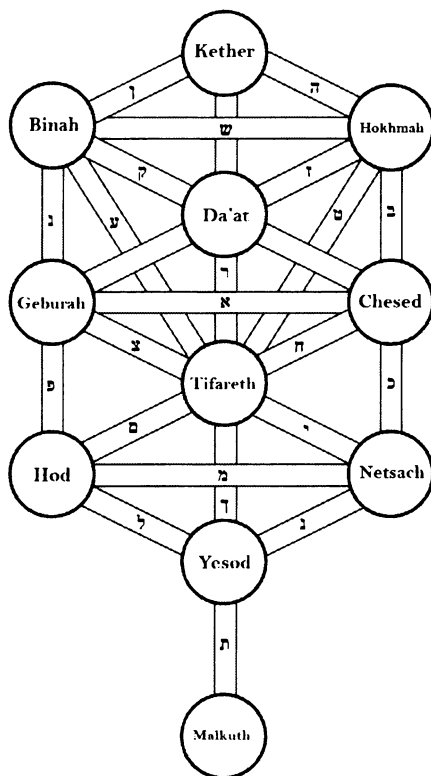
Over the following weeks I would discover that Simon based his magical work on the Kabbalah, though like Dion Fortune, Aleister Crowley and others, he preferred to spell it “Quabbalah”, believing that an initial “q” matched the original Hebrew (“ק”) better than “k”. The change also makes the word seem more mysterious.

In the nineteenth century the popularity of the Kabbalah was given a considerable boost by the writings of Eliphas Lévi and its subsequent incorporation in the rituals of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a group Mr. James had mentioned more than once but about which I knew next to nothing. Before that it had featured also in a curious work by Francis Barrett, published in 1801 and called *The Magus or Celestial Intelligencer*, its title page promising readers a “complete” system of magical philosophy. Comprehensive, if not complete, the opus certainly was, with its author recapitulating what he had unearthed in the writings of such eminent predecessors as, Agrippa, Paracelsus and Pietro di Abano, the last of these responsible for an influential treatise called *Heptameron or Magical Elements* (1496). Readers unable to make sense of what was on offer, admittedly not easy, had no cause for despair since Mr. Barrett also offered “private instructions and lectures uponthe RITES, MYSTERIES, CEREMONIES, and PRINCIPLES of the ancient Philosophers, Magi, Cabbalists, Adepts &c.”. To partake of this “ETERNAL WISDOM”, candidates had only to present themselves at an address in Marylebone between the hours of eleven and two. Among those who took up the offer, though this happened several years afterwards, was Lévi’s sometime patron, the novelist, Bulwer, later Lord, Lytton. (My father had encouraged me to read the author’s *Last Days of Pompeii* as a small boy but, mindful of the two phantom ladies at my bedside, never mentioned Lytton’s more fantastical works, highly esteemed

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by Madame Blavatsky, such as *A Strange Story*, *The Coming Race* and *The Haunted and the Haunters*.)

For Mr. James the Kabbalah held little interest. This was not because he thought it devoid of merit but because its Jewish origins made it foreign to the tradition, in this case Celtic, that was his. Like Jung, he believed in the notion of an archetypal inheritance peculiar to each ethnic or cultural group, and by an accident of birth, his own was not one to which the Kabbalah properly belonged. As a result he did not feel at ease with it. On top of which he was careful to point out that what went by the name of Kabbalah was often a type of mystery-mongering that did scant justice to the theological and cosmological implications of the original.



Tree of Life

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It is ironic, too, that while people like Lévi and the gentile founders of the Golden Dawn were imbibing the Kabbalah and incorporating its language and symbolism in their ritual, prominent Jewish thinkers were distancing themselves from what they had come to regard as outmoded superstition. (Since then opinion has changed, with interest now widespread even among non-Orthodox Jews.) The word itself means “acceptance” and is intended to suggest a body of received wisdom, its source none other than God, who is held to have whispered it to Moses during the several hours they spent together on top of Mount Sinai. In due course Moses would reveal these to seventy elders who in turn transmitted them by word of mouth to their successors until the earliest written texts, probably the *Sefer Yetzirah* or *Book of Formation*, appeared at some time between the second and sixth centuries of our era.

The book describes how God used the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, here called *sefirot* or numbers, to create all that exists, impregnating each with something of his divine essence, a mystery further explored in the *Sefer Ha-Bahir* or *Book of Light*, written in the 12th Century by Rabbi Nehunja ben Ha-Cana but much expanded over the years by other commentators. The *sefirot* are now described as emanations, rather than numbers, and collectively represent the *Shekinah* or divine presence in the world and, more specifically, in the people of Israel, evidence of a Creator who has chosen to remain hidden until such time as he in his wisdom decides. They are compared also to a tree that bears fruit in all seasons and from which gush the living waters of the Torah.

Another revered kabbalist, Isaac the Blind, author of a commentary on the *Sefer Yetzirah*, described God as the *Ein Sof* or Infinite, with the *sefirot* again depicted as successive emanations but now limited in number to ten, possibly in deference to a statement in the *Mishnah* that “from ten words was the world created”. A name is now given to each of the *sefirot*, inspired in part by the opening section of the blessing King David bestowed on his people: “Yours, God, are greatness (*Gedulah*), might (*Geburah*), splendour (*Tifareth*), triumph (*Netsach*) and majesty (*Hod*), yes all that is in heaven and on earth; to you Lord belong kingship and pre-eminence above all.” (I Chronicles 29:12) The *sefirot* are furthermore arranged in an order that anticipates what would become the diagrammatic model of the *Etz Chaim* or Tree of Life, with the three topmost *sefirot* deemed superior to the rest because of their proximity to the divine source. As for the others, these are

linked to various angelic orders, among them the Chaiot or angels of life within Chesed, led by the Archangel Michael (“Who is like God?”), while their neighbours in Geburah, the Seraphim or Lords of Fire, are under the authority of Gabriel (“God is my strength”). In between lies Tifareth home to the Rachamim and their chief, Uriel.

Other writers were to produce different names and different attributions, some even increasing the number of angelic orders to ten by assigning one to each of the three higher *sefirot*. The variations, not to mention the many discrepancies among them, greatly exercised the founders of the Golden Dawn as they struggled to produce a coherent (and historically valid) angelology for use within the Order. Until then preference had been widely given to those mentioned in the much revered *Testament of Solomon*, possibly dating from as early as the 2nd Century and falsely attributed to the biblical monarch, by then regarded as the most powerful of magicians, endowed by the Archangel Michael with authority over the infernal world. Other books imputed to him were the *Clavicle or Key of Solomon* (14/15th Century) and the *Clavicula or Lesser Key of Solomon*, also known as the *Lemegeton*, thought to date from the 16th Century. These contain a helpful catalogue of various demonic powers, and are still a happy hunting ground for magicians and students of the occult, for whose benefit an impressive new edition of the former was published in 2009. The Testament records the names of seven archangels (Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, Sabrael, Arael, Iaoth and Adonaël), while the apocryphal Book of Enoch, its author linked to the Egyptian god Thoth (and accorded a chapter to himself in Madame Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine*) had already listed seven angelic regents, in this case Uriel, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Zerachiel, Gabriel and Remiel.

Despite so many and such varied choirs of angels, not everything in the Blue Yonder was sweetness and light. Already in the *Sefer ha-Bahir* it is suggested that because the whole of creation emanates from God, then evil must likewise be part of him, if but a small one. To forestall criticism from the pious, kabbalists pointed to a verse in the Bible appearing to support their interpretation. In it God is recorded as saying: “I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe.” (Isaiah 45:7) By “woe” is meant “evil”, which is why, when the verse is quoted at the start of Jewish morning worship, immediately after the *Barekhu* or call to prayer, “woe” is tactfully replaced by “everything”. Anyway, the result is that for the kabbalists there are bad angels as well as good ones, with each archangel accompanied

by a negative counterpart bearing names like Chaigidiel, Sathariel, Golab, Gamaliel and the Italian-sounding Togarini. Also among them is Lilith, born of the last of the *sefirot* (Malkuth) and reputed to have been the first Eve. As goddess of the Underworld in Sumerian mythology, she is traditionally identified with the dark side of the moon.

All of which gave nineteenth-century magicians plenty to draw upon, though their preferred source seems to have been another classic of kabbalistic literature, the *Sefer ha-Zohar* or *Book of Splendour*, a compendium or, rather, synthesis of almost everything that had gone before. Its author, Moses de Leon, lived in Spain during the 13th Century but like the compilers of the pseudo-Solomonic texts, lent his book spurious antiquity (and thus greater authority) by attributing it to a well-known rabbi, Simeon ben Yochai who had died a good nine hundred years earlier. For de Leon the *sefirot* represent spheres of divine experience that together bring an organic harmony into the world and it is to him we owe the final version of the Tree of Life, a diagrammatic reference still of huge importance to contemporary magicians. Also accepted by them is the author's account of the threefold constitution of every human being, a combination of life (*Nefesch*), spirit (*Ruach*) and soul (*Neschama*), though a similar triad, differently expressed, is found in other esoteric traditions, as well as in Eastern thought. What cannot be overlooked either is the sexual element in some of de Leon's writing, as in his description of how the seed of Kether, first of the *sefirot*, gushed into its neighbour, Binah, who thus became Mother of the World. The author similarly makes much of the *Shekinah* or feminine aspect of the godhead, depicting it as the divine consort who, once fructified, invests all existence with life.

Finally, one other kabbalist, Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572), often known as the Ari, deserves mention because his teachings not only inspired the Hasidic movement and for the first time made Kabbalah accessible to the masses but were also gratefully incorporated in the magical systems popular in Europe from the time of the Renaissance. One concerns the notion of the Adam Kadmon or Paradigmatic Man, a being composed of the same Heavenly light as that which flowed through each of the *sefirot*. Superimposed on the Tree of Life, sum total of existence, this human figure is a reminder of the hermetic truth that macrocosm and microcosm are inter-related, with each in a mysterious way representative of the other.

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A second contribution made by Luria deals with a primeval catastrophe known as *Shewirat ha-Kelim* or Breaking of the Vessels. According to him the creative effusion that issued from God passed unhindered through the first three *sefirot*, each robust enough to accommodate its presence, but caused the rest to shatter. Most of the fragmented light managed to return to its supernal source but some, together with debris from the broken *sefirot*, descended into an infernal region where they were made subservient to the Spirit of Evil. As for the *sefirot*, these were hastily rebuilt (and, presumably, reinforced) so that the process of creation might be successfully completed. Even so, the pristine unity of the world could never be restored and God, as a consequence, dwells in exile or, in the language of de Leon, the divine Bridegroom and his *Shekinah*, remain disunited.

All is not lost, however, for Luria promises that when, through their devotion and good works, God's people have gathered up and restored to him the errant shards of light, the Messiah will arrive and union between Creator and creation finally prevail. As for those unable or unwilling to fulfil their obligations in one life, they are assured of another chance by the promise that after death the soul may return to earth in a new body, a process given the Hebrew name of *gilgul* or wheel. Ever a core belief among occultists, the possibility of reincarnation was among the notions seized upon by those intent on plundering the Kabbalah for its "magical" usefulness – the symbols, angels, demons, amulets, seals and abstruse permutations of letters and numbers – but were otherwise untouched by its deeper significance and the attendant moral obligations. For unlike Christianity, which, though proclaiming the existence of powers and dominions was coy about identifying them, the Kabbalah provided enough information to keep even the most ambitious sorcerer happy, something Agrippa von Nettesheim made much of when compiling his influential *De occulta philosophia* (1531). It also enabled one of his pupils, Johannes Wierus (1516-88) to list no fewer than seventy demons in his own *Pseudomonarchia daemonium*, together with their respective offices and titles, while a companion volume, *De praestigiis daemonium et incantationibus et veneficiis*, advised on their successful conjuration.

Some enthusiasts, it is true, did explore the deeper meaning of the *sefirot* – the "speculative" Kabbalah (*kabbalah lyunit*) as opposed to its "operative" counterpart (*kabbalah ma'asit*) – but all too often they sought to reconcile their findings with Christian dogma, inventing a system that not

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only acknowledged the divinity of Christ but claimed moreover to prove it. Prominent among them was Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522) known as the Father of the Reformation, followed half a century later by the Flemish chemist – and alchemist – Jan Baptist van Helmont. Another of their number, the precociously clever Pico della Mirandola (1463-94), having assured his contemporaries that magic was “the noblest of the sciences”, confessed that the Kabbalah had led him to a better understanding of Plato, Aristotle and, more improbably, the Early Church Fathers.

As we have observed, interest revived in the 19th Century due to the enthusiasm of Eliphas Lévi and the founders of the Golden Dawn. For them and more recent magicians, among them Dion Fortune whose book *The Mystical Quabbalah*, is held in high regard, the Kabbalah transcends its Jewish origins and offers to all a mystical vision – hence the book’s title – of the ultimate reality behind the world of form, being a *corpus symbolicum* independent of time, place and people. What it reveals is that the world was not formed out of nothing, a *creatio ex nihilo*, but involved the progressive unfolding of potencies already present within the *Ein Sof*, itself without beginning or end. Being, as it were, God’s awareness of himself, at once the product and expression of the divine mind, creation is conceived as a series of thoughts emanating from their divine source and described as a series of ineffable lights. (The analogy is a helpful one, for just as white light is composed of different colours, so the creative thought is said to contain all the forces active through the universe.) In all, God brought into being ten such lights – the *sefirot* mentioned earlier – with each containing less and less of the divine essence until the final one formed the world of dense matter. And because the process may be viewed as the unfolding of a divine language, some speak of creation in terms of words and the sacred letters that comprise them, making the hidden world of God a world of language, with powerful names unfolding in accordance with the divine will.

What is made abundantly clear is that by the finite act of creation God manifested himself as a dynamic unity marvellously rich in content, emerging from concealment to reveal himself in creation, albeit indirectly. The world can thus be regarded as one in which visible and invisible are mysteriously reconciled, a view consistent with Mr. James’ conviction that matter is the expression of a spiritual reality, not something apart or fundamentally different, and is the product of a mysterious process going on

within the godhead. When describing this process kabbalists speak of four different but interrelated levels of existence, a spiritual hierarchy consisting of *atziluth* or realm of divine emanation, *beriah* or realm of creation, *yetsirah*, the realm of formation, and *asiyah*, the realm of activation. These realms, like the ten lights, are not arranged in a series but exist simultaneously and are all in reality one and the same.

It was several weeks after our lunch at the Belfry that Simon introduced me in a roundabout way to the intricacies of the Kabbalah, though at the time I had no idea that such was his purpose. It began over supper at his home in Lennox Gardens, within easy walking distance of mine, when he casually asked if I ever met my HGA. Detecting my bewilderment he quickly added "Your Holy Guardian Angel". It left me none the wiser.

What I had by then discovered, however, is that abbreviations of this sort were something one had to get used to when talking to occultists – with Mr. James it was just the bad language that needed getting used to – since they were (and still are) very much in favour. Their avowed purpose is to conceal from the uninitiated whatever the combined letters represent, though it normally takes little ingenuity to work out what that is. The real intention, I suspect, is to make matters seem more mysterious than they really are, while allowing those in the know to feel agreeably smug.

Freemasons do the same, at least in their written texts, with God for instance referred to as the GOU (Great Architect of the Universe) and Master Masons, less cleverly, as MM, though some other abbreviations are more baffling, at least to those not privy to the secrets of the Craft. Among occultists, the liking for mystification extends even to the names adopted by various organisations, as we saw with Mrs. Britten's HB of L (Hermetic Brotherhood of Light), an example quickly followed by the HOGD or Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, though one of its offshoots, the Stella Matutina, was prescient enough to resist opting for SM. Occasionally the initials are separated by a triangle composed of three dots or asterisks, a pretty touch favoured by Aleister Crowley for the Argentium Astrum (A.:A.:) or Silver Star, a magical order he established in 1907, while triangles are replaced by squares in the abbreviated version of the *Mysteria Mystica Maxima* (M::M::M::), a name given to the British section of the *Ordo Templi Orientis* or OTO. (Crowley would become its national head in 1912.) Popular in Freemasonry as well, such squares and triangles

are said to demonstrate that the relevant organisation is a sodality connected, in ways undisclosed, to the Ancient Mysteries. You may believe it, if you want to.

Anyway the HGA – now I'm succumbing to the habit – is a term, Christian in origin, found in *The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage* or, more precisely, in the translation used by Aleister Crowley when he made that first unsuccessful attempt to meet his own Guardian Angel on the shores of Loch Ness, an event with such disastrous consequences for the people around him. Despite the risk of mishap Crowley would maintain throughout his life that “the central and essential work of the magician” remains:

“ the attainment of the Knowledge and Conversation of the HGA. Once he has achieved this he must of course be left entirely in the hands of that Angel, who can be invariably and inevitably relied upon to lead him to the further step – crossing the Abyss and the attainment of the grade of Master of the Temple. ”

Happily, by the time he came to write these words the author had already met his HGA, as well as discovered that the procedure ordained by Abramelin, with its meticulous preparation and unpredictable outcome, was not essential after all, easily replaced by other methods which procure the same result with considerably less effort. And do so, moreover, without having to conjure up the four infernal princes, eight sub-princes and their 316 servitors who, as we observed, can never be depended on. At the same time Crowley did not entirely relinquish his passion for ritual or at least his passion for dictating ritual procedures for others to follow, while himself, it is said, cutting corners when it suited him. In one such text (*Liber VIII: 8th Aether*) he recommends a room with white walls and a red lamp burning overhead, an altar with white wooden top, a censer, incense, anointing oil and a wand of almond or hazel, cut from the parent tree at the equinox or solstice, going on to promise that on the first day of the twelfth week “in a light insufferable for splendour, and a perfume intolerable for sweetness” the HGA will finally appear and for the next three days explain to his conjurer how to reconcile “the world that is within with the world that is without.” After a retreat of ninety-two days the duly enlightened conjurer may resume normal life.

And if that still appears too daunting, consider a variant in Crowley's *Liber Samekh* where, surrounded by the usual paraphernalia, the magician is re-

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quired to perform his ritual -

“once daily for one moon, then twice at dawn and dusk for two moons, next thrice, moon added, for three moons, afterwards midnight making up his course, for four moons four times a day. Then let the eleventh moon be consecrated wholly to the Work; let him be instant in continual ardour, dismissing all but his sheer needs to eat and drink. For know that the true formula, whose virtue sufficed the Beast in this Attainment, was daily thus: Invoke Often.”

Given the demands college made on my time, I was relieved that the advice Simon offered when he started urging me to confront my own Holy Guardian Angel dispensed with the ritualistic flimflam so dear to the likes of Crowley and Mrs. Penry Evans, though he would have been the first to concede that flimflam has a useful role to play in the practice of magic. Instead and much to my relief, he simply repeated the injunction to “invoke often”, which was fine except that before going ahead, I was concerned to understand what it was I was supposed to be invoking. And to be frank, I wasn’t greatly taken with the term “Holy Guardian Angel” either, far too churchy for my Nonconformist upbringing.

It was reassuring to learn therefore that within the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, responsible for introducing Crowley to the practice of magic, the Holy Guardian Angel was referred to as one’s personal “genius”, a word defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as either a spiritual element dwelling in each of us or an attendant spirit that serves as our companion from cradle to grave, guiding and protecting us along the way. Certainly “genius” struck me as less off-putting than Holy Guardian Angel, even if I was by no means sure which of its two meanings it was meant to have in this context. Only later did I learn it had both.

So pervasive has been the influence of the Golden Dawn since its creation in the late nineteenth century that one cannot overlook it, even if its importance has at times been exaggerated. Trend setting, even trail blazing, it certainly was, but there have always been magicians who opt for different traditions or even no tradition at all. Mr. James dismissed it as a hotch-potch, something cobbled together by a bunch of Freemasons in search of something more exciting, female company included, than the staid rituals of Grand Lodge. And there may be a grain of truth in this, although I suspect the old boy was in one of his moods when he said it.

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Certainly the founders of the Golden Dawn were committed Freemasons, as shown by their attachment to a hierarchical structures whose grades and degrees, all with fancy titles, tell us more about their fondness for pomp and circumstance than their magical accomplishments. By general consent the beginnings of the Order can be set in 1884 but much else about it is disputed. According to one version, an Anglican clergyman named A. F. A. Woodford chanced upon a collection of documents in a second-hand book shop close to Seven Dials in North London, written in a script he could not identify. He bought them nevertheless. Three years later and still none the wiser, he lent one section to a Dr. Woodman, like himself a leading light of the Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia, a quasi-masonic group founded in 1868, and another to Dr. W. Wynn Westcott, deputy coroner for the London Borough of Hoxton. Equally baffled, they in turn showed it to a flamboyant character – Messrs Woodford, Woodman and Westcott, were, one suspects, anything but – named Samuel Lidell Mathers who grasped immediately that the manuscript was written in Enochian, the Angelic language that had fascinated the Elizabethan wizard, Dr. John Dee. With occasional help from his future wife, Mina, a gifted clairvoyant, Mathers was able to discover that the text described certain magical practices based on the Kabbalah.

Not at all, say others. The original documents were passed to Woodford by Kenneth MacKenzie, a Masonic scholar and fellow Rosicrucian who in his younger days had been received into a continental branch of the Rose Croix while living in Vienna. (He was said also to have met Eliphas Lévi during a brief stay in Paris.) Where MacKenzie, compiler of the *Royal Masonic Cyclopaedia* (1870), first came across them is uncertain, some claiming it was while rummaging in the archives at Freemasons' Hall, and others that they were given to him by his friend Frederick Hockley when both were helping to set up the Research Lodge Quatuor Coronati (No. 2076), constituted a year before Hockley's death in 1885. What nobody disputes is that MacKenzie surrendered the lot to Woodford who, unsure what to make of them, handed them over to Westcott in 1886

According to this version of events, the material contained in the documents was not written in Dr. Dee's Angelic Script, but in a code which Westcott, assisted by Woodman and, more especially, Mathers, succeeded in deciphering with the aid of an alphabetical key invented in the late 15th Century by Johannes Trithemius, Abbot of Sponheim and something of a

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sorcerer himself . (He wrote a popular treatise on demons.) Once uncovered, the text allowed its three translators to cobble together a set of rituals that were later used by the Golden Dawn.

Meanwhile in a letter attached to the source documents or – accounts vary – in a message concealed within the body of the text, was a request that anyone who succeeded in breaking the code should contact a certain Anna Sprengel, at an address in Nuremberg, something Westcott did in October 1887. Or so it is claimed. Others argue that the mysterious Fräulein Sprengel, rumoured to be the illegitimate daughter of Ludwig I of Bavaria and the dancer Lola Montez, was not, as Westcott and his associates maintained, a high-ranking German Rosicrucian but an invention of their own, designed to make the whole affair seem more mysterious, as well as justify their claim to have obtained Frl. Sprengel's consent to establish the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. She was supposed also to have bestowed on each of them the grade of Adeptus Exemptus, thereby saving them the bother of progressing through the ranks like everybody else.

The first five of these grades constituted the “Outer” Order, to which, strictly speaking, the name Golden Dawn uniquely applied, the second or “Inner” Order, established in 1892, being the *Ordo Rosae Rubeae et Aureae Crucis* (Order of the Ruby Rose and Gold Cross) or, for understandable reasons, the ORRAC. Only in the latter did members actually get down to the practice of magic, their time in the Outer Order spent instead on learning about astrology, the tarot, the Kabbalah and how to manipulate the four elements, notably by means of the Lesser Banishing Ritual of the Pentagram, usually referred to – here we go again – as the the LBRP. (There is also the LIRP but one is quite enough for now.)

Above the second Order came a third, known as the *Argentinum Astrum* or Silver Star, not to be confused with Crowley's organisation of that name, whose élite membership was composed of discarnate entities known as Secret Chiefs. It was they who dispensed advice and encouragement to Mathers and Westcott when, following Woodman's death in 1892, the two men agreed to run the organisation jointly, the one as Imperator, the other as Praemonstrator, a partnership that would end five years later after confidential documents mislaid by Westcott were discovered in a hansom cab parked outside Charing Cross Station. Told by his employers to choose between magic and his day job, he prudently opted to stay on as coroner for

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North East London. (Rumours persist that Mathers, ambitious to govern alone, had planted the documents in the cab himself.) Never mind, Wescott still had his Freemasonry to keep him busy and, with it, the consolation of being appointed Grand Sword Bearer of the United Grand Lodge of England.

It was in 1887 that the world at large or, rather, that section of it which subscribed to Madame Blavatsky's magazine, *Lucifer*, first learned of the existence of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Its address, according to an announcement submitted by the founding fathers, was in Keighley, Yorkshire, though it was in London that the enterprise took off, following the inauguration of the Isis-Urania Temple on 1 March 1888. (The premises it occupied, like the Master Temple Psychic Centre over Mr. Homer's chemist's shop in Portsmouth, did scant justice to its name.) Among its first members was Mina Bergson, sister of the French philosopher Henri Bergson, who chose as her magical pseudonym – everyone was expected to have one – *Vestigia Nulla Restrorsum* ("I leave behind No Traces"), subsequently changing her first name to the more Celtic-sounding Moina and her second to Mathers, following her marriage in 1890 to the Adeptus Exemptus, later Imperator.

Other recruits included a fellow student of Moina's at the Slade, Annie Horniman, whose father, a wealthy tea merchant, founded the Horniman Museum in Dulwich, the American esotericist A.E. Waite, translator of Eliphaz Lévi's books but nowadays best remembered for the popular Rider-Waite Tarot cards, the journalist and author Arthur Machen (Arthur Llewellyn Jones) from Caerleon in South Wales, inventor of the legend of the Angel of Mons, and the actress Florence Farr, Shaw's sometime mistress and by all accounts something of a bossy boots. The poet W. B. Yeats joined in 1892, six years before Crowley, and would later switch to the new, but not unrelated, Stella Matutina, following the dissolution of the Golden Dawn. He remained a member until 1921.

Over the ten years between 1888 and 1898 as many as three hundred individuals were received into the Order, though it is unlikely that more than a hundred were ever members at any one time. At its peak the Golden Dawn had provincial branches in Edinburgh (Amon-Ra), Bradford (Horus) and Weston-super-Mare (Osiris). There was also one in Chicago (Thoth-Hermes).

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But already Mathers was becoming a problem. As hinted by his magical name *Deo Duce, Comite Ferro* (God is my Guide, my Companion a Sword) his great passion other than magic was the art of warfare which may explain the belligerence that often surfaced in his dealings with more docile members of the Order. Always restless, he had moved with his wife to Paris by the turn of the century, their expenses paid by the ever-obliging Miss Horniman. There he established a new temple (Ahatoor) from which he issued diktats to the Faithful back in England. According to one account he had for some time been claiming to be the reincarnation of Michael Scot, a 12th Century wizard mentioned by Dante in the *Inferno*, though a similar claim was also being made by another Golden Dawn, the novelist J. Brodie Innes, head of the Amon-Ra Temple in Edinburgh. Anyway, in his enthusiasm for all things Scottish, Mathers, born and bred in London, had years earlier added the name MacGregor to his own, but now to impress his French admirers, he also awarded himself the title of Comte de Glenstrae.



Samuel Liddle
"MacGregor" Mathers



Moina Mathers
(née Bergson)

One evening the newly ennobled Mathers was sauntering through the Bois de Boulogne, presumably more salubrious after dark than it is today, when he came upon three of the Order's Secret Chiefs who persuaded him, not, one supposes, with undue difficulty, that he himself was the visible pres-

ence of their supreme head, the Ipsissimus. Few of those in London, fed up with his bullying and his long absences, shared his joy when they learned of it.

On the contrary members of Isis-Urania were growing increasingly restive. Things reached a climax when Aleister Crowley upset everyone by trying to clamber up the hierarchical ladder too fast, albeit with the blessing of Mathers, he ensuing brouhaha such that one group of rebels set up a rival version of Isis-Urania, while another went off to found an entirely new Order, the Stella Matutina. Up in Edinburgh, Brodie Innes and the Amon-Ra Temple stayed loyal to Mathers, as did the bewildered congregations in Bradford and Weston-Super-Mare. A furious Mathers thereupon put Brodie Innes in charge of the British side of things – the name Golden Dawn was replaced by Alpha and Omega – while Mathers continued to busy himself in Paris until his death in 1918. By then years spent in communication with the Secret Chiefs had taken their toll, claimed a disconsolate Moina, but her erstwhile disciple, Dion Fortune, would always maintain that he died of influenza. For the record it should be mentioned that the same Mrs. Penry Evans attributed the great postwar flu epidemic to vampiric Transylvanian soldiers killed on the battlefields of France, their malign influence responsible also for the spread of homosexuality throughout Europe that followed. (This might account for the decidedly Slavic cheekbones of my Toreador.)

“It’s easy to poke fun at them”, remarked Simon one evening, after doing precisely that for a good two hours. But no, however pompous the rituals or self-important the people conducting them, he insisted that the ceremonial pomp should be judged by its effect on the imagination of those taking part. The robes, the incense, the conjurations and the solemn oaths, however meaningless, even downright silly, they might seem to outsiders, were all justified if they alerted participants to a reality beyond the threshold of their everyday awareness, one no less valid for being imagined rather than empirically experienced. At the same time the more involved people became in what was going on, seduced by its symbols, colours, rhythms and scents, the more ready would their imagination be to release that creative energy which, if conditions are right, can render thought objective. It is a process similar to that which may account for poltergeist phenomena or the materialisations attributed to Mrs. Duncan, at least when the latter were not attributable to cotton sheets or ladies’ “smalls” (or “not-so-smalls” in

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her case). By means of such creative visualisation, as writers on magic call it, what is inwardly perceived may be outwardly experienced. This, after all, is how Madame David Neel created her rebellious tulku, while dispensing with the theatricality Mathers and his pals went in for. Like Mr. James, she was very Low Church.

Himself no stranger to ritual, as the description of his encounter with the shade of Apollonius makes plain, Eliphas Lévi described the paraphernalia of ceremonial magic – the pentacles, sigils, charms and fancy dress – as above all “instruments for the education of the will”. In other words they conspire to stimulate the volitional, as well as creative, powers of the imagination, giving purpose and direction to a magical operation. In the first place this serves to reconcile two planes of experience, subjective and objective, but secondly, by adapting the latter to whatever the ritual is intended to accomplish – and this where the rabbit emerges from the hat – the desired result is magically achieved. It is, as Crowley defined it, “the art of causing change in accordance with the will”.

And the role of the Kabbalah?

Well, let us go back to the Tree of Life, a representation both of the process of creation and of the reality, seen and unseen, in which we subsist and of which we are part. The latter means that forces represented by the various *sefirot* are active not only in the world at large but also in us, indicative yet again of the hermetic connection between the macrocosm and the microcosm that is each of us. By examining or, better still, *experiencing* these forces, we better understand ourselves and the workings of nature, even become attuned to the mind of God as revealed in his creation. It is, in other words, a question of proceeding from the known to the unknown, the visible to the invisible, the human to the divine.

This affinity between part and whole means, too, that the one can affect the other, itself the foundation on which magic confidently rests. Each *sefirah* from Kether at the top (and thus closest to God) to Malkuth, companion of our earthly plane, has its own characteristics, all of them universal yet specifically relevant to us. By knowing these, together with a host of related associations, from words, colours, numbers and planetary rulerships to the particular force linked to each *sefirah*, the latter sometimes personified for our convenience, magicians are equipped to get down to business.

Within the Golden Dawn this business would have involved dressing up for the occasion, the belief being that ceremonial robes not only blur the identity of those taking part but, more importantly, have a powerful impact on their imagination, one reinforced by the use of colours and symbols proper to the occasion. In practice the garments worn can be as plain or elaborate as wallet or dress sense allows, since it is their psychological impact that counts, together with their complementary impact on the Inner Planes. And to facilitate the latter, every detail of such an operation is meticulously planned in advance, from its timing to the choice of objects in the room or resting on the altar, their relevance lost in antiquity but familiar still to those reaches of our mind that impinge on the Collective Unconscious. Like all other signs and symbols pressed into service, they are the expression within time and space of whatever supra-physical force the magician has set out to attract.

Yes, at first glance it may seem a load of superstitious rubbish, in particular the rather absurdly sounding names culled from old magical texts that remain popular even today. (A propos of which, the infernal princes who caused Crowley so much bother up in Scotland are said to be Paimon, Oriens, Arifton and Amaimon: the first goes about on a camel, while the last gets angry if one doesn't doff one's cap to him.) The reason for their popularity has less to do with their meaning, if they have one, than their "vibrational" quality and its acoustic effect on both the natural and supernatural worlds. Created when molecules start to vibrate, each sound causes a wave of sympathetic vibration among neighbouring molecules, the result being propagated motion and, importantly, the energy behind it. It is the kinetic energy peculiar to specific sounds, that determines the choice of words in a magical operation, their resonance on the Inner Planes provoking a response that conforms with, and may ultimately realise, the magician's intention.

In addition to this, words and names are regarded by every magician as an intrinsic part of what they refer to. As such, they become a substitute for it because they contain something of its essence. That of course is why magicians have always prized the names, no matter how nonsensical, of angels, spirits and demons, aware that by addressing them by name, they can influence the specific force, itself impersonal, that each represents. As early as the third century Iamblichus, a Syrian Neoplatonist, was further

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suggesting in his *Mysteries of the Egyptians, Chaldeans and Assyrians*, that such names possess a magical virtue of their own, having become hallowed by centuries of use. Not surprisingly, magicians committed to the Kabbalah discern a special holiness in the sacred name of God. For them the whole of creation is an expression of God's self-awareness, initiated when he acknowledged his true name, one so ineffably majestic that no human tongue dare speak it. As the eternal Logos within the Godhead, its four letters make up the Tetragrammaton (יהוה) sacred to Judaism, though their correct pronunciation has long been forgotten, even if Aleister Crowley did boast that he alone knew it, adding that the sound, if uttered, would rend the universe asunder.

Ah, Crowley! His foiled attempt to conjure up his Higher Self came immediately to mind when Simon proposed one afternoon that the time had come for me to meet my own. We were upstairs in Mooney's Wine Bar in the Strand. (I still remember that we shared a bottle of Madeira, a wine few people seem nowadays to drink.) Anyway, despite assurances that no harm would befall me, I could not at the time be persuaded that things would not be high-jacked by four demonic princes and a retinue of boisterous attendants. It was a risk I preferred not to take.

In any case I was far from clear about who or what I might finish up meeting. Yes, it was my Higher Self, as members of the Golden Dawn described it, but that left me none the wiser. For his part W. B. Yeats had opted to call it his "daimon", an idiosyncratic spelling of daemon, the term used by Socrates and the Neoplatonists who took it to mean the elemental ruler allocated to each of us the moment we draw our first breath. Anyway in the end I decided Higher Self was still the term I preferred for something which belongs essentially to the spiritual realm and yet, paradoxically, is an integral part of us as well.

Within us, Simon had already explained, it manifests itself through our intuition, that subtle faculty which makes us cognisant of realities inaccessible to sense experience and reason alike. By happy chance, Henri Bergson, brother of Moina (*Vestigia Nulla Restrorsum*) Mathers, has done much to make the notion a little easier to grasp. The point he makes is that knowledge of what is real and absolute, rather than what is derived, transitory and dependent, becomes available to us only when we acknowledge the limitations of reason and consciously surrender to our intuition. By doing

this we are able to reconcile our outer and inner selves, achieving a state of wholeness comparable to the "individuation" which for Jung and his school is the key to personal happiness, as well as a better understanding of the universe. In other words, just as the dismembered Osiris was gathered up by Isis and restored to wholeness, so the divisions within us can be reconciled once we consent to the fusion of our "Higher" and our "Lower" selves.

In Buddhism this undifferentiated state of consciousness, where subject and object are experienced as one, is known by the Sanskrit term *samadhi*, precursor to ultimate enlightenment and thus to *moksha* or final liberation. Here, the Higher Self is comparable to what is called *atman*, meaning not only the potential within us to attain buddhahood but also the agent that permits us even now to experience the true meaning of things rather than the meaning we unwittingly impose on them. On our part nothing more is required than to suspend for a moment the 'I' that is our conscious personality, a construct shaped and nourished by the world about us and therefore reactive rather than original. Once we manage that, we shall perceive for the first time things as they really are, not as our consciousness interprets them for us. This is precisely what Mr. James sought to teach me as a boy when, under his guidance, I first came into contact with the Inner Planes. It is almost a manner of experiencing reality in the absence of oneself.

Almost, but no more. For it is difficult to see how one can speak of experiencing reality unless we remain aware of what is being experienced. In other words, the observer may well exclude himself from the act of observation but unless he or she participates in the experience, then clearly nothing will have been observed. Those who dabble in psychology claim the solution is to allow what is intuitively perceived to pass unrecorded through the conscious mind (or even by-pass it completely) and enter the subconscious unimpeded. Which is easier said than done. And that is precisely why magicians have recourse to the concept of a Higher Self (or whatever other name they give it) to denote a faculty that registers the experience of what we observe while detaching our consciousness from the act of observation. As a result we come to experience reality, natural and supernatural alike, as it is, not as what we make of it.

Now all this may enable us better to understand what the Higher Self *does* but not what the Higher Self *is*. Here it helps to be reminded of the esoteric belief that the personality that is ours during a particular lifetime,

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fashioned to some extent by what we experience in the course of it, is the manifestation within space and time of a “self” independent of both. Each successive lifetime is part of an educative process, governed by the law of Karma, which the enduring self must undergo until ready to graduate to a new stage of development. The same tradition teaches, however, that a residual portion of the self never incarnates. Instead it remains detached, though only from our three-dimensional perspective, from the self that undergoes successive incarnations, its “absence” a reminder of our supernatural origin. It is, in short, our “Higher”, because non-incarnated, self. Some commentators, mindful of the relationship between microcosm and macrocosm, draw on the Kabbalah, likening the process of incarnation to the way God experiences the world through his presence in each of the *sefirot*. That is why the Gnostics often spoke of the Higher Self as the Logos or divinity within us, and why Crowley bestowed on it the Hebrew title Adonai or Lord.

Unsurprisingly this concept of a Higher Self that is at once part of us yet also separate, becomes easier to grasp if we treat it as being independent of ourselves. As we have seen, Crowley spoke of his Holy Guardian Angel as a discrete entity, its name Aiwass, claiming that the relationship between such a being and “his client is that of friendship, of community, of brotherhood, of Fatherhood.” He then goes on to add sternly, “He is not, let me say with emphasis, a mere abstraction from yourself; and that is why I have insisted rather heavily that the term “Higher Self” implies a damnable heresy and dangerous delusion.”

Oh heck!

As so often with Crowley, he manages to be both right and wrong. Right, because the Higher Self is not some noble or elevated aspect of the you or me that goes about its business in this world, but is instead a reality subsisting totally outside it. Wrong, because if understood in this sense, the term is neither heretical nor delusive. It is worthwhile adding that in the passage referred to, Crowley touches on another characteristic of the Higher Self when he asserts that it is “something more than a man, possibly a being who has passed through the stage of humanity”. Here he may have had in mind the occult belief that our enduring self, the one that submits, at least in part, to a series of incarnations, is not the discrete entity we like to think, but a composite being made up several identities each with its

own history, some of it post-human. Such a notion is unpalatable to lots of people because it undermines a comforting belief in our individual uniqueness, yet it is consistent with the fact that even if temporarily differentiated or at least perceived to be so, we are, all of us, ultimately components of a single whole, both many in one and one in many.

And my own Higher Self? Well, in the end I consented to make its acquaintance, albeit not without trepidation. To facilitate the experiment, Simon recommended I stay overnight at his house while he was absent on business, adding that I would be doing him a favour, as there were two elderly cats in residence that needed to be fed in his absence. The arrangement suited me also, given the cramped conditions in Onslow Gardens, with barely enough room for the Toreador, all six-foot-four of him, and me, let alone a new-found Guardian Angel as well. When he called to hand over the keys, Simon assured me I would find everything I needed on the table in the kitchen, which I took to mean a few tins of Whiskas and a fresh bag of litter.

As expected, the litter and cat food were there when I arrived that same evening, but beside them was a note containing suggestions – they were nothing more, the writer was keen to assure me – on how to set about discovering my Higher Self. To my relief these were fairly straightforward, though that was not surprising for I knew by then that Simon did not favour too much theatricality when practising magic or show a liking for fancy dress, at least not when working on his own.

Anyway, that evening I fed the cats, checked that the litter tray was not in need of attention, then went upstairs to bed and slept soundly. Throughout the next day, I went without food, as the note suggested, and by late afternoon even the open can of Whiskas began to smell tempting. At four minutes past nine, on this my instructions were specific, I entered the basement room to which Simon had directed me in his note, lit the two candles on the small white-wood table, turned to face East (or, for want of a compass, in the direction of Victoria Station) and performed what is known as the kabbalistic cross, intoning the words (*“Ateh Malkuth v’ Gedulah v’ Geburah le Olahm, Amen”*) without undue embarrassment as I knew by then sufficient Hebrew to recognise the concluding doxology to the Lord’s Prayer (“For Thine is the Kingdom” etc.).

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Next on my list was the LBRP or, in case you've forgotten, the Lesser Banishing Ritual of the Pentagram, adjudged so important by the leaders of the Golden Dawn that only after mastering the technique were members permitted to advance from the Outer to the Inner Order and assume the grade of Adept. Its purpose is to create an invisible, but none the less protective, barrier around the practitioner, thereby rendering him or her impervious to any hostile influences emerging from the Inner Planes once the gate between the worlds has been opened. Basically it involves tracing a pentagram, pictured in terms of shimmering white light, at the four cardinal points and investing them in turn with one of the divine names. When this is done, the elemental rulers traditionally assigned to each are duly summoned and visualised appropriately. In the Golden Dawn system, these are the four archangels, with Raphael (Air) pictured on a purple hill-top, his pale yellow garments billowing in the breeze, Gabriel (water) in blue and surrounded by cascading torrents of water, Michael (fire) clad in scarlet and bearing aloft a sword, and finally Uriel (Earth), standing against a fertile landscape whose greens and browns match the colours of his cloak. But that's not quite the end of it. The magician has next to visualise a refulgent six-pointed star overhead, its interlaced triangles anticipating the fusion of his or her temporal self with the forces soon to be encountered. Only with a second formulation of the kabbalistic cross is the exercise completed.

It is a prudent way to commence all ritual work, though the specifics, in particular the words and images, can be adapted to match individual preferences. Some, uncomfortable with the judaeo-kabbalistic references, replace these with others taken from, say, Hinduism, with a growing number drawing inspiration from the seven chakras (six, according to the *Hatha Yoga Pradilika*) or psychic centres linked by tradition to various parts of the body. Often depicted as lotus flowers, each with its own distinctive colour or combination of colours, the chakras have an affinity also with certain letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, one that enables Hebrew terms to be dispensed with.

And after these preliminaries? Well, in accordance with Simon's instructions, I lit the incense burner set between the candles, only to rediscover, first to my astonishment and then my delight, the same heady scent that filled Tanrallt on that night when part of me, insubstantial but real notwithstanding, had ended up on a mountain top behind the house. As I con-

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tinued the operation I began after an hour or so to experience, not without a touch of disquiet, commingled with delight, a similar feeling of detachment from my physical body. With it came the prospect of an adventure on the same lines as last time. My destination, however, turned out to be quite different.

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It was the shabbier end of the fairground, a tawdry fringe of booths with show-fronts that might once have been jaunty, even garish, but were now scruffy and in desperate need of fresh paint. One depicted a tropical forest, the greens and yellows of its foliage badly faded, with ethereal fauna just about discernible among the strangely pallid leaves. "Giant Rat" announced a sign above the entrance, while others on either side offered patrons the chance to see a mangabey ape, a mongoose, a porcupine and – "Born Alive" – a two-headed pig. (The "Born Alive!" while it may well have been true, disguised the fact that the creature was by now pickled in alcohol.) Next door was home to the Headless Woman ("Must be Seen to be Believed") and beyond her, Selene, "Mistress of Allure" who, according to the man drumming up custom outside, was the only female fakir in the world. The Mistress of Allure, looking anything but, stood impassive on a podium behind him, her bare midriff and a chiffon yashmak vaguely suggestive of the mystic east.

But it was not towards these I found myself heading as I crossed the muddy patch between this sad, crepuscular world and the raucous bustle of the fair, its lights and cheerful music, shouts and laughter, already well behind me. Here, the illuminations were less bright, the panatropes muffled and reality, if no less real, was ever so slightly askew. This was a place where pigs were born with two heads, while close by dwelt a lady with no head at all. Even the Mistress of Allure, according to the man listlessly touting her virtues, swallowed razor blades and slept on a bed of six-inch nails. Nothing was quite as it should be.

Just as Dorothy, once over the rainbow, knew she'd left her native Kansas, I now realised I was a long, long way from Lennox Gardens. At the same

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time I realised there was not much I could do about it. I felt equally unable to resist stepping up to the little pay box in front of a booth even more dilapidated than any of its run-down neighbours. On my left a frail, solemn child, with crude epaulettes pinned to his jumper, stood half-heartedly banging a drum, encouraged by an elderly woman dressed all in black, her hair the same brassy yellow as the boy's epaulettes, who wordlessly accepted the shilling I placed in her hand. Only as the little drummer boy drew back a purple curtain across the entrance did I notice he was in fact a wizened old man. The discovery shocked me less, however, than hearing him greet me by my full name.

Inside, on trestle tables down the centre of the tent stood an assortment of mesh cages, as well as several large jars containing more prodigies that may or may not have been born alive but were now very much dead. Among them were a three-legged duck, a snake (its deformity unclear as the label on the bottle had faded), a toad with five feet and a turnip-shaped object said to be a genuine mermaid but immersed in such murky liquid that it might well have been a turnip after all. In the cages were two squirrel monkeys, huddled together for warmth, and various other small animals, all of them, from what I could tell, endowed with the correct number of heads, limbs and feet. It was a squalid exhibition all the same and the plight of the exhibits or at least those of them with breath in their bodies made me infinitely sad.

Close to the exit was an added attraction, two large distorting mirrors propped up against the iron struts that held the tent in place. Designed to make the viewer look grotesquely misshapen, either squat and fat or tall and skinny, sometimes both, it was impossible to miss them. Yet when I looked into their curved surfaces, the reflection I saw was none other than my normal, everyday self, with not a hint of distortion or as much as an inch out of place. That would have been enough to persuade me I was dreaming, even had a languorous voice behind me not confirmed it.

"Nothing here is what it fucking seems" it drawled, "if you'll pardon my French."

I turned around to find a magpie watching me from a cramped little cage. Now, even if magpies, like parrots, can be trained to speak, the sentence just uttered struck me as remarkable, the more so as it reflected perfectly

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what had gone through my head seconds earlier.

“Oh come on, you daft bugger, stop gawping and open this bloody door.”

Before answering I checked there was no one within earshot.

“You want to come out?”

“No, dearie, I want you to come in.”

A magpie not only gifted with speech but also sarcastic. Camp as well, by the sound of it.

Anyway I opened the door of its cage.

While my attention was distracted, the canvas walls, even the fairground beyond, must have melted away for on looking up I found myself in open countryside, alone and with no sign of the newly liberated bird. Not before time I set about trying to gain some control over what was happening or at least make sense of it, racking my brains for the meaning of what I'd come across so far.

To do so I needed to reflect on the magical system used by Simon when jotting down the notes I'd followed earlier, one recognisably in the tradition of the Golden Dawn and thus based on the Kabbalah. Or, rather, based on the eclectic approach to the Kabbalah long popular with occultists, in whose eyes it offers, as our intrepid necromancer, Eliphas Lévi, once rhapsodised,

“a philosophy as simple as the alphabet, profound and infinite as the Word; theorems more complete than those of Pythagoras; a theology which may be summed up on the fingers; an infinite which can be held in the hollow of an infant's hand.”

For the moment this philosophy, not to mention the attendant theology, would have to wait, while the theorems were well beyond me anyway. No, what I needed to do (and do urgently) was refer to the symbolism of the *Etz Chayim* or Tree of Life, at least as much of it as I could remember, in the hope of finding out where I was and, as the magpie would put it, what the fuck was happening.

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From a magical perspective, the Tree of Life is a diagrammatic representation of forces active within us and in the macrocosm present in you, me, and everything else. In keeping with kabbalistic tradition, it supposes that the creation of the universe coincided with God's awareness of Himself, a cosmogonic event involving four types of manifestation – the initial emanation, its creative dynamism, the subsequent appearance of form, and, finally, the physical universe. Because it portrays all that exists, the Tree offers in this context a convenient guide to varieties of manifestation beyond normal sense experience and thus enables us to venture from our native Malkuth and discover each in turn. Such an expedition is no less valid (and will seem no less real) for being undertaken in the imagination, with symbols representing what might otherwise be inconceivable, though the practised traveller, reconciled with his or her Higher Self, may experience these transcendental realities directly, without, that is, any intervention by the conscious mind. In most cases, however, there is a felicitous mixture of spontaneous cognition and a gently monitored imagination.

The second of these got to work as soon as I adjusted to my unexpected visit to the fairground, not the likeliest of places, you might think, to meet a Holy Guardian Angel, one's own or anybody else's. Yet the clues were plain to see the instant I made an effort to find them. The muddy ground beneath my feet, for instance, was indicative of Malkuth, traditionally represented by earth and water, as were the pale greens and yellows, twin colours of that *sefirah*, dominating the jungle vista at the front of one of the sideshows. Even the double-headed pig and the Headless Woman next door hinted at the illusory quality and subtle distortions associated with Malkuth, just as nearby, Selene, Mistress of Allure, emphasised its lunar connections. Indeed nothing could be more suggestive of the Sphinx, imputed to that *sefirah* by Aleister Crowley in his *Liber 777*, than the ghost of a smile, just about visible through the chiffon, that now and then crossed her otherwise expressionless face. As for Crowley's preference for salamander black, speckled with gold, as the colours most congenial to Malkuth, these were conspicuous in the dress and hair of the woman to whom I paid a shilling to get into the booth. Only later would I discover that Crowley had made a point of linking this particular *sefirah* to the discovery of one's Holy Guardian Angel.

Admittedly, other commentators link this momentous occurrence to the neighbouring *sefirah*, Yesod. There is much to be said for it, since Yesod,

home to archetypal paradigms, is regarded as the sphere most sympathetic to the subliminal reaches of our mind. The Hebrew word means 'foundation' and is not inappropriate, given that we find here the basis or, better still, the prototype of everything about to find concrete expression in the natural kingdom (Malkuth). It is also the vehicle through which the life of the universe, more specifically what we call organic life, is channelled. That I must have moved here from the realm of Malkuth was implied by the purple curtain at the entrance to the booth, this being one of the colours attributed to this *sefirah*, as also is the reddish white – more pale russet than pink – of the five-footed toad, again a creature peculiar to Yesod. As for the snake displayed next to it, that too was significant, though this struck me only later, given the phallic associations of this particular *sefirah*, indicative of its life-imparting function. Finally, the rainbow that greeted me when I found myself out in the open is another symbol of Yesod, a luminous bridge between the visible and invisible worlds – as Judy Garland reminds us.

And the magpie? Ah well, thanks to Mr. James, I already knew this to be one of the symbols of Mercury or, rather, of the planetary spirit identified as its custodian, the others being a king on the back of a bear, a handsome youth and a fleet-footed dog. With Mercury the sponsor of the ritual I had undertaken, as well as the rising planet in my natal horoscope and thus governor of my innermost self, the little magpie, cheek and bad language apart, was the ideal bird to come across that evening.

Time must have passed, though I failed to notice it, for I saw that the rainbow had vanished and a lambent moon risen in its place, softening the greys, greens and browns of a landscape already misted with rain but now, as in a painting by Corot, endowed with an illusory, almost dream-like, quality. Yet as I wandered like some disembodied Heathcliff over brooding acres of moorland, cold, damp and with no idea where I was heading, everything around me seemed perfectly real. I tried not to think of how to get back to where I'd started from, by which I mean not the enigmatic fairground but the house I'd left behind in Lennox Gardens, hoping that as so often in the past this would take care of itself.

At some point I began to find the scenery curiously familiar, despite not being able to recognise any of it. In a vague, slightly ambiguous way, it now seemed less hostile, even mildly well disposed to me, though it was

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not until I spotted a patch of vervain a few steps ahead that I realised where I was. The bleakly lofted slopes of Pumlumon were a long way from Knightsbridge, but for me in another sense they were a great deal closer to home. As I knelt to touch the tiny pale-lilac flowers, I knew before looking up, that in front of me stood the man who'd called on Mr. James all those years ago. This time his features – and the discovery surprised me less than it should have done – were undeniably my own.

I remember thinking there and then that the bored-looking woman at the Freshers' Party had been right. That first trip to Dolmen Bedwyr, just like this one, had been, as she put it, a case of the self, in this case mine, looking in at itself. But only partly right, for what it went on to find there, I now understood, was not a mere reflection of itself but itself magnified, as in one of those fairground mirrors I had noticed earlier. Facing the fourteen year old me and facing me again that night was my Higher Self or my daimon, as Yeats liked to call it. It was me, certainly, but also more, far more, than the everyday me. Here was someone I'd lost touch with as a boy, but met up with again as a man. Together, even if temporarily apart, the two of us had a relationship like that Yeats described in relation to himself and his daimon:

What marks upon the yielding clay? Two marks
Made by my feet, two by my Daimon's feet
But all confused because my marks and his
Are on the selfsame spot. His fell
Where my heel fell, as he and I
Pausing a moment in our headlong flight
Face opposite ways, my future being his past."

That night, however, my Higher Self and I briefly faced each other.

"We've met before," I muttered stupidly.

"Silly bugger, of course you've sodding well met before!"

Perched on a nearby rock was the magpie. And do you know what? He sounded just like Mr. James.

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12

Aleister Crowley's name is one I have mentioned several times already, yet so controversial a figure is he, that I've tried to steer clear of him up until now. He deserves better.

Mr. James, too, had been wary of him to begin with, but found him good company when they finally met at the home of Lord Tredegar. There was also his evident respect for the volume of Crowley's work he had shown me as a boy, even promised to let me have after his death, though, sad to say, I never received it. For the popular press of his day, the Master Therion, as Crowley liked to call himself after the Great Beast, with the number 666, mentioned in the Book of Revelation, was known also as "the Wickedest Man in the World", no small achievement for someone brought up among devout Plymouth Brethren in Leamington Spa, though his teetotal father did own a brewery. Ever anxious to boost his esoteric credentials, Crowley claimed also to be the reincarnation of Ankh-f-n-Khonsu, an Egyptian priest of the 26th Dynasty, Pope Alexander VI, a less than exemplary pontiff, Edward Kelley, the accomplice of Dr. Dee, Count Cagliostro and of course Eliphas Lévi who died, fortified by the sacraments of the Church on 31 May 1875. (The Theosophical Society would be founded one month later and Crowley born on 12 October.)

Like several of those who gathered for lunch every Sunday in Limehouse, Simon held a bit of a grudge against the Great Beast because of, as he put it, "what he did to poor Nina", a reference to the painter Nina Hamnett who had been one of their gang when our host, Father Christian, served as a priest in Soho during part of the nineteen-fifties.

"What a girl!" the vicar exclaimed after someone let drop her name one

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Sunday lunchtime as the usual crowd, with me a regular by now, dallied over our pudding, “she danced on a café table absolutely starkers. In the middle of Montparnasse.”

“La Coupole,” murmured Vivian Cox .

“No dear, La Rotonde.”

This from his neighbour, a slightly sozzled Brian Desmond Hurst..

“Neither. It was a bar in the Boulevard Raspail.”

The correction was offered by another of the regulars, less extrovert than the rest which may be why I’ve forgotten his name. I do remember he lived in a flat once occupied by Augustus John on Chelsea embankment, though I may be confusing it with what was briefly Bram Stoker’s home in Cheyne Walk. From my one and only visit there, I recall seeing a portrait, possibly self-portrait, of the artist which had pride of place on a drawing room wall. Anyway, pleased with his intervention, the speaker now turned to ask me if I knew the small town of Tenby on the Pembrokeshire coast.

“Nina came from there,” he explained, “ So did Augustus and his sister Gwen. They were older, both of them, though not by much, just ten to twelve years at most. The girls were in Paris at the same time, though Gwen got involved with the sculptor Rodin. Totally besotted. It went on for ages. That’s how she ended up painting all those nuns.”

Around us the conversation had switched to other things, still to do with France but now mainly items of gossip such as Cocteau’s final dalliance, Roger Peyrifitte’s wartime past, Line Renaud’s true age and the charms of the Café de Flore, not to mention those of Piaf’s new husband, well-endowed and pretty free with it, according to the knowledgeable young Frenchman seated on my right. (I discovered later that his father owned the bateaux-mouches that ferry tourists up and down the Seine.)

Not until Simon was giving me a lift home to South Kensington, did I find out what Aleister Crowley “did” to Nina Hamnett more than thirty years before. The whole business started after the publication in 1932 of her autobiography, *Laughing Torso*, when Crowley’s attention was drawn to

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a passage which, he would allege, suggested he practised black magic. (In fact the offending paragraph merely reported, correctly but with a touch of malice, what his neighbours in Sicily suspected he got up to.) As usual in dire need of money, he sued author, publisher and printer for libel.

Proceedings commenced on 10th April 1934 in the King's Bench Division of the High Court where, despite a bravura performance in the witness box, he lost his case after the judge, shocked by material submitted by the Defence ("dreadful, horrible, blasphemous, abominable stuff"), intervened in the proceedings. The jury promptly found in favour of the Defendants.

"I'm told by people who knew her that Nina was never the same afterwards" declared Simon, "The whole business affected her badly. It's possible she'd got a soft spot for Crowley and felt let down. After all, they'd been pals for more than twenty years."

"Or perhaps she felt she'd let him down," I volunteered.

"That as well perhaps. When I got to know her, she'd hit the bottle. In those days I lived off Charlotte Street so would see her cadging drinks in the Fitzroy. I admired her cheek. It was just before Christmas when she fell from an upstairs window. Of course she may have jumped but chances are she was pissed and just fell. Poor thing, she ended up stuck on some railings, though I don't think it killed her outright. Anyway people said Crowley and the court case were to blame, not for the accident but for the boozing that led up to it."

The offending references the book had made to black magic relate to a period in the nineteen-twenties when, after consulting the Yi-Ching, as he routinely did before important (and even unimportant) decisions, Crowley moved to Sicily, taking up residence in a dilapidated villa a few miles outside Cefalù. Some ten years earlier, following an encounter in Cairo with his Holy Guardian Angel, manifesting itself as Aiwass, emissary of the Egyptian god Horus, Crowley had become persuaded of his divine mission to inaugurate a new aeon which would lead to the perfection, even the apotheosis, of humankind. With that thrilling prospect in mind, he turned his rented villa into the Abbey of Thelema, based on Rabelais' fictional precedent, adopting as its motto "Do what Thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law. Love is the Law, Love under Will", usually abbreviated to "Do

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what Thou Wilt”, which is closer to Rabelais’ *Fay ce que voudras* and slightly more *laissez-faire*. It was not long, however, before lurid and salacious rumours, some justified and others not, began circulating throughout the neighbourhood and these eventually made their way to England – Lord Beaverbrook’s *Sunday Express* was especially affronted – with reports of drug taking, orgiastic rituals and even human sacrifice, all of which led in 1923 to an order by Italy’s new Fascist Government expelling Crowley from Italy. These were the rumours Nina Hamnett had gleefully referred to in her book.

“Did you meet Crowley?” I asked Simon.

He had not, obliged by circumstances to cancel a projected visit to Netherwood, the boarding house in Hastings where the magus, as impoverished as ever but still hopeful things would look up, lived until his death in 1947 at the age of seventy-two. Many of Simon’s friends had known him, some of them well, among them Frieda Harris who spent five years collaborating, not always harmoniously, with Crowley on a deck of tarot cards, discussed in one of his last essays, the *Book of Thoth*. Some of the original paintings by Lady Harris – her husband, a former Liberal Member of Parliament, was made a baronet in 1932 – were exhibited in London in 1942, with the result, so Crowley maintained, that the war promptly took a turn for the better. Dion Fortune made similar claims in respect of some patriotic magic worked by her at around the same time.

It is worth mentioning that the cards, now in general circulation, incorporate in their design something called projective or non-Euclidian geometry, a system developed, but not invented, by Rudolf Steiner, and one that first came to my attention in Munich where an enthusiastic young woman sought to persuade me that two parallel lines have of necessity to join up in infinity. (By repeating “of necessity” the speaker tried make their eventual conjunction seem obvious, but for me it was anything but.) Only later on a visit to the Anthroposophical Society’s headquarters at Dornach in Switzerland, did I begin to grasp what was meant when a down-to-earth woman named Olive Wichert, an expert in the field, urged me to think in multi-dimensional terms rather than limit myself to the three dimensions of our physical environment. (This of course is exactly what Mr. James tried to make me do years earlier by encouraging me to view a matchbox from all possible angles at one and the same time.) Another of her recom-

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mentations was to picture infinity as space turned in upon itself, reaching towards a centre rather than extending outwards and onwards towards an ever-receding periphery. Years later I discovered that Lady Harris was told exactly this when she, too, sought tuition from the same expert before working on the tarot cards. A devoted pupil of Steiner, tireless prophet of the Cosmic Christ, Mrs. Wichert would certainly have disapproved of her pupil's links to the Great Beast, had she been aware of them, the more so as Frieda was required to enter Crowley's OTO, under the magical name of Sister Tzaba, before being allowed to pick up her paint brush..

"She ended up on a houseboat in India. Srinagar, I think it was, anyway somewhere up north," added Simon, "That much I do remember."

He was about to drop me off on the corner of Old Brompton Road when he suggested that if I were curious to learn more about Crowley, I should ask Gerald, another Sunday visitor to Limehouse, who had known them all, even if never quite as intimately as he liked to pretend.

"Mind you," he went on "I did hear he cadged a bed in Crowley's spare room when he was on his uppers once. Near Jermyn Street Baths, I think it was. Probably just before the war."

The temporary lodger was Gerald Hamilton, not one of the lunchtime regulars or, for that matter, especially welcome when he did turn up, being inclined to grow sullen before the meal was over, surveying his plate and the company around him in a way that implied neither was much to his liking. Already well into his seventies he had been the inspiration for Arthur Norris, the shady wheeler-dealer featured in Christopher Isherwood's tales of pre-war Berlin, most notably *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*. On our first meeting he told me that hearing me speak was like being restored to the company of his sorely missed friend, Dylan Thomas, though someone later remarked that he said it only to make people think he and the Swansea-born poet had once been bosom pals. On another occasion he declared that I sounded like the actress Glynis Johns, possibly because something I said had displeased him. Usually it was Brian Desmond Hurst, a fellow Irishman, who brought him to the vicarage and if Gerald could be coaxed from his sulk with a drop of Tullamore Dew, the pair would sing Irish comic songs, just as the late Sergeant Murphy did in Lady Caillard's Belfry.

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It may well have been on the last occasion I saw him, shortly before he withdrew from public life, as he put it, to complete a second volume of memoirs, that I found the courage to enquire about Crowley. What had he thought of him, I asked.

“Not much,” was the answer I got.

Seeing the abandoned food and the disapproval on his face as he looked around the table, I feared that would be the end of it. Then all of a sudden in a loud voice he announced to all and sundry, “The old goat spent a weekend bugging Victor Neuburg in Paris then pretended it was magic.”

“Perhaps he meant magical,” ventured Brian Desmond Hurst.

“Not with Victor Neuburg,” muttered Gerald before relapsing into his sulk.

The reference was to something called the Paris Working or *Opus Lute-tianum*. (Like most of his contemporaries, Crowley enjoyed parading his public school Latin, though their pronunciation would probably not have met with Mrs. Winkler’s disapproval.) On this occasion he and Neuburg, a poet who hung out with poets better known than himself, collaborated in a ritual designed to attract some much-needed money. By invoking Jupiter, traditionally the god – and for astrologers the planet – of largesse, they invested the occasion with a serious theurgic purpose but the goings-on that followed would certainly have horrified the strait-laced founders of the Golden Dawn, not to mention their Holy Guardian Angels.

By then of course the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn no longer existed, yet of the groups which succeeded it and, to varying degrees, stayed loyal to its practices, the one that would prove most resilient is Crowley’s OTO, something few would have predicted. Crowley played no part, however, in the founding and early history of that organisation.

The name itself, *Ordo Templi Orientis*, is evocative, deliberately so, of the Knights Templar and suggests an established order of chivalry such as the Knights of Malta, even if the reality, as so often the case, is very different. In fact the organisation dates only from the turn of the last century when it is identified with two men, Carl Kellner, a wealthy industrial chemist from Vienna, and the Bavarian Franz Hartmann, the latter the more inter-

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esting of the pair, if only because of his involvement in the scandals that engulfed the Theosophical Society during the summer of 1884.

Nineteen years previously, the twenty-seven year old Hartmann, a ship's doctor, had quit Europe for America and become an early disciple of Madame Blavatsky, his commitment such that within a year he had removed himself to India where he rapidly gained the confidence of Colonel Olcott, though Madame herself regarded him as a bad lot. Thanks to Olcott's patronage, he found himself among those left in charge of the premises at Adyar when Blavatsky and Olcott set sail for Europe the following spring, with the result that he was caught up shortly afterwards in the brouhaha following Emma Coulomb's disclosure of how "miracles" hitherto attributed to the Masters had been fraudulently engineered, prominent among them the cabinet, known as the shrine, in which letters and small objects would inexplicably materialise. It was the phlegmatic Hartmann who had the presence of mind to drag this discredited relic, complete with sliding panel at the back (accessible from Madame's bedroom), out of the house and into the garden. There he took an axe to it, returning next day to set fire to the pieces.

By 1885 and now back in Europe, he set up a German branch of the Theosophical Society, careful to avoid further contact with the people he'd left behind in India. (For their part they never much liked him anyway, being critical of his unkempt appearance, rough manners and long greasy hair.). Money was always scarce but on becoming acquainted with Carl Kellner, he at last found an admirer and, better still, a generous benefactor. (For a time he ran a clinic owned by Kellner, where the pair developed an inhalation treatment, Lungo-Sulphate, claimed to bring relief to patients with chronic chest complaints.) Meanwhile through his new protégé, the impressionable Kellner became acquainted with Theosophy, while continuing to pursue an early interest in yoga and, possibly, some of the tantric, practices that would later give the OTO a bad name.

A third man now joined them, Theodor Reuss, sometime journalist, opera singer, chemist and possessor of a charter to run the Swedenborgian Rite of Masonry, acquired in 1901 from Dr. Wynn Westcott, the London coroner whose Golden Dawn papers turned up in the back of a London cab. While Reuss alone can be said with certainty to be the founder of the OTO, he and Hartmann were both active in events leading up to its formation,

while Kellner was reliably on hand to bail them out from time to time. An important step was made in 1905 when they acquired from a Mancunian named John Yarker, something of a wheeler-dealer in irregular Masonic charters, the authority to perform the Antient and Primitive Rite of Memphis, the Ancient Oriental Rite of Mizraim and the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite. At around the same time Yarker showered on Kellner, Reuss, Hartmann and a fourth associate, some of the highest degrees in each of these three orders. There was certainly no shortage of them: whereas Freemasonry proper has but three degrees, the highest being Master Mason, the Scottish Rite has 33, while the Mizraim and Memphis Rites boast no fewer than 90 and 97 respectively.

According to most commentators, the authority to operate their own quasi-Masonic system prompted Reuss and Hartmann, with Kellner's blessing, to set up the OTO, limiting the number of degrees to nine, or ten if one includes the honorary degree, Supreme and Holy King, awarded to the Order's national head in each country. In addition the founders secretly imported into the workings of the higher degrees some of the sexual practices derived from Hatha-Yoga that were known to Kellner and Hartmann. Other commentators, determined to preserve the good name of both, deny this, arguing that because the formal Constitution of the OTO is dated 22 January 1906, neither Hartmann, known to have parted company from Reuss the year before, nor Kellner, who died in June 1905, had anything to do with the new organisation or whatever slap and tickle its senior members indulged in. The date does a similar favour to defenders of Rudolf Steiner who in 1905 paid Reuss 45 marks to join the Memphis-Mizraim lodge. (The fee included membership for Marie von Sievers, due to become the second Frau Steiner after the death of the first six years later.) A narrower margin, this time eighteen days, but a margin all the same, likewise separates Steiner's acceptance from Reuss of the 30°, 67°, 89° grades of, in turn, the Scottish, Memphis and Mizraim Rites, as well as the purchase from him of a Mizraim-inspired Rite named *Mysteria Aeterna*, intended for his personal use. According to this interpretation, whatever the OTO got up to, Herr Reuss got up to it alone.

Fortunately he was not alone for long. The Great Beast was at hand. Already in 1910 Reuss is said to have rushed Aleister Crowley through the lesser degrees of the OTO, but two years later on a second trip to London he called unexpectedly at his home in Victoria Street and in an access of

generosity elevated him to the tenth and topmost grade. As a result, unknown to Buckingham Palace close by, Edward Alexander Crowley became the Supreme and Holy King of Ireland, Iona and all the Britains within the Sanctuary of the Gnosis, an honour unrecorded in the Court page of *The Times*.

That was on 12 April. On 1 June the Grand Lodge of the OTO in England was formally established, opting to call itself *Mysteria Mystica Maxima* or, with those squares mentioned previously, the M::M::M::: Only three further developments merit our attention. The first was in 1913, when Crowley composed a Gnostic Mass, destined, as he put it, to become the central event of the Order's public and private celebrations. Two years later, in a further sign of his growing influence, it was decided to make Thelemic doctrine, as expounded by him, the central credo of the organisation. Finally in 1920 that old hubris which had offended members of the Golden Dawn and played no small part in its demise, surfaced again, prompting Crowley, already Patriarch Grand Administrator General (33°, 90°, 96°), to try to usurp Reuss by declaring himself the supreme chief or Outer Head of the Order (O.H.O). No longer in the rudest of health, Reuss formally expelled him but was dead within two years, clearing the way for Crowley to be elected his successor at a rowdy, ill-tempered meeting of Grand Masters. Members hostile to the succession marched off into exile, in this case to Switzerland, taking with them what they held to be the true deposit of the faith, their leader a certain Alice Sprengel who, some improbably claim, had transferred her loyalties to Reuss after Rudolf Steiner jilted her in 1914. By coincidence hers is also the name of the mysterious woman, Fräulein (Anna) Sprengel, who authorised the founders of the Golden Dawn to set up shop in 1888.

All of which seemed far, far removed from the type of magic, I had learned from Mr. James, a type unencumbered by orders, degrees and the taint of human vanity. That thought struck me with still greater force a few weeks later when – it must have been around the middle of June – I arrived home a day or two before term officially ended and could look forward to visiting Tanrallt after an interval of nearly a year. More than anything else, I was impatient to tell Mr. James what I'd been up to, about the knowledgeable Simon and, with a few tactful omissions, about the vicarage in Limehouse and the disreputable Sunday lunches. In short I wanted to show off. Only now can I see I may also have craved his approval. At the same time I was

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aware of the need not to sound too enthusiastic, let alone self-satisfied, in case he think I had – to use a favourite Aberystwyth expression – “forgotten myself”. No offence was more serious. Natives of the town who ventured beyond its disapproving confines were expected to behave as if they’d never left them, should they ever return. And if they forgot, there was always someone happy to remind them who they were and where they came from. And quite right, too.

On that first evening home I retrieved my bike from the back of what, for me, would always be Uncle Davy’s shop, its centenary year now past but still baking the bread that could never be bettered. The bike’s brakes were duly tested and air pumped into its tyres, then after a bit of a polish it seemed as impatient as I was to set off on the road to Pumlumon.

What brought me home earlier than planned was a funeral. “Aunt” Charlotte, in reality my mother’s eldest cousin, I had known since childhood, aware even then that the family looked down on her slightly, while according her the respect due to someone who had lived in London and thus knew more about life than provincials like us. As a boy, what impressed me about her was how she could navigate her way around Harrods, tell you where all the red buses went, and smoked de Reszke cigarettes. She was also on ARP duty in Piccadilly the night the Café de Paris got hit by a bomb. Close to eighty when she died, she never forgot the bus routes, though nobody had the heart to tell her that the landmarks she remembered, places like the Metropolitan Music Hall on Paddington Green, Gorrings, Derry and Toms, St. George’s Hospital and the bustling Lyons’ Corner Houses had long since disappeared.

She was born at Nant Gwrtheyrn in North Wales, a tiny cluster of houses hemmed in by cliffs on three sides and exposed to the sea on the other. A path led down from the road a mile or two away, so steep and precipitous that until recently the village could be reached only on foot or on horseback, the latter at significant risk to pony and rider alike. The climb up was hard work, too, but not anything as hazardous as the descent. Shortly before Charlotte was born, a young girl lost her footing on her way home after dark and had lain on the hillside all night. She was dead when they found her next morning.

Robert Edgar, Charlotte’s father, had married a woman whose name I

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never discovered, possibly because no one in the family could bring themselves to utter it. The daughter of a quarryman and, even worse, red haired (evidence of Irish blood or undue sensuality, possibly both), she was considered by my great-grandmother, mindful of her Wilson connections, an unacceptable choice. Shunned on that account by his family, Robert Edgar took his new bride to Nant Gwrtheyrn where he found work in the granite quarries close by. There, in quick succession a son and three daughters were born, one of them Charlotte, who had just turned ten when her father died of silicosis. Left with four children to feed, her mother took in washing to make ends meet and rented a spare room to the postman who called twice a week from Pwllheli, then stayed overnight before resuming his round the next morning. Whether love was to blame or loneliness or even the notorious red hair, eighteen months later the young widow discovered she was pregnant. Soon afterwards she drank a full bottle of Lysol while the children were out of the house, a disinfectant so caustic it probably burned through her stomach in minutes, hence the rags she stuffed in her mouth to muffle her screams.

The three girls were taken in by my grandparents but the boy, named Robert after his father and at fourteen old enough to start quarrying slate, was dispatched to his mother's people in Ffestiniog. (He, too, would die young, again of silicosis.) The girls did not stay together long. Once their knowledge of English was good enough for domestic service, places were found for them in households as far removed from Wales as possible. Charlotte ended up in Norfolk.

Well, not quite. She ended up sixty-five years later in a small graveyard outside Aberystwyth. Her cousin George, my mother's eldest brother is also buried there, another relation I was told to "keep in" with since, like Uncle Davy, he had no children and was thought to be well-off. Here again nothing came of my efforts, further proof that I was not terribly good at keeping in or, more likely, that such tactics were counter-productive and doomed to failure from the start. Word of this second disappointment reached us one evening as we were leaving, my parents and I, after putting fresh flowers on Uncle George's newly filled grave. From a small, pebble-dashed house next to the chapel emerged a beaming Maggie Jenkins, resident caretaker, who asked if we'd heard about my late uncle's will. Somehow my mother gave the impression we had.

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“Everything to the chapel! Isn’t that marvellous? We’ll have central heating for a start. That’s something we can do with.”

The “we” consisted of six to eight worshippers who turned up every Sunday afternoon, none under sixty apart from Bronwen Humphries, provider of chintz curtains to a less than grateful Mr. James. The news was too much for my mother.

“Jim” she said, “go back and get those flowers.”

“You can’t do that, Madge.”

Madge could and she did. For two weeks afterwards six chrysanthemums occupied a cut-glass vase on our hall-stand, set between an ivory-backed clothes brush and a silver tray (that turned out to be EPNS). Chrysanthemums have struck me as gloomily sepulchral ever since.

The morning after my return I set off early for Tanrallt, progressing effortlessly until I reached the foothills of Pumlumon. From there I struggled for five or six miles, more breathless than I used to be, until finally, with the breeze in my face, I was free-wheeling down into Ponterwyd. A final climb awaited me but by then I was close to my destination so the challenge passed unheeded. By then, too, I could almost hear the honking of the alchemical geese.

To my surprise there was a car parked beside the house when I got there. Its owner, clutching a brown paper bag, was about to climb in as Mr. James, sporting a tartan scarf I’d not seen before, offered final instructions on how to take the medicines he’d just finished dispensing. There was a clink of bottles as the bag went onto the passenger seat.

“This gentleman” the visitor informed me, with a respectful nod towards Mr. James, “knows more than any doctor. He *understands* nature. Not like all your scientists. They think they do just because they know a lot. But it’s not the same thing, knowing and understanding. Not the same thing at all.”

The accent was Scottish. I wondered if that explained the scarf.

By then I knew enough to guess what the speaker meant. Scientists do

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know a great deal about the natural world and to them we rightly turn, not to the likes of Mr. James, when we want to learn how it functions or what it is made of. Whether this helps us understand it any better is less certain. The rigorously objective approach adopted by scientists is fine up to a point, even if their professed detachment is never complete, given that they, too, are part of the reality under investigation. Missing from it is any empathy between observer and observed. And without this we have no more than a superficial acquaintance with what is being examined. To discover more, the entire person, emotions and all, must be engaged, just as when meeting someone for the first time we draw on our subjective experience to assess what he or she is like. That way we learn more, far more, than we would from such “objective” criteria as shoe size, fingerprints or even a full DNA profile.

Occultists claim that nowhere is this more relevant than to the organic world, for by subjecting living things to the scientific method, we are in effect treating them as lifeless and inert. Yes, we learn much about their material composition, even its impact on their behaviour, but their significance eludes us completely. For that, we have necessarily to move from the perception of material evidence to a conceptual method adapted to the supra-sensible reality underpinning it. In other words, like the prisoners in Plato’s famous example, persuaded that the shadows on the wall of their cave are all there is, we need to turn around and see the people passing back and forth who are the cause of them.

The plant I saw on the kitchen table when Mr. James led me inside the house was one of several he used to treat a condition known as basal cell carcinoma or, more familiarly, rodent ulcer (in Welsh *dafad wyllt*). A form of skin cancer, it is less dangerous than other types as the rogue cells do not in this case migrate and get up to mischief elsewhere in the body.

“It’s under his chin,” said Mr. James, picking up a small mortar and pestle, which he took over to wash in the sink. .

My hope that morning was to hear more about Aleister Crowley not talk about herbs, as well as to learn more about the OTO. In fact I mentioned the latter before we’d even set foot inside the house. Mr. James was dismissive.

“Silly sods.”

I reminded him that he had spoken well of Crowley in the past.

“He was,” he conceded, “very gifted. No doubt about that. And a gentleman. “Do as Thou Wilt” makes a lot of sense. But the OTO? Well, I don’t know what to say.”

And so he said nothing. Instead he picked up the plant in front of us and asked for its name, scolding me because I no longer remembered it in Welsh.

The cancer he hoped to cure with its help is caused by an excessive multiplication of cells, in this case just below the surface of the skin. It is excessive because it goes beyond what’s needed to replace other cells that have died. From the esoteric point of view, this is not the complete picture. For that we must remind ourselves that organic matter is the product of a felicitous compromise between particle and wave, the latter related to the formative influence occultists call “etheric”. (That the name comes from the now discredited theory of a universal ether does not invalidate the concept itself.) It is this etheric impulse that governs the morphology of living things. Indeed its earliest intervention occurred when a felicitous combination of chemicals enabled certain nucleo-proteins to replicate themselves and so generate life. Ever since, as both the sponsor and determinant of organic form, it has played a dual role within the evolutionary process, the one expansive (growth) and the other restrictive (shape or form). Together, both encourage development but also limit and adapt it to the best interests of the organism concerned

Like everything else, plants are subject to its rule but only in animals do we detect a hint of collaboration. In human beings by contrast its influence can to a significant extent be furthered or hindered, consciously or not, by our mental or physical disposition and by our way of life. It is as if in us the etheric force is for the first time working both from within and without, its activity the reason why the mind-body relationship is of such interest to the medical profession, not to mention to practising magicians.

It is when something happens to upset the balance between these two complementary functions that things start to go adrift. Should the momentum for growth predominate, then cells will proliferate without the restraint

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normally imposed by the parallel urge to build structures conducive to the well-being of the host. Alert to this possibility, Anthroposophical physicians have developed a diagnostic procedure which involves adding a drop of blood to a salt solution that is then allowed to crystallise. The pattern thus formed supposedly reflects what the etheric forces are up to, enabling the clinician to detect specific diseases, above all cancer, well before they betray any symptoms. It is even claimed that the organ most likely to be effected can also be identified.

From a therapeutic perspective, the reckless multiplication of skin cells is reminiscent of the over-exuberance associated with Jupiter when too expansively disposed, something astrologers make much of. The same tradition teaches that Jupiter, like the zodiacal sign it governs (Sagittarius), has a special affinity with the liver and like many occultists, Mr. James believed in a polarity between that organ and the skin. This relationship manifests itself in a complicity that defies their anatomical and functional differences, evident in the tendency of liver disease to make itself known by changes in the colour or texture of the skin, while the destination of choice for cells migrating from cancers of the skin (other than the basal cell variety) is most commonly the liver. And so, from the outset Mr. James, faced with a patient like the one who had just driven off, made sure the hepatic system was functioning well by prescribing a decoction of agrimony (whose Jupiterian associations were noted by Nicholas Culpeper over three hundred years ago), centaury and fumitory. Included also are the greater celandine and either birch or beech leaves – I no longer remember which. Like the dandelion, many of the plants ruled by Jupiter have a bitter taste and bright yellow flowers. It is their role in helping the liver break down fats, as well as ridding the body of toxins that Mr. James valued, not to mention the sense of well-being they conspire to promote.

At this point he went on to tell me he had also given his visitor a sachet containing crushed nutmeg, cinnamon, cloves and aloes wood, again connected to Jupiter, but imbued also with musk, a substance linked to the inhibiting propensities of Saturn. Their combined scent, he maintained, rarely failed to redress the imbalance in the etheric force active or, rather, over-active, at the source of this particular disease.

As if that were not enough – no wonder I had earlier heard the clink of several bottles – he also made provision for a topical assault on the site

itself. Here his weapon of choice was an ointment containing the plant I had noticed on the table, known to country folk as cleavers or clivers (*Galium aparine*) but also as barweed, catchweed and goose-grass. (The reason for this last name became clear to me when I saw for the first time how the alchemical trio tucked into it with relish.) It is a plant whose “signature” or affinity with cancer is evident in its intemperate, even aggressive, growth, ruthlessly overwhelming its more diffident neighbours in gardens and hedgerows. Here the growth impulse (Jupiter) is at its most dynamic, with its formative complement (Saturn) barely able to keep up. Animals are familiar with its beneficial properties and dogs in particular will often seek it out, aware possibly of what Mr. James claimed were its tonic effect on the urinary tract, though he did not put it quite as delicately as that.

Now, herbs and plants are all very well and have played, indeed still play, a valuable part in medicine, butJupiter?

Well, to understand this and the implicit relationships, seemingly incongruous, that Mr. James, like other magicians, draw upon, we need to remember that the constituent parts of the reality we inhabit, though subject to change and causality, remain integrated within a single Whole. It is thus as much from its complexity, being the sum total of its parts, that this Whole derives its unity, as from the unity implicit in each of its parts. This is acknowledged in the *Bhagavad-Gita* where Brahman speaks of “the countless gods that are my million faces”, as well as by European thinkers of the same period, people like Heraclitus and Anaxagoras, for whom “all things are in all”. A similar message was delivered by the Neoplatonists, with Plotinus declaring that “the whole is in all, as well as in every part”, a view echoed by German philosophers of the nineteenth century, notably Hegel who taught that the Absolute is the ultimate form of Unity, one whose components have no meaning other than their unity, while that unity has no meaning other than its components. All of which boils down to the simple truth that the totality of everything is both many in one and one in many.

Now, whereas most people mistakenly regard themselves as a constituent of the many and, as such, in objective relation to everything else, the magician stands in subjective relation to the rest, thanks to his or her acquaintance with the hermetic principle of “as above, so below”. It follows that to know oneself – the “*γνωθι σεαυτόν*” famously proclaimed at Delphi – is

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to know both the Whole and the parts that comprise it, as well as the relationships persisting among them, some closer and more significant than others. Where and how this network of sympathies operates in the natural world, often among things that appear totally unconnected, is discernible in those analogies (or “correspondences”) which for Eliphas Lévi were “the last word of science and the first word of faith.” In them we have a way of identifying the subtle relationships that bind together, again in his words, “the visible and the invisible....the finite and the infinite”.

That morning, however, I had wanted to talk to Mr. James about The Great Beast and the rituals of the OTO, both, it seemed to me, a hundred times more glamorous than all this stuff about plants and the subtle correspondences to which they bear witness. Mr. James seemed not to realise I had changed, grown up, gone out into the world and mixed with sophisticated people, men and women – well, men mostly – who talked posh, swigged Madeira in the middle of the afternoon and gorged not on apple tart and *pwdin reis* but crème brûlée. (Elizabeth David, no less, had given me the recipe for crème brûlée, writing it out in her own hand. In green ink, too.) Yet here was Mr. James going on about celandines (lesser and greater), beech leaves, goose-grass and dogs that found it hard to pee. It was as if for him I’d never grown up. Any minute I expected him to order me to start mucking out the cowshed. No wonder that by lunchtime I was back on my bike and already more than halfway home.

It was the last time I saw him. Sometimes it troubles me to think he knew it would be.

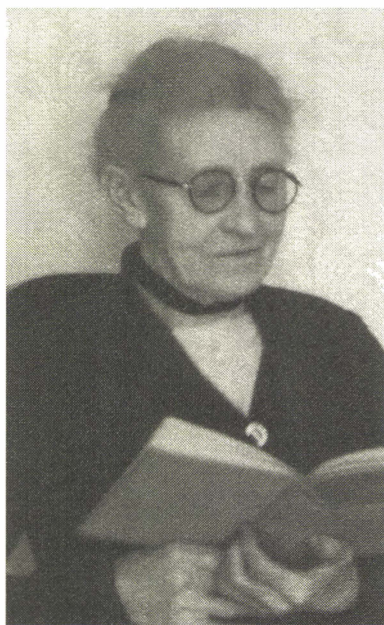
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A year later, still in Onslow Gardens but bereft of the Toreador, stolen by a wealthy Argentinean with an estate as big as Wales and, even more infuriating, good looks that matched his own, I got stuck into college work and, to everyone's astonishment, not least mine, ended up with a First. Only then, able to look up from my books and lecture notes, did I discover to my surprise that there were witches everywhere. Well, perhaps not everywhere but week after week came reports on television and in the popular press of nude frolics not just in the woods of rural England but also in the very heart of London. And whereas such tales occasionally surfaced in the *News of the World* or *The People* while I was growing up, these were invariably censorious, even if packed with titillating innuendo. Now, by contrast, the reporting, though still designed to titillate, was more sympathetic, treating such goings-on as yet another aspect of the Swinging Sixties. Certainly there was no more talk of a "repulsive pagan sect" as *The People* described witchcraft in 1957, having been invited to photograph a naked trio somewhere in North London.

Until then the only vaguely witchy person I'd met apart from Mr. James who was not really a witch, even if at times referred to as such, was very different from those now eager to get their kit off in front of the cameras. This was a cousin of my grandmother's known as Bodo Marged (Auntie Margaret) whose home, a thatched cottage with mud and wattle walls, lay just outside Aberystwyth. She shared it with several cats and at least as many rats, the latter more hospitable or at least less feral than the cats, but both anxious to keep out of sight when busybodies from the Social Services came by. Old-fashioned roses filled the front garden, so sweet smelling that as a boy I could never walk past without plunging my face into their crimson, saucer-sized blooms. No other flowers ever smelt so sweet.

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By the front door and on the roof of the privy or *tŷ bach*, houseleek grew in abundance, its juice dispensed by Bodo Marged, without ever disclosing its source, to people afflicted with warts or verrucas. (For an extra shilling she undertook to wish the warts away as well, just to be certain they went, while for half a crown she'd see to it they ended up on anyone the sufferer happened to dislike.) There were other tinctures, too, but I never got to find out what they were or what they were intended to cure, though my grandmother did remark once that Bodo Marged was better than any doctor for "women's complaints". I also heard her tell how she once brought the old lady back to her house for a bath. "I scrubbed her with Vim" she reported, "and even then not all the dirt came off."



Auntie Margaret at 90

This was an exaggeration. She may have had only an outside tap by the front door but Bodo Marged always looked clean enough to me. And she smelled clean as well. As a child, I'd have noticed, had she not. On Mondays, until well in her nineties, she caught the two o'clock bus into Aberystwyth, dallied in Woolworth's for an hour, then called on us for a cup

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of tea and two scones (no butter but lots of jam, preferably, rhubarb and ginger). There exists a photograph of her in our dining room, taken on her ninetieth birthday, looking very elegant and pretending to read a copy of Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. She later borrowed it and, encouraged by my father who made a habit of writing to authors whose work he admired, sent the writer a note via the publisher, eventually receiving a reply from his home in Switzerland just months before she died. By then she had moved to live with her niece in Tredegar, the "poor Auntie Sal" whose love for my father had gone unrequited.

Bodo Marged's family were Unitarians, not uncommon in Cardiganshire and good enough reason to keep her away from the churches and chapels of Aberystwyth, all committed, whatever trivial issues might otherwise divide them, to Father, Son and Holy Ghost. To her, God was Father, not Son or Holy Ghost, and was even, she would scandalously add, Mother as well. With the help of *Old Moore's Almanac* she kept a watchful eye on the movements of the planets but especially on the moon's waxing and waning, seeing in these a significance she was happy to explain to anyone willing to listen. Once, Edward Lyndoe, an astrologer whose predictions appeared on Sundays in *The People*, called to see her with my father, both men having got to know each other after Lyndoe – who had repeatedly predicted that World War 2 would not happen – moved into our area to escape the German bombs falling on London. "A bit of a witch" was his opinion, though he was careful to add that he meant it in the nicest possible way.

She would not have minded in the least, unlike the woman Simon took me to see one afternoon, shortly after the Toreador's unexpected departure for South America. Spoken of as the Witch of St. Giles, but never in her presence, she occupied a large mansion flat, more stage set than home, with a décor that mixed the darkly gothic with a festive, almost frivolous, baroque. The "St. Giles" referred to her previous residence on a site off St. Giles High Street, now occupied by the Centre Point building at the top of Charing Cross Road, while the "witch" was Madeleine Montalban, a name more romantic (and less reminiscent of a New Mexican township) than "Dolores North", as she briefly called herself following her marriage in 1939. As a matter of fact the name was familiar to me already thanks to articles she contributed to a magazine called *Prediction*, her monthly reflections, often on the Tarot, by far the best thing in it.

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“Don’t let on you’re gay” Simon warned as we travelled up in a rickety old lift to her flat off Shaftesbury Avenue, “She’s got a thing about it, though the poor dear’s camper than a row of tents. Her male students aren’t exactly butch either.” I took this to mean I should avoid sitting with my legs crossed and not smile at her too often.

Camp, she certainly was, dramatically so, with flowing garments that reminded me of Mrs. Caradoc Evans, though unlike hers, these were uniformly black. Resting on her head was an auburn wig, which she absently patted from time to time, as if to check it was there or at least still in place.

Her “thing” about gays may have stemmed from the views Madeleine – she authorised me to call her that – professed to hold about the respective and, in her view, disproportionate contribution men and women make to the success of any magical operation. For her it was women that were the better equipped to generate, possibly channel, those currents of energy needed to produce an intended effect, while men were constitutionally deficient in this regard.

“Angels are more sympathetic to women,” she declared, waving her hand as if to an invisible, perhaps angelic, audience, “Our sensitivity is more attuned to theirs. You men should accept that joyfully and with gratitude.”

My suspicion was that she regarded gay men as a challenge to this female hegemony, hence her dislike of them.

Soon afterwards, she and Simon were immersed in a discussion about the authorship of a work falsely attributed to the sixteenth-century writer Cornelius Agrippa. Purportedly the fourth volume of his *De occulta philosophia* and filled with detailed instructions on exorcisms and the conjuration of spirits, it lacks the profundity of the three earlier books where Agrippa argues that magic offers the key to understanding God and his manifestation in nature. From what I could make out, our hostess was suggesting that Dr. Dee might have had a hand in the forgery, possibly while living in Prague. (He and his partner, Edward Kelly, had gone there to manufacture alchemical gold for Rudolf II, but the experiment ended in failure, with Kelley finishing up in jail. He died while trying to get out.) Simon was seeking to persuade her that the disputed fourth book was already in circulation by the fifteen-sixties, long before Dee paired up with Kelley, while

she was robustly contesting the dates he suggested. As the two argued, I found myself studying a painting on the wall beside me of another monarch, whom I took to be Richard III, presumably a favourite of hers, as we'd passed several other portraits of him in the hall. What intrigued me were the semi-precious stones Madeleine had painstakingly glued onto all the rings and other bits of jewellery depicted in the pictures. Since then I have learned that her maiden name was "Royals" but whether that's of any relevance, I have no way of knowing.

"And what are you reading nowadays, young man?" she suddenly broke off to ask, guessing that I was out of my depth. Before answering I remembered to uncross my legs.

Now, as it happens, the resurgence of interest in witchcraft had prompted me to dig out and read again an old paperback edition, bought on a school trip to Edinburgh, of *Witchcraft Today* by Gerald Gardner. And so despite thinking it might not meet with her approval, I told her. It was a mistake.

"Horrid old man!" she shouted, not so much at me as at the world at large, "Don't believe a word of it. With him it's all beg, borrow and steal. And", she paused, "bondage!"

Following this outburst we did not stay long. It was evident that Gardner's name had plunged her into the foulest of moods – her temper was legendary – though that business about Dr. Dee can't have helped much either. But why Gardner? Not, surely, his penchant for ritual scourging, a practice alluded to in his writings but one that pales into insignificance besides Aleister Crowley's more ambitious debauches. Yet she had earlier referred to Crowley with no hint of disapproval, even given us to understand she'd benefited from his expertise in what would have been the final ten years of his life. There were no such kind words for Gardner. Was it really because, as Simon explained to me later, the old boy liked being tied up, then have his bottom smacked or privates tickled with a feather duster? (For historical accuracy, I should add that most people claim it was Madeleine that Gardner wanted to tie up and tickle with feathers. Pink ones, preferably.)

By now the two of us were having a desultory supper in the Vega, a vegetarian restaurant that once flourished, though "flourish" is too robust a word for something so wan, at the bottom end of Leicester Square. Over his

nut roast, Simon told me how people he trusted had assured him that Madeleine and Gardner were previously close, someone he knew even claiming to have attended a magical ceremony at her home, with Gardner among the participants. (Conducted with meticulous decorum, the performance involved neither feathers nor fetters, though the arrival of an unexpected visitor brought things to a premature end.) At that time Madeleine had just been demobbed from the Wrens and encouraged people to think she acted as Lord Mountbatten's personal seer, presumably while he was Chief of Combined Operations. (By October 1943 he had been transferred to Supreme Allied Command in South-East Asia.) If true, her seer-ship was not up to much, for it was during this period that the ill-conceived Dieppe Raid took place, resulting in the death of over one thousand soldiers, mostly Canadian volunteers. By the time Mountbatten resumed his naval career, retiring as First Sea Lord in 1959, Dolores North had metamorphosed into Madeleine Montalban, esteemed by readers of *Prediction* magazine, among them the adolescent me. (Other boys read *Health and Efficiency* on account of the naked ladies.)

Like Madeleine Montalban, Gerald Gardner claimed also to have done his bit to help the Allied cause in World War II, participating in a combined effort by the witches of England to frustrate Hitler's plans to invade the British Isles in 1940. This happened on the Feast of Lammas when several covens gathered in the New Forest to create a "cone of power", using, in Gardner's words, "mighty forces ...of which I dare not speak," which were then dispatched to Germany to weaken Hitler's resolve. The "mighty forces" were helped on this occasion by the willingness of at least two participants to sacrifice their lives as part of the exercise: frail and elderly and, like everybody else, stark naked or, as witches put it, "sky-clad", they declined to smear grease all over their bodies to protect themselves against the cold and died as a consequence. All of which seems a little far-fetched, not least because Lammas falls on 1 August and weather conditions in Hampshire that night are recorded as warm, with no more than a few light showers.

Another unsung hero of World War II is Aleister Crowley, provided we accept his claim that MI5 invited him to organise some woodland magic of his own, code-named Operation Mistletoe, in Ashdown Forest. Also rumoured to have been involved are Ian Fleming, author of the James Bond books, and Dennis Wheatley whose novels about magic and witchcraft

were immensely popular in the nineteen-fifties and 'sixties. While undeniable that both men worked for the security services during the war, there is no evidence that they participated in such an exercise, reportedly the brain-child of their boss Maxwell Knight, Head of Section B5(b). (The selfsame Maxwell Knight was an occasional visitor to the vicarage in Limehouse, though his MI5 colleague, the predatory Tom Driberg MP, was less welcome and came only once: a former chum of Crowley's, he was famously described by Winston Churchill as "the sort of man who gives sodomy a bad name.") Maxwell Knight subsequently found fame as a naturalist and broadcaster, his *Frogs, Toads and Newts in Britain* being one of my end-of-year school prizes.

With them in Ashdown Forest were forty soldiers (as it happens, more unfortunate Canadians) who wrapped themselves up in army blankets bearing occult symbols before perambulating around a dummy figure in German uniform, possibly meant to represent Adolf Hitler. The success of the operation became known to Crowley when a few days later he received a 'phone call to say the Führer's Party Deputy had landed in Scotland. A triumph of sorts perhaps, even if the arrival of Rudolf Hess did nothing to alter the course of the war.

It is possible that only after hearing talk of this episode did Gardner fabricate the story of the New Forest witches and those powerful but unmentionable, forces. What is indisputable is that by 1938 he and his wife had moved to Highcliffe, on the edge of Christchurch, where, as he told his biographer, he met people interested in witchcraft through his connection to a fellow Liverpoolian – Gardner hailed from the genteel suburb of Blundellsands – named George Alexander Sullivan or Frater Aureolis, sometimes changed to Aurelius. Sullivan was head of a quasi-Rosicrucian order he founded in 1911, The Order of Twelve but latterly known as the Rosicrucian Order: Crotona Fellowship. By then Sullivan, whose admirers included Annie Besant's daughter, Mabel, and Peter Caddy, founder of the Findhorn Community in Scotland, was running the Christchurch Garden Theatre, so called because it was built in someone's garden at Somerford, adjacent to Highcliffe, with several practising witches among its supporters. Their coven, according to Louis Wilkinson (whose oratory at Crowley's funeral and "jet black hair" had so impressed Mr. James) was a mixture of "middle class intellectuals and local peasantry". No doubt it was the bourgeois intellectuals who spotted that Gardner had been one of their

own in a previous life.

So far as this life was concerned, he had spent most of it in the Far East, first as a tea grower, like Captain Hewitt in Kenya, then as manager of a rubber plantation, before being appointed a Government official. At some stage, possibly even before his return to England, he became friendly with a man named John Sebastian Marlow Ward, known to everyone as "Father" Ward, priest of the Orthodox Catholic Church of the British Empire, a body which, like C. W. Leadbeater's Liberal Catholic Church, was neither catholic nor orthodox. Elevated to the episcopate in 1935, Ward became Archbishop-Metropolitan within three years and settled in Hertfordshire. There he and Gardner would renew their association as the war was coming to an end.

Meanwhile back in Highcliffe someone keen to introduce Gardner to the practice of witchcraft was a local elocution teacher, Mrs. Edith Woodford-Grimes, nicknamed Dafo, who arranged for his initiation to be conducted at the home of "Old Dorothy", since identified as the fifty-eight year-old Ellen Anne Clutterbuck, née a respectably Welsh-sounding Morgan, and by then, according to one report, no longer Clutterbuck but Fordham, following a second marriage three years earlier. (One suspects that in those days little in Highcliffe could be taken at face value.)

Whatever the New Forest witches got up to, it appears not to have satisfied Gardner. One suggestion is that its members were scarcely more than back-to-nature enthusiasts, disposed on occasion to strip off and invoke pagan deities, even chew magic mushrooms when they wanted to be daring. At any rate before the war ended he had moved to Bricket Wood near St. Alban's, not far from his chum, the Archbishop-Metropolitan who by then was running a Folklore Park, a kind of open-air museum of rural arts and crafts, in nearby Barnet. From him Gardner acquired a small wooden building, allegedly Elizabethan and known as the Witch's House, which he erected on a patch of land close to the Five Acres naturist club, of which he had become part-owner. (There were, indeed still are, several such clubs in Bricket Wood, famous also for its Morris Dancing.) With the building in place, Gardner may have hoped to establish a coven of his own, with Mrs. Woodford-Grimes, former "Maiden" in Old Dorothy's coven, serving as High Priestess. Absent from the scene, however, would have been the Archbishop-Metropolitan, forced to quit England in 1946 and seek ref-

uge on a plot of land owned by Gardner in Cyprus. It followed a scandal involving a minor, though unlike Bishop Leadbeater's dalliances, this one involved a young girl.

Meanwhile Gardner seems to have made a first attempt to bring some order to the jumble of beliefs and practices he'd come across in the New Forest coven, though not everyone, it must be said, is persuaded of its existence. As part of the exercise and for understandable reasons he did not hesitate to draw on external sources – sources, that is, other than “traditional” ones – to create a denser, more coherent system. In addition to magical texts like the *Key of Solomon* and Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia*, as well as such Golden Dawn material as was then available, he lifted bits from *Aradia, or The Gospel of the Witches*, a book on Italian witchcraft by the American folklorist Charles Leland, published in 1899, and even dipped into Masonic rituals familiar to him. Also useful, not least because they seemed to give academic legitimacy to his claim that witchcraft was the remnant of a pagan religion once prevalent in pre-Christian Europe, were two books by the anthropologist Dr. Margaret Murray, *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921) and *God of the Witches* (1931). Best of all, in May 1947 he paid several visits to Aleister Crowley in Hastings, on one of which he supposedly paid £300, a hefty sum in those days, for a charter authorising him to set up his own chapter of the OTO, Crowley having consented to elevate him there and then to the Order's fourth degree. In this way he gained access to the rites and practices of the Order as well as those of its ecclesiastical arm, the Gnostic Catholic Church. On the same occasion Crowley presented him with the *Liber Legis* or Book of the Law and arranged for him to purchase copies of *The Equinox* at a discounted price. Some of this material would find its way into Gardner's novel, *High Magic's Aid*, privately financed by the author and published in 1949 by the sympathetic owners of the Atlantis Bookshop, situated close to his flat in Bloomsbury and just around the corner from the then home of Dolores North. Indeed hers were the willing fingers that typed the manuscript prior to publication.

Whatever may have led her, now transformed into Madeleine Montalban, to dismiss Gardner so vehemently, it was presumably not resentment at being unrewarded for some typing done a good twenty years before. Of course it may be that while doing it, she recognised the varied sources he had drawn upon and would draw upon in two later books, hence her reference to “beg, borrow and steal”, but then she, too, would beg, borrow and

steal, just as irreproachably, from a variety of sources when assembling the teachings of her own Order of the Morning Star. In this context Gardner's only mistake was not to acknowledge what he had done, fearing no doubt that it might undermine the historical credentials of witchcraft. As a result he led people to think the entire package (or at least most of it) was original.

Four years later the material derived from Crowley was to cause dismay to one of Gardner's brightest recruits, a young woman named Doreen Valiente. So intrigued had she been by an article on contemporary witchcraft published on 27 September 1952 in *Illustrated* magazine that she wrote to one of the people mentioned in it asking for more information. This was Cecil Williamson, then owner of the Folklore Museum of Superstition and Witchcraft on the Isle of Man. (Gardner would later buy the establishment from him, though little love was lost between the two.) He passed on her request to Gardner, witch-in-residence at the museum in the tourist season, and following an exchange of letters, Mrs. Valiente was invited to tea at the home of Mrs. Woodford-Grimes, with Gardner present also. Her initiation took place on Midsummer's Eve a year later.

Only then did Mrs. Valiente, clearly no stranger to the sources exploited by Gardner, discover the extent of his plagiarism, though her dismay was due mainly to his reliance on Crowley, whose notoriety she feared might damage the reputation of witchcraft. The explanation Gardner offered was that the source material available to him was so fragmentary, he had been left with little choice but to supplement it as best he could. But that best was not good enough for his zealous new convert. With his agreement she took it upon herself to re-write his *Book of Shadows* – known as *The Witches' Bible* – removing much of Crowley's input, and creating what are today such valued items as The Witches' Rune and, with a nod to Leland's *Aradia*, the Charge of the Goddess, as well as helping to compose the poem containing the Witches Rede. By then she was Gardner's High Priestess at what he called the Northern Coven, its New Forest parent being the southern counterpart.

In 1954 came Gardner's first factual treatment of the topic, *Witchcraft Today*, prompting a new spate of enquiries from people interested in joining the Craft. The majority were welcomed by the author, fearful perhaps that without them the movement he'd set out to revive might not prosper. From

that same fear sprang his conviction that any kind of publicity, however bad, was preferable to no publicity at all.

And bad publicity was not slow in coming, even though the tone of many newspaper reports was fairly neutral at first. Soon the same papers were hinting at devil worship, while others began tut-tutting about black magic, Satanism and rampant sexual excess. By their account Gardner was fast becoming a danger to the nation's moral health. With the help of the ever-dependable Mrs. Valiente, he did his best to refute the more salacious allegations in a second book, *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959), prompting more enquiries from sympathetic readers but also a renewed bout of negative reporting and, finally, the interest of the police. But Gardner took no notice and continued to give interviews to all and sundry, even letting himself be photographed in his birthday suit, by now the worse for wear, alongside the man who helped run the nudist club and his girl friend, both similarly naked. The picture appeared alongside the article that referred to witchcraft as "a repulsive pagan sect".

Already Doreen Valiente and others were dismayed by what they perceived as a lack of judgement, almost a masochistic recklessness, on the part of Gardner and some of his associates, never more content than when exposing themselves (in every sense) to muckraking journalists. For her the future of the Craft was being put at risk. She urged discretion. He would have none of it. Finally to end her carping he unexpectedly produced set of Wiccan Laws no one knew existed, one of which required every High Priestess to "recognise that youth is necessary to be the representative of the Goddess. So she will gracefully retire in favour of a younger woman, should the coven so decide..." Thirty-five year old Doreen read into this, no doubt correctly, a bid to replace her with a younger, more comely, successor and resigned on the spot. Rumour has it she had in any case never been terribly keen on that business with the feather, her own preferences being somewhat more robust.

Seven years later Gardner died of a heart attack while on a Mediterranean cruise and was buried in Tunis. Foremost among those eager to acknowledge their indebtedness to him was Doreen Valiente. As she acknowledged, it is undeniable that in his lifetime he single-handedly invented or, perhaps more accurately, re-invented witchcraft, enriching it with a variety of foreign, but never alien, elements that were surprisingly compatible with the

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fragmentary source material at his disposal. The end result has been a system that comfortably accommodates the historical fantasy on which it rests and in a sense legitimises it. More importantly, it manifestly continues to offer religious and spiritual fulfilment to hundreds of thousands of people in many parts of the world nearly fifty years after his death.

The credit, however, is not Gardner's alone. Neither is it due solely to the missionary work of his more articulate followers such as Doreen Valiente, Vivianne Crowley (no relation to Aleister) and Patricia Crowther, founder, together with her husband, Arnold, of a coven in their home town of Sheffield in 1961, a year after her initiation on the Isle of Man. (Arnold, a professional conjurer, had been an old friend of Gardner's, as well as an acquaintance of Aleister Crowley's, being instrumental in arranging the first meeting between the two in 1947.) For regardless of what Gardner's admirers may say – and some never tire of saying it – part of the credit for the popularity of witchcraft must also go to Alex Sanders, commonly known as King of the Witches, a title, which, as he privately acknowledged, means nothing and for that reason was widely resented.

To discover more about this complex individual we have first to remove ourselves from the New Age environment of Somerford, colonised by its eccentric mix of Rosicrucians, Theosophists, Pythagoreans, Spiritualists and witches, and travel to a prim, slightly aloof, little village in North Wales.

Trefriw nestles on the edge of Snowdonia, set among wooded foothills that grow into the great peaks of the two Carneddau, Dafydd and Llywelyn, named after the region's last defenders against the English in the thirteenth century. It also lies within sight of Llanrwst on the opposite side of the river, reputedly birthplace of the architect Inigo Jones. (He is believed to have designed the charming little bridge that spans the river Conwy at this point and bears the date 1636.) According to Morris Jones, who wrote a history of Trefriw in 1879, its location "is such that germs cannot live there", which may be why one of those lucky enough to be born in the village, Mary Owen, had become the oldest person in Britain by the time she died in 1911 at the age of 108. Not that her case was unique: in 2010 a relation of mine, another Mary and likewise from the area, celebrated her 107th birthday. Apart from deafness – which irritated her greatly – she remained in fine fettle to the end.

When I was a teenager I often visited Trefriw to see my Aunt Lydia and Uncle John – “John *Het Fawr*” or “John Big Hat”, as he was known because of his fondness for Homburgs, invariably black so that he could wear them when setting off to preach on Sunday mornings. For me the attraction of such visits was my uncle’s collection of books on Spiritualism, works by long forgotten authors like Dennis Bradley, Nandor Fodor (who pronounced authentic not only the “Katie King” who charmed Sir William Crookes, but a talking mongoose as well), Stainton Moses, C. Drayton Thomas and G. Vale Owen (author of *Life Beyond the Veil*), the last three being men of the cloth. If he were in a good mood Uncle John might be persuaded to talk about Mrs. Bibby who had lived close by – there are still Bibbys in Trefriw today – and who, as Edward Lyndoe said of Bodo Marged, was “a bit of a witch”. Apparently Mrs. Bibby could both converse with the spirits and produce materialisations every bit as good as those of Mrs. Duncan – and do so without relying on the cover of darkness or on bits of masticated cheesecloth. In addition she professed to be in communication with the fairy kingdom, though here my uncle was more sceptical, despite admitting that in his father’s day Trefriw folk still talked about their dealings with the *tylwyth tég*. (A cascade of water behind the local woollen mill is called the Fairy Falls, as is a public house nearby.)

Alex Sanders maintained that a Winifred – at other times her name is given as Mary – Bibby, similar to the one described by Uncle John, was his maternal grandmother, making it possible, even likely, that both were one and the same. He himself was born in Birkenhead in 1922, just across the river from Liverpool where Sullivan’s Rosicrucian Order was based at the time, and not so very far from Gardner’s home in Blundellsands. The family’s real name was Carter but following a move to Manchester, they informally changed it to Sanders and stuck with it. As a small boy he would be dispatched during the school holidays to Mrs. Bibby and from her he began to learn some of the things Mr. James taught me some twenty years later. In a book provocatively titled *King of the Witches*, his biographer reports that one afternoon he ran indoors and discovered his granny standing naked within a circle on the kitchen floor. Unperturbed, she called him over, told him to remove his clothes and initiated him into the Craft. The story is implausible, not least because a respectable Welsh woman like Mrs. Bibby would never have allowed herself to go about in her petticoat, let alone stand in the middle of her kitchen without it.

Equally implausible is the suggestion, encouraged by Sanders in his lifetime that the same Mrs. Bibby was somehow connected, possibly married, to the Joseph Bibby who in 1876 founded a company manufacturing soap and animal feeds on Merseyside. The truth is that Joseph Bibby and his wife lived in considerable splendour on an estate near Tarporley in Cheshire. Any connection to their homonyms in North Wales is tenuous at best.

Sadly, two further claims must likewise be refuted. The first is that Sanders was descended from the 15th Century national hero, Owain Glyndŵr, a name dredged up, one suspects, only because of Owain's reputation as a wonder-worker, something Shakespeare makes fun of in *1 Henry IV*. There, his "Glendower" boasts:

"I can call spirits from the vasty deep."

To which Hotspur, hard-headedly English, answers dryly:

Why, so can I, or so can any man;
But will they come when you do call them?"

The second spurious claim is that Mrs. Bibby handed her grandson a copy of the *Book of Shadows*, spurious because at the time Gardner and Mrs. Valiente had not yet got around to writing it.

In reality, as Sanders cheerfully admitted, his formal initiation, at least within the "apostolic succession" established by Gardner, did not occur until 1961, though he had been studying and practising magic long before that. Among those keen to deny him any prior acquaintance with witchcraft, none was keener than Patricia Crowther who never tired of recounting how he'd applied to join the group she and her husband were leading in Sheffield but in the event was turned down. Meanwhile his ignorance of witchcraft was supposedly proven by the initial letter he sent them, a document still brandished forty years later by the octogenarian Mrs. Crowther – her husband died in 1974 – at any mention of Sanders' name. (In fact the letter, its tone politely diffident, is more suggestive of good manners than universal ignorance.) For good measure the Crowthers went on to add that his subsequent initiation was invalid because the officiating priestess lacked the authority to conduct it, while the absence of a high priest merely com-

pounded the fault. For their part, defenders of Sanders have argued that the priestess in question was fully competent and that the presence of a male counterpart is by no means indispensable.

Sadly, such disagreements between those committed to the “orthodox” heritage of Gardner and others who prefer the more eclectic, even experimental, approach of Sanders, persist to this day, though new recruits to the Craft show increasing willingness to acknowledge the merits of both. What Sanders did, was make witchcraft less self-centred and more open, ridding it of the rather fuddy-duddy image which the septuagenarian Gardner and his cohorts could never quite shed, even while baring their all to the cameras. With his future wife, Maxine, blonde, good looking but above all fully committed to the Craft, he made witchcraft attractive to young people searching for a new way to express their spirituality. That the new way was in fact the old way, rooted in a pagan past, only added to its appeal.

Alex Sanders died in 1988. Since then, like the East-West divide of the Christian Church in 1054, witchcraft has to a large extent been rent by schism, split between those who call themselves Gardnerian and those who profess to be Alexandrian. And the difference? Well, apart from the dispute over the legitimacy of Sanders’ initiation, it is more one of style than of substance, with Alexandrians placing more overt emphasis on ritual procedures in the Golden Dawn tradition and being perhaps more amenable to change. True, some observers detect a greater emphasis on the masculine, represented by the Horned God, among the Gardnerians, while the Alexandrians put more stress on the female element (the Goddess), but this distinction is arguable at best. What is undeniable is that Sanders, as his enemies like to point out, was not averse to incorporating novel elements in his rituals, displaying something of the pick ‘n mix approach favoured by Mathers when setting up the Golden Dawn. But then Gardner, too, had done the same, as Doreen Valiente found out before she got around to helping him do more of it. In the end the cause of the division may lie, as often the case, in the personalities involved. Even witches are human. I can’t help thinking Mrs. Bibby would have knocked their heads together.

For as Simon explained between mouthfuls of nut roast, there is more that unites than divides them. Both are intent on finding access to the divine in and through the natural world, though by acknowledging realities outside

it, they fall short of confining God to matter in a pantheistic way. Indeed, Gardner was the first to acknowledge the transcendence of God – Prime Mover, was his preferred, if unoriginal, description – before going on to teach that throughout Creation this unknowable, ineffable One has manifested itself as Two, a duality expressible in terms of male and female or, in wiccan terms, as god and goddess.

“They tend to put the goddess first,” explained Simon, “because for them she’s the Protogenitrix – a lovely word I’ve just made up – who conceives and gives birth to her divine bridegroom. *Mater deo*, so to speak, except that in this case, the god is both child *and* lover. That’s why in every witch coven, the High Priestess is supremely important. She represents the goddess. In fact she *becomes* the goddess.”

“Drawing down the moon.”

“Yes, that’s how they put it. Their belief is that the goddess consents to manifest herself in and through the High Priestess, just as the god takes over the identity of the High Priest. You see, the point about witchcraft is its sacramental approach to everything. Do you know what I mean?”

I didn’t, so thought it best to say so.

“Well, a sacrament is, let me see if I can remember how the Church puts it, a sacrament is the outward and visible sign of an inner grace. Something like that. For today’s witches the created world is an expression of the divine, a reality in which the god or goddess or any other subordinate deity – all of them, you’ll remember, manifestations of the One – is not only present but ceaselessly active as well. I suppose it’s a way of seeing God in everything, but only up to a point because, as I said, for them God isn’t present in nature alone.”

It didn’t sound all that different from what I’d once been taught by Mr. James.

And what sort of magic did they perform, I asked. This, he told me, was not very different from any other kind of ceremonial magic. There was a consecrated circle and the four cardinal points, together with their elemental guardians, were usually invoked under a variety of names, while on the

altar would be symbols of the god and goddess, together with some of the objects likely to be used in the ritual, things like a knife or athame, wand, chalice, pentacle, candles and incense. In addition and more particular to witchcraft, there might be a cauldron or broomstick close by.

Simon then struggled to remember the four Greater Sabbats of the year, their dates coinciding with old Celtic, specifically Irish, festivals, but Beltane and Samhain, traditional Feast of the Dead, were as far as he got. I tried to help by adding the solstices and equinoxes, but was told, somewhat impatiently, that these marked the four Lesser Sabbats. Whereupon I suddenly remembered the New Forest witches and their magical offensive against Hitler, so was able to redeem myself by offering Lammastide, enabling us to finish up with three out of the four, which wasn't bad going. (The missing one was Imbolc, held on February 2nd, and intended to celebrate the first signs of spring.)

"I used to believe each Sabbat was linked to one of the virtues listed in the Charge of the Goddess," he continued, "reverence, humility, compassion – that sort of thing, but I may have made that up. In any case the basic rule of conduct is found in the Rede, almost certainly borrowed from Crowley or, rather, good old Dr. Rabelais: 'an' it harm none, do what ye will'. By the way do you know what Rabelais said on his deathbed? You should do, Mr. First Class Honours. It was, 'Bring down the curtain, the play is over.' Rather nice, that."

Actually he is alleged to have said "The farce is over" but because Simon was paying for the grim supper my vegetarianism, in the event short-lived, had imposed on us, I said nothing. Watching him spoon up his apple compote, I realised he still hadn't told me how one became a witch. So I asked again.

With the Gardnerians, he explained, a year and a day had to pass between approval of a candidate's request for admission and his or her initiation. In theory, that is. In practice the waiting time, meant for study and reflection, was often curtailed, sometimes drastically. The Alexandrians on the other hand were more pragmatic, allowing enquirers to participate as neophytes in the routine activities of the coven, at least up to second-degree level, while they made up their minds whether to join. In all cases, however, advancement to the second degree followed only if the postulant could

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demonstrate an acquaintance with the meaning and purpose of the tools used for ritual work. Meanwhile ascent to the second-degree empowered one to initiate others or even start a new, but not fully autonomous, coven of one's own, while a third degree initiation brought with it the authority to receive others into that grade as well as start a fully independent coven. It also made one eligible to participate in the Great Rite, celebrated on the feast of Beltane, when the union of Maiden Goddess and Divine Lover was re-enacted by the High Priest and Priestess, sometimes symbolically by plunging the ritual dagger into a chalice of wine held by the High Priestess.

"But, look," declared Simon, "why are you asking me all this? If you really want to know, go and see Alex Sanders or Maxine. You'll feel at ease with them. And unlike the other lot they do at least keep their clothes on. Well, some of the time anyway. I'll ring them, if you like. Or do it yourself –" he consulted the back of a diary then gave me a 'phone number– "and the address is, let's see, 40 Clanricarde Gardens."

I never found the courage to telephone. But a few days later I did take the 52 bus to Notting Hill Gate and peered down the steps to their basement flat. It was the closest I came to becoming a witch.

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I needed now to find a job. Urgently. Something creative, I told myself, without having the remotest idea what I had ambitions to create. In the end I decided that working in television was the job I wanted, so wrote off to the BBC and its independent rivals after being told they took on a number of trainee producers every year. They probably did but by the time my letters got posted, the annual quota must already have been filled since I never got invited to an interview. Not once. Even the expressions of regret were perfunctory.

Then one evening I was invited to a drinks party at a flat in Albany, surprisingly dark and poky for such a smart address. With barely enough money to feed myself now that my grant had run out, the chance to fill myself up with canapés suddenly became more appealing than even the prospect of free drinks, evidence of how hard life had become. Between mouthfuls there was ample time to observe that many of the faces in the room belonged to entertainers of one sort or another who, though recognisable, seemed mysteriously diminished in life, at least compared with their stage or television selves. Most were almost famous rather than famous but among them was a well-known pop singer, who, as it happens, had begun his career at the Little Theatre in Aberystwyth. A juvenile lead who, to my envious eyes at least, couldn't act for toffee, already in those days he possessed the looks and thuggish charm – his father sold fruit and vegetables off a barrow near Marble Arch – that quickly got him noticed and put on the fast track to stardom. Tempted though I was to go up to him and start reminiscing, a favourite pastime of the Welsh, I reckoned he probably wouldn't wish to revisit a past so infinitely less glorious than the present. He wore a white suit, very tight fitting, which showed off more than his suntan. That inhibited me slightly as well.

At some point I managed to attach myself to a group of people gathered around a celebrated television personality, my mind filled with the daft, champagne-fuelled, notion that he might be of assistance in bringing my creative ambitions to the notice of the BBC. Close to being a national treasure when he died not long ago, his death brought fulsome tributes from colleagues and fellow celebrities, even from his bitterest rivals. (There is something self-indulgent about the way showbiz gushes praise when one of its own kicks the bucket, as if it sprinkles stardust over the profession as a whole.) Now, I know *de mortuis, nihil sine bonum*, as Mrs. Winkler would say, but that evening this particular individual was behaving like a show-off and a bully. His victim? A mild-mannered German, middle-aged and slightly-built, who was overheard to ask his neighbour, after both words featured in the clever monologue to which we were being treated, what the difference was between “tolerance” and indifference”.

“There is none,” snapped our celebrity, “zee two words are interchangeable, *nicht wahr?*” As he spoke, he put his index finger across his upper lip and might have raised his right arm, had it not been encumbered by the glass of Veuve Clicquot he was holding. All, naturally, to the sycophantic delight of the coterie around him.

Oh dear! My hatred of bullies always did get the better of me, even at school and often to my cost. Briefly and not too incoherently, I explained to the company that “indifference” was an absence of feeling, whereas “tolerance” was a willingness to put up with something, whether indifferent to it or not. As for the impersonation, I suggested the Famous Person try Marlene Dietrich in future. It suited him better.

Alas, the victim of his mockery seemed more put out than ever in the wake of my intervention but did recover sufficiently to come over and thank me later on. (His business card is still among the clutter at the back of my desk, kept there because the name is prefixed by “Dr. Dr. Dr.”, surely some kind of academic record.) Someone else who approached me afterwards was a genial, white-haired gentleman who asked me what work I did. Hearing of my fruitless attempts to get into television, he gave me his business card.

“You’ll get through to my secretary. You can start in, let’s see, about a fortnight. We can sort it out over dinner beforehand, just the two of us. That’ll

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be nice. A chance to get to know each other better. Trainee producer, is that what you said?"

The boss of an independent television station, he gave my arm an over-familiar squeeze before ambling off.

It was the squeeze that persuaded me not to take up the offer. I really didn't fancy a career that depended on who I got to know or, far worse, how well I got to know them. Very high-minded, but I still needed work. And so on Simon's advice I reluctantly took the Civil Service entrance examination, bringing immense joy to my parents when they learned I not only got through but came second – by only one point – from the top. "You'll get a good pension" my mother assured me in her weekly letter. That prospect depressed me.

From the outset the Foreign Office tried hard to claim me but I resisted, unwilling to run the risk of an overseas posting when I was having such a jolly time in London. The next offer came from the Admiralty, which struck me as marginally better, given the chance of peripheral benefits not suspected by the Civil Service Commissioners, until, that is, I discovered I had first to be positively vetted. As a preliminary step I was invited to fill in a questionnaire that accompanied the letter.

Much of the form was plain sailing. What newspapers did I read? (*Times* or *Telegraph* and *Guardian* seemed a wise option, indicative of broad political sympathies), what addresses had I occupied over the previous five years? (Easy.) Was my present accommodation shared with anyone else? (Only intermittently and not long enough to count. For the first time it struck me the South American might have done me a favour by kidnapping the Toreador). Had I ever had contact or involvement with the Communist or Fascist parties? (My Uncle Gwilym used to read the *Daily Worker* but stopped after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. As for the Fascists, the reference suggested the document had not been updated since Mussolini got Italian trains to run on time.) But then came the really tough one.

"Have you ever had any homosexual experiences?"

Oops.

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After reflecting on the question for two days – on, that is, what subtleties of language might help avoid giving a straight answer – I sent a letter to the Commissioners. In it I expressed disquiet about such rigorous scrutiny of my personal life, careful to make it sound like an objection of principle rather than disquiet about anything specific. The result was less pompous than this might suggest, even if I did conclude by saying I intended to look for alternative employment. Where and what this might be, I couldn't for the life of me imagine.

By return of post came an urgent request to meet the Commissioners again. (I had after all come second in their bloody exam.) Accompanying it was a travel voucher for a return trip from North Wales to London, presumably because my parents' address, for reasons I no longer recall, appeared on the application form. Six months later I used it to travel home for Christmas.

Three Commissioners, elderly and male, were waiting for me when I turned up at their office in Curzon Street the following week.

"It's the intrusion into my personal life that's unnerving" I repeated, careful to keep my legs uncrossed and my smiles at bay, as I did for Madeleine Montalban.

My dear chap," huffed one of the triumvirate, " You mustn't worry about trifles like that. Not at all. As long as you keep your nose clean and don't go to bed with your best friend's wife, you'll be fine."

All three guffawed, none suspecting the best friend might be the problem, not his wife.

A week later, the form still unfilled, they offered me a job with the Inland Revenue in Somerset House, right next door to my old college. It was either that or end up on the streets.

Still, my afternoon with the Commissioners was not a complete disappointment. The tea and Marie biscuits were welcome for a start, but still better was what happened as I strolled down South Audley Street on my way to meet them. Three-quarters of the way along there came towards me a man of about my own age, perhaps slightly older, who reminded me so much of the feckless Toreador that once he'd passed I turned to look back. By coin-

cidence he did the same. It was by no means a heart-stopping moment and no nightingales sang in nearby Berkeley Square, but I did resolve to return to a point mid-way between us, determined that if he failed to do likewise, I would continue on my way to Curzon Street. In the event he walked the required distance.

“And what part of Wales are you from?” he asked with just a hint of condescension on hearing me speak. As he said it, I detected a faint, barely discernible, lilt in his voice.

“Aberystwyth” I replied, “and what part of Anglesey are you from?”

Gotcha! After admitting he came from Holyhead, he invited me to join him for tea. Outside the Ritz at four-thirty.

Now, tea at the Ritz was an extravagance I'd heard about but never sampled. As a result I was there on the dot. So was he. To my dismay, however, instead of passing through the double doors of the hotel, it was along Piccadilly we walked before cutting diagonally across Green Park in the direction of Birdcage Walk. Just my luck. Despite his apparent sophistication, a quality I lacked and therefore was attracted to, it was a bed-sitter in Victoria for which we seemed to be heading. Already I could see the candlewick bedspread, the washbasin in one corner, the rented television and the suitcases stacked on top of the wardrobe. And sure enough, straight towards Buckingham Palace Road we continued until, suddenly and without warning, he grabbed my elbow and steered me into the palace itself. It crossed my mind that I might yet be spared the candlewick bedspread.

Just inside the door, the trade entrance presumably, was a plain-clothes policeman who nodded amiably but said nothing as we walked past. Down a long, windowless corridor we proceeded, past kitchens and a vast silver pantry before turning right and right again into a lift that almost smelt as fragrant as Bodo Marged's roses.

“Cut flowers,” my companion explained, “they've just arrived. They come twice a week from Windsor. From the greenhouses.”

Two, possibly more, floors up we emerged into a corridor with cream walls, a high ceiling and a burgundy-coloured carpet, along which we marched

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in silence until we arrived at his suite, up a few steps and set slightly back to the left. In a brass frame attached to the door, his name, Edward Jones, was printed on a small white card. Everything was fine until suddenly, after being invited to sit down in one of two matching armchairs, their covers recognisably John Lewis, I began to find my host's formal manner more and more unsettling, even if in keeping with the building we were in. In an attempt to dispel it, I switched from English to Welsh but no sooner had I started than a young man in dark trousers and a kind of blouson, navy-blue with red trimmings and EIIR embroidered on the front, likewise in in red, arrived with a tray of dainty cakes and minuscule sandwiches, pilfered, I suspect, from the kitchens we'd just passed and intended for mouths a lot grander than mine. To my surprise he addressed us in Welsh – it emerged he came from Penmachno, a village five miles east of Trefriw – but that did little to put me at my ease.

The room we were in overlooked the garden at the front of the palace (or “back” to those familiar with the view from the end of the Mall). At one point my host glanced through the window and murmured, “Ah, there's Mother taking the corgis for a walk.” Guessing that such an observation had induced previous visitors to jump up and take a peek, I stayed put and declined to evince any interest. For good measure, I made it plain that I was both a Welsh Nationalist and a committed republican, both true, as Edward Jones would have ample time to find out in the thirty years we went on to spend together.

Thanks to him, too, my magical education took a new and unexpected turn that summer when he put me in touch with someone who professed to be a Thelemite, the first of the breed I'd come across. Even in those days the term had been appropriated by devotees of Aleister Crowley, less numerous than they are now but every bit as keen on both the man and his message. A few of them, rumoured to include a member of the rock band Led Zeppelin, sometime owner of Boleskine House, Crowley's old haunt in Scotland, even ran a shop off Kensington Church Street, selling books by him. It was still there in the nineteen-seventies when Edward and I moved to Notting Hill Gate, having bought the London home of the then Camilla Parker-Bowles, now Duchess of Cornwall and herself no stranger to Buckingham Palace. What is beyond dispute is that the injunction “Do as Thou Wilt” has universal significance and is not the property of any one person or group, even if it is to Crowley and the OTO we are indebted for

making the concept more widely known.

This appeared also to be the view of the Thelemite I got to meet thanks to Edward's tactful mediation, a feisty old woman with an exceptionally loud voice. Later I found out she was deaf.

"Thelema means more than all that," she bellowed across the low table that divided us, "more even than Aleister Crowley, though he did revive interest in it and that's to his credit. In any case he never claimed to have invented it. On the contrary he made a point of saying he hadn't."

Around her mouth were remnants of the shortbread she'd been munching while I, nervous but keen to make a good impression, had blathered on about Crowley and what little I knew about the workings of the OTO.

By then I was in Balmoral, latest stage in my royal progress that memorable summer. Well, not in Balmoral as such, but in the residents' lounge of the Deeside Hotel a few miles down the road in Ballater. It was my first visit to Scotland since the school trip that led to my discovery, in print at least, of Gerald Gardner at the back of a bookshop off Princes Street, stuck between *Raphael's Dream Book* and *The Coming of the World Teacher*, by Annie Besant. Still it was Balmoral I'd be heading for shortly.

I was there because each year once Ascot Week was over, Edward travelled to Scotland with the Royal Household. This time he suggested I might care to join him for a short break. Accommodation would be available in one of the estate cottages and permission was obtained for me to visit his rooms in the castle during the day, as well as return there for dinner – in the event more venison than I could stomach – in the evening. Rather than stay overnight on the estate, possibly in a teetotal Presbyterian household, I had booked myself into the hotel.

Having tea with me and making short shrift of the shortbread, was the person he'd suggested I meet upon learning, not without bemusement, of my lifelong interest in magic. He had come across her after Stephen Barry, one of the palace footmen, later valet to Prince Charles, found himself chatting to her at a reception in, of all places, the Papal Nuncio's residence near Wimbledon Common. Owner of a country house near Abergeldie, not far from Balmoral, she had pressed him to call there for a drink when

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next in the area, adding, for no obvious reason, that unlike other people in the room that evening, she was not a Roman Catholic but a Thelemite. The word meant nothing to Stephen but after consulting Edward back at the palace, his confusion only increased when Edward, thinking he meant "catamite", read him the dictionary definition of "a boy kept for unnatural purposes". She must have said "socialite", both had concluded by the time they turned up on her doorstep for the promised drink, Stephen too diffident to venture there alone.

It was a full year before Edward told her about the misunderstanding. And only then did she put the record straight by declaring she was neither a socialite nor a catamite, but a fervent Thelemite. Her explanation of what the term meant left him none the wiser.

"At least it's something to do with magic. That much I did get", he confessed, "so I've suggested she meet you or, rather, I said you'd like to meet her while you're up here. She'll come to the hotel around four. And your tea's paid for by the way."

With the shortbread gone and no sign of anyone to provide us with more, though I did volunteer to look, I switched from the OTO, manifestly a topic not much to her liking, to an account my childhood experiences. I told her also about Simon and the Witch of St. Giles.

"She writes for *Prediction* magazine." I elaborated.

"I don't know it."

The implication was she would not have read it, even if she had. It left me with no choice but to revert to Mr. James. At least he seemed to meet with her approval.

"He was right to teach you the importance of the will," she announced, "As you know, magic is about the changes it can bring about. Crowley said as much, but this again was common knowledge long before he came along."

Still determined to show off, a failing common to only children and one I never fully lost, I let drop the name of Nietzsche. Everyone knew Nietzsche went on about the will.

Not the same thing, she retorted, not the same thing at all. For Nietzsche it was the will to power that counted and even that was a notion he'd pinched from the melancholic Schopenhauer. (All I knew about *him* was that he once owned a poodle called 'Atman', a Hindu term for "life force" and a detail too trivial to mention. By all accounts he doted on the dog.)

"Nietzsche" she continued, "died insane. In Weimar. That gifted, but rather silly man, Rudolf Steiner paid him a visit. He got no sense out of him but was terribly impressed by his profile."

No, she continued, meticulously picking up crumbs off her plate, volition or exercise of the will – and only in its exercise did the will exist – lay at the heart of everything.

She had a point. Already Mr. James had taught me that our will is not only the motor behind our actions but the primary agent of consciousness. Without it, he used to maintain, life would not have emerged from inert matter, just as the first individual, as opposed to collective, act of will by our animal ancestors was what turned them into human beings. Yet although volition is evident in the behaviour of animals, its presence only to be expected, given its universal prevalence, in animals it is instinctively directed and species-related whereas in us, endowed with reason, it is individual and fully informed.

Mr. James had further explained how a deliberate action can no more be detached from the will to make it happen than the latter can be detached from the action itself. Each manifests itself in the other so that in objective terms neither has a separate existence. For instance, every time my guest that afternoon in Ballater stretched out her hand for yet another shortbread, the action would not have happened, had it not been willed. Conversely, without the concomitant action, the act of willing would not have existed, at least not in the three-dimensional reality in which both operate. What this tells us is that so far as concerns "thelema" or will, cause and effect are not merely co-dependent but essentially one and the same.

From this it follows that on a broader scale, what might be called Universal Will necessarily transcends cause and effect because both are present within it. As a result conditionality ceases. It is what fills the plenitude –

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the pleroma of the Gnostics – that comprises manifested reality, just as it implicitly pervades the total emptiness where all that is, as yet is not.

Within human beings its presence, fragmented but real none the less, not only sponsors the micro/macrocosmic relationship previously described but renders each of us potentially divine. The first aim of magical training is to make us aware of that potential by offering access to a reality outside the space-time environment we occupy from the moment of conception. Secondly it empowers us, once released from the grip of causality, to effect changes in that environment by exercising our will in a new and sovereign manner. Thirdly it reunites us with God by reminding us of our inherent divinity – of, if you like, the “co-substantiality” between us and the Absolute. As Madame Blavatsky once put it, both are of the one flame.

Being reminded of this is what leads magicians, as well as modern witches, to suppose that the gods fill them with their presence at the climax of their rituals. It is why Dion Fortune saw herself not just as the representative of Isis, but as the goddess herself, why Aleister Crowley, however despondent or hard up, could still proclaim himself “the self-crowned God”, just as in any wiccan coven the High Priest and Priestess become the god and goddess in person. It is arguable of course that such entities are in fact a dramatised version of the Higher Self, though if true, this does not invalidate them in the least.

Such, too, was the opinion, so far as I could gather, of my companion that afternoon, at whose behest I had finally gone off in search of more short-bread. (“And a jug of hot water wouldn’t go amiss either”, she shouted after me as I headed for the kitchen.) For her, acquaintance with one’s Higher Self or Holy Guardian Angel was to be cognizant of the divinity inside us, bringing with it the additional benefit of making us aware, possibly for the first time, of our “true” will, located at the very core of our being and unaffected by upbringing or social convention. A product of our unconscious, as much as conscious, mind, it is the true will that allows us to function in the illusory world about us, illusory because we experience it subjectively, without continuing to mistake the transient and mutable for what is eternal and unchanging. The business of everyday life is thereby transformed into a veritable sacrament of “being”.

“Whether they know it or not, everyone who works magic is a Thelemite,”

boomed my companion once I returned from my expedition, “though some of our friends in the OTO would disagree. As they see it, theirs is the one true church and the rest of us are heretics. ‘Savages’ Crowley used to call them.”

By the time he said this, the ambitious Crowley had already gone a long way to making the OTO, if not his own (since Theodor Reuss was still officially the boss) then certainly a vehicle for propagating his views on Thelema. The opportunity was certainly there, as one cannot help feeling that before he came along, not a great deal went on inside the order, at least not so far as the actual practice of magic was concerned, a weakness Reuss may privately have recognised. This changed after 1915 when more was done to initiate members into the Mysteries, each revelation coinciding with a further step up the hierarchical ladder, as well as satisfy their devotional needs through regular celebration of the Gnostic Mass.

And then there were the naughty bits. Even before joining forces with Crowley, the enterprising Reuss, like his early partners Kellner and, to a lesser extent, Hartmann, was considering how sexual techniques, particularly those found in tantric practice, might be adapted to induce a state of heightened awareness, even mystical enlightenment. He almost certainly knew that such elevated states were likened by the Gnostics to sexual union between a human being and God, their conjunction symbolised by a serpent swallowing its tail. It is not surprising that this emblem recurs throughout the literature of the OTO, while the higher degrees, those in which sex magic was performed, were collectively referred to as the Sanctuary of the Gnosis.

For Reuss, drawing on Sanskrit terms found in a pamphlet on the yogic *pranas* by Kellner, sex magic involved what he called *nāpa*, alleged by him to be the sixth of the *vayus* or elements, and linked specifically to what he described as “the organs of reproduction”. Critics argue that *nāpa* was Kellner’s faulty rendering of *naga*, one of the supernumerary *vayus* – strictly speaking they number only five – whose name, perhaps conveniently, means “snake” but whose true function relates not to sex, but to belching and bouts of flatulence. Anyway, according to Reuss, by concentrating hard on this particular *vayu*, it was possible to transfer energy from the genital area to the solar plexus (presumably without burping or farting). There, helped by techniques of breath control, it would induce a higher level of

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consciousness, as well as enable the adept to revisit past lives.

Another technique favoured by Reuss involved reciprocal touching of the phallus, a pastime confined, of necessity, to male participants and one that led to the accusation that he and his supporters indulged in homo-erotic practices. (The Nazis made much of it to justify their wholesale ban on esoteric organisations in Germany.) Defenders of Reuss have sought to warrant such behaviour by pointing to a verse in Genesis (24:9) where a servant “put his hand under the thigh of Abraham, his master, and swore to him concerning that matter”, an act of intimacy which, they claim, traditionally accompanied pledges of loyalty and which Casanova may have had in mind when referring to “the oath of the Rosicrucians”. Hmm.

Not that a bit of furtive groping by consenting male adults would have done much, either magically or erotically, for Aleister Crowley. More adventurous forms of sex were for him an important constituent of magic, not because they brought enhanced psychic awareness, though that might happen, still less because they made oaths harder to break. No, for him each and every orgasm reflected in microcosmic terms the creative impetus that brought the universe into dynamic existence, comparable to the impregnation of Nuit, the Egyptian sky goddess, by her consort, Haduit. Represented as a circle whose centre is everywhere and outer edge nowhere, Nuit ensured, by accepting Haduit’s fructifying presence, that the listless void within her became filled with plenty, and the unmanifest made manifest in Time. Perhaps in microcosmic terms it is comparable to what happens when we invite our Higher Self into the deepest reaches of our being and become alerted for the first time to the possibilities waiting there to be realised.

More idiosyncratic, though consistent with hermetic theory, with its emphasis on the affinity between microcosm and macrocosm, was Crowley’s attachment to the notion that each spermatozoon contained within it something of God’s creative impulse. For him its concealed presence meant that the consumption of semen, something encouraged in the VIII° of the OTO, would lead to union with the Divine, though its role as carrier of the Logos was disclosed to members only after their accession to the IX°. The notion is again derived largely from Gnostic, in particular Manichean, sources where creation is viewed as a fructifying effusion of supernal light, the Logos Spermatikos, which permeated the universe before retreating

to its heavenly source. Left behind, however, are the sparks it emitted as it penetrated and vivified matter, all now concentrated, given our special relationship with the cosmos, in human beings and more specifically, but not exclusively, in semen. The misogynistic Crowley did concede that something akin to them was present also in vaginal fluids. Indeed he advocated a commixture of the two, attributing to it such remarkable qualities that he peddled it under the name of Amrita, from the Sanskrit for "immortal" and etymological parent of the ambrosia that nourished the gods of Ancient Greece. A week's supply cost twenty-five guineas, a hefty amount even today, let alone seventy years ago when Beecham's Pills, a popular laxative, said to be "worth a guinea a box", could be had for under a shilling.

One cannot help thinking that Crowley's preoccupation with intimate fluids, as well as blood, whether ingested or smeared on talismans to make them more effective, tells us more about his private tastes than it does about his magic. In his writings there surfaces time and time again the same obsessive urge to be humiliated, preferably by those "Scarlet Women" he tirelessly recruited, none in the end capable of sustaining the extremes of degradation that he, by his own reckoning "the sublimest mystic of all history.....the self-crowned God", so desperately craved. And yet it would be foolhardy to dismiss outright his thoughts on magic, even his theological speculation, simply because his sexual predilections are not to everybody's liking. The truth is that Thelema or Universal Will is a valid concept regardless of what bizarre recreations its chief advocate of recent times happened to enjoy.

That the woman sitting opposite me might know, let alone approve of, what Crowley got up to, struck me as so improbable that I hesitated to make even an oblique reference to it. Apart from her appetite for shortbread, everything about her suggested moderation, even abstemiousness, and that dour respectability I remembered so well from my childhood. There now arrived the second helping of shortbread, as well as the jug of hot water she had demanded, though with them also came word that the cost would be added to my bill at the end of the week, since only one tea had been paid for in advance. As tactfully as I could, I alluded to Crowley's reputation for sexual excess.

"Dirty", was the stentorian response, "dirty and depraved. And I'll not forget what he did to that wee cat."

(On Crowley's orders, the cat in question, Mischette, was due to be killed as part of a magical rite at the villa in Sicily. In the event the sacrificial victim wriggled free, its throat half cut, and ran around the room spattering blood on everyone until recaptured and successfully dispatched. Any blood left over was then drunk.)

"Mr. Grant would never condone such a thing."

The reference was to Kenneth Grant, pretender – one of several – to the throne left vacant when the Great Beast and Outer Head of the OTO succumbed to bronchitis on 1 December 1947, though whether Mr. Grant repudiated sex or cruelty to animals was left unspecified. (I suspect the latter.) At the time his name meant nothing to me but once more it was the reliable Simon who put me in the picture by explaining how the twenty-year old Grant, already an assistant and disciple of Crowley's, was admitted into the Order in 1944 and elevated to the IX^o eighteen months later. In accordance with Crowley's wishes and with the approval of Karl Germer, his official successor, he was given a free hand to run the OTO's affairs in England, doing so with considerable flair and contriving to import new ideas and practices which, one cannot help thinking, were long overdue. All remained sweetness and light until 1954 when the precocious Grant took it upon himself to set up something called the New Isis Lodge. (One has the impression modern occultists keep poor Isis far busier than she ever was in life.) Established to exploit what its Manifesto referred to as the Sirius-Set current, the new Lodge but in particular its esoteric pretensions, so displeased Mr. Germer, now settled in America and perhaps a tad jealous, that he expelled Grant from the OTO the following year. Unsurprisingly Grant immediately declared that he, not Germer, was the rightful Outer Head, a claim his supporters (in what has come to be known unofficially as the Typhonian Order) continue to defend.

As for Karl Johannes Germer, he was born in 1885 at Elberfeld, a town destined to become famous a decade later thanks to some remarkable horses, described by one Swiss academic as the "mathematical wonders of the world". Not only could these animals do complicated sums, even give square roots when requested, but also answer questions put to them by visiting scientists and eminent men of letters. An acquaintance with these prodigies may have aroused in Germer an early interest in the paranormal for he

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was soon active in the various occult groups then flourishing in Germany, principally in Munich and Berlin. Sometime in the nineteen-thirties he was arrested by the Nazis and incarcerated for several months, though subsequent claims that he languished in a concentration camp throughout the war are without foundation. In his prison cell he turned to Crowley's *Liber LXV* (*Liber Cordis Cincti Serpente*) and in due course met his Holy Guardian Angel (who managed to persuade him that being bugged would be the making of him). Certainly he was an admirer of Crowley by the time he recovered his freedom and, having married well (twice) may also have supported him financially. It is said that Crowley designated him his successor as early as 1942 but, true or not, it is indisputable that a majority of OTO members were content to see him become the Order's Outer Head when the post fell vacant five years later.

By the end of the war Germer had settled in America where the only group still active was the Agape Lodge in California. One of its leading members, a man named Grady McMurty, seems also to have enjoyed Crowley's favour in the final years of his life, which may explain why Germer expelled him in 1953 and closed down the lodge for good measure. By now the autocratic Germer, allegedly nick-named Tutti-Frutti in his youth, had his eyes, possibly his hands, on the man then responsible for running the Order in Switzerland, a certain Hermann Metzger (who, Germer claimed, liked to boast how Crowley relentlessly propositioned him) but their amity turned out to be short-lived. Though dismissed as "half crazy" by his former admirer, Metzger felt no qualms about pronouncing himself the Order's new chief after Germer's death in 1962, an appointment supposedly confirmed at a meeting of IX° members, but not taken seriously outside the Canton of St. Gallen.

First Grant, then Metzger, and now, back from exile came McMurty, his eye also on the leadership. During his years in the wilderness, McMurty had been associated with a group founded by two former members of the defunct Agape Lodge. Calling itself the Solar Lodge of the OTO, it initially stayed more or less faithful to the original model but went on to develop eccentric and paranoid notions of its own, with talk of race wars, famine and the impending apocalypse. In addition there was enough sex, drugs and rock'n roll to attract some members of the hippy movement, including the likes of Charles Manson and members of his notorious "family". Rumours of child abuse and other wrong-doing soon attracted the notice

of the authorities, with McMurty more than willing to switch sides when things became uncomfortable, and denounce his former cronies to the Fed.

Karl Germer had died without publicly naming a successor. Deprived of his leadership, though by all accounts seldom more than half-hearted, the Order risked going into slow decline until McMurty who, with his wife, had established a group presciently named The Continuum, resolved to step in. Reminding everyone of the confidence formerly shown in him by Aleister Crowley, he assumed the title of Caliph (X°) and set about reviving the moribund organisation, while taking care neither to spell out its precise relationship to the original OTO nor proclaim himself its new Outer Head. Similar scruples seem to have affected his successor, William Breeze, known as Hymenaeus Beta (McMurty was Hymenaeus Alpha) who, though formally elected Outer Head, seemed oddly diffident about using the title. Finally, mention should be made, if only for the record, that McMurty's take-over did not pass unchallenged. Another claimant to the post vacated by Germer was Marcelo Ramos Motta (1931-1987) who boasted that Germer's widow, Sascha, had assured him that her husband wanted *him* to be his successor. Few believed it. Motta also maintained that Germer, again perhaps on the bidding of his Holy Guardian Angel, kept trying to seduce him, though the young Brazilian may simply have mistaken the Rosicrucian Oath for something different.

"Do as thou wilt," trumpeted my companion when, with tea (or, rather, two teas) over, I helped her climb into her car outside the hotel. She also invited Edward and me to have lunch with her a few days later. Once the car was out of sight, I fetched my hired bike and headed for the castle.

In those days security arrangements were less conspicuous than they are today. Only one good-natured policeman was visible at the entrance to the estate, its wrought-iron gates flung open and a group of sightseers gathered nearby in the hope of glimpsing one of the royals. (That afternoon all they got for their patience was me.) Downhill and with a left turn into the drive I cycled, as usual without being stopped or challenged, an omission that puzzled me until I learned there were sentries concealed all over the place, each of whom knew who I was and let me pass unhindered. I was also told, though I was unsure whether to believe it, that armed soldiers lurked not only behind every other tree along the route to the castle but inside some of them as well.

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Edward and the royal corgis at Balmoral

Edward's room was at the top of the tower, up a stone staircase with a tartan carpet not dissimilar to the wallpaper favoured by the Rockingham. It overlooked a small inner courtyard. He had instructed me beforehand to greet the Queen, were I to meet her by chance in the grounds, but not engage in conversation unless she instigated it. Fair enough, this was her home and she was on holiday.

"And say 'Your Majesty' the first time, then 'Ma'am' afterwards" he went on. "I know you're a bloody republican but you can leave all that behind you at the gate."

It must have been on my third or fourth visit that I unexpectedly came upon a small, slightly built woman vigorously chopping logs, a sight so unexpected that I had been observing her for a good thirty seconds before it dawned on me that here was the sovereign lady herself. All of a sudden she glanced up but resumed work without acknowledging my presence. She may not even have noticed me.

"It's something she enjoys," remarked Edward when I told him, "The funny thing is, the last Kaiser, Great Uncle Willy they call him here, also liked nothing better than chopping wood. It must run in the family."

"But she looked, I don't know, so frail."

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“Don’t you believe it. In any case it makes no difference. The Kaiser had a withered arm but could still swing an axe.”

I was wrong in thinking the Queen had not noticed me. The next day she suggested to Edward that his “brother” – she was either poorly briefed or wished to be tactful – might care to join the family and guests to watch a film after dinner that night. The film was *The Night of the Generals* and before it started, liveried footmen offered cigars to all the men, while the ladies got a box of chocolates, with two pages on hand to provide them with rugs, should they find the room a bit chilly. (Actually a nice woolly rug and some Godiva soft centres would have suited me nicely.)

As for lunch with the Thelemite, this turned out to be more formal than I’d expected. The butler and the maid I’d been warned about, but not the hat our hostess wore for the occasion, a tweedy affair with pheasant plumage secured to it by a large amber brooch, partner to an even larger, thistle-shaped brooch on her lapel. Ladies always wore hats for lunch, the ever helpful Edward informed me later, which may be true, but I still found it odd for somebody to wear one in her own home. For the record the muligatawny soup was lukewarm and the salmon criminally under-poached.

“I need to fill myself up,” our hostess declared over pudding, possibly to herself, as she smashed through the crust of – what else? – a crème brulée (like Steak Diane and duck à l’orange, it was hugely popular forty years ago). Its colour matched the two brooches perfectly. “I’m dining at Birkhall tonight. Lots to drink but never enough to eat. Never.”

“The Queen Mother’s house” Edward again explained, “you pass it on the top road to Balmoral.”

Next day, out of curiosity, I took the top road, longer and more scenic than my usual route, but saw no sign of the house. I must have passed it, however, for as I pushed my bike up a modest incline, reflecting on how less fit I was since my days of cycling to Tanrallt, a car overtook me, its engine so quiet I’d not even known it was behind me. Deep lilac in colour and a Rolls Royce, it stopped a few yards ahead. There then emerged from one of its windows what I took to be a small bouquet of flowers.

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“You’re making for the castle, aren’t you? Would you like a lift?”

Drawing closer, I saw that the bouquet was in reality a hat, its flowers fashioned from silk and its wearer Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother. Uncertain whether the bicycle would fit inside the boot and reluctant to abandon it, having paid an exorbitant deposit for its hire, I declined the offer, adding a few gratuitous “Ma’ams”, but not enough to compromise my republican convictions.

“I know who you are” was the response, “and I know everything about you. *Everything.*”

The Thelemite no doubt.

The pastel coloured flowers withdrew inside the car. I half expected a cry of “Do as Thou Wilt” but, no, the purr of the engine was all I heard as the vehicle resumed its decorous ascent.

15

What is it about the eyes of people who are – how shall I put it? – not fully of this world? There was the quintessential blueness of those belonging to the man who'd called unexpectedly at Tanrallt on the first and only night I stayed there and who might, just might, have been a superior version of my humble brown-eyed self. (I still couldn't make my mind up about that "Holy Guardian Angel" stuff.) And then twenty years later, unexpectedly but no less unmistakably, there was Hubert Wattiaux.

Now Hubert was Belgian, from Charleroi and the name sounds a lot better pronounced the French way. He was sitting at the counter of a tiny bar, friendly but not entirely respectable, called *Le Béliér*, on the *Place Fontenas* in Brussels – I keep meaning to enquire if it's still there – when I first noticed him or, rather, noticed his eyes as he turned towards me after I'd gone up to order a beer. Like all such establishments, *Le Béliér* was dimly lit, yet the blue of Hubert's eyes grabbed my attention at once. It was as if they emitted a light of their own and had no need of other illumination, an effect all the more startling because he was peering at me in that intense way short-sighted people often do, their curiosity exaggerated almost to the point of impertinence.

Within minutes we began talking but it was not until he got up for us to move to a quieter part of the room that I realised how big he was, taller and broader than Mr. James even. I remember thinking how much he reminded me of a picture I'd seen of our cavemen ancestors, not only on account of his build and lumbering gait but his long hair and broad, flattish face as well. By profession a landscape architect, he told me he was currently designing sites for a chain of supermarkets then being built all over Belgium and known as GB (which I took to mean "Grande Bretagne" until someone

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pointed out that it stood for “Grand Bazaar”). Hubert’s brief was to make sure the area contained enough trees and shrubbery to satisfy the planning authorities whose job it was to approve each project. Having seen the finished product, I suspect more trees appeared on paper than ever ended up being planted, doubtless because each additional flowering cherry or mountain ash meant one less parking space for customers.

It turned out that he and I had one friend in common, a girl I’d met at an embassy function whose father owned the building where he lived and did most of his work. Like Mr. James in Uncle Davy’s shop, Hubert seemed virtually to fill the loft-like space he rented under the eaves, with a partitioned-off bedroom and a tiny kitchen, made even smaller by the shower cabinet squeezed between the fridge and the end wall. The remaining area served both as workshop and living area, the latter as untidy as it was snug. In fact I far preferred his place to mine in the genteel suburb of Uccle, with its chandeliers, brocades, Persian rugs and portentous mix of Louis XV and Empire furniture, all of it reproduction – but “quality” reproduction, as the letting agent pointed out after trying to pretend it was authentic. (“You know, Monsieur,” he went on to add, “some fake stuff is superior, far superior, to the original, more realistic for a start.”) For me the only consolation was that my rent was paid for by Her Majesty’s Government, as were my living allowance and the other privileges that came with my new diplomatic status.

For by then the Foreign Office had finally claimed me. And this time I was only too happy to be claimed as it meant escaping from Somerset House, home of the Inland Revenue.

I have been told that when the novelist, Iris Murdoch, left Oxford in 1938 it was with a foreboding equal to mine that she accepted a job in the Revenue, starting like me as an Assistant Principal, bottom rung of the career ladder for those entering the Administrative Class of the Civil Service. Within two to three years Assistant Principals mutated into fully-fledged Principals before going on to become Assistant Secretaries, then Under Secretaries and, if among the brightest and best, Deputy Secretaries and finally Permanent Secretaries, the last receiving a knighthood by way of a bonus. In the Revenue the Administrative Class looked after fiscal policy rather than the routine business of tax gathering, a chore delegated to Inspectors and generally viewed with patrician distaste by us lot. In our work

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we were supported by members of the Executive Class and, under them, a populous Clerical Class, lowly and mildly disgruntled because of it, though still not quite the bottom of the heap – that was occupied by messengers and other dogsbodies. Meanwhile each of these categories was divided into a series of grades, resulting in a structure every bit as complex and rigidly hierarchical as anything dreamt up by Samuel MacGregor Mathers for the Golden Dawn or Reuss and Crowley for the OTO. Only the Memphis and Mizraim Rites managed something better.

Like me thirty years later, Iris Murdoch must have turned up on her first day to be told what to expect by way of promotion and what pension entitlement awaited her on reaching sixty. But whereas I was then handed some case files to study, she by all accounts was given a clip board and dispatched to make an inventory of all the lavatories in Somerset House, no small undertaking given the size of the building, with its New Wing, West Wing and a third nameless wing where the legal department was housed. (She was told she could omit the Probate Registry, which, though occupying several rooms overlooking the Strand, was not part of the Revenue.) Apparently she abandoned the task half way through and by threatening to resign on the spot forced the Civil Service Commissioners to authorise her transfer to the Treasury, its lavatories presumably catalogued already.

For the first few months my job was to draft replies that Treasury Ministers could send to Members of Parliament whose constituents had sought help in connection with their tax affairs. For this all one needed to do was solicit a report from the responsible tax office and draft a letter in the light of whatever it contained. (It helped if one understood the explanation offered, but I never did, so this was by no means essential.) From time to time a mistake would be identified in, say a tax code or an allowance wrongly withheld but usually the calculations turned out to be correct and what was needed was a firm but soothingly worded reply. “A little *sapo mollis*,” I was advised, though it took me several minutes to realise the speaker meant “soft soap”, not some abstruse aspect of taxation.

Iris Murdoch managed to escape from Somerset House before she got around to writing any books. I did not. Instead, the book I wrote became the instrument of my escape.

It all started when a group of us attended the first night of the musical

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Hair at the Shaftesbury Theatre on, my diary reminds me, 27 September 1968, a date chosen by the show's creators because, while less propitious than that of the Broadway opening five months earlier (when Jupiter, Uranus and Pluto occupied the 10th House, Neptune graced the Ascendant and the Moon was favourably disposed) the auspices were still very good. They included a sympathetic conjunction of Mercury and Venus in the Fourth House, while Saturn, benignly placed in Aries promised resounding success. On a night so well-starred, it was inevitable perhaps that on my way home after the performance, I took it into my head to write a book on magic, "real" magic, that is, magic of the kind I'd been interested in since I was a boy. No doubt I was affected in part by the joyful exuberance of the cast who had sung and danced for two hours on stage then come down and cavorted in the aisles with members of the audience for a good thirty minutes afterwards. Anyway, on the tube home, somewhere between Tottenham Road and Notting Hill Gate, I decided that my contribution to the impending Age of Aquarius, with its promise not only of harmony, love, and understanding but also "mystic crystal revelations", whatever these were, would be to bring magic, long scorned and discredited, to the attention of the *Hair* generation, *my* generation, and show how it could be exciting, wholesome and, something never attempted before, intellectually plausible as well. It was a big challenge, but with assertive Aries dominating the Midheaven that night, one I felt qualified to meet.

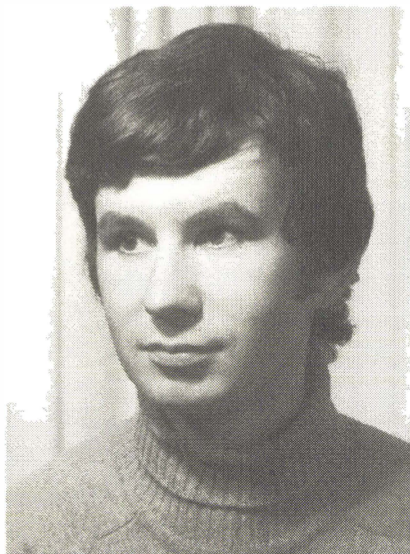
Over the next few months reports from tax inspectors up and down the land were treated more cavalierly than ever, while I applied *sapo mollis* in such big dollops it's a wonder Government Ministers, Members of Parliament and taxpayers alike weren't overwhelmed by the scent. Perhaps they were, for a number of complainants felt sufficiently moved to write back in gratitude, even when their grievance had not been upheld and, as a consequence, there was no repayment to look forward to. In very little time I'd cleared the massive backlog inherited from my predecessor, a conscientious soul who tried to understand the issues in dispute and even did the calculations all over again, sometimes more than once.

"You've cleaned the Augēan Stables!" proclaimed a member of the Board whom I met one afternoon in the corridor. I was the Hercules of the New Wing.

What neither he nor anybody else realised was that this accelerated dis-

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patch of Parliamentary correspondence left me free for most of the day to press on with my book. Behind a barricade of files, I was able to write about magic for hours on end, with foolscap paper and ballpoint pens provided by my unsuspecting employer. Meanwhile, concealed from view in the top right hand drawer of the desk, my manuscript grew thicker by the day. Even my lunch hours were productive, spent either in a public library at the bottom of Charing Cross Road where there was a comprehensive "Occult" section or, when I could not find what I wanted there, in the depths of Watkins' bookshop, specialists in esoteric literature, in nearby Cecil Court. (Simon told me that one day, in a fit of pique, Aleister Crowley caused the entire stock to vanish from the shelves, though the books reappeared once the Great Beast stormed out of the shop.) I had no money to buy the volumes I consulted so had to memorise the information I needed – lists of planetary spirits, angelic beings and other things Mr. James was never much concerned about – before jotting it down on scraps of paper once back out again on the street.



The author (publicity photograph
1972)

The book was finished by the middle of April. The unwieldy manuscript, its pages littered with changes, some scarcely legible, and overlaid with

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scraps of paper bearing new bits of text, now had to be typed. By happy chance or, possibly, the presence of Saturn in Aries on the night the opus was conceived, a portent of triumph over adversity, the lady who did the Chairman's typing, Margaret Williams, came from Dolgarrog, three miles west of Trefriw. Better still, she and her Revenue colleagues had been evacuated during the war to Llandudno, finding refuge in that very same Craigside Hydro Hotel where Dion Fortune, future Priestess of Isis, spent her formative years. The outcome was that I persuaded her to do the job for forty pounds, half up front and the balance on completion. It was not a large sum even in those days, but as I pointed out, by doing it in her working hours, she was in effect being paid twice over.

The snag was that when, as often happened, there was nothing to fill those working hours, Miss Williams, turned fifty but not yet resigned to spinsterhood, liked nothing better than to promenade around the building in what everyone called her "party frocks", dresses she made herself in a style reminiscent of Dior's New Look. (Full skirted and in the brightest of colours, they accompanied her also to the tea dances she attended every weekend with portly Mrs. Kingham from the Typing Pool.) On these leisurely peregrinations Miss Williams would stop to gossip with any other women she encountered, their time likewise heavy on their hands, foremost among them a Scots lady, Chrissie McKay who did the filing for the Board's medical officer and was thus a source of information on everybody's ailments and infirmities. (Miss McKay's great-nephew was later arrested for murdering several rich widows in Knightsbridge, though that piece of information his aunt took care to keep strictly to herself.) Anyway, with my typed pages arriving only in dribs and drabs (and some weeks neither) I got into the habit of going in search of Miss Williams whenever I found her absent from her desk, scouring the corridors, the Board's library (where she went to read early editions of the evening paper) and, my final port of call, Miss McKay's cubbyhole over the bridge between the New Wing and the West Wing. In the end, fed up with my constant harassment, Miss Williams agreed to stay late every evening to work on the book. The arrangement kept her safe from other distractions but turned out not to be the sacrifice she made it sound, once it emerged that she'd claimed overtime from the Revenue for all the extra hours "worked".

With the typescript in my possession, the next step was to find a publisher. A former college friend, now an editor with Penguin Books, recommend-

ed Jonathan Cape in Bedford Square so I squeezed Miss Williams' neatly typed pages – at the time hers was the only electric typewriter in Somerset House – into a large official envelope, marked “On Her Majesty’s Service”, and enclosed with it a brief covering letter. It was very much a take-it-or-leave-it type of letter, due more to ignorance of the way publishing worked than over-confidence. That same day, in my lunch hour, I set off on foot for the firm’s headquarters and twenty minutes later was handing my bundle over to a woman at the reception desk, aloof to the point of rudeness and redolent of *Arpège*. My feelings were those of an unwed mother leaving her baby on the steps of a Victorian workhouse, resigned to the prospect of not seeing the infant ever again.

“At least you finished it,” I told myself over a drink at a pub in Bow Street before returning to the files and the *sapo mollis*.

In Somerset House it had long been the custom that every afternoon at four o’clock people closed their files and trooped solemnly off for tea and biscuits. Each week, possibly for the sake of a change, they would gather in a different colleague’s room, segregated by rank but bound by a common understanding that for the allotted fifteen minutes, nobody was permitted to talk about work.

There was the Principals’ tea club, to which we Assistant Principals were admitted, the Assistant Secretaries’ tea club, and an elite group consisting of Under-Secretaries, mostly members of the Board, as well as its two Deputy Chairmen and the Chairman himself. Tea, brewed at the end of the corridor by a squad of elderly messengers, was the same for everyone but members of the Board drank it from fine china cups while seated around a mahogany table on which Lord Nelson was said to have ravished Lady Hamilton when the Admiralty had its home in Somerset House. (The identical claim was made of another table in the so-called Nelson Room elsewhere in the building so either one was an impostor or the First Sea Lord availed himself of both.) Next to the table was a Thomas Tompion long-case clock that discreetly alerted those present once their fifteen minutes were up. Farther down the corridor our approach to time keeping was a lot more cavalier, with breaks of forty minutes not at all uncommon.

One afternoon when it was my turn to welcome the tea club into my room, the telephone rang in the middle of things. Usually such calls went un-

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heeded, given that most related to work and were likely therefore to result in a breach of etiquette if answered. Personal calls, too, were best ignored, the trouble being that if one happened to pick up the receiver, the room immediately fell silent as those in it stopped talking, often in mid sentence, or halted whatever else they were doing, leaving teacups mid way to lips or cigarettes still unlit between them. In part it was done out of courtesy, in part plain old-fashioned nosiness.

It must have been inadvertence, therefore, or mere force of habit that induced me to pick up the 'phone that particular teatime, only to find myself listening to an unfamiliar voice, American by the sound of it, which clearly had no interest in discussing income tax, corporation tax, stamp duty or any other kind of impost.

"I've read your manuscript" it drawled, "and really must ask you something. Are you suggesting that if I do what you say in it, I'll conjure up lots of sexy demons?"

While working out how best to reply, knowing a straightforward "Yes" might lead to further embarrassing questions, while a "No" would suggest the book was rubbish and not worth publishing, I could hear a colleague beside me trying to crunch a biscuit as soundlessly as he could without visibly moving his mouth.

I think in the end I answered yes, if only to shut the caller up. I know I agreed to drop in at his office after work that evening. His name was Ed Victor, now a prominent literary agent but then on the board of Jonathan Cape. A week later I received the first third of my advance. Before putting the cheque into the bank I made a point of photocopying it, proof that I could after all get paid for being creative.

The book was written under a pseudonym, thought up days before it went to the printers and meant to forestall possible difficulties at work. It came out early the following year and received good reviews. Best of all, the *Sunday Times* published an article about it by the writer, Philip Oakes, composed after the two of us spent three self-indulgent hours over lunch at L'Escargot in Soho. (Meals there were always unhurried, the menu reminding customers that "*Pour bien manger, il faut savoir attendre.*") Later and the worse for drink, I allowed myself be photographed outside Somerset

Philip Oakes meets a magician from Somerset House

SPELLING IT OUT

DAVID CONWAY has been a civil servant for the past nine years. He has an office in Somerset House, and he's hot stuff on tax and Treasury problems. In his own time—and here's where you should take a deep breath—he's also pretty knowledgeable about astral projection, and love charms, and curses (although he says he's never cursed anyone). He can distil a draught that's said to guarantee eternal youth, and he can tell you how to divine the future.

In short, he's a magician, although he hates the word ("It's so rich in associations") and he's very down on consorting with demons whose conjuration is likely to bring about magic (and trouble than even the Civil Service can handle). Talmudic tradition names over seven million of these, from Amnion to Valefar. But not one of them, says Conway, can be trusted. On the other hand, he adds, practicing magic is a good deal safer than driving a car. "But you need care and skill to ensure safety."

It's a lot to swallow in one gulp, and Conway's not seeking converts. Cape have just published—at £5—his first book: *Magic, An Occult Primer*—which, they claim, is the first do-it-yourself manual on the subject. It's witty, informative, and very practical. "But," says Conway, "I have no intention of laying down the law. The last thing I want to do is make my mind up about anything. I prefer to remain sceptical, and that's how I hope the book will be read."

He means what he says, but lately there's been a boom in witchcraft (a fairly homespun kind of magic) which leads one to suppose that half the woods in the Home Counties are jam-packed nightly with naked ladies prancing round bonfires on which cauldrons simmer. It's a busy little industry, says Conway, but they're not his people or his public. "In the first place, they're extremely glib, and secondly they're interested in magic for very short-term rewards, mostly sexual. The trouble is that sex—which can be used legitimately as a means—becomes an end in itself."

"They're pathetic, really. I knew one girl, a stripper, who was hired by one group to join in their rituals because they were all so unattractive, and they needed someone like her to turn them on, so to speak."

The only bonfire session that Conway attended was the result of his answering a small ad in the *New Statesman* inviting followers of the Great White Goddess to contact a certain box number. He was interviewed by members of a witches' coven in Ealing (another would-be recruit was a West Indian who drove a number 11 bus), and eventually found himself in the boskuge near Westerham, witnessing erotic tableaux which left him unmoved, and feeling distinctly chilly. He decided that witchcraft was not for him: "For one thing, the set-up was so artificial. For another, it was so damned cold."

Conway puts down the pretenders with *Resne*, but he is utterly serious about what he believes to be genuine magic. The rituals that he lists in his book are elaborate, and not with-

out some trappings of hocus-pocus. But, he insists, they are not to be taken lightly. "Spells do work, and that's what worries me. If they didn't, then I could settle down and become a happy materialist."

He's not been that since he was five years old (he's thirty-two now), and he awoke one night to find two old ladies standing beside his bed. "Not for one moment did it occur to me that they were other than flesh and blood people. But when they disappeared—as I thought, into a wardrobe—I yelled for my mother. They came back the next night and one of them tickled me. When I yelled again they disappeared. But it went on until the family doctor was consulted. What finally transpired was that their descriptions tallied with those of two elderly sisters who had lived and died in the house thirty years previously. Other members of my family had seen ghosts, and it was clear that I had inherited the psychic gift."

His parents ran a grocer's shop in a village near Aberystwyth, and Conway recalls a friend of his father who taught him the ABC of herbalism. "He could also put a hex on cattle, or take it off if he was spoken to nicely. He was a humble man—which is unusual for anyone connected with the occult."

He cast his first spell when he was twelve. "It was to help me through an examination, and it

was a dismal failure. I'd have been much better occupied learning my French verbs." Subsequently, he treasured an old pair of socks which he had sworn while taking—and passing—his school certificate exams. Darned and shrunken, they saw him through the rest of school and university (where he earned a double first in French and eighteenth-century French philosophy), until they finally fell apart during an unsuccessful driving test. "I doubt whether they possessed any special talismanic virtue," says Conway. "But I do know that my own confidence in them soothed my nerves, and improved my performance."

He's convinced that a good deal of magic is, quite literally, in the mind ("Beginning with telepathy"), and thinks it high time that occultists and physicists got together to examine the evidence. What's off-putting, he says, is that so many of the rituals are couched in medieval language. "But the fact that they are so elaborate teaches self-discipline. They are meant to discourage the dabblers."

He keeps at it, he says "Because I have this universal curiosity. Magic won't make him rich, or famous, and for one simple reason: 'I'd much rather test my own ability.' It sounds very Welsh, very puritanical but it can't be helped. "I come from a long line of non-conformists," explains Conway. "You can't get over a thing like that."

Frank Herrmann



"The Magician from Somerset House"

(*Sunday Times*, January 1972)

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House, with the result that readers of the paper were treated the following Sunday to a picture of me on the steps leading to the West Wing, with "Inland Revenue" clearly visible above the door behind me. And in case anyone missed it, the piece was headed "The Magician from Somerset House".

At work next day nothing was said. Not one word. The tea club met as usual but though tempted to stay away, I decided in the end to make an appearance, reckoning the longer I left it, the harder it would be to show up. But again none of those present made any reference to what had been in the paper the previous day, gradually encouraging me to hope they might all, without exception, be readers of the *Observer* rather than the *Sunday Times*, unlikely though it seemed.

Over the next fortnight came more interviews but no more photographs, while from the publishers I received the first batch of readers' letters. Among them was one that gave me more pleasure than the sender could possibly have imagined when he wrote it, two pages in violet ink and a script so tiny as to be almost illegible. After some comments about my book and a reference to his friends, the Sheffield witches, Arnold and Patricia Crowther, he reported how pleased he was to see Aberystwyth mentioned in the *Sunday Times*. Had I, he asked, ever come across his late mother who had also once lived there and been interested in the occult? The writer was none other than Nicky Sandys, son of Countess Barcynska, the man I'd always imagined leaving town with a valedictory swish of silk scarf, determined not to set foot there ever again. But return he did, for the next time he got in touch, it was from an address in Powell Street, Aberystwyth. In a rambling narrative he spoke at length and with much affection of his mother before disclosing that he planned to buy a caravan and see out his days in New Cross, the place where she and Caradoc Evans had lived and now lay buried. It was the last I heard from him.

Another week went by. Already I was starting to enjoy my new celebrity when out of the blue came a summons to go to see the Chairman of the Board.

"Treasury Ministers have read the piece in the *Sunday Times*. So has the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I'm told the Prime Minister has seen it as well."

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The speaker looked as grave as he sounded. Sitting opposite him in a leather chair, which, like others in the room, had recently been re-covered – the Principals' tea club grumbled for the best part of a week about the extravagance – I was uncertain how best to respond. If apologies were called for, the *Sunday Times* should proffer them. After all, it was they that blew the gaff by getting me to pose in front of the building. In the boardroom next door the Tompion clock haughtily struck the hour. Then as if on cue the Chairman gave a broad grin. "Well" he declared, "You've got more in you than most people here, even if they do stay out of trouble and know more about taxation than you ever will. You've learned an important lesson – never trust the press. Journalists are in it only for themselves, no matter well they treat you. And they're always dodging tax, especially on their expenses."

I neither spoke nor shifted in my chair. The first because I still hadn't worked out what to say, the second because the new leather made whoopee-cushion-like noises whenever I moved.

"I suppose they fed you. Where did you go?"

"The Escargot."

"French by the sound of it."

"It's in Greek Street."

I was starting to wonder if he'd asked me what we'd eaten when suddenly he went on to something else.

"I've a proposal. There's a job going in Brussels, with the United Kingdom delegation, monitoring tax developments, keeping an eye on the Commission's budget, that sort of thing. Do you want it? At least you'd be out of the spotlight."

I was minded to ask for time to think things over. It never paid to seem too eager. On top of which I was beginning to find the spotlight rather enjoyable.

"Full diplomatic status. You'll be seconded to the Treasury and lent by

them to the Foreign Office. With all the benefits you'll more than double your salary. And your accommodation's paid for – I think they even allow for domestic staff, at least they used to in my day – and there's duty-free shopping on top. You'll end up better off than me!"

Who cared about seeming too eager? Or about the spotlight, fun but at the end of the day not all that lucrative? There and then the two of us shook hands. A month later I was off.

I suppose I had been in Brussels for two or three weeks, time enough to discover the right places to go to, when I first came across Hubert in the *Bélier*. From then on I seemed to bump into him often, sometimes at the home of Nicole, the friend we had in common, and not long afterwards he began dropping in on me from time to time for supper. Or else I would go to his place, usually with a carton of the Marlboro cigarettes he smoked and I could buy cheaply. Once, after I complained that I never saw anything of Belgium beyond its capital, he drove me to Charleroi to meet his parents. What I remember especially is that in all the hours we spent together we talked about everything under the sun except the supernatural. It was something he showed no interest in and that was fine by me.

Although I regarded our friendship as no different from others I had made since leaving London, I still found the quality of his eyes not only remarkable but slightly disturbing as well. True, I grew accustomed to them over time but that in no way diminished their impact, especially when he turned to look at me directly. I was even beginning to have the vague but uneasy feeling there was something not quite right about them and, more worryingly, not quite right about him either. This disquiet, mild and intermittent as it was, in no way affected our friendship and I continued to enjoy his company no less than before. What I did feel, however, was that part of him lay concealed from me, as well as from everybody else and that this part was something we were, none of us, equipped to understand. For all that, it never worried me unduly.

Until, that is, one Sunday night when he called late at my place to collect something he'd persuaded me to order for him, not cigarettes this time but a litre of pure alcohol. (His intention was to pour some into a jar with space enough at the top to allow him to suspend a pear above it. The hope was that once corked and left alone for several months, the alcohol would turn

into Poire Williams.) By the time he arrived, I had already drunk several glasses of wine and now, with all this talk of home-made brandy, the two of us downed several glasses of Cognac. Was I drunk? Not quite. When I've drunk too much, I start feeling queasy, a signal to stop, keep swallowing hard and, by way of distraction, run through Latin conjugations in my head. (If I start reciting them out loud, then it's time to make for the bathroom.) That Sunday I was close to being drunk but no more.

Close enough, however, to ask him for the first time about himself. I can see us now, him sitting awkwardly by a small rosewood table and me like Madame Récamier with my feet up on an Empire sofa. Whether because of the brandy or the light from a lamp beside him, the strangeness of his eyes struck me more forcibly than ever.

"Tell me, Hubert," I asked, "about your secret?"

"What secret?"

Had I known that, I'd not have asked him in the first place. I tried again.

"There is one, isn't there?"

This time I got an answer.

"Yes."

His admission left me not a jot wiser. Still, it was progress of sorts.

"Are you going to tell me what it is?"

"No. I don't want to discuss it. Either you stop asking questions or we stop seeing each other. It's up to you."

And with that, he stood up, picked up his car keys and walked out of the flat.

Perhaps I was closer to being drunk than I thought. Annoyed as I had been by Hubert's refusal to enlighten me further, I did not question his right not to do so. Yet here I was, normally the most pacific of creatures, suddenly

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overwhelmed by a tremendous and quite disproportionate rage. Only when I heard him vainly trying to start his elderly Citroën outside in the street did I manage to calm down. "You'll be sick, if you don't" warned an inner voice that might have been my Higher Self.

By then my belief had grown that Hubert's secret related to a previous incarnation, that he had somehow brought into this life the memory of an earlier one, just as Dorothy Eady had for years cherished the memory of her life in Egypt a good thirty centuries before she was born. Either that or Hubert was being "overshadowed", as occultists put it, by an entity who, as in cases of possession, impinged on his normal consciousness from time to time. Whatever it was, I was still resolved to do my damndest to find out.

By then the car had consented to move off. "Don't get so worked up," cautioned the inner voice, beginning now to sound like my mother. But its urgings went unheeded. Worked up I was and worked up I stayed. Moving unsteadily into the bedroom, I threw myself onto the bed and yelled at the ceiling

"If there's anything out there, please, please tell me what it's all about?"

The answer came at once. So unexpected was it that I sobered up immediately. What struck me then (and has done ever since) is the total conviction it carried, the more remarkable because it was not the answer I wanted, not at all. Yet, much as it disappointed me, I could not do other than accept it. Unwelcome it might be but I *knew* it was true, so much so that the certainty I felt that Sunday night in Brussels has stayed with me ever since. If, as I half expected, it had involved past lives or discarnate entities, I would not have minded in the least. With things like that I was already familiar, even fully at my ease. But, no, this was something different and it left no room for doubt or contradiction.

Now, there is one kind of literature that has never appealed to me in the slightest, and that is science fiction. Neither have I been much interested in flying saucers or tales of alien abduction. My view is that sightings of the former, when not an optical illusion, are largely imagined, while the latter appear to suggest the presence of some psychosis or emotional disorder in those claiming to have been abducted and, more often than not, sexually abused in the process. For his part Jung suggested that flying saucers were

projections of the Collective Unconscious – he tended to blame the Collective Unconscious for a lot of things – although he did concede towards the end of his life that sightings of them might contain an objective element also. I am glad to say my own scepticism has never prevented me from enjoying films like Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* but my disbelief remains suspended only until the final credits start to roll. That is why I felt so badly let down by the answer imparted to me, Goodness knows by whom, as I lay staring up at the bedroom ceiling. Frankly, the last thing I wanted to hear was that an extra-terrestrial had been sitting by my faux Louis-Philippe table (“splayed legs and decorated with brass ormolu mounts” said the inventory) in the Avenue de Messidor. But, like it or not, the answer I got was that Hubert did indeed come from another planet.

There might be no room for disbelief but for a fresh wave of anger there seemed room enough, anger that people from other worlds were wandering in our unsuspecting midst, looking more or less as we do. (“More or less” because, in Hubert's case, his eyes and physique did rather set him apart.) Back into the living room I went, by then more steady on my feet, and out onto the balcony. The sky above was free from cloud and filled with stars. As I looked up and over towards the Forest of Soignies, with Waterloo somewhere beyond, I shouted “How dare you come here, you bastards, looking just like we do!”

For this perhaps is what infuriated me most, the similarity they bore to us human beings. Had Hubert and his sort been little green men with two heads or a discreet pair of horns, I might have felt less hostile. It was the subterfuge that got me so worked up. Thankfully, none of my neighbours, by then curled up beneath their goose-down duvets, was still awake to hear my little rant.

Next morning I awoke without a hangover. What I did have but could well have done without, was the same unshakeable conviction as the night before. Like it or not, I had been in the company of someone from another planet. Neither Mr. James nor Simon had prepared me for *that*. But at least there'd been no hint of spaceships or flying saucers, scant consolation though it was: wherever Hubert came from he had not used one of those to get here. Of this I felt sure. Neither, strangely enough, did I think of him as anything other than human. The extraterrestrial element was part of him, the defining part perhaps, but in all other respects he seemed no

different from anybody else.

Driving into work, I decided I must tell somebody – anybody – what had happened, even at the risk of being taken for mad. (The fact that I'd written a book on magic did little to improve my credibility.) In the end I settled on the Ambassador's secretary, a woman called Fiona Comber, who had met Hubert several times and, better still, was famously discreet.

In those days the United Kingdom Representation to what was then the European Economic Community and is now the European Union, occupied two floors in a modern building on the Avenue des Arts, a few hundred yards from a self-service restaurant unlikely to be patronised by my diplomatic colleagues. Confident there was little chance of anyone disturbing us, I suggested to Fiona that we go there for lunch. On our way, still unsure how to raise the subject without seeming to have taken leave of my senses – Fiona might be the soul of discretion but she was also, still is, the type of cool, no-nonsense woman the Foreign Office likes – I tried to prepare the ground in advance.

"I saw Hubert last night."

"He's from Outer Space, isn't he?"

With that she stopped dead in her tracks. I can see her now, her green tweed coat, the Hermès scarf, and her auburn hair, sensibly cut.

"Good Heavens," she said, "Whatever made me say that?"

From then on it was relatively easy to tell her what had happened. Today she remembers every detail of our conversation, though she insists the coat was navy-blue, and has written her own account of the episode.

Over the next few days my anger dissipated but the feeling of certainty did not, accompanied now by a renewed desire to hear the truth from Hubert's lips. My experience of such matters was negligible. In fact only twice do I remember giving them more than passing attention, though like most people I did wonder from time to time about the chances of there being life, intelligent life, that is, anywhere else in the universe. (On balance I thought it probable, but would not have been too surprised to learn we were on our

own after all.) So far as concerns reports of mysterious flying objects, the only account I'd ever paused to think about was one Edward told me about one afternoon as we walked past Peibio near his home town of Holyhead.

It was there in 1743 that a certain William Lewis and his young *gwasffferm* – the kind of hired help I would have been, had Mr. James paid me for my labours – were ploughing a small patch of land behind the house when they saw a ship in full sail travelling across the sky from the direction of Snowdonia. The farmer called his wife who emerged just in time to see the vessel start moving backwards to where it had come from, its sails now furled and pennant lowered to the deck.

Within days news of the event reached the ears of Lewis Morris, writer, antiquarian and, by profession, marine surveyor, who turned up to investigate the case. Wisely, he took the precaution of questioning the farmer and his wife separately in order to reduce the risk of collusion. In the event Mrs. Lewis, though unfamiliar with nautical terms, provided him with such a detailed account that Morris was in no doubt she had actually seen the vessel she so painstakingly described, while her husband, interviewed in a Holyhead tavern, struck him as honest, sober and without any trace of that “melancolick” disposition that might lead people to imagine things or tell untruths. Certainly William Lewis was adamant that what he had seen was a real ship, not some trick of the light, confounding those who suggested it might be the reflection of a packet-boat moored in Holyhead harbour, by insisting he had clearly observed the keel from underneath. He described also how he had seen its sails billow out in the wind, counted the ropes of the rigging and watched a flock of curious seagulls gather near the vessel, circling it excitedly until it began to move backwards, at which point the birds flew off as one in the opposite direction. What also impressed Lewis Morris, judging by the hasty report he penned that night in, appropriately enough, the Ship Inn at Dolgellau, was the farmer's assurance that he had witnessed a similar phenomenon ten years earlier.

It seems probable that William Lewis and his wife (whose main concern was what her neighbours might think, were the report of their experience ever published) did perceive “something” in the sky above Peibio, but pictured it in terms familiar to them, as usually happens when non-physical events are perceived by witnesses, whether at one of Dion Fortune's magical workings or at Mrs. Duncan's séances. Much the same happened after

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a pilot named Kenneth Arnold reported seeing what looked to him like nine shining discs passing Mount Rainier in Washington State on 24 June 1947, moving, as he put it, it, in the way a saucer might do “if you skipped it across the water”. From then on what people everywhere reported seeing in the sky were not ninety-ton ketches in full sail, with pennants proudly flying, but saucer-shaped objects every bit as shiny, flat and fast moving as their Mount Rainier prototypes. (Arnold later amended his original description, preferring to call the objects crescent-shaped, though by now more variants have been recorded, with cigar shapes currently popular.) Some of those claiming to have spotted such things may well be deluded or genuinely mistaken, while others are hoaxers, but the rest, as Jung ended up believing, may well have perceived something, but it is a “something” to which their own imagination has given form and detail.

This is borne out by the second occasion flying saucers and their alien navigators briefly captured my attention, this time because it reminded me of something connected with my childhood. No doubt Jung would have made much of the coincidence.

At the time, like many other seven-year-olds, I belonged to a gang. In fact I was the boss of it, the only gang likely to interest me being one I was in charge of. Typically, we had our cryptic signs and passwords, as well as the names I allocated to each member, all of them listed in a rather tuneless ditty we used to chant on our way home from school every afternoon. It began with Magonia, which was my name, then Magousta, that of my best friend and deputy, Colin Samuel, followed by Macara, Pharmee, Meritza and three or four others. What led me to invent these bits of nonsense, I no longer remember, any more than I recollect why I used to tell the others that Magonia was the name of a civilisation somewhere out in space.

Not until forty years later would I discover that early in the ninth century, St. Agobard, Archbishop of Lyons, had written a treatise on the weather in which he, too, spoke of a realm beyond our Earth called Magonia. According to him, local peasants believed its inhabitants travelled in “cloud ships” which could sometimes be observed zigzagging across the sky, with bad weather usually coming in their wake. (They may of course have simply been referring to storm clouds.) Shortly afterwards I came across the name again, this time in a book called *Passport to Magonia: from folklore to flying saucers*, by Jacques Vallée, scientist, ufologist and reportedly the model for

the character played by François Truffaut in Spielberg's *Close Encounters*. The book is regarded as important by believers and sceptics alike. While careful not to question the authenticity of the experience reported by those claiming to have seen UFOs or consorted with aliens, the author rejects the literal interpretation commonly favoured. Instead, he proposes that both are part of a multidimensional reality that may occasionally impinge on our own four-dimensional one. In other words, the reality behind them is similar to, if not the same as, that of the Inner Planes with which magicians aspire to interact. For him, therefore, phenomena like the 90 ton ketch seen crossing the sky above Peibio or the nine shining discs observed by Kenneth Arnold in Washington State or even religious events like the so-called miracle of Fatima in Portugal, where in 1917 the sun was seen to dance in the sky by more than 70,000 spectators, are, all of them, the objectification in terms consistent with the reality we know, of another lying outside it. In short, what is purportedly "seen" is not real in a physical sense, but is the product of the psychological and social conditioning of those made aware of it, though in its own terms no less real on that account.

All very plausible no doubt, but Hubert was undeniably real, tangibly so, and not a construct of my imagination. In fact the following Thursday I was due at his place for supper and when that day came without further word from him, I took his silence to mean he still expected me. It would be my first opportunity to confront him with what I'd discovered – to "have it out" with him, as my mother used to say – but I was still no nearer to deciding how to go about it by the time I arrived at the Rue Cornet de Grez where he lived. All I knew was that I could never bring myself to ask him outright where he came from, no matter how certain I was of the answer. (I even persuaded myself there was a possibility he might be unaware of it himself). I need not have worried, for when I walked into his kitchen, I found that Nicole, the landlord's daughter, and her friend Jacqueline were invited also, both already seated at the kitchen table with a jar of alcohol and a rather sweaty pear in front of them. They were busy telling Hubert that the pear should be immersed in the alcohol not suspended over it by a piece of string. Its correct position was still in dispute by the time we got to the end of our meal.

Next morning the two girls had to start work early so left shortly afterwards. To get out of Hubert's way as he began stacking plates and glasses in the sink, I perched myself on the high stool in front of one of his draw-

ing boards in the adjoining room. With no door to the kitchen, we were able to carry on chatting but in my mind I was already trying to work out how to use this opportunity, now that there were just the two of us, to ask again about his “secret”. The trouble was, I still couldn’t think how to start. To blurt out “Are you extra-terrestrial?” seemed crass and intrusive, like quizzing someone about his or her sexual preferences. Even worse, it sounded rather comic, indeed so comic he could easily have laughed it off.

It was at this point I glanced around the room and noticed in the corner where he kept his records the music from Stanley Kubrick’s film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Over I went to fetch it and was no sooner back on the stool than Hubert came into the room.

“By the way” I said, endeavouring to sound casual while holding the album flat against my chest, “I think I’ve discovered your secret.”

My plan was that on seeing the record sleeve, he’d put two and two together and own up.

“What is my secret?”

It was more of a challenge than a question. Still, having got this far, I was not about to give up.

“Tell me, are your origins the same as mine?”

“What are my origins?”

“Hubert, I believe your origins lie beyond the sun.”

It sounded rather precious but at least got things out in the open.

“I’d like you to leave.”

“But is it true?”

“Please, I want you out of here. Now.”

I stayed put. For the first time I felt I had the upper hand. Even his eyes had

lost a little of their mystery. I felt in control.

“I’ll go when I’ve had an explanation. I think I’m entitled to that”

Again it sounded precious, but, come on, I told myself, you’ve given him your friendship, had him over for supper umpteen times and virtually kept him in cigarettes, not to mention Southern Comfort. (If Hubert was in any way typical, the makers of Southern Comfort have a vast untapped market somewhere out in space.)

“I’ll go when you’ve explained what it’s all about.”

“How do I know what it’s all about?” he shouted and suddenly I began to feel sorry for him.

We returned to the kitchen. There was wine left over from dinner so he took two glasses from the sink, rinsed them under the tap and we sat down again at the table. With that he proceeded to tell me how he’d known for as long as he could remember that his home, his true home, was not in our world but in another so fundamentally different that he could scarcely imagine what it was like, only catch glimpses of it sometimes while he slept. Now that he’d grown up, the knowledge of it was easier to live with but as a child, even as a baby, he had longed to return to wherever he’d come from or at least be reminded of what he’d left behind in order to be human.

“I was born, I’ll fall ill and I’ll die. Like anybody else. But then –” and now his eyes became more luminous than ever – “the real me will go back to where I came from.”

“Are there others, other people, like you?” I enquired.

“Yes, but I don’t know them. A number of us have become human beings so as to understand what that means. Where I’m from, you see, nothing’s at all the same. That’s why we must live fully human lives. To get to know what it’s like at first hand. When we return we’ll take the experience back with us”

I asked if anybody else had uncovered his secret. Only one other, he told

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me, a young artist from South America, who took L.S.D and smoked hash and had “seen” – it was the word Hubert used – what I had intuitively grasped. This man went on to paint strange, psychedelic landscapes that were a fair approximation, at least in terms of our environment, of what things might be like where Hubert came from. Apparently he had done a brisk trade selling his work in Amsterdam. According to Hubert, the money more than paid for his fare back home.

“I’ve told you enough, too much even,” he continued solemnly, “In any case it’s not safe. Not for you and not for me either. By knowing what’s going on you’ve become a threat. So have I, by talking about it. The reason I’m here is to live like an ordinary human being. That means not thinking of the other me.”

I was about to say something when he got up and moved to the door.

“You must leave. Now. And you must understand why I can’t talk to you again. I’m sorry. This thing’s come between us.”

“The truth, that’s what’s come between us.”

It sounded melodramatic and I wished I hadn’t said it.

“The truth” replied Hubert softly, “can do harm as well as good.”

By the time I heard it, I was half way down the stairs.

If I’d hoped an admission from him would make me feel better, I was soon disappointed. Over the next few days I had the feeling that whatever world Hubert belonged to, it was beginning to impinge on my own. Well not so much impinge as to make what I’d hitherto taken for granted seem less certain and, in a subtle way, less important. Not only was there “something” else out there, but this “something”, now that I’d experienced it, left me restless and dissatisfied. For me there was only one antidote and that was to revisit the past I’d grown up with, letting the hills and mountains of my native Wales reaffirm who I was and where I came from. I telephoned Edward in London, to say I’d be home the following weekend, suggesting he pick me up at Heathrow on the Friday afternoon. We could drive straight from there to my parents in Llandudno.

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In the event we interrupted our journey to call briefly on his sister in Northampton. While there she drew our attention to a record player she'd recently bought, an elaborate affair in a wooden cabinet that already looked quaintly old-fashioned. Detecting our lack of enthusiasm, she went on to praise the quality of the sound, putting on a piece of music to prove it. Her choice was the theme – in fact Richard Strauss' Also *Sprach Zarathustra* – from Kubrick's film, the white sleeved album identical to the one I'd held in Hubert's flat a few days earlier.

We were approaching the Welsh border when I decided to tell Edward the story. Though sceptical, understandably so, he was not totally dismissive, sensing perhaps how deeply affected I was by the experience. And then, no sooner was I finished than my beloved mountains came into view, darkly purple in the fading light but now, to my surprise, far smaller than I seemed to remember them. They had not changed, obviously, so something inside me must have changed instead. And with the discovery of it I began to realise that in the wake of what I knew about Hubert, everything in this world had come to mean a little less to me than it did before.

Next day we travelled to Anglesey to visit Edward's mother. Again we stopped on the way, this time for coffee at my cousin's home in Llanfairpwll-gwyngyll – the village with “gogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogoch” tagged on to its name to please the tourists. As we sat talking, her eldest son, Rhodri, then six or seven, walked into the room, marched straight up to the record player and put on the Zarathustra piece before going back into the garden without saying a word. Like the previous occasion, the incident is worth mentioning only because of what followed.

From Wales we returned on Sunday morning to London and before driving me to Heathrow to catch a late flight to Brussels, Edward took me to a street market somewhere between Kennington and Waterloo Station, Borough Market probably. By then he had left the palace and opened an antique business in Chelsea so was always on the look out for new stock. While he went off in search of bric-a-brac I wandered around on my own until I came upon a stall selling candles, aromatic oils, joss sticks and the little coloured patches we used to stick on jeans and denim jackets in those post-hippy days, often with messages of love and peace embroidered on them. One that attracted my attention bore the legend “Come share my Star”.

“Why don’t you buy that for your extraterrestrial?”

Edward was standing behind me. I did ask the price but thought it too much to pay for a scrap of machine-embroidered denim so left it where it was. Three hours later I was back in the Avenue de Messidor.

Over the days that followed there came no news of Hubert. Neither did I contact him nor mention him to friends we had in common. The person they knew was in any case not the one I had recently discovered. Later that week there came a reminder of what had happened between us when I went with the ambassador’s wife, Marie Palliser, with whom I got on well, to the opening of an art exhibition close to where I lived, her son being among those who had paintings on display. Sitting on the floor at one end of the room were a hippy couple, both in crushed velvet and wearing more scarves and trinkets than even Countess Barcynska would have thought tasteful. They got up when they saw us and made their way over.

“Hi, you’re extra-terrestrial,” said the boy, bringing his face close to mine, at once reminding me how sickly-sweet the combination of patchouli and stale marijuana can be.

Gently, half apologetically, I assured him I was not. He was deathly pale, extremely pretty and stoned out of his mind.

“Well, if you’re not, you’ve been in contact with someone who is,” his girl friend assured me.

“Recently,” added the boy.

And with that they meandered back to the patch of floor they’d made their own for the evening.

A week later I saw Hubert again. Not only was the meeting unexpected but unwelcome to us both. Mine was the feeling one might have on coming across somebody, this time socially, with whom one had disastrous sex the night before. Neither wants to be reminded of it, certainly not in the company of others. Although the intimacy between Hubert and me was not sexual, it was something both of us preferred to forget, for instead of

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forging a bond between us, as shared secrets normally do, ours had driven us apart, leaving me embarrassed to be in his presence, the more so for knowing his own embarrassment was greater even than mine.

We were among seven people invited to supper by a woman named Barbara Jeffreys. Whether Hubert and I greeted each other when I arrived, I no longer remember. We may have exchanged nods. In any case we ended up sitting at different ends of the table so that suited us well. At some point during the meal our hostess asked me if I'd enjoyed my recent trip home.

"And did you enjoy our music?" demanded Hubert before I could reply.

Instead of answering I mumbled about having almost brought him something back from London.

"I know" he said wistfully "and you didn't want to share my star."

They were the last words he ever said to me. I never saw him again. Twelve months ago I discovered that in the nineteen-eighties, long after I'd left Brussels, he had died of Aids.

From what I have been told, his death must have occurred around the time I was sent on a business trip to Amsterdam, one that happened to coincide with the appearance of my book in Dutch. Too impatient to wait for the complimentary copies publishers normally send to their authors, I had gone into a bookshop near the Leidseplein and bought one for myself. I was glancing through it in the bar of the American Hotel when a man sitting nearby – we were the only people in there at that hour of the afternoon – asked me in English if I was interested in magic. As he spoke he nodded towards the book, its cover bearing the Dutch title *Sleutel tot Magie* or "Key to Magic".

"Sort of" I replied warily before pride got the better of me and I confessed to being the author. "It's just come out over here."

"Then, we must have a Bols to celebrate – pick a colour, any colour you like"

"Now it's you that sounds like the magician!"

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He laughed and moved over to the stool next to mine. From the bottles coquettishly lined up behind the bar, I chose a lurid crimson one, blood-orange, I think it was, while my companion chose something green, possibly kiwi fruit or lime.

"I'm afraid magic's not something I've tried," he continued after emptying his glass in one gulp, "Mind you, I know it's not quite the same but I did come across an extra-terrestrial once. In Brussels of all places."

"Hubert Wattiaux."

It was not a question and he never took it to be one.

"I thought you'd met him. As a matter of fact I knew as soon as you walked in. All that stuff about the book, well, that was to start a conversation. I'm sorry – here, let me make amends. Another Bols! Let's see, shall we try the blue caraçao? It matches his eyes, don't you think?"

Here was the South American painter Hubert had mentioned. He had not gone back home after all.

"Have they started making you doubt what happened? It's what they usually try. First you're one hundred percent certain, then they get you to doubt this or detail. Their hope is you'll persuade yourself you made the whole thing up. It didn't work in my case."

"Nor mine."

"Here" he went to fetch an aguayo bag from under the chair he'd recently vacated and pulled out a postcard. "That's what it's like where he comes from. I was high when I did it but it's what I saw. He cried when I showed it him. You can keep it."

With that he paid the barman, stood up and shook my hand.

"Don't talk about it. You never know. At the very least people will think you've gone crazy."

Before leaving, he put his hand on my shoulder and said very softly, "Be-

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sides, perhaps we're from the same place, only you and I don't remember. There must be a reason why we spotted something wasn't right."

And why we met here today, here in the centre of Amsterdam, I might have added. But by then he was gone. I looked down at the postcard in my hand. No, it didn't remind me of anything.

16

In October 1914 my grandfather sailed to New York on the Lusitania, though this was not his first Atlantic crossing. That happened seven years earlier on the maiden voyage of her sister ship, the Mauretania. Family legend has it that only a plate of dodgy shellfish, consumed on the eve of his departure for Southampton, kept him off the Titanic when she set off from there on 14 April 1912. What is indisputable is that by then he was running a small but successful construction company, chiefly employing men from Llandudno, which, even if it had not “built Jersey City”, as my mother liked to claim, could still account for a number of the new buildings then going up along the west bank of the Hudson.

Also on board that October, three months into the war and barely six before the Lusitania was sunk off the Irish coast by a single German U boat, had been Aleister Crowley. He would spend the next five years in America and shortly before his return to England in 1919, publish the blue-covered book that Mr. James had shown me and from which he read aloud the Hymn to Pan. (The book was in fact a volume of Crowley’s anthology, *The Equinox*.) In it, unnoticed by me at the time, were two portraits the Great Beast had painted, one of himself as the sage Kwaw, probably Kwaw Ly Ya, a Chinese poet he sometimes pretended to be, and another of an entity called Lam, the latter bearing a strong resemblance to those extra-terrestrials, notably ET himself, whose embryo-like features are now familiar to us all. In the book Lam is depicted without ears so it is ironic (and probably not accidental) that his likeness appears immediately before a reprint of Mme. Blavatsky’s meditative essay, *The Voice of the Silence*.

Whether Crowley regarded Lam as an extra-terrestrial is impossible to say. In the course of his life, he did apply the term to non-human beings

supposedly exempt from the laws of time and space, but it is unclear if these were anything other than entities proper to the Inner Planes. Much of the training given me by Mr. James had been a preparation for such encounters, aimed at helping me cope with their impact and, equally useful, to distinguish between those worth getting to know and those best given the cold-shoulder. Never, until I met Hubert, did it cross my mind that some might be extra-terrestrials.

It is in any case arguable – and the argument was made earlier – that what we call “entities”, irrespective of their source, are in reality currents of energy, endowed by us with form or identity only because we’re constitutionally ill equipped to perceive them for what they really are, facets of that Universal Will which, the Thelemites maintain, is operative in us and in everything else. And the “everything else” refers here to the *totality* of existence, regardless of whether it lies in time and space or subsists outside both, in the latter case not only on the Inner Planes but also in that part of the universe, ninety-percent of it no less, composed of Dark Matter. (Actually, the term scientists prefer is non-baryonic matter, as opposed to the baryonic matter that makes up, say, the chair on which I’m sitting – and makes up me as well, come to that.) The term Dark Matter is appropriate for this is matter that cannot be seen, in part because there’s no light by which to see it: so jam-packed with it are the Black Holes at the core of every galaxy that it collapsed long ago under its own prodigious gravity, squeezing out the last faint glimmer of light. What goes on there is anybody’s guess. It has been suggested that were it possible to enter such a Black Hole we would emerge in another universe, perhaps one of multiple versions of our own, places where choices not exercised here have been realised, thereby precipitating a different chain of events and, in consequence, a different version of history.

Did Hubert emerge from such a reality? Or the two old ladies who made my bedtimes so miserable? Or Mrs. Duncan’s phantoms? Mrs. Cooke’s White Eagle? Aleister Crowley’s Higher Guardian Angel, not to mention my own? I wish I knew.

Someone who did claim to know the answer, at least so far as I can make out – an admirer described his work as “an overwhelming and hallucinatory bouillon of arcane fact, mystic speculation and apparent outright fantasy” – is Kenneth Grant who, as previously noted, became in 1955 the self-pro-

claimed Head of the OTO or at least its “Typhonian” variant . (He died in January 2011.) For Grant, who received from Crowley the original portrait in 1947, Lam is a praetor human being whose name, the Tibetan word for “pathway”, points to his role as channel for “trans-platonic” energies. Such was Grant’s high regard for him that he even set up a Cult of Lam within the parent organisation, its members urged to meditate on the egg shaped head depicted in the picture. Apparently this can serve “as an astral vehicle for travelling to Lam’s domain, or for exploring extra-terrestrial spaces in which OTO Tantric Time-Travellers are exploring the Tunnels of Set in intra-cosmic and chthothian capsules.” (The rest of us make do with budget airlines.)

Another thing extra-terrestrials are good at, according to these intrepid Time-Travellers, is “seeding” life in various parts of the cosmos, something they once did on Earth. In fact they may still be at it, so far as I understand what Mr. Grant (alias Aossic Aiwass 718°) is saying. Being squeamish, I never attempted to discover how the seeding process works, in part because the Typhonians, like Crowley, betray an unwholesome interest in the magical potential of bodily fluids. Called by the tantric name *kala*, those secreted by women are held to vary subtly, albeit importantly from a magical point of view, throughout the twenty-eight day lunar (or menstrual) cycle, while the Sun has a similar influence on their male complement.

A similar fascination pervades the liturgical pretensions of the OTO. (Like Leadbeater and the Liberal Catholic Church, they enjoy nothing more than a bit of religious pomp and circumstance.) Thus for his Gnostic Mass Crowley recommends a Host containing blood and semen, ingredients still in favour, judging by a recommendation to the Faithful at the height of the Aids epidemic that communion wafers be baked at an oven setting of 160° Fahrenheit to avoid any risk of infection. Familiarly known as Cakes of Light, a term familiar also to witches, communicants may be offered a choice of either “blanks”, often containing egg white and red wine, or the real thing. Not surprisingly, one’s religious and magical commitment is measured by which of the two one swallows. Or, rather, does *not* swallow, at least not outright, for participants are warned that the delicate protein fabric enveloping the “holy essence” is vulnerable to stomach acids. To enable it to “integrate into the mind-body symbiosis” with its virtues unimpaired, the wafer must be allowed to dissolve between tongue and palate instead.

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What people are willing to revere or ingest is their business. (Indeed, a case can be made out for investing bodily substances with sacramental meaning, though I'm not disposed to attempt it.) Regrettable, however, is the lack of originality shown by these latter day Templars. Opting to parody the Christian Eucharist, while strenuously denying any link to Christianity, is not the only example of how the rites and practices of the Church were plagiarised by Crowley. The hierarchy of the Gnostic Catholic Church, ecclesiastical arm of the OTO, is for instance composed of Patriarchs, Archbishops, Bishops, Priests or Priestesses and Deacons, while the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, Marriage, and Anointing of the Sick are offered on their website, much as one might expect on the notice board of any parish church. By way of musical accompaniment the works of Holst, Mahler and Strauss – Richard, presumably, not the waltz king, Johann – are in favour, evidence at least and at last of some originality.

Incidentally, among the saints (yes, they have those as well) venerated by the Gnostic Catholic Church are Priapus, Orpheus, Osiris, Odysseus, Pan, Merlin and King Arthur, the Roman poets Catullus and Virgil (over whose tomb St. Paul is said to have wept, foreseeing perhaps what the OTO had in store for him) and such latter-day notables as William Blake, Gauguin, Goethe, Wagner, Nietzsche, and that unfashionable poet, Swinburne. The dependable Eliphas Lévi makes it onto the list, as does Apollonius of Tyana whose wan phantom scared the magus witless in 1854. François Rabelais, too, earns a mention, presumably as inventor of the maxim “Do as Thou Wilt”, together with those pioneering figures we met earlier: Carl Kellner, Theodor Reuss, Karl Germer and Grady McMurty. Of this company only Aleister Crowley has the honour of appearing twice, first as To Mega Therion (The Great Beast) and, later, as himself but with “Sir” before his name. There are no extra-terrestrials among them, at least none to my knowledge, and, last time I looked, no women either.

But let's go back to those trans-galactic beings who, by “seeding” our planet in the remote past are the true progenitors of the human race. As noted earlier, Madame Blavatsky and others contend that our primitive ancestors acquired a physical body only after a process involving, as the Gnostics taught, a descent from spirit into matter. Referring to our corporality as “a fixed ultimate of debasement”, Blavatsky promised, on the basis of the texts she purportedly studied in Tibet, that humanity would escape from its abject state by progressing through a succession of root races, each

an improvement on the one that went before. By making it plain that root races contained sub-races and that humanity as a whole would move forward, not this or that section of it, she managed – just – to avoid the charge of favouring one particular race. Not all who followed were as scrupulous.

Certainly not within the occult groups that flourished in Germany and Austria at the turn of the last century. For them, the Aryan root race was not only superior but also fundamentally different, remnant of an advanced civilisation that journeyed here from outer space, though from where in outer space was disputed. One of the most influential groups, the Tempelhof Society, founded in the eighteen-eighties, plumped for Alderaban, a star in the constellation of Orion and now a favourite in works of science-fiction, claiming to have gleaned this information from “ancient Sumerian” texts, the existence of which you and I must take on trust, though I myself feel disinclined to do so.

Members of the society also believed that their extra-terrestrial origin endowed the earliest Aryans with supernatural powers, reminiscent of the “vril” described by Bulwer Lytton in his novel *The Coming Race*. Source of these was the Black Sun, a term still popular among occultists, many of whom identify it with Sirius or, more precisely, the star’s invisible satellite, known to astronomers as Sirius B. It is a concept not dissimilar to the Dark Sun which Mr. James had claimed, again with no supporting evidence, was a core belief of the Druids. Like them, occultists in Austria and Germany regarded the visible sun as the material expression of a spiritual counterpart, sometimes referred to as the anti-Sun, with solar light the shadow of a superior radiance, invisible to us and conceivable only in representational terms. One such symbol was the *Sonnenrad* or solar wheel, a central circle from which several rays emerge, usually four, which are depicted as crooked or else bent at right angles, possibly to convey the notion that ordinary sunlight provides only an indirect experience of them, one that is, as it were, refracted. Plausible, too, is the suggestion that the crookedness imitates natural light, which not only appears to bend as it travels through the curvature of space but may actually bend when it strikes a sufficiently large object like the Sun. In English the symbol is known by the Sanskrit word “swastika” (lit. “Of good fortune”).

Which leads us, I fear, to Adolf Hitler and the Nazis. Not that it’s ever easy to get away from them nowadays, such is their unwholesome grip on the

popular imagination. In the nineteen-thirties, Carl Gustav Jung, tirelessly searching for archetypes and manifestations of the Collective Unconscious, discerned both at work in the German dictator, going so far as to describe him as a “spiritual vessel, a semi-divinity, even better a myth”. What he was suggesting is that Hitler had become attuned to, even possessed by, the Collective Unconscious of his race, enabling him in some mysterious way to draw on metaphysical forces outside himself. It is unclear if the intention was to divinise or demonise the Führer but Jung was forced later to deny any implied sympathy with the man and the political movement he led. Whatever his intention, the observation has always struck me as way over the top. Hitler was astute, manipulative and ruthless in the pursuit of his personal and political ambitions. He had no need of outside help, certainly not from the Collective Unconscious.

Such was already my opinion when, two years after my return from Brussels, I again turned my back on London, this time to begin a new career in Munich, formerly *Hauptstadt der Bewegung* or Capital of the [National Socialist] Movement. Like Nuremberg, scene of the annual Party rallies, the city had made a commendable effort to eradicate its brown shirted past, but signs of it defiantly remained. This first came to my attention when walking past the Feldherrenhalle in the town centre, site of a large bronze plaque erected by the Nazis to commemorate those killed nearby in the failed putsch of 1923. (Passers by were required to salute it, with SS guards on duty to make sure they did.) With the war over, down came the plaque. Forgotten, however, were the holes where heavy bolts had formerly secured it to the wall, still there and plain for all to see. Similar evidence could be spotted on other buildings, among them the old Party headquarters in Königsplatz where a giant swastika topped by an eagle once adorned its neoclassical façade. In the end I took to watching out for such clues, treating it as a challenge, even a game, and so rendering the post-war sanitization not merely ineffective but counter-productive as well. The example I came to cherish most, perhaps because I walked past it on my way to work every day, were two giant stone eagles squatting on the roof of the conference hall of the Deutsches Museum. Deprived of the swastikas on which they were intended to perch, they looked just like two broody hens.

The flat Edward and I moved into was in a new block close to the centre of town, even closer to the Bürgerbräukeller where on 8 November 1939 a bomb exploded fifteen minutes after Hitler quit the building earlier than

scheduled. This would not be the only time an attempt on his life was foiled by a last-minute change of plan, encouraging post-war commentators to suggest he possessed a sixth sense that alerted him to danger. He himself put it down to Providence.

Adjoining our flat was a larger one owned by an elderly couple, clearly not short of money, whose main home lay over the border in Austria, not far from Braunau am Inn, the one-time Führer's birthplace. ("This apartment is useful," the wife told me on our first meeting, "because it gives us somewhere to change for the Opera.") Always formal but never unfriendly, they turned out to be decent enough neighbours and we all got on well. So well that one evening, we invited them to dinner, together with two other couples we knew, each boasting one partner whose professional status, in this case a judge and a cardiologist, might be expected to meet with next door's approval. In addition we brought out the best dinner service and our Georg Jenssen silver, as well as buying food and wine at reckless expense from Käfer, the most exclusive grocery shop, though it would resent being called that, in the whole of Munich.

Two weeks later came a return invitation. On the appointed day, Edward rang me at work to report that for a good hour that morning, two men in overalls had been carrying boxes into the flat next door from a van parked outside in the street. As the vehicle bore Austrian number plates, he suspected it had come from their other home laden with china and silver carefully chosen to outrank our own. He was right. Everything that evening was designed to impress, not just the Meissen tableware but the eight other guests, double our four, the bowls of white peonies and cream-coloured roses, the unseen help in the kitchen and the two girls hired to serve our food. Admittedly the enlarged company did not boast a judge or a heart specialist but the woman next to me was treated with such deference that I guessed she more than made up for it. Only half way through the meal did I discover she'd been a well-known film star in the nineteen-thirties and 'forties, an actress who suffered death by drowning in so many films that she earned the popular nickname *Reichswasserleiche* or State Water Corpse. For much of the meal she chatted to me not about films but about photography, revealing to my surprise that she knew Signor Resta's two portraits of Mme. Blavatsky – "done on glass plates," she expertly informed me.

By the time pudding arrived and the umpteenth bottle of wine was un-

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corked, the atmosphere had grown more relaxed. Our neighbours were now pressing us to call them by their first names, the alliterative Hans and Hedda, but neglecting to specify if this entailed a switch to the familiar “Du” form of address rather than the more formal “Sie”. (To be safe and because Edward had yet to master “Du” forms of the verb, we stuck to “Sie”.) Keen to put our new friendship on the soundest of footings, our host assured us that as a Luftwaffe pilot during the war he had never dropped a single bomb on England, though he did allow himself, as he put it, to voice regret that we British had not joined forces with Germany in its fight against the Soviets. He also disclosed, without sounding immodest, that he was the holder of not one but two Knight’s Crosses, the first earned after he was shot down over the Crimea. He had parachuted into a lake but broken his nose in the process.

“In fact I broke it twice” he informed us, “that was only the first time.”

“And the second?” asked Edward.

This happened in a bombed out Hamburg just after the war. One day, in front of what remained of the railway station, he had spotted a young German woman, by implication blonde and blue-eyed, sitting on the lap of an American soldier, a *black* American soldier. Was it for this, he asked himself, that he’d earned his two Knight’s Crosses? On deciding it was not, he pulled the girl away and took a swipe at the soldier.

“But he hit back,” he confessed, “and his arm was longer than mine. That’s how my nose got smashed the second time.”

From then on nothing could stem the tide of reminiscence that engulfed us, with the women around the table keen to describe the various hardships they’d endured as the war drew to its close. One had made her way on foot all the way from Breslau, now in Poland, to Cologne to escape the advancing Russians, while another, after two happy years spent in Prague – home of Germany’s oldest University, our host interjected for our benefit – found herself in Dresden on the very night British and American bombs turned the city into an inferno. Amidst it all Edward suddenly realised that the woman next to him had said nothing. Taking it to mean, as he later explained, that she might have something less harrowing to report, he asked politely, “And where were you at the end of the war?”

“In the Führer Bunker” she replied tartly, “I was one of the typists.”

The chance to question her further never came for our host picked that moment to slam bottles of liqueur down on the table, exhorting us all to help ourselves. With his next breath and while assured of everyone’s attention, he informed the company that I was not only, in his words, a high-ranking Civil Servant – the word *Beamter* never fails to impress the Germans – but also author of, again in his words, a “best-selling” book. There were some polite murmurs, nothing more, and my neighbour, the former actress, asked if the book were a novel.

“It’s about the supernatural,” replied Hans on my behalf, “Magic, that sort of thing.” With that he implored her to have a glass of schnapps, thus leaving everyone free to continue reminiscing. I was not unhappy to be overlooked.

But not overlooked completely. An hour later as people dispersed, I was shaking hands with a tall, white-haired man who had arrived unaccompanied but been paired with the once-famous film star – clearly old friends as both used “Du” to each other – when he made a point of handing me his card. Saying he, too, was interested in esoteric matters, he assured me it would give him enormous pleasure, were I to call on him one afternoon, as it would his wife who saw very few people, being housebound, but, he joked, was mentally more alert than he was. I had time to notice a “von” in front of his name before putting the card in my pocket.

I took up the invitation. Over the months that followed our acquaintance grew into one I came to value highly, even if it never quite possessed the warmth that friendships are made of. At our third or fourth meeting when, as became the custom, I arrived at his home one Saturday afternoon, my host suggested we thenceforth call each other by our first names, his being Karl-Peter. This time, however, I was left in no doubt that the “Sie” would be rigorously maintained. It was also a rule that at four o’clock we would finish our talk and join his wife in a room overlooking the garden where an elderly housekeeper turned up minutes later with marble cake, never any other sort, and a pot of strong coffee. “We know you normally drink tea in your country” Karl-Peter remarked on my first visit, “but that’s wrong. Coffee alone is suitable with cake” He made it sound as if the British got

much else wrong besides.

My value to Karl-Peter was that I could listen, unlike poor, ear-less Lam, while he did the talking. By this I don't mean I sat completely silent through the many hours we spent together. On the contrary he welcomed my views, even made a point of soliciting them, but the topics discussed were normally of his choosing. I used to wonder if by talking to me, what he was trying to do was belatedly impose order on information he'd acquired over a lifetime, all of it stored inside his head but in a jumbled, haphazard sort of way. Sometimes he would pause in mid-sentence and, as if thinking aloud, say to himself "No, that's Steiner's view, it doesn't belong here" or "Ah, that reminds me, what was it von Rosenroth said about the Path of Aleph" – a subject not being discussed at the time – "in his *Kabbalah Denudata*?" He admitted once that the only two people he'd ever been able to talk to before we met at the dinner party, were a paranormal investigator named Hans Bender, not an occultist as such, and a man called Rudolf Mund who, like himself, was a former member of the SS. The *Waffen* SS, he added defensively.

From a magazine picked up one lunch hour at a specialist bookshop in Buttermilchstrasse, five minutes walk from the office, I discovered that the same Rudolf Mund was head (the official designation was "Prior") of an organisation called the Order of the New Temple or Ordo Novi Templi. (As the OTO realised, a bit of Latin always adds a touch of class, though in this case Mrs. Winkler would have put the "Novi" after the noun.) Based in Austria, it was founded on Christmas Day, 1907 by Jorg Lanz von Liebenfels, a former Cistercian monk and, like Mr. Grant, a staunch a believer in trans-galactic beings, for whom he invented the name Theozoa. (His magnum opus, originally published in 1905 and reissued in 2002, bears the daunting title *Theozoology or the Science of Sodomitic-Hominids and the Divine-Electron*.) According to von Liebenfels, the earliest human beings reproduced themselves by means of "electricity", a process not dissimilar to what Mme. Blavatsky claimed was prevalent in pre-Lemurian days. Over time, however, people began to fancy something more exciting and were soon having it off with the more humanoid varieties of primate. This offence, said to be recorded in Genesis 6.4 ("the sons of God came in to the daughters of men and they bore children to them"), led not only to the loss of those paranormal gifts bestowed on them by the Theozoa but also to the way human beings look like today, some demonstrably closer to their sim-

ian ancestors than others. Farthest removed are the Aryans, notably those with blond hair and blue eyes, so by selective breeding, argued von Liebenfels, it might still be possible to repair past damage and restore things to what they were before our forebears started consorting with monkeys. At times the author gets very worked up, possibly in more ways than one, at the thought of Aryan women being ravished by their racial inferiors – dark-skinned, over-sexed and disgracefully over-endowed. The only cure, he thunders, is wholesale castration.

Such views found expression also in a magazine called *Ostaria*, possibly the first publication to feature on its cover the right-handed swastika, emblem of the solar Vishnu. It has been often suggested that the youthful Hitler came across it while living in Vienna, largely because its exaltation of Aryan virtues and contempt for Jews were echoed later by him. Such ideas, however, were widespread at the time and by no means confined to esoteric circles, even if Hitler did adopt the swastika as the Party emblem and personally supervise its design. As Albert Speer and others have affirmed, the truth is that Hitler displayed no sympathy whatever with occultism. Discussing astrology over dinner on 19 July 1942, he denounced it as a swindle and, perhaps with Edward Lyndoe and others in mind, added “in which the Anglo-Saxons in particular have enormous faith.”

The same cannot be said of Henrich Himmler, though Karl-Peter cautioned that it would be wrong to exaggerate his interest. Typical of it were his efforts to mythologise the SS, part of which involved creating a modern version of Camelot at the 17th Century castle of Wewelsburg, complete with Round Table and twelve “Arthurian” Knights, the latter represented by the twelve departmental heads of the organisation. (Twelve happens also to be a sacred number in the *Edda*.) Himmler reportedly saw himself as a reincarnation of the 10th Century Saxon king, Heinrich I, known also as Henry the Fowler, while his masseur, Felix Kersten, not the most reliable of sources, claims the Reichsführer carried a copy of the *Bhagavad-Gita* with him wherever he went. Certainly his interest in the cultural and anthropological history of the Aryans led him to believe that Nordic people were descended from an ancient civilisation somewhere in the Himalayas whose leadership qualities, like their blond hair and pale skins (in Sanskrit: *arya-varna*), set them apart from the darker skinned natives they governed. The hope of finding traces of them led him to sponsor or subsidise expeditions to this remote corner of the world, just as researchers from a special

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department of the SS, the Ahnenerbe or Institute for Ancestral Heritage, scoured Europe for traces of a Germanic past that would support the ideological assumptions of their boss.

Himmler's attention had been drawn to the mystical significance of Wewelsburg by the one occultist known to enjoy his full confidence. That this confidence was misplaced became apparent only later. By then, however, so firmly established was the idea of an SS citadel, allegorical centre of the world, that building work, undertaken by inmates from a concentration camp nearby, continued right up until 1943 when the worsening war situation led to the suspension of all non-essential construction activity throughout the Reich. In March 1945, two days before the Americans arrived, the site was blown up but a shortage of explosives meant that much of it stayed intact. It later became a youth hostel.

According to Karl-Peter the occultist who drew Himmler's attention to Wewelsburg was Karl Maria Wiligut, then already in his sixties and with connections to the Order Novi Templi.

"I saw him only once" he told me, "but wasn't impressed. He looked like a character in *Jüd Süß*. That," he went on to elaborate, "was a film they brought out during the war. Do you remember the woman next to you at dinner the night we met each other? She was in it. As a matter of fact her husband produced it. That got him into trouble later on."

He was right not to be impressed by Wiligut. An unbalanced character at the best of times, he spent the years from 1924 to 1927 in an asylum near Salzburg, diagnosed schizophrenic after his wife reported his abusive behaviour to the police. In 1932 he left his family and moved to Munich where his ideas, especially those on the religious beliefs of early Germanic tribes appealed so much to Himmler that he made him a member of the SS. Four years later he joined the Reichsführer's personal staff and moved with him to Berlin, though not before he consolidated his position by denouncing many of his rivals as dangerous subversives. Much of the persecution endured by individual occultists during this period is attributable to him.

By then the new rulers of Germany had begun to show their hostility towards occultism. Groups such as the Theosophical Society and Steiner's Anthroposophical Society were automatically suspect because they evaded

the control of the state and, like many religious denominations, had an international membership. So, of course, did the Freemasons, though in their case the element of secrecy made them an even greater threat to the totalitarian ambitions of the regime. The result was that measures introduced in 1935 to dissolve Masonic lodges throughout Germany were extended to esoteric organisations as well. Only the Waldorf Schools, run in accordance with Steiner's educational theories, managed to survive, but even they began to close voluntarily over the next two years, the exception being the school in Dresden, which lasted until 1941 before being shut down by the Gestapo. One group that managed to outlive the rest was the Ordo Novi Templi but in 1942 it, too, was compelled to disband.

By contrast Steiner's recommendations concerning medicine and, more especially, agriculture were tolerated, even endorsed, by the regime. Vegetables served at the Führer's table, for example, were cultivated along biodynamic lines, with times for planting and harvesting determined by the phases of the moon, as indeed were the herbs commercially grown on land attached to Dachau concentration camp, reportedly under the supervision of a former head gardener at Weleda, the large anthroposophical concern at Schwäbisch-Gmünd. This was despite the quasi-magical character of the methods involved, requiring not only compliance with the lunar calendar but use of special fertilisers, numbered 500 to 508 and each based on a particular plant, two of them, by way of example, yarrow and oak bark. (The former is stuffed into the bladder of a red deer and after six months' exposure to the summer sun, buried in the ground for a further half year before being ready for use, while the oak mixture goes inside the skull of any farm animal prior to undergoing a similar procedure.) Quasi-magical or not, these methods are today widely practised all over the world. In Germany the University of Kassel even has a Department of Biodynamic Agriculture.

Here, then, is one area Brigadier Wiligut did not succeed in discrediting, possibly because it enjoyed the support of top-ranking Party members like Alfred Rosenberg author of the notoriously unreadable *Myth of the Twentieth Century*, and Walther Darré, Minister Of Food and Agriculture until 1942. Another strong advocate of biodynamic agriculture was Rudolf Hess, Deputy Leader of the Party, though his endorsement became a liability after Hitler publicly questioned his sanity following his flight to Scotland in 1941. To blame for that initiative, according to the Propa-

ganda Minister, Josef Goebbels, were not Aleister Crowley and the rites conducted under the auspices of MI5 in Ashdown Forest, but “horoscopes” and “half-baked occultism”, reason enough for a new wave of arrests, even though astrologers and fortune-tellers had been banned from plying their trade since 1938. That some stayed in business nevertheless is shown by the horoscope Goebbels himself commissioned early in 1945, which predicted a turn for the better in Hitler’s fortunes by the middle of March. When news reached him that President Roosevelt had died, he at once telephoned the bunker – where Edward’s neighbour at dinner was at the time working – and passed on to Hitler the glad tidings “written”, as he put in, “in the stars.” Not for the first time the stars got it wrong.

By then Wiligut was no longer in Heinrich Himmler’s service. Shortly after Austria became part of the Greater German Reich in 1938, rumours about his past reached SS headquarters in Berlin, prompting one of its most senior officials to call on Frau Wiligut at her home in Salzburg where she lost no time in telling him of her husband’s bad behaviour and previous bouts of madness. As a result the man whose clairvoyance had revealed to his gullible patron the religious beliefs of the first Teutonic tribes, unknown until then, encouraging him to make Wewelsburg Castle the centre of a new Arysanised world, was hastily and ignominiously “retired”.

“I believe he survived the war,” said Karl-Peter, “but not for long.”

Over the weeks that followed, his conversation returned time and time again to these topics, none of them of more than historical interest for me and then only of the slightest. Whereas I had not minded when Mr. James went on about the Druids, even if there was scant evidence for much of what he said, I found Karl-Peter’s talk about the theories of von Liebenfels and people like him not only devoid of interest but also unappealing, especially the stuff about relations between Aryans and monkeys. Now, after two or three afternoons spent listening to him, I started to realise that far from being, as I’d earlier thought, an outdated product of their time, such notions were still very much alive. Worse, I began to think Karl-Peter might be sympathetic to them.

My suspicions were confirmed when one day he chided me over a flippant remark I made about the asexual characteristics of our ancestors and the electrical charges enabling them to breed. The offence was trivial but must

have bothered him because a few minutes later he stopped in the middle of talk about a materialisation medium then being written about in the Munich papers, a Countess no less, to assure me there were sound reasons for believing that the first human beings did indeed propagate by supra-sensible means, following their arrival from Santur, another name for the Black Sun. Once here, he continued, they settled in a region around the North Pole, known to Greek cartographers as Hyperborea (“beyond the north wind”), with Thule, its capital city, a detail Herodotus (died 425BC) would claim to have heard about in Egypt. All of which left me still unpersuaded when four o’clock came around and with it the usual marble cake and coffee. A propagandist of these notions, I would discover later, was a Chilean diplomat, author, and acquaintance of Karl-Peter’s named Miguel Serrano who died in 2009 at the age of eighty-three. Sympathetic to the Gnostic view that the visible world is the creation of the Demiurge, an inferior deity out to subvert God’s plan for humanity, Serrano argued that the Hyperboreans, children of the “true” God rather than the upstart Demiurge, committed the ultimate blasphemy, one with metaphysical and genetic implications, when they illicitly consorted with ape-like Neanderthals, dismissed as “an abomination and manifest creation of the Demiurge”. The consequences were evident in the appearance and intellectual shortcomings of the non-white races. Only if today’s Aryans were to breed exclusively among themselves would their blood be restored over several generations to its original perfection.

Ensuring that this came about, Karl-Peter suggested, diffidently to start with but then with unsettling conviction, had been the mission of Adolf Hitler. Drawing on concepts proper to Hinduism, he repeated Serrano’s claim that the former Head of State had been an avatar, a Sanskrit term for the incarnation of a deity, usually Vishnu, whose earthly task was to bring an end to the present Dark Age or Kali Yuga and effect a return to that pre-lapsarian Golden Age (Satya/Krita Yuga) when Hyperboreans ruled the ethnic roost. It came as no surprise to me when I learned too that Serrano had been on amicable terms with Jung, whose pre-war views on Hitler, as we have seen, came perilously close to his own. Others he claimed to know included the Dalai Lama, Nehru and Indira Gandhi, all of whom he probably met during a posting to New Delhi in the nineteen-fifties, a period when, according to him, he was taught Tantrism, magic and esoteric science by Brahmanic sages at a secret location in the Himalayas. (Madame Blavatsky beat him to it by a good eighty years, though the Tantric prac-

tices would not have been to her taste.)

Also among his friends he counted George Lincoln Rockwell, founder in 1960 of the American Nazi Party but killed seven years later by a disaffected party member. Today Rockwell's ashes are kept at the group's headquarters in – where else? – New Berlin, Wisconsin, next to those of a woman named Savriti Devi, whose writings not only influenced Serrano but are still popular among Nazi sympathisers, possibly more so than his own as they are marginally less fanciful. It was she that first called Hitler an avatar, having converted to Hinduism, as well as changed her name (from Maximiani Portoz) during a visit to India shortly before the war. She had gone there in search of primitive Aryan culture.

One might have expected that for her and Serrano, not to mention Karl-Peter who seemed now to talk of little else during the hours we spent together, Hitler's death put paid to all their hopes and aspirations, but avatars, like old soldiers never die. As a result the late Führer's admirers still cherish the hope that their hero will one day take on human form again and bring his work to fruition. More than once Karl-Peter referred to a passage in the *Baghavad-Gita* where Vishnu promises that "whenever there is decay of righteousness...and there is exaltation of unrighteousness, then shall I come forth...for the defence of the good, for the destruction of evil-doers, for the sake of establishing righteousness. For this purpose I am born from age to age." By then it was obvious that for him "righteousness" meant the triumph of the Aryan cause.

Meanwhile he drew comfort from reports that Hitler did not shoot himself in his Berlin bunker on 30 April 1945 but was secretly conveyed by submarine to a destination under the landmass on which Hyperborea had once invisibly rested. Accessible through an opening at the North Pole, this subterranean refuge is rumoured to have been mentioned by Grand Admiral Dönitz in an address delivered to German sailors towards the end of the war, when Hitler's appointed successor spoke of "an invisible fortification beneath the eternal ice." All of which is consistent with a belief prevalent in German occult circles at the beginning of the last century that the interior of our planet, if not completely hollow, then at least contains subterranean regions that are home to advanced civilisations, as well as to Hidden Masters like Madame Blavatsky's two disputed mentors, Koot Hoomi and Morya.

The North Pole is only one such entrance. Others include the South Pole, the Great Pyramid at Gizeh and Mount Shasta in California, where the last survivors from Lemuria by all accounts settled. Notable, too, are similar places in the Gobi Desert and under the Potala Palace in Lhasa, in this case giving access to Agartha or, in Sanskrit, Aryavarsha ("Land of the Aryans", no less), whose capital is Shamballa, better known as Shangri-la. (It is tempting to add Captain Hewitt's Mount Elgon to the list.) Oh yes, such places are believed also to serve as a launch pad for flying saucers, an invention of the German rocket scientists who worked on the V1 and V2 at Peenemünde. Those of them, that is, not whisked off to America in 1945.

It was nonsense of course, all of it, so much so that for a time I found it easy to dissociate what Karl-Peter rambled on about each week from the grim reality of the historical record. Had I thought about it, I would have seen that while Himmler and his henchmen might have reservations about the Hyperboreans and their "plasmic emanations", their murderous commitment to Aryan superiority was no different from, and could well have been nourished by, the work of von Liebenfels and his sort, just as post-war neo-Nazis are encouraged by the ravings of Serrano and Savriti Devi.

This became all too plain sometime later when our neighbours, pleased that Karl-Peter and I got on well, took us both out to lunch at St. Wolfgang, home of the famous White Horse Inn and not far from their house in Austria. The meal over and already on our way home, we stopped at one of the several villages we passed through, in order to visit a church celebrated for its rococo trimmings, gloriously extravagant even by local standards. With Hedda still inside the building, the three of us were loitering on the steps waiting for her to emerge when, as often happened with Hans after too much wine, the conversation got around to the war. Much about that day I remember vividly, including the *Waller*, a type of catfish, I sampled for the first time and did not much like, yet for the life of me I cannot remember what prompted Karl-Peter, unless it was talk of the war, to offer a comment that would not only blight what until then had been an agreeable outing but also bring our Saturdays together to an abrupt and acrimonious end. Never mind, the context is unimportant.

"The tragedy" declared Karl-Peter soberly, "is that Hitler wasn't given time enough to finish off the Jews. We should have gassed the whole damn lot."

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Suddenly that stuff about the Theozoa wasn't funny any more. Neither did it have any connection to magic, at least not the magic I'd known for most of my life. Worse, the speaker was demonstrably sane so the excuse of madness was denied him. I was in the presence of something else, something different, and into that sunlit afternoon, into a setting prettier than the prettiest picture-postcard, there had crept something evil. No, not "something" evil. This was evil itself. And I'd never knowingly come upon it before.

I did not expect an answer to the letter I sent Karl-Peter a few days later and none came. Neither did Hans or Hedda make any reference to him ever again. In any case we began to see them a lot less often as well.

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For Shopenhauer, philosopher and dog-lover, evil did not exist. In his view the world was the result of blind, instinctive will, nothing more, so concepts like good and evil were irrelevant. True, some forms of conduct might be labelled “good” (because they do not cause harm) and others “evil” (because they do) but for him and those who followed his example – Hegel and Jean-Paul Sartre among them – that distinction is a utilitarian construct, invented to regulate our dealings with one another and promote social harmony.

In direct contrast is the more optimistic view of other philosophers, most notably Spinoza. For them nothing is intrinsically evil, as finite things have necessarily to be good, being all part of the one divine substance. Like Voltaire’s *Candide*, they believe that “all is for the best in the best of possible worlds”

Christian thinking is more nuanced. Its advocates need after all to accommodate the reality of evil, indispensable to a theology of Redemption, within a system, which, like its Creator, cannot be other than good. For them evil becomes the wilful negation or, more properly, refusal of what is good, implying that while evil may derive from good, it is goodness misapplied, routinely perverted by human beings in the exercise of their free – but flawed – will. (Flawed because of a hereditary disposition to evil resulting from Original Sin.) Thus evil is possible because of the freedom vested in us, though the way to forgiveness stays open, while at the end of time the pristine goodness intended by God will once again prevail.

As Mr. James explained to the fourteen-year old me, he too believed that the possibility of good and evil is a precondition of our moral indepen-

dence, though valid only in the conditioned reality we currently occupy. Beyond that, in other words beyond space and time, no such duality exists. There, all is reconciled in the One, and that selfsame One is already implicit in each of its parts.

What this tells us is that the unconditioned reality magicians hope to explore, even on occasion exploit, is both singular and plural, with the whole in its plurality present in each of its parts. From this it follows that every force active on the Inner Planes must of necessity contain something of its opposite, described as its “shadow”, which represents an alternative, albeit contrary, mode of manifestation, one that is latent rather than actively expressed. Were a force deprived of this complementary aspect, it would become deficient or, as magicians call it, unbalanced, the specialist term being *klipotic*. Derived from the Hebrew word *klipah* (קליפה), meaning “shell” or “husk”, *klipotic* forces were held by some Kabbalists to be the impaired remnants of a universe preceding our own, a kind of cosmic debris attached to the Tree of Life like bits of decaying bark. For Rabbi Isaac Luria, you may remember, they were the shards that dropped into the nether world after seven of the original *sefirot* were shattered by the first effusion of divine light. A third opinion, possibly derived from the Neoplatonists, maintained that when the creative impulse emerged from within the Godhead, the divine essence gradually diminished as it passed through each of the *sefirot* in turn, with the *kliipot* a product of the instability prevailing before its final extinction.

All this attempts to explain how the conditioned reality we inhabit, despite being a reflection of God’s perfection, contains not only the evil for which we are responsible but another kind independent of us. To understand it, we need only remember what was said earlier about the two contrasting aspects of every force, with trouble arising when the two are separated. (Years ago a scientist at the Swiss Patent Office in Berne, where Einstein began his career, assured me that this ubiquitous duality is comparable to the square (²) in the celebrated formula $E = mc^2$, though I’ve no idea how.) As long as both aspects stick together, a creative tension prevails, the engine of many of the natural processes going on around us, in particular those of growth and decay. It is these forces the magician endeavours to press into service, opting for the force compatible with his or her intention – with, that is, the desired outcome. Yet he or she will be mindful also of its “opposing” aspect, not least because, denied proper supervision, it

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may assert itself and end up running riot. A competent lion tamer, after all, keeps a watchful eye on *all* his charges, not just the one about to jump through the hoop.

Just as science has set about categorising things in the natural world in order to make them easier to comprehend and thus more manageable, magic has done the same with the intangible forces it deals with. The categories it favours differ from one culture to the next (despite an intriguing similarity that merits investigation) but in the West these frequently bear the names of Greek or Roman deities, hence previous references to Jupiter and Saturn, while the gods of Ancient Egypt, like those of the Celtic pantheon, are popular also. What counts, of course, are the qualities associated with a particular divinity, even if in magical operations it is the gods themselves that are invoked or summoned to turn up in person. And if the names inspire little confidence, particularly in our day and age, we have only to remember that if recourse to them were worthless, none would have survived. Magic is nothing if not practical.

The same is true of the forces each represents. It is the fact that these are real and, under certain conditions, amenable to the will of the magician, that makes the practice of magic worthwhile. (And were it not worthwhile, it would have died out long ago.) It is thus for practical reasons that the magician opts to concentrate not on a particular force but on its representation, accepting the latter at face value and treating it as if it were real. Indeed, it does possess a reality of sorts, in this case fashioned by the imagination of those who have reflected on it intently, at times devoutly, over centuries, if not millennia. As a result when the magician pictures a particular image in his or her mind, it slowly takes on the appearance of another already formed on the Inner Planes, which can then be made objective by an act of will. At this point the force represented by this or that entity is actually present and, provided the right approach is followed, responsive to the bidding of the magician. It is not an undertaking for the faint-hearted or the imprudent, any more than walking into a cage of lions, to revert to our earlier comparison, is a wise choice for someone not trained for the job and, worse still, terrified of cats.

An example of what can go wrong occurred in New York about thirty years ago when a group of young people, more interested in thrills than in magic, set out to perform a ritual based on what they had learned (and

imperfectly understood) from the works of Aleister Crowley and others. The place they chose for their experiment was a building in the city's meat-packing district, in those days, situated on the edge of Greenwich Village, close to West Street and the Hudson River.

Not a particularly salubrious area, especially after dark, its attraction for these tyro magicians was the proximity of animal carcasses and, more importantly, blood, which, as Goethe's Mephistopheles points out, is "a very special fluid". While it is an important part of many cultural and religious traditions, in magic blood is esteemed because, as Dion Fortune reminds us in one of her books, it "contains a large proportion of ectoplasm, or etheric substance. When shed, this ectoplasm rapidly separates from the congealing blood and thus becomes available for materialisations." (This may be what sealed the fate of the "poor wee cat" Crowley ineptly sacrificed in Sicily.) Certainly there is plenty of etheric substance in blood, if Anthroposophical doctors are to be believed, but its relationship to ectoplasm is arguable, though I do remember being told once that Mrs. Duncan's materialisations were particularly impressive "on certain days of the month", as my informant tactfully put it. Witches, too, still sacrifice the occasional chicken, a cockerel if possible and preferably black, but I am assured the bird is humanely dispatched and, more often than not, later popped in the oven and eaten.

Whatever the magical virtues of blood, our friends in New York were determined to use it. Their original plan was to evoke Arartron, planetary spirit of Saturn whose alternative name is Zazel. (After my references to lion tamers I can't resist mentioning that Zazel was also the name of a lady acrobat who in 1877 was fired from a cannon at the Westminster Aquarium, for which she got paid a generous £200 a week over a period of two years. She died in 1937, comfortably-off and still in one piece.) Now, had they stuck with Zazel/Aratron, they might have come to no harm for despite his reputation as something of a spoilsport, Saturn does represent the wisdom and restraint they so evidently lacked. But no, they craved excitement and inspired perhaps by an evocatory rite devised by Crowley, they shifted their attention to Phaleg, alias Bartzabel, ruler of Mars and a somewhat unappealing version of Horus. What they certainly overlooked was that Mars or, rather, the Greek Ares – both are virtually the same – is accompanied everywhere by Discord, Terror and Fear, represented in Greek mythology by Eris, Deimos and Phobos. Also at his side is Enyo,

most aggressive of the three Graiae, whose taste for blood led to her being widely feared throughout the Ancient World.

Our friends knew nothing of this. Or if they did, were past caring. Their only ambition was to evoke the planetary spirit of their choice and have him materialise in person, moulded presumably from the ectoplasm generated by the blood congealing all around them. (Walking past the building several months later – it was situated on Washington Street, now spruced up and gentrified – I remember smelling what I took to be blood and animal fats. Even the pavement felt sticky underfoot.) With a piece of chalk they had drawn a triangle on the floor just outside the magic circle, the so-called Triangle of Art, making it large enough to contain within its boundaries the entity they planned to conjure up. Had they got hold of my book, they would have read on page 95 that “if there is reason to suspect that the force you wish to contact may be boisterous, like that involved in a rite of Mars, for example, or if you persist in pursuing the klipotic aspect of any force, then take the precaution of tracing a *second* triangle in salt inside the first as this will reinforce the barrier.” I went on to add, “the Chinese often formed the second triangle out of scarlet peony petals, believed to keep demons at bay.” Now, peony petals might have been asking too much, but the salt might well have come in handy.

Of course some may feel the entire episode should be taken with a pinch of salt, even perhaps a large cupful. Yes, the procedures do seem quaint to modern eyes but that’s because they derive from those crafted by Mathers for the Golden Dawn way back in the eighteen-eighties, themselves copied from material assembled centuries before. They’re bound to seem dated. And yes, as I’ve said, the terminology of magic, whatever its source, is off-putting to many people today, with its talk of zodiacal signs, pagan deities, planetary spirits, and much else that belongs to a more superstitious past. The trouble is that nobody has so far bothered to invent anything better. Why? Because what we have, still does the job. “Behind the slightly shop-soiled nomenclature” I assured readers of my book, more pretentious at twenty-five than I hope I sound now, “there hides a reality as vital, as fresh and as relevant today as it was at the beginning of time.”

All the more regrettable, therefore, that what took place in Washington Street that night was so ill conceived and incompetently managed. Unsurprisingly, the triangle remained stubbornly empty throughout the hour-

long ritual despite the pleas and imprecations of everyone present, not to mention the proximity of so much freshly slaughtered livestock. Reluctant to accept failure the company now decided that one of its number should step inside the triangle and remain there while the prayers, chants and vociferous entreaties were renewed with increased and, in part, drug-induced fervour. The hope was that even if unwilling to appear in person, Phaleg might still consent to utter a few words, even answer a question or two, through the lips of whoever volunteered to represent him. This turned out to be a young black man, Joe, a former Pentecostalist whose only qualification may have been his experience of speaking in tongues, though the participants must have hoped that Phaleg, if he deigned to speak at all, would consent to do so in English.

And so, they smeared their wrists, throats and foreheads with a salve made from a recipe popularly attributed to Paracelsus after it was discovered during maintenance work next to where he lies buried in Salzburg. (The grave is just beyond the porch at the entrance to the cemetery, on the left, and so inconspicuous that I noticed it only by chance.) In addition to rose petals, valerian root, oil of nutmeg, centaury and cinquefoil, it contains less innocent plants like deadly nightshade and henbane. And for reasons known only to them, the group also began to chant the name of Golab, which, according to one source, refers to the negative manifestation of Geburah, fifth *sefirah* on the Tree of Life and traditionally linked to Mars, though more usually to the planet rather than the deity. Now, Geburah, whether in positive or negative mode, signifies power and might, qualities opposed to those of its neighbour, Chesed, the expression of God's loving kindness and, as such, the active representation of what, though latent in Geburah, is totally missing from Golab. (A simple way of understanding it is to think of Golab as a sefirotic force deprived of its complementary aspect and thus rendered klipotic or unbalanced.) Furthermore just as Chesed, at God's right hand, dispenses the Creator's love to his creation, so Geburah offers a sterner, harsher aspect of the Deity one traditionally associated with the Gamchicoth, mimickers of virtue and a travesty of the qualities they purport to represent. In short, by overlooking the mitigating aspect of Chesed, our foolhardy New Yorkers ensured that Phaleg or, rather, the corresponding force, was at hand to cause mayhem.

Which of course it did. Precisely what happened, as opposed to what the participants believed happened, is difficult to establish. Within the Tri-

angle of Art, according to one account, Joe underwent a gruesome transfiguration, his body erupting in pustules and his facial features reduced to a single aperture, vulval and grotesquely mobile, from which emerged a spate of obscenities, interspersed with bouts of macabre laughter. At the same time unseen hands began moving heavy crates from a corner of the room and tearing them apart like plywood before tossing the pieces in every direction. Amidst it all, dark, fluid, almost fungoid, shapes, intermittently, if only suggestively, human, gathered along the edge of the circle, with a loathing for those huddled inside it, their bravado abruptly extinguished, which was almost palpable. Had our beleaguered magicians stayed put and tried by a collective effort of will to regain some control, things might still have ended, if not well, then at least with no harm done and everyone a great deal wiser. Instead they broke loose of the circle, blindly pushed their way through the shapes crowding in on them and fled in panic from the building. An hour later, totally out of their minds, they were picked up in Sheridan Square and conveyed to St. Vincent's Hospital close by. I am told they were to spend many weeks in psychiatric care before being judged fit enough to resume their normal lives. No such opportunity awaited Joe. His body was found dumped in the back of a container truck parked on the corner of Washington and Charles Street. He had been shot in the mouth and little remained of his face.

Yes, I know it sounds like a low-budget horror film, the sort that never makes it to the big screen but goes straight to DVD. Apart from Joe's death (and shootings were not uncommon in the area at that time), what reportedly took place may have happened only in the mind of the participants, the product of what in effect was a collective hallucination. This does not mean *nothing* happened – for a start the destruction of those wooden crates was real enough – but that those perceiving it, did so in terms compatible with their experience of everyday things. In other words the supra-physical forces they recklessly contacted, the more dangerous for being unbalanced, took on the appearance, but no more, of menacing shapes or of changes in Joe's physical appearance. (On the other hand, the latter, like the bad language, may well have occurred as similar phenomena have been reported in the past by clinical psychologists and by psychical researchers.) The lesson is that experiments of this kind, if attempted at all, should not be undertaken without a proper understanding of the forces evoked.

Reference has been made to the Gamchicoth, the so-called imitators of vir-

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tue linked to Geburah, fifth of the ten *sefirot*. According to some kabbalists it was they that first brought evil into the world by feigning compassion for the klipotic forces trapped beneath Malkuth and releasing them from their confinement. (Although the Tree's perceived base is in Malkuth, this in fact is its summit, its true roots being in Kether at the top of the diagram, the *sefirah* closest to God.) According to one modern interpretation, the Gamchicoth represent the emergence of intelligence in our primitive ancestors and with it the capacity for moral choice, while the *klipot* are a harmful by-product of the wrongdoing that ensued. Fortunately some bad deeds are matched by acts of goodness so both may then combine to create a force that is well-balanced or whole, leaving the remainder still deficient and klipotic, able on occasion coalesce into the kind of objective evil I sensed for the first time outside a village church in Austria. Here we meet the dark side of nature and the dark side of magic. Happily, we have no need to linger in its shadow any longer.

18

Throughout these pages I have spoken of a reality beyond time and space to which we may on occasion have access or which, as I discovered at an early age, may sometimes have access to us. Until one or other happens, we can either dismiss the notion out of hand or keep an open mind. To me the latter seems more sensible.

In the hours I spent in his company, Mr. James would refer frequently to the limitations imposed on us by our experience of space and time, as well as the causality endemic to both. His complaint was that not only do they inhibit us from being aware of anything beyond them but also from perceiving reality for what it is, rather than what we make of it. The result is that we never perceive something directly, what Kant famously called “the thing itself ” (*das Ding an Sich*), but only its representation.

In acknowledging this, we have necessarily to acknowledge also an underlying reality independent of our perception. There, things exist as themselves, not as we perceive them, still less *because* we perceive them. (To think otherwise would leave us like poor Bishop Berkley, the eighteenth-century divine, who argued that things exist only when our senses are aware of them – *esse est percipi* – and cease to exist when they’re not.) Contrary to what we perceive, the constituents of this reality are not differentiated but form part of a single whole, something referred to by Mediaeval philosophers as the *unus mundus* and comparable to that ultimate reality, made up of abstract symmetries, which physicists like Heisenberg discern beyond the sub-atomic particles on the edge of space and time. It is not far removed from Plato’s proposition that the idea or form of something matches our abstract notion of it, but enjoys also an existence outside the three-dimensional world we occupy. In other words the implicit or under-

lying reality whose “shadow”, as Plato would say, we perceive (and then but imperfectly) is neither mind nor matter but something partaking of both.

To describe the nature of this underlying reality Jung coined the word “psychoid”, suggesting that acceptance of it might resolve the dichotomy between “subjective” and “objective” which, according to his collaborator Wolfgang Pauli, confronts those trying to unravel the mysteries of particle physics. Again it supposes that behind the explicit or phenomenal world there exists an implicit reality, reminiscent of the one – indeed *the One* – every mystic strives to experience. All of which suggests an open mind is indeed the more sensible option.

We have established that the aim of every magician is to transcend the phenomenal world and explore the timeless reality that contains it. But whereas the mystically inclined consent to being subsumed in this reality, magicians do the opposite, preferring to assimilate it within their consciousness and thus preserve their integrity as a discrete part of the here and now. In hermetic terms, it is a case of accommodating the macrocosm within the microcosm that is each of us.

It is by no means surprising therefore that Mr. James kept reminding me as a boy that the world around me, while seemingly real, was in fact illusory, its appearance and to some extent its behaviour determined by my perception of both. In Indian philosophy this gives rise to the concept of *maya*, defined by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan as “the principle which accounts for the apparent conditioning of the unconditioned Absolute”. Anyone wishing to understand esoteric thought, certainly anyone hoping to become a magician, must come to terms with this ambiguity. In practice it means having consciously to reconcile perceptible reality with the wider, imperceptible and unconditioned reality to which it belongs. The aim is to feel at home in both.

Of course magicians do more than simply observe whatever marvels they encounter outside time and space. Change in accordance with the will is, after all, their primary aim, not rapt contemplation of the Inner Planes and the multitude of wonders on display. These are in any case but aspects of a single reality which, as my Thelemite companion would say (in between mouthfuls of shortbread), is a manifestation of the supernal will present in each of us, as in everything else. Meanwhile it is the unity prevailing

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among all the parts and implicit in each, that proclaims their interdependence, even down to those humble correspondences Mr. James liked to point to among the plants we came across on our walks, identifiable not by ordinary vision but by “the eye of the soul”.

The use of similar correspondences is the mainstay of magical practice, whether for the purpose of meditation and visualisation or in the choice of colours, sounds, numbers and angelic names that feature in a traditional “working”. Here the aim is to induce a state of heightened awareness, while ensuring that forces most sympathetic to the magician’s intention are successfully engaged. As Eliphas Lévi put it, “Analogy is the last word of science and the first word of faith.....the sole possible mediator between the visible and the invisible, between the finite and the infinite.”

You may remember that the same writer pointed out that ceremonial magic of the type favoured by the Golden Dawn and its imitators, was essentially a technique for creating what he described as “certain habits of the will”. For that reason the dressing up and elaborate ceremonial might be dispensed with once those habits became fixed. Both Mr. James and Simon, neither of them partial to pomp and circumstance, would certainly have agreed, yet been careful also to warn that the “outward vesture” should never be jettisoned completely, no matter how well educated the will. It is a lesson some contemporary magicians, more iconoclastic than most, have belatedly discovered. Even those attracted to “chaos” magic who arrived on the occult scene a few years ago and were disdainful, rightly so, of the stuffiness of established magical orders and keen on a more experimental, even anarchic, approach, are nowadays less scornful of tradition, while still as innovative as ever. Most concede that by not chucking all the water from the bath, they have managed – just – to keep the baby safe.

The fact is that the practical details of magic share a common purpose, whether one adopts the informal approach preferred by Mr. James or something more structured like the rituals of the Golden Dawn, with their abundance of “strange words and numbers, grotesque laws and ritual acts, personifications and mystifications”, not to mention the robes, candles, symbols, incense and, in Aleister Crowley’s case, the sex. (Most witches, by the way, favour something in between.) All is grist to the mill provided it helps strengthen the creative powers of the imagination so that, as Levi proclaimed, “a practice, even though it be superstitious and foolish, may

be efficacious because it is a realisation of the will.” And the will is what promotes the changes magic brings about, whether in the practitioner’s consciousness, as Dion Fortune proposed, thereby giving access to the Inner Planes, or objectively in the world around us, as Crowley suggested. Both are a local manifestation of that universal will which quickens and directs the universe itself.

All very fine in theory but for those with no experience of it the practice raises intellectual problems that need to be addressed. Unless they can be resolved then the prospect of transcending our space-time environment becomes too implausible to be taken seriously, let alone attempted. And, strangely enough, it is the fourth dimension, Time, that is the stumbling block.

It was on one of those Saturday afternoons in Munich when I was still visiting Karl-Peter that I found myself aware for the first time of this fundamental challenge. Until then such incongruous events as my “glimpse” of Rudolf Steiner on Penmaenmawr Mountain and the discovery of Mrs. Winkler’s newspaper cuttings in a Berlin junk shop, had persuaded me that Time might be non-linear but never before had I paused to consider the philosophical implications this brought with it.

On that particular afternoon I had arrived at the house in Grünwald only to find another guest already there, someone who had “turned up at unparadonably short notice”, as he himself put it, with no hint of contrition, while languidly shaking my hand. Indeed of the two men who greeted me, Karl-Peter seemed the more ill at ease, but clearly he and his guest, introduced as Professor Dr. Bender, were friends of long standing, as their tell-tale use of “Du” once again testified.

For years Germany’s best-known expert on the paranormal, his name familiar even to a foreigner like me, Professor Bender – his entitlement to call himself “Doctor” would be challenged some months later in the press – regularly appeared on television. Looking avuncular but a touch self-satisfied and rarely without his trademark pipe, he seemed to turn up on the screen whenever someone was needed to comment on a reported haunting or any other inexplicable event. Nothing was too trivial for his sympathetic attention and over the years I heard him pontificate, his manner never less than self-assured, on such curiosities as a mediumistic budgerigar (instead

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of “Hello Joey”, the voices of the dead issued from its beak) and a domestic hot-water tap from which similar noises emerged. But his enthusiasm was part of his charm. It is said that the public lectures he delivered each week in a blacked-out auditorium at the University of Freiburg, his well-sculptured features illumined by a single reading lamp, were as spooky as anything Mrs. Duncan put on at the Master Temple in Portsmouth.

His involvement with the supernatural stretched back to the nineteen-thirties. That his younger self suffered no disadvantage under Nazi rule was probably due in part to his timely decision to join the Party in 1933 but also to the German Government’s ambiguous attitude towards the paranormal. In practice this meant that despite its hostility towards occultism and those engaged in it, classified as “political” offenders, its view of parapsychology was broadly sympathetic. In his book, *Fifty Years of Psychological Research*, published in 1939, Harry Price – once the bane of Mrs. Duncan – boasts of a letter he received two years earlier from the German government inviting him to collaborate with a Professor Rothacker and “his colleague Dr. Hans Bender”, the latter not yet thirty, in establishing a Department of Parapsychology, the first of its kind, at the University of Bonn. Only the outbreak of war put paid to the project. As a result, Price stayed in London, Professor Rothacker resumed his normal work and Bender travelled south to take up a senior post at the University of Strasbourg, by then under German control following the invasion of France.

Karl-Peter had clearly told him about some of my experiences, among them my acquaintance with the “extra-terrestrial” Hubert in Brussels. Of the latter he was less dismissive than I expected. His explanation (and from watching him on television, I knew he was rarely without one) drew heavily on quantum physics and the notion of relativity, each currently at odds with the other but once reconciled, he assured me, likely to make distant planets, even alternative universes, accessible at last. Time travel, too, would be feasible.

“To the future as well as the past?” I enquired.

The famous head nodded slowly.

It was, he declared, all down to wormholes, the name given to a hypothetical short cut between two points in space-time. According to the theory of

special relativity, if the particles at one end of a wormhole were accelerated to a high velocity, then anything passing through it would emerge from the other end at a time prior to its moment of entry.

“It’s time dilation based on velocity,” the speaker assured me, as if that said it all.

For once Karl-Peter was silent. It was left to me to say something (and clearly one of us was meant to) so I suggested that if a time traveller journeyed to the past, there was surely a danger that his or her subsequent history might end up differently from the one already experienced.

“You mean the Temporal Paradox?”

I could only suppose that I did.

“What you’re thinking,” continued our expert, “is that you might in theory kill one of your grandparents and thus prevent yourself being born. Don’t worry, the time-line has a natural continuity so any event, in this case your birth, that’s already happened cannot be rescinded. Somehow or other events will conspire to forestall it.”

I was reflecting on this when he threw out a fresh observation, confirming my impression that the afternoon was turning into a tutorial.

“Sadly, our misunderstanding of Time is because we think of it in terms of space, like your eminent Mr. Newton – “

“Sir” interjected Karl-Peter, suddenly coming to life, “It’s *Sir* Newton, not Mister.”

“Newton” continued the speaker, unused to correction and opting to dispense with titles altogether, “regarded time as another dimension of space, an expanse in which things happen one after the other, a kind of stage across which events move in sequence. Even before Einstein came along, this was being called into question. What Einstein did, was show how two observers moving at different speeds will register a different lapse of time for the same event. That’s the principle governing wormholes. It’s what will permit us one day to travel through time, as well as cover vast dis-

tances in space. Your Brussels chap may have done precisely that.”

I suspected not. Mr. Grant and his chthothian capsules, maybe, but not Hubert.

For me, the flaw in Dr. Bender’s approach, attributable perhaps to his scientific background, was the assumption that a traveller was bodily transported from one place to another. If challenged, he would probably have dismissed the notion, seeing it as further evidence of the Newtonian view of time as an extension of space. Yet clearly *something* has to move along the tunnel in order to emerge at the other end, even if physicists try to wriggle out of it – the conundrum, not the wormhole – by suggesting that this something is composed of “virtual” particles, not the sort that you and I are made of.

It was at this point I started to understand how magicians are spared the problem because for them time is not another spatial dimension like length, width and volume. If it gives the impression of being linear and ongoing, this is only because, trapped inside Mr. James’ railway carriage, we cannot experience it as any thing else. Yet viewed from the roof of the train, past, present and future are seen to exist simultaneously and, as it were, side by side. Now, this might seem to bring with it a “Temporal Paradox” of its own, for it does suggest that, like the train, we are hurtling towards a pre-existent future that we’re powerless to change. (The same assumption is implicit in any attempt to predict what lies ahead by resorting to horoscopes or tarot cards or even the two guinea crystal balls on special offer at the *Psychic News* bookshop.) In short, if the future is already in place, then gone is our ability to determine what it will turn out to be. Those who believe in free will had better stay inside the carriage.

Well, not quite. The absence of freedom is apparent only if we persist in thinking of time as a linear extension of space, with the future lying fully formed ahead of us. Once we accept, however, that past, present and future are in reality contemporaneous, rather than stretched out in sequence, we restore to our moral life – to each and every decision we take – the autonomy that a pre-arranged future farther down the line, would seem to preclude. This happens because we are indeed free to take this or that decision (or at least as free as nature, nurture and circumstances allow) when offered a choice, but our decision is itself part of a future which, like our third

telegraph pole, is concurrent with the present. In other words, tomorrow already exists because we are busy creating it today.

As usual it was Mr. James who had enabled me make sense of it or at least as much sense as our situation "within" time permits. On the day he talked about the railway carriage, he had gone on to suggest I picture the two of us side by side, with him embodying the future and myself ensconced in the present. I was then to imagine myself faced with two possible courses of action, the choice between the two mine and mine alone, with neither my decision nor its outcome pre-determined. In spite of this uncertainty he, being the future, had necessarily to know what my decision and its outcome would be, for both were already contained in himself. Mine was the freedom to decide, yes, but his was the privilege of knowing what decision I would take. And if this notion of a future that is pre-existent but not pre-determined still seems unreal, we might remember that some psychologists maintain that the person each of us will become in the course of a lifetime, largely the product of choices we make, is already fully present at our birth. The future, it turns out, is well and truly now.

As I said, all this becomes less puzzling, though no easier to explain, once we meet for the first time the unconditioned reality behind, as well as beyond, the everyday world we inhabit. Even so, few who get behind the scenes are permitted to take a peek at what will happen to them in the future, mainly because the observer still belongs to the present and prior knowledge of what lies ahead would compromise his or her freedom. By contrast the past is open to inspection for those who know where to find it, every detail meticulously recorded in the akashic record. Again, however, the portions available to view will depend on the inner disposition of the enquirer (his or her motive, if you like), which acts as an impediment to what might otherwise become a kind of akashic voyeurism. Another and altogether different impediment is the tendency of some people to see in the record what they want to see, rather than what is on display, as accounts by Blavatsky and Steiner of life in Atlantis confirm, not to mention those lovelorn priestesses and dashing young pharaohs we came across earlier.

Here then is a form of time travel that relieves us of the need to squeeze through wormholes and be transported into the past, with the practical problems this might entail once we reached our destination. Moreover, because we contemplate the past, rather than intrude on it, there is no risk of

the Temporal Paradox Professor Bender mentioned. On the contrary, we neither impinge on the events under observation nor affect their outcome, any more than I influenced the behaviour of Rudolf Steiner and his companion on coming across them all those years ago in Penmaenmawr.

If, that is, I did come across them. Sceptics would question whether such experiences demonstrate that time has been transcended. And they would be right to do so. After all there is no objective proof at hand, with nobody returning to the here-and-now clutching a bit of pottery or a coin from, say, Pompeii on the eve of its destruction. (Few would wish to be there on the day itself.) Neither would such objects prove that the bearer had gone back in time to retrieve them. As for returning with information unknown to contemporary historians, few are expert enough to know what to look for or, if they did, alert enough to spot it.

The best evidence I could offer Professor Bender that Saturday in Munich – the afternoon having passed so quickly that the truest measurement of linear time may be how we inwardly experience it – relates to an event that happened five years earlier, involving two friends of mine and an old fashioned tape recorder, appropriately enough of German manufacture.

It was by then close to four o'clock and the usual coffee would already be brewing in the kitchen, provided of course our visitor's unexpected arrival did not mean we would have to forego it. Before I repeat the story I told him, a brief word is needed about a relatively new area of psychical research formerly known as Electronic Voice Phenomena but now by a more cumbersome term I can never remember. In those days it related to a procedure in which a tape-recorder is left running, often while an untuned radio nearby emits "white sound", in the hope that disembodied voices will be heard when the recording is played back. In most cases the words captured – and words are commoner than sentences – are meaningless, many of them scarcely audible above the background hiss. It is the fact they are there at all that counts.

The idea is not new. As we noted, Thomas Edison, inventor of the phonograph, was predicting in the eighteen-eighties that it might soon be possible to record the voices of the dead, while a similar conviction led William Dobson, himself by then deceased, to put his technical knowledge to good use by supervising the construction of the reflectograph and its

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more dependable successor, the communi-graph once so dear to Lady Cail-lard. But things did not really take off, and then only by accident, until the nineteen-fifties when Friedrich Jurgenson, a Swedish polymath, set out one night to record the sound of birds in a forest near his home. On replaying the tape he was astonished to hear on it the voice of a man commenting in Norwegian about nocturnal birdsong. Jurgenson experimented further, eventually publishing a book called *Voices from the Universe*. Between that book and his next, he made further recordings until one day he heard on them what he took to be the voice of his deceased mother calling him by the pet name she always used. It was enough to satisfy him that the mysterious voices captured on tape were those of people who had died, hence the title of his second book, *Radio Link with the Dead*.

One reader impressed by Jurgenson's efforts was Konstantin Raudive, a Latvian psychologist then working at the University of Uppsala. Long interested in psychical research, Raudive had lived in Edinburgh in the early nineteen-thirties so may well have come across Mrs. Duncan and her tire-some familiars, even her stockinette vest, during the time he spent there. He, too, began conducting experiments with a tape recorder but became fully engaged only after hearing a voice whisper "Va dormir, Margarete" which he took to be a reference to a close friend whose death had affected him deeply. He subsequently wrote a best-selling book and when he died in 1974, ten years before Jurgenson, was investigating a budgerigar whose chatter was interspersed with voices like those on his tapes. Presumably it was this remarkable bird or a close relation I heard Professor Bender talk about shortly after my arrival in Munich.

None of which is of tremendous import. And few magicians will be bowled over by unexpected noises on a spool of tape, with only a small number resembling human speech and most of those incomprehensible. An excep-tion, however, is the recording I described to both men in the few minutes left to us before the coffee and obligatory marble cake.

Responsible for it were the two friends I've already mentioned. Both had read an article in a magazine about the Raudive experiments (which seem to have eclipsed the pioneering work of Mr. Jurgenson) and, mildly curi-ous, decided to see if they could emulate them, using an old Grundig tape recorder consigned long ago to the attic of their home in Chelsea. Nothing happened, not even a whisper, either on the first attempt or on the dozen

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more that followed. About to give up and haul the machine back upstairs, they resolved to try one more time and were rewarded with the sound of a voice, faint, slightly querulous but unmistakably that of an elderly man, which demanded to know what was happening.

Now, my friends are not the type to jump to conclusions, least of all one that implies the dead are queuing up to gossip on a spool of tape. At the time both had responsible jobs, he with a City law firm, while she taught at a school in South London, though I admit that responsible jobs are no guarantee of honesty or even common sense. Certainly neither had no more than a passing interest in the paranormal.

Still, the voice on the tape, whatever its source, had asked them a question so despite feeling rather foolish, even after several glasses of wine, they put on another tape and the husband – let's call them Jim and Ann as they want their true names withheld – explained that they were trying to contact what he delicately referred to as "The Other Side".

"Give him your name," Ann can be heard prompting in the background.

I am told the tape was run through the machine eight times before the voice responded. Less faint this time but, such at least was my impression, now sounding more anxious than petulant, it can be heard asking Jim what he means by "Other Side". The old-fashioned way of speaking, with Jim repeatedly addressed as "Sir", brought to mind a television adaptation of Dickens.

There had been only three spools of tape in the attic, two of them unused, while on the third was an attempt at some Chopin Preludes by Anne's younger sister, easily and, she claimed, deservedly erased before that, too, was pressed into service. Already she and Jim were trying to get hold of more supplies but as things turned out, none was needed.

On this third and final tape Jim can be heard explaining gently that by "Other Side" he has in mind beyond the grave. For the first time his voice suggests he is talking to another human being, not playing about with a tape recorder.

What comes afterwards is profoundly disturbing. For a good twenty min-

utes there is the monotonous hum of the machine but then, suddenly, shockingly, there irrupts a terrible wail, followed by heart-rending sobs, amidst which the same man as before pleads to be told why he is being tormented by voices inside his head, all demanding to know who he is and, worse, determined to persuade him he is dead. Most chilling of all, however, is the speaker's discernible terror at knowing – and this he states over and over again – that his tormentors come from a time in the future. The “Unborn” is what he calls them.

The whole thing may have been as fraudulent as Koot Hoomi's parlour tricks, though there is no apparent motive for deception, with only a handful of the couple's friends told of the experiment and fewer still allowed to listen to the tapes. Far from bringing any benefit to Jim and Ann, the experience left them so troubled that they sought advice from their parish priest, Canon de Zulueta, at his presbytery in Cheyne Row. Over several schooners of sherry, that wise old prelate managed to allay their concerns but recommended they destroy the tapes and abstain from similar diversions in future. “Necromantic practices”, was the term he used for them.

For me the story again demonstrates how fluid is the relationship between time “past” and time “present”, the latter being time “future” so far as the past is concerned: Jim and Anne's present was another man's future, while for them his present was located in the past. In exceptional situations or in dreams, we, too, may find that all three overlap, while on other occasions chunks of experience may be displaced and no longer occupy their rightful position in time. It is, a phenomenon central to the plot of several plays by J. B. Priestley, notably *An Inspector Calls* and *Time and the Conways*, while Priestley himself wrote a popular study entitled *Man and Time*, based on the theories of J. W. Dunne, aeronautical engineer and inventor, but nowadays best remembered for two books published in the nineteen-thirties, *An Experiment with Time* and its successor *The Serial Universe*. His own dream experiences had persuaded the author that time is the progressive realisation of a pre-existing future, much as Mr. James had described it to me all those years ago.

None of which will satisfy the sceptics. No amount of argument can do that. Only by experiencing what it is like to shake off the constraints of our environment and enter the reality behind it, can one grasp its true nature. Peculiar to the magician is that he or she grasps this reality, not by

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losing himself in it, as do the mystics, but by assimilating it in a manner that makes it his or her own. .

Happily, this conscious integration with or, more correctly, this appropriation of, the macrocosm does not mean those who experience it strut about afterwards persuaded they are God, not even those who have crossed the Abyss and partaken of the splendour beyond it, the *vishpara-darshana* of Hindu mysticism. In his heart of hearts even Aleister Crowley, despite his claim to be the Ipsissimus – setting him above the gods and conventional morality – had no such pretensions. (On the contrary his bouts of megalomania betray a lack of self-esteem, not an excess of it.) True, every encounter with the Inner Planes endows magicians with new confidence, necessary if they are to impose their will on the subtle forces recruited to serve their ambitions, be they gods and goddesses, angels, demons or puckish elementals, but this falls well short of big-headedness. Most remarkable of all, however, is that, far from diminishing the everyday reality into which we were born, our experience of something beyond it serves only to make our workaday world more wonderful. And that is very humbling.

Perhaps it happens because we begin for the first time to look differently at our surroundings, seeing them through the “eye of the soul” or “eye of the heart”, as William Blake called it, alert suddenly to the “correspondences” that prevail among its myriad parts. The Silesian mystic, Jacob Boehme (1576-1624) recounts how he suddenly acquired this new way of seeing things, careful nevertheless to emphasise that in no way did it impinge on his everyday life, still less his grasp on reality. To his delight he found that on going out into the fields he was able to look deep into, as he put it, the very being of the herbs and grasses around him, adding that what he saw there was fully compatible with what he called their “external nature”.

This explains how, in making me aware of a transcendental reality, unconditioned by time, space and causality, Mr. James ensured also that the reality it transcended was itself enhanced as a result. He may have known worlds other than this one but for now, quite rightly, this was the one he loved best.

19

Two summers ago I returned to Aberystwyth. Much had changed since I caught a train to Paddington all those years ago. Like the London of today compared with the one the elderly Charlotte used to reminisce about, several landmarks were missing. Gone was the Little Theatre, with a grim municipal car park where it previously stood, while the run-down cinema next door was replaced by another, built entirely of brick and looking for all the world like an air raid shelter or a military bunker, certainly not a place of public entertainment. In the same street the building that housed the lavatories where Jack Bradley was manhandled by two over-zealous policemen, had given way to a morose block of flats, but the Coliseum was still there, though not its formidable owner. Now its interior was given over to an exhibition of historical artefacts and local memorabilia but otherwise faithfully preserved. And yet stripped of seating, deprived of an audience and without its flickering screen, it struck me as eerily depressing, more mausoleum than museum. Mrs. Gale would never have allowed it. Of the ubiquitous chapels, some were still in business, their old defiance gone, but others had been sold and put to more profane use. By now the devil well and truly had the upper hand.

Slightly dispirited I drove out to Pumlumon, following the route I used to take on Saturday mornings to visit Mr. James. Here were fewer changes, though I noticed a new house on the corner where once there had been a tumbledown cottage, home to half-a-dozen nanny-goats (the billy had a shed to himself) and their reclusive owner, said to have been a dancer with the Ballets Russes in younger, more glamorous days. (The smell from there was so bad, I used to hold my breath when cycling past.) Also gone was a second dwelling, this one halfway up a hill that managed always to defeat me, forcing me off my bike well before I got to the top. At my approach an

old man would appear in the doorway, supported by two sticks and wearing a balaclava helmet, eager to tell me that German bombers had again been busy overhead the night before.

“Making for Liverpool, I expect,” he would add.

“Or Manchester,” I got into the habit of replying, not brave enough to tell him the war had ended long ago.

Mr. James had died half way through my final year in college. When the news reached me, tacked on by way of postscript to my mother’s weekly letter, it saddened me of course, but less deeply than it would have done, had I not still been in thrall to the delights of London. Perhaps, too, I felt guilty about not going back to see him on my several visits home over the preceding two years. Only later did I find out he had not died in his sleep at Tanrallt, as he would certainly have wanted, but suffered a stroke three months earlier. Alerted by the two Miss Davieses, a distant relative in Birmingham arranged for him to be transferred to a nursing home in a part of the city called King’s Norton. The old boy must have hated it, though the same relation, thought to be a cousin several times removed, assured the Miss Davieses that Birmingham was “very leafy” so he’d not miss Pumlumon one teeny-weeny bit. Neither of the ladies believed it. Nor do I.

All this I learned when I called at their house to see them. Now close to ninety, as the elder of them boasted, without admitting precisely how close, they seemed not to have changed since that Saturday many Christmases ago when we plucked geese together for the last time. “Oh, those geese”, protested the younger Miss Davies when reminded of it, “such a job it was getting the down off. The big feathers weren’t too bad, not once you got the knack of it.”

The kitchen we sat in was warm and spotlessly clean, with a polished kettle on the hob and newspaper laid out on the newly washed flagstones underfoot. In the air hung the smell of baking and of homeliness, to me one and the same, while a clock ticked gravely away in a corner. Our tea we drank piping hot from Crown Derby cups normally confined to the dresser, with a row of matching plates propped up behind them, their sudden call to duty an honour that didn’t escape me. Like Mr. Howells, the minister, I was now a B.A (Hons.) and entitled to the best china. Mr. Howells was a Bachelor of

Divinity as well so the honour didn't go to my head.

I knew that what I was doing by staying on to chat with both Miss Davieses was postponing the moment when I'd set eyes again on Tanrallt. I even dallied in their tiny front garden before leaving, making a big fuss about the hydrangeas crowding around the front gate and in urgent need of cutting back. Our goodbyes finally over, I was about to drive off when the older Miss Davies hobbled up to the window of the car.

"He thought the world of you, you know,"

And with that back she went inside the house. I wished she hadn't told me.

By the time I reached Tanrallt the afternoon had turned gloomy, with the sky as grey and as heavy as lead. For one brief moment it seemed the house might still be intact but on drawing close I saw that its roof, already sagging when Mr. James was alive, had finally collapsed. Its downstairs windows were gone, too, as was the front door, removed for someone else's sheep to find shelter within, judging by the muck incontinently strewn about. No excited barking greeted my approach, no honking from the geese, nothing. Everywhere was motionless and still, timelessly so. I must have stood there for no more than ten minutes, yet it seemed like as many hours, even half a lifetime, until suddenly, but not I thought indifferently, there came the doleful cry of curlews from a patch of marshland nearby. There and then I turned on my heels and headed for the main road. It had been a mistake to go back. It usually is,

Mr. James had made magic part of my life. Not in a Golden Dawn kind of way or that of the OTO or indeed of any other group that nowadays vies for our attention. For him magic was not something to dress up for on special occasions – that was reserved for his weekly trips into town – but an integral part of his everyday self. Integral and fully integrated also, for it never compromised other aspects of his existence, still less brought anything otherworldly to the way he went about them. (It didn't even dilute his bad language.) Instead he lived comfortably with the knowledge, based on experience, that reality is more than what our senses reveal. And that what they reveal is not diminished as a result.

When I first asked Mr. James to teach me magic, I did not want a replace-

ment for the things I enjoyed as a boy, none of them different from what my friends all got up to. And at no time since has it distracted me from the ordinary business of living. If anything, it has helped me live life more fully.

To be fair, some religions offer the same but in their case only at a price. For each requires its followers to experience the numinous in terms consistent with the imagery and theological assumptions, both inter-related, that are peculiar to itself. Even among occultists there is a tendency for this or that group, while publicly in favour of independent thought, to expect consensus on certain basic propositions. "There is no religion higher than Truth!" trumpets the Theosophical Society, professedly scornful of doctrine yet committed to a few core beliefs, derived largely from the works of Madame Blavatsky. Similarly the disciples of Rudolf Steiner are encouraged to investigate the spiritual realm for themselves, as *der liebe Doktor* recommended, but the validity of their findings will always depend on how closely they match his own or those of the governing body in Switzerland. At least the Spiritualists are free to think what they like, with an assortment of mediums, spirit guides and moralising Native Americans on hand to offer helpful, if confused and even contradictory, advice.

Magic by contrast allows the practitioner to explore the supernatural without prejudice or prior commitment, equipped only with a readiness to accept the possibility (and no more than that) of its existence. Whatever is discovered can then be critically assessed until there emerges a body of knowledge whose most important element may well be the awareness of one's true or higher self. It was one of Crowley's more sensible beliefs that the world would be a better place if more people took up magic because acquaintance with this other self would reveal to them the purpose of existence, as well as their shared responsibility for its attainment. For that reason some have argued that magic, correctly understood, is a way of personal development, a kind of alchemical operation in which the karmic dross of the incarnated self is gradually shed, enabling the "lower" and "higher" selves to become united, perhaps reunited, and so perfected. Viewed in this light, the entities we meet on the Inner Planes become aspects of ourselves that we experience objectively, giving us the chance to confront our individual weaknesses (what Jung and his followers call The Shadow) or, if appropriate, consolidate our private strengths.

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That magic, whatever meaning we give it, can have a worthwhile purpose is contrary to what we hear from those busybodies who profess to know what's good for us, with rationalists loftily dismissive and religious authorities, keen to monopolise the supernatural, swift to condemn the "black arts" and the miscreants who practise them. The truth is that magic is morally neutral and among magicians there have been men and women of the highest integrity and others who were a thoroughly bad lot. Most of us muddle along somewhere in between.

On that rainy afternoon when I asked Mr. James to teach me magic, the request seemed to cause him no surprise. Neither did the admission that I hoped to re-learn things I knew once but by then had forgotten. Now, I tend normally to be sceptical of past life recollections, the lives people recollect being too often packed with the excitement, colour and prestige missing from their present one. And anyway, what's the point of bothering about previous lives when we've more than enough to get on with in this one? Yet that afternoon as Mr. James and I trudged down the hill behind the farm, it did seem that for a few seconds a previous me had caught up with the present one and that somehow or other my companion was familiar with both.

Anyway, that's how it all began, at least this time around. Yet built into every beginning is its end and so having denied myself the chance to say goodbye to Mr. James in his lifetime, let me do it now. And where better than on that bleak hillside high above Tanrallt, out in the wind and the rain. That's where Mr. James, *my* Mr. James, really died. Not in "leafy" Birmingham.

And yes, endings are often sad, even for magicians. After every performance on the bandstand Professor Humo would flatten his top hat with a punch then withdraw backstage to rejoin the rabbit, the fantail doves, the multi-coloured silks and the jumbo-sized playing cards that had recently bewildered and beguiled his young audience. No one else was allowed behind the scenes except his daughter Pearl, eleven years old and a contributor to the afternoon's entertainment. (After some desultory tap dancing, she returned to execute a few tasteful contortions to the music of 'The Skaters' Waltz.') Part of me ached to know how the tricks were done but a more discerning part knew that something would be lost and lost irretrievably, were I ever to find out. That is why I made a point of hurrying from the

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bandstand once the show was over. To see Professor Humo walking back in civvies to his digs in Portland Road, a sulky Pearl in tow and Mrs. Humo at his side behind a battered pram, would have spoiled things beyond repair.

Unlike the Professor's magic, the kind I've been describing – and having it described is, admittedly, not a patch on seeing it done – has no backstage secrets to protect, no concealed mirrors, false pockets, marked cards, or hidden compartments. It has no need of them. In any case its true purpose is not to offer signs and wonders, though these certainly occur and, when they do, are just as impressive, if not as flamboyant, as anything seen on Aberystwyth promenade half a century ago. The real difference is that magic, real magic, is both natural and supernatural, its effects occurring in this world but their cause located outside it. A bit like what happened when the twelve year-old me asked Mr. James to teach him magic, hoping to recover something that – in another place and in another time - had once been his. Where and when did not interest me. It never has. My only wish was to have it back.

Being the seventh child of a seventh child may be what helped me get it.

