

Cagliostro
and his
Egyptian Rite of Freemasonry

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A MASTER OF MAGIC

Cagliostro! - the name is one to conjure with. It has a cabalistic sound. Who in reality was this incomparable master of mystery, this Rosicrucian and archnecromancer of the eighteenth century, who suddenly emerged from profound obscurity, flashed like a meteor across the stage of life, and then vanished in darkness in the gloomy dungeons of the castle of San Leon, Italy, charged by the Church of Rome with magic, heresy, and Freemasonry? He hobnobbed with princes and potentates; he was the bosom friend of the Cardinal de Rohan, grand almoner of the court of France, and the founder of the Egyptian Rite of Freemasonry. He claimed to be able to evoke the spirits of the dead. In fact, he was the prototype of the modern spirit medium or psychic.

Was he a knave or a martyr? The question is worthy of investigation.

One hundred and twenty-four years have passed away since his death. In drama, romance and history his personality has been exploited. Alexandre Dumas made him the hero of his novel, *The Memoirs of a Physician*. Grim old Carlyle penned an essay about him full of vituperation and condemnation. The great Goethe wrote a drama in five acts portraying his career called *Der Gros-Cophta*. Perhaps there never was a character in modern history so denounced and vilified as Cagliostro. Were there no good points about him? Was he simply a charlatan preying on a credulous public, heartless and -unscrupulous? Did he not have some redeeming traits, some ideals?

In the year 1910 a voluminous work was published in London, which treats the subject of the arch-hierophant of tile mysteries in an impartial manner. It is entitled

Cagliostro, the Splendour and Misery of a Master of Magic, by W. R. H. Trowbridge. The author has, in my opinion, lifted the black pall of evil which has rested upon the character of the sorcerer for over a century, and has shown very clearly that Cagliostro was not guilty of the heinous crimes imputed to him, but, on the contrary, was in many respects a badly abused and slandered man. As all readers of history know, he was mixed up in the Diamond Necklace trial, which dragged the fair name of the beautiful and innocent Queen of France, Marie Antoinette, in the mire. But the necromancer was acquitted, after having been imprisoned for more than a year in the Bastille. He was afterwards banished from France by order of Louis XVI. He took refuge in England. At the time of the affair of the necklace the French police did their best to throw light on Cagliostro's past, but all their efforts were baffled. It was in September, 1786, that the assertion was first made by the *Courier de l'Europe*, a French newspaper published in London, that he was Joseph Balsamo, a forger and swindler, who some years before the advent of Cagliostro in Paris had made a criminal record for himself in France and other countries, and then mysteriously disappeared. The editor of the above-mentioned journal was Theveneau de Morande, a notorious blackmailer and spy in the pay of the French Government. His attempts to besmirch the character of Cagliostro were doubtless instigated by the French Minister of Police in order to discredit the alchemist and wonder-worker in the eyes of the English public, more especially the Freemasons. Cagliostro, in his famous *Letter to the French People* had attacked royalty in France in no uncertain terms, and the pamphlet had been widely circulated in Paris and throughout France.

The book published in Rome in 1791, under the auspices of the Apostolic Chamber, purporting to be a life of Cagliostro, with an account of his trial by the Holy Inquisi-

tion, also identifies the necromancer with the criminal Balsamo, but no dates are given. It is special pleading from start to finish, full of bitter clerical invectives against Freemasonry, and, to my mind, totally unreliable. Upon the articles by Morande and the so-called biography published by the Inquisition, all subsequent authors have based their opinions that Cagliostro, the occultist, was Joseph Balsamo, blackmailer, forger, swindler and panderer for his own wife; a man wanted by the police of France, Italy, Spain and England. "But," says Mr. Trowbridge, "there is another reason for doubting the identity of the two men. It is the most powerful of all, and has hitherto apparently escaped the attention of those who have taken this singular theory of identification for granted. *Nobody that had known Balsamo ever saw Cagliostro.*

Again, one wonders why nobody who had known Balsamo ever made the least attempt to identify Cagliostro with him either at the time of the Diamond Necklace trial or when the articles in the *Courier de l'Europe* brought him a second time prominently before the public. Now Balsamo was known to have lived in London in 1771, when his conduct was so suspicious to the police that he deemed it advisable to leave the country. He and his wife accordingly went to Paris, and it was here that, in 1773, the events occurred which brought both prominently under the notice of the authorities. Six years after Balsamo's disappearance from London, Count Cagliostro appeared in that city. . . . How is it, one asks, that the London police, who "wanted" Joseph Balsamo, utterly failed to recognize him in the notorious Cagliostro? And so with his identification in Paris. The Balsamo legend seems to be punctured. But, after all is said, who was Cagliostro? He admitted that the name was an alias. Balsamo was devoid of education, or even the appearance of respectability; grasping, scheming and utterly disreputable. Count Cagliostro was a highly accomplished man; a chemist of no mean ability; an

empiric, who made many remarkable cures of diseases that baffled the medicos of the period; a psychic and a mesmerizer. He was charitable and generous to a fault, and gave away immense sums of money to the poor. As Grand Master of the Egyptian Rite, he was fairly worshipped by his followers. How could Balsamo have transformed his character so completely from a common crook to a humanitarian. As Trowbridge says: "Whoever Cagliostro may have been, he could certainly never have been Joseph Balsamo." Now let us turn to the man whose impenetrable incognito of Comte de Cagliostro astonished all Europe.

In July, 1776 - the exact date is unknown - two foreigners arrived in London and engaged a suite of furnished rooms in Whitcombe Street, Leicester Fields. They called themselves Count and Countess Cagliostro. They were presumably of Italian origin, and possessed money and jewels in abundance. The Count turned one of the rooms he had rented into a chemical laboratory. It was soon noised about that he was an alchemist and Rosicrucian. To please some people he had met he foretold the lucky numbers in a lottery by cabalistic means. Refusing to be mixed up any further in such matters, he was persecuted by a gang of swindlers, and spent some months in the King's Bench prison on various technical charges. To avoid further trouble and the evidence is conclusive that he was the innocent victim of sharpers, who wished to use him as a tool to obtain money for them by predicting lucky lottery numbers - he left England. But before doing so he was initiated into a Masonic lodge in London. It was known as Esperance Lodge, No. 369, and was composed mainly of French and Italian residents in London, holding its sessions at the King's Head Tavern, Gerard Street. It was attached to the Continental Masonic Order of the Higher Observance, which was supposed to be a continuation and perfection of the ancient association of Knights Tem-

plar. The date of the initiation of the famous psychic was some time in April, 1777. Deeply immersed in the dreams of the Rosicrucians and mystics, Cagliostro determined to found an Egyptian Rite of Freemasonry upon the first three degrees of the fraternity, where magical practices were to be perpetuated. According to the Inquisition biographer he borrowed his ideas for the ritual from an obscure spiritist, George Coston, whose manuscript he picked up in a bookshop in London.

In his magical séances, Cagliostro made use of a young boy (*pupille*) or young girl (*colombe*) in the state of virgin innocence, to whom power was given over the seven spirits that surround the throne of the divinity, and preside over the seven planets. The boy or girl would kneel in front of a globe of clarified water placed upon a table, covered with a black cloth embroidered with Rosicrucian symbols, and Cagliostro, making strange mesmeric passes, would summon the angels of the spheres to enter the globe, whereupon the youthful clairvoyant would behold the visions presented to his or her view, and often describe events taking place at a distance. Many eminent persons testified to the genuineness of the feats performed. This is what is called "crystal vision" by students of psychical research, although the object employed is usually a ball of rock crystal and not a globe of water, such as Cagliostro used. The Society for Psychical Research has shown that people in a state of partial or complete hypnosis frequently develop clairvoyant and telepathic powers. The crystal is used to promote hypnosis, also to visualize the images that appear in the mind. Undoubtedly Cagliostro was an accomplished mesmerizer. He possessed remarkable psychic powers which he confessed that he did not understand. But, like many mediums who have such gifts, he sometimes resorted (if his enemies are to be believed) to trickery and sleight-of-hand to accomplish results when the real power

was not forthcoming. We have seen this in the case of the extraordinary materializing medium, Eusapia Paladino, who died a few years ago in Naples, after a somewhat lurid career. But that is another story, as Kipling says. To return to Cagliostro.

From England the arch-enchanter went to The Hague. Throughout Holland he was received by the lodges with Masonic honors - "arches of steel," etc. He discoursed learnedly on magic and Masonry to enraptured thousands. He visited Mitau and St. Petersburg in 1779. In May, 1780, he turned up at Warsaw, where he "paraded himself in the white shoes and red heels of a noble." In September, 1780, he arrived at Strasbourg, where he founded one of his Egyptian lodges.

He lavished money right and left, cared the poor without pay, and treated the great with arrogance. The Cardinal de Rohan invited the sorcerer and his wife to live at the episcopal palace. Cagliostro presented the cardinal with a diamond worth 20,000 livres, which he pretended to have made. The churchman had a laboratory fitted up in the palace for the alchemist, where experiments in gold-making were undertaken. The cardinal, in fact, claimed that he saw Cagliostro transmute baser metals into gold. Spiritualistic séances were held in the palace, with all the *miseenscene* that Cagliostro knew how to invest such occult doings.

The skeptical Baroness d'Oberkirch, in her memoirs, says that while at Strasbourg, Cagliostro predicted the death of the Empress Marie Theresa of Austria. "He even foretold the hour at which she would expire," relates the baroness. "Cardinal de Rohan told it to me in the evening, and it was five days after that the news arrived." In the parlance of modern Psychical research this feat savors of telepathy.

In the year 1785 we find the count at Lyons, France, where he founded the world-famous lodge of Triumphant Wisdom and converted hundreds to his mystical doctrines. But his greatest triumph was achieved in Paris. A gay and frivolous aristocracy, mad after new sensations, welcomed the magician with open arms. The way had been paved for him by Mesmer and St. Martin. He made his appearance in the French capital on January 30, 1785. The Cardinal de Rohan selected and furnished a house for him. Houdon, the celebrated sculptor, executed his bust in marble, from which numerous replicas in bronze and plaster were made and sold. Engravings of him by Bartolozzi were to be had in the print shops, bearing the following inscription:

"De l'ami des humains reconnaissez les traits; Tons ses jours sont marqués par de nouveaux bien faits, Il prolonge la vie, il secourt l'indigence, La plaisir d' être utile est seul sa récompense."

He was called "the divine Cagliostro." His house in the Rue Saint Claude was always thronged with noble guests who came to witness the strange séances where ghosts from "the vast deep" were summoned. How were these phantoms evoked? Confederates, concave mirrors and images cast upon the smoke arising from burning incense may explain many of the materializations witnessed in the "Chambre Egyptian."

I do not doubt the truth of the telepathic, hypnotic and clairvoyant feats, for I have seen enough to warrant the genuineness of such phenomena, but I must take the so-called materializations with a pinch of salt. Says Trowbridge: "To enhance the effect of his phenomena he had recourse to artifices worthy of a mountebank. The room in which his séances were held contained statuettes of Isis, Anubis and the ox Apis. The

walls were covered with hieroglyphics, and two lackeys, clothed like Egyptian slaves as they are represented on the monuments at Thebes, were in attendance to arrange the screen behind which the *pupilles* or *colombes* sat, the carafe or mirror into which they gazed, or to perform any other service that was required. To complete the *mise-en-scène*, Cagliostro wore a robe of black silk on which hieroglyphics were embroidered in red. His head was covered with an Arab turban of cloth of gold ornamented with jewels. A chain of emeralds hung *en sautoir* upon his breast, to which scarabs and cabalistic symbols of all colors in metal were attached. A sword with a handle shaped like a cross was suspended from a belt of red silk."

Speaking of Cagliostro's career in Paris, Arthur Edward Waite says:

"He assumed now the role of a practical magician, and astonished the city by the evocation of phantoms, which he caused to appear, at the wish of the inquirer, either in a mirror or in a vase of clear water. These phantoms equally represented dead and living beings, and as occasionally collusion appears to have been well-nigh impossible, and as the theory of coincidence is preposterous, there is reason to suppose that he produced results which must sometimes have astonished himself. All Paris, at any rate, was set wondering at his enchantments and prodigies, and it is seriously stated that Louis XVI was so infatuated with "le divin Cagliostro" that he declared that anyone who injured him should be considered guilty of treason. At Versailles, and in the presence of several distinguished nobles, he is said to have caused the apparition in mirrors and vases, not merely of the specters of absent or deceased persons, but animated and moving beings, of a phantasmal description, including many dead men and women selected by the astonished spectators."