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A STUDY IN SYMBOLISM

INTRODUCTION

“ By the symbol charioted,
Through loved things rising up to Love’s own ways :
By these the soul unto the vast has wings
And sets the seal celestial on all mortal things.”

A. E.

SYMBOLS are like the treasures found by children in seashore caves. While they are wet with the waves of the sea of life they shine with unearthly radiance ; but they dry in the hand even while the holder rejoices in their beauty, and become mere dull stones and shells and weeds. Out of their own element, their glory has departed ; replace them in their pool, and they will shine again. A skilful lapidary may polish the stones into permanent brilliance, but never more will they have the charm and glamour that emanated from them in that magic cave where they were bathed in their own element of living water.

So it is with ancient symbols in the science of archæology. They seem to fade and die in the eager hands of the scholars ; they are like dim, shadowy

decaying into merely conventional and unmeaning ornament. The prosaic modern architect will even declare that all symbols are decorative forms of purely æsthetic interest; while the enthusiast or mystic will see a meaning in devices where there is obviously no deeper intention than the enrichment of a vacant space. But between the utilitarian architect and the superstitious symbolist there is ample room for the interpretations of the poet and philosopher.

Many meanings have been given for the Greek word "symbolon"—a gathering-place, a pledge, an earnest, a sample; and perhaps this last, in spite of its associations, is one of the most illuminating definitions. For a symbol is as it were a sample in the material world of that which is too great to be shown in its completeness. It is a miniature, of the same form and substance as the whole, only reduced in scale for the convenience of the messenger who brings it from his master, and for the readier apprehension of the receiver.

Again, a symbol may be a memorial or a souvenir—a token between two parted friends, as a ring, a locket, a chain, or a picture. To the mystic they are indeed love-tokens, given to the soul for its comfort during the long journey away from and the return to the Divine Lover. They are like the amulets and talismans exchanged by friends and lovers in Eastern wonder-tales—magic gifts, which gave tidings of the fortunes of the giver. Even in these modern days there are strange psychic

happenings, and two friends who thus exchanged gifts were enabled to send each other telepathic messages while they held them in their hands. They had given something of themselves—some emanation or magnetism—which made their gifts sensitive to vibrations from the greater life which had in some degree ensouled them.

A symbol also is a gift and a pledge of union. As a ring to parted lovers, so is a religious symbol to the worshipper and his God in outward ritual, and so it is to the soul and its Lord in the inward and spiritual life. The sight and touch of the symbol are as signs of the reality and permanence of the covenant. Moreover, they are messages of love, ever new and ever coming, though old as the hills of the earth or the stars of heaven.

A symbol is never really outworn and never need be broken, for it is always capable of transformation by receiving new life and a new and deeper interpretation—which is probably only the old original meaning restored. This question of first origins and meanings is the crux of the problem of symbology; for whereas the student of comparative mythology sees in primitive symbols only the slow evolution of faith or superstition from savagery to civilisation, the student of comparative religion beholds a divine revelation, expressing complex processes in simple formulæ. Only a few forms are comprehensive enough to hold universal meanings, because only a few—it may be five or seven or ten—are signs or formulæ of universal

laws within our powers of perception. And assuredly this is the main purpose of a symbol or creed—that it should be the simplest expression in matter of some law that shapes all degrees of matter. Hence the oldest and most enduring religious symbols that have come down to us from ancient civilisations are geometrical forms—the upright line, the cross, the circle, the zigzag and spiral, the triangle and the pentagon, the lines expressing force, motion, and energy, the figures denoting inertia, limitation, or condensation. We may speak of these shorthand notes of the working of great laws as “geometrical signs,” but they are also and primarily natural forms, for primitive religion and science were one and the same.

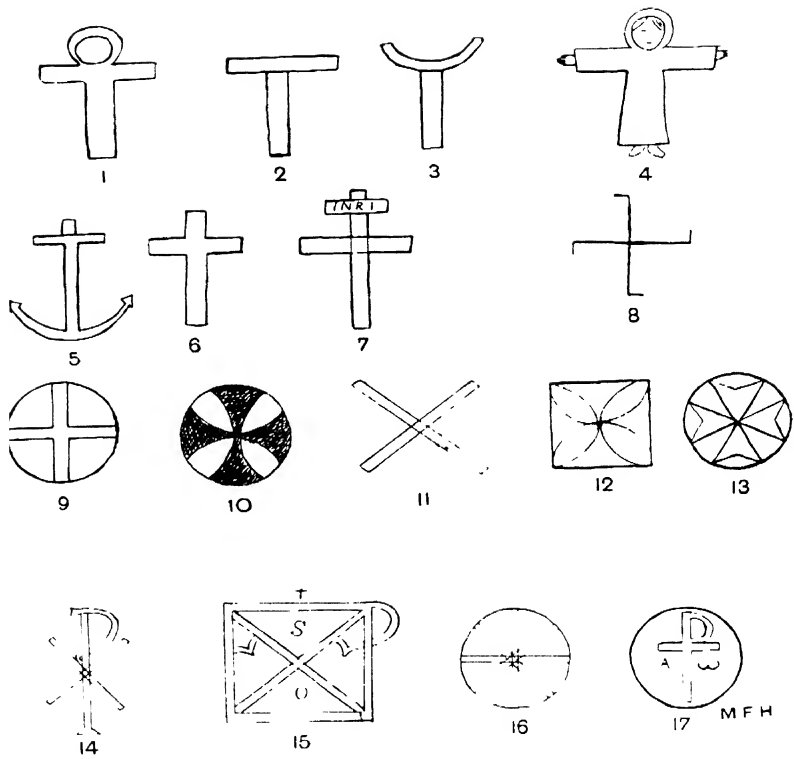


PLATE I. CROSSES

CHAPTER I

THE CROSS AND CIRCLE

PROBABLY most of us in our early school-days have played surreptitious games at "noughts and crosses" with our neighbour during lesson-time. It is a very old game, and the diagram on which the figures are marked has been found scratched on the stone seats in the novices' walk of monastic cloisters. It is likely that it may be traced back far beyond the mediæval period, and back into Egypt at least. The history of the game would probably make an interesting study, for it might prove to have a symbolical origin.

The cross and the cipher "nought" (whether a circle or an oval) are two of the oldest and most primitive symbols. The pillar or heap of stones may be an older form than the cross, but the circle is generally found with the pillar, and the cross is either the foundation of a perfect circle or the two are mutually dependent. For, given a point, there are two methods of constructing the plane figure of a circle: to take a line as radius from the point and straightway draw the circumference

with compasses ; or to draw two straight lines which are bisected by this centre point at right angles to each other. The circle may then be drawn with these lines as radii. If the right angles are also bisected by straight lines we have both the Greek equal-armed cross and the diagonal St Andrew's cross within the circle. The svastika is merely the first form of cross with the beginnings of the circle indicated at the ends of the cross. All of these symbolise Life manifesting in Form, or matter in process of redemption, while on the physical plane they signify the sun and the earth. The first stirring of consciousness, Life desiring to manifest, is represented as a point ; this is surrounded by the circle that limits it, and the cross is inherent in the symbol as the two chords upon which the circle is stretched. In these simple geometrical, or rather astronomical, figures the ideal or cosmic cross of manifestation is represented—a conception which seems to have reached Byzantine Christianity from the Egyptian, Hebrew, and Greek mysteries.

The Latin cross is apparently a development of the Egyptian Ankh, the symbol of immortal life, and it often takes the Tau form, without a headpiece. As the cross of the Passion it may have a short upper limb, and the lower limb is much longer than the arms ; as the Resurrection cross-standard it has the three small equal arms, and a long slender stem. As the cross Triumphant in heaven, both the Latin and the Greek forms usually have the

lower member longer than the other three, and the surrounding circle or oval aureole is at some distance, not containing it exactly, as in the form of the ideal cross.

The crucifix is a later development, dating from about the fifth century, and the earliest figures of Christ on the cross are crowned and living, and resemble the "Orantes" or praying saints of the Catacombs, which may be an adaptation of the Ankh form of cross. This is the type of Saxon rood which still remains in a few English churches, as at Romsey and Langford, and on the early Celtic crosses.

When used in architectural ornament, the circle may enclose or be enclosed by a square, and it often contains a cross made of semicircles, as in one type of Maltese cross. When the diagonal cross similarly drawn is also included, the symbol approximates nearly to star and flower shapes, and suggests the influence of the Assyrian rosette or sun-flower. The Gothic rose-windows, the sun-flower and marguerite of the Crusaders and troubadours, and many of the seemingly meaningless *pateræ* in Norman ornament, are developments of the cross and circle, and seem to have originated in the Greek islands (especially Cyprus, Rhodes, and Malta), where Gnostic Christianity still survived. The "mystic rose" of mediæval theology and romance, the "York and Lancaster" and the Tudor rose, were all evolved from these cross-flowers.

There were houses of Templars and Knights of

St John in these Greek islands, and the symbols of Eastern and mysterious origin which were carved in their churches caused suspicion in the minds of the Latin Catholics, and helped to bring about the downfall of these rich military orders. Chief of these figures was a mysterious symbol of the Divine and human Trinities—three interlaced circles, which seemed heretical because the central triangle where the circles overlapped contained a human head, representing the Logos or Atman as a sun-god. The devotion to this symbol was not necessarily more idolatrous than the orthodox veneration of the “Vernicle,” the “true image” of Jesus, preserved in Rome. It was transformed into an orthodox devotion by being called the “Head of St. John,” because the patron saint of the Templars was John the Baptist. It was a solar symbol, nevertheless, and its use during the fifteenth century as an ornament for misereres and in alabaster panels for private devotions may be misleading to the symbolist.

The Rosicrucians, who rediscovered or had preserved the traditional meaning of this and other probably Gnostic symbols, surrounded them with mystery in order to hide their theosophic import from the more intolerant churches. Whether the symbol was a red cross, a rose and cross, or the “St John Head” on a plate, above a tomb, the intention was to symbolise the sun as itself the symbol of the Logos, in the dual male-female aspect, as Wisdom-Love. It is a type of higher Pantheism,

but there is no trace of evidence of the survival of any degenerate ritual of Phrygian Nature-worship in the theory or practice of the Rosicrucians.¹ The cross and circle did not symbolise sex in the ordinary sense, but merely the duality of the second Logos, the condition of manifestation, and hence the interplay of energy and inertia which causes life to appear. It is the symbol of the Incarnation in every aspect, in the Cosmos, the Avatar, or the individual. Therefore the true meaning of these symbols is a metaphysical truth of the highest and most mysterious order, and our childish game of "noughts and crosses" may have its origin in ages and even worlds beyond the memory of man's soul.

¹ Hargrave Jennings's book on the Rosicrucians contains useful illustrations, but its ingenious theories are founded on an entirely mistaken and superficial hypothesis.

CHAPTER II

SYMBOLS OF EGYPT

THE characteristic symbols of Egypt are of vast antiquity, and it is hard to refute the arguments of those who claim even an antediluvian origin for the Great Pyramid and the Sphinx. All that is certain is that these monuments antedate all others of their kind, and that a very ancient tablet records that their origin was not known to the Egyptians themselves in an early dynasty.

Many archæologists have measured and studied, explored and excavated around them, but, although they have speculated widely upon their use and purpose, they have seldom treated them as symbols. Undoubtedly they were a kind of Palladium to Egypt, and probably the Great Pyramid was the repository for the authoritative and original religious writings and symbols of the nation in its early and (to us) prehistoric days. But the form is itself a symbol, and to the enlightened soul beholding it at sunrise or sunset, its summit crowned by the red ball of the sun, it would seem to be a revelation of the nature of the Divine Being. The

circle of infinity and eternity would appear to touch earth through this great mass, triangular in elevation, though square in plan, signifying the mystic Tetrahedron which combines the symbolic Pythagorean numbers, three and four and seven. It has been surmised that the intention of its builders was to make four sphinxes flanking it, as hieroglyphs of the great Kumaras or Powers, and even to carry out the vast symbolical scheme by outer circles representing lesser beings in the spiritual hierarchy, composing thereby a great cosmogony in stone which might witness to the truth for all time. But this scheme—if it ever existed—must have failed like that of the builders of the tower of Babel. According to old and perhaps occult traditions, the Great Pyramid was never a tomb or a granary, but a shrine and a temple of mystery and enlightenment. That mystic creation, the Sphinx, the epitome of human and animal life, the winged and human-headed lion that guards this sanctuary where the mysteries of life and death and rebirth into other worlds were hidden and revealed, was the symbol of an Archangel or superhuman being evolved so far beyond our knowledge that it may guard the secret wisdom and power that is shown and given to pure souls, devoted to the service of the gods. This strange and awful figure is the type of a Guide and Guardian of humanity, an Evangelist, a Watcher and an Holy One, such as the Hebrew prophets saw in visions of the unseen worlds. The "living creatures" of Ezekiel and the four heavenly

beasts of the Apocalypse are guardians of holy things, like this terrible yet beautiful Sphinx, which is an image of divine power made manifest in the combination of the strongest of earth's creatures.

The lotus and the scarabæus, the sacred beetle of the Nile, were symbols of the resurrection of a body and the immortality of the soul. Are not these echoes of the mysteries vague hints unconsciously imparted by the initiates, who revered in these simple forms the working of the great cosmic laws of life that had been taught them under the seal of silence? Though we may prefer to believe that there were poets even in those far-off days, who loved and watched Nature and learnt from her the processes of change of form and rebirth. For, as the Greeks saw the divine life in Nature visible in beauty, and the Jews in power, the Egyptians sought and found truth as science, the knowledge of the laws of life.

The mysteries of ancient Egypt and Chaldæa became the revelations of the early mystic Christianity, and have become mysteries again, according to that law of rhythm which governs symbols as well as nights and days and times and seasons.

The winged disk of Egypt, the symbol of the sun and the soul, of eternity and immortality, became in Christian art the holy Dove, the Spirit brooding over the waters at the Creation, and overshadowing the blessed Virgin Maria (Maya) at the Annunciation. The sacred Tree of Osiris and the Lotus of Isis are merged in the lily-plant, that sometimes

bears a crucifix, and stands between the angel-messenger and the maiden. The scattering and the gathering of the limbs of Osiris,¹ his entombment and resurrection, and the figure of Isis with the infant Horus, were also symbols of Egypt that passed on almost unchanged into the symbology of the early Christians.

¹ See *The Gnostic Crucifixion* (G. R. S. Mead).

CHAPTER III

PLATO AND GREEK ART

It is Plato, the poet-philosopher, who is for us the Pontifex, the bridge-builder, between the geometrical symbolism of the austere and intellectual Egyptians and the Pantheistic nature-symbols of the sensuous and emotional Greeks, whose highest ideal of divinity was Heavenly Beauty, rather than the Divine Power of the Hebrews or the Truth of the Egyptians. This way of symbol is described by Plato in his *Banquet*, or discourse of Love :

“ Now, to go on, or to be led by another, along the right way of love is this : beginning from these beauties of lower rank to go on in a continual ascent, all the way proposing this highest Beauty as an end, and using the rest but as so many steps in the ascent ; to proceed from the beauty of bodies to the beauty of souls, and from the beauty of souls to that of arts, and from the beauty of arts to that of disciplines ; until at length from these sciences he attains that science which is the science of no other thing than the Supreme Beauty ; and thus finally attains to know what is the Beautiful itself

. . . (which) knows neither beginning nor ending, neither growth nor decay, but always IS."

Plato's way through symbols to knowledge of the Supreme Beauty is not a philosophy but a religion, for it cannot be attained by thought alone, but through life and love and action. For him that principle which is the beauty of all forms, the life that pulses through all creation from the rock and tree to the man and angel, is power come forth from the Divine Life—is Itself, in infinite degrees of manifestation as it shines through the veil of illusion which we call matter, but might equally well call mind.

It is strange to pass from Plato's theory of the beautiful to the prosaic statement of one of our highest modern authorities on Greek art. "The Greek mind was not mystical . . . there was little or no mysticism in Greek art," he writes of the beautiful forms that expressed the religious thought and the poetry of that beauty-loving race. Yet what was their whole mythology but a system of mystic symbolism? What were their mysteries but symbolic representations of the mystical life of man in this and other worlds? The great primal and cosmic laws of rhythm, the interaction of energy and inertia, of force and mass, are expressed by their legends of creation or emanation. The wonderful interplay of forces in Nature, as we see it in this world, is dramatised in the stories of the gods and heroes. They are poetic dreams of the powers of Nature, and of their reflections in the powers

of humanity. The life of the world and the life of the soul are mirrored equally in the art which was the glory of Greece. It is therefore mystical or "immediate," in the highest sense—it is a revelation in symbol of the inscrutable and indescribable, a manifestation of the unseen beauty and truth, and it is mystical or "secret" because the full beauty and meaning can only be discerned by the pure or initiated.

It is believed that Egypt was the cradle of Greek civilisation and religion, and hence of Greek art; and how the crude and archaic figures of Egyptian painting and sculpture could be succeeded in a few centuries by the marvels of Phidias and many another unknown artist of his age must be an unanswerable problem for the strictly scientific anthropologist. But Plato, in that description of the ascent to heavenly beauty, has given the key to the mystery of the characteristic development of this symbolism. As the Egyptians sought by the intellect for truth, and found its symbols in the plainest and most geometrical forms, so the Greeks sought that order and harmony of life which is the beauty and joy of Nature. The two ideals are different aspects of the divine Unity expressed by its chief attributes of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness. For the third we must turn to the Semitic creed of righteousness, with its consummation in the self-sacrificing love of Christianity. But, short of the highest spirituality, the Greek symbols mark the highest level to which man has attained in harmony

with his environment. The Greek youth, whether boy or maiden, was probably Nature's most perfect animal, and the worthiest vehicle ever formed for the spirit of humanity. It is no marvel that there was little distinction between the gods and heroes, for, since the same life pulsed through all, it was but the difference in strength and beauty and knowledge that marked the degree as human or divine. The great warrior was a demi-god, the teacher was a messenger of the gods; and both the helpers and the deliverers of mankind were merged in time with the benevolent aspects of Nature and their myths and symbols.

Hermes and Athene, the teachers of the arts and crafts of life, Orpheus the poet and musician, Pythagoras the philosopher, Homer and the heroes of Troy, and the cosmic divinities of Hesiod—all nature-lore and traditional history mingled to make the art of their symbols. The result, beautiful as it is, may seem to be a confused medley; but order becomes apparent when it is recognised that the two aspects, natural and human, are combined in the one set of symbols. As in one sense the gods are the cosmic forces whose interaction is the universal order, the evolution of worlds and beings, so in a deeper sense they are the powers of thought and will that shape the evolution of the human soul.

Myths and legends become significant as well as beautiful when they are seen not only as personifications of Nature, but as symbols of the spiritual

life of humanity. The stories of Persephone and Demeter, of Eros and Psyche, of Prometheus, of Pandora, of Danae and of Perseus and Andromeda, of Endymion and Selene, Narcissus and Echo, of Zeus and Ganymede, of Orpheus and Eurydice—all have their allegorical meaning and purpose, scarcely veiled by the romance and poetry. None can say which came first—the legend or the meaning,—for as they have come down to us in art or poetry they are welded into perfect symbols, and the interpretation is hidden only from those who have lost Plato's key to the ideals of Greek religion. The vision of heavenly beauty reflected in the form, the life, and the soul of humanity—this was the light which illumined the long pilgrimage towards perfection, through life and death, through the ascent into the heaven-worlds and the return to birth, of which Plato speaks again and again, sometimes in myth and parable, sometimes in plainer terms. The beauty of the symbols has misled the modern critics, so that they have overlooked the little mystic clues which are tokens to the initiated—the thyrsus, the lyre, the rock, the panther-skin, and other emblems inherited from older religions. Greece had its mysticism and its symbolism—and, as in earlier and later religions, the creeds or symbols have outlived the faith they represented.

CHAPTER IV

THE NAASARENES OR WATCHERS OF ISRAEL

IT often happens that a young nation learns the symbols of an older race and infuses new life into them. The captivity of Israel was a period in which a transfusion of this kind occurred. The Hebrews were a pastoral and poetic people, child-like, fiercely moral and religious for all their backslidings, and possessed of a faith so strong that the utter failure of their national and personal hopes in this world only led them to seek an explanation in some deeper and more spiritual theology. No more than Job, who was their type and symbol, would they "curse God and die" in the woes of their captivity. They would rather search out the ways of the Almighty, even in His dealings with the other nations. And so there arose a new devotion amongst this simple people, exiled to the vast city of Babylon, the stronghold of religion and of superstition. It may have been suggested by the symbols of sun-worship, or the Assyrian Tree of Life watched by winged gods, for its chief emblems seem to have been the Dawn

of the "Sun of Righteousness," and the "Branch" or rod or stem, the Hebrew word for which closely resembles that for dawn. There was a great spiritual awakening—new worlds and a new future were perceived, and the sincerely pious but materialistic Jews grasped the idea of immortality, of angels, and divine helpers and guides of humanity. This appears first in Deutero-Isaiah, where the coming of Cyrus and the return to Jerusalem are inextricably mingled with mystical hints of the soul's descent into the captivity or prison-house of the body, and the return along the great highway, which is the "Path" in Eastern wisdom. Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Malachi especially are full of Assyrian and Persian symbols, in which the prophets had found new meanings and a new hope for the world. This was the most astounding result of the captivity which had threatened extinction or absorption—that the noblest of the Hebrews, without losing faith in their own calling as a race set apart for a divine purpose, realised that all souls of all nations, the whole earth and all the worlds, were the Lord's, and were "full of His glory." This was the day-star of Christianity, the hope of the Dawn which is seen in many of the Psalms and in the Wisdom-literature, and was materialised in the Jewish Apocalypses. There were Watchers for the Dawn of salvation, not for their own nation alone, but for the whole world. There were Guardians of the sacred tree of life of that race from which the fruitful Branch, the rod of power,

should spring. It was no narrow and tribal view that these Watchers took, but a world-wide prospect; and the Gnostic hymns called by us "Magnificat" and "Nunc Dimittis," and the fragments of verse inserted in the writings of St Paul, are echoes of this pre-Apostolic Christianity. Prophets and priests alike had their share in the "cult," though it may sometimes have been a secret society, during the troubled centuries that elapsed before it took definite form in Christianity. Not only Zoroastrianism with its beautiful expectation of a coming Saviour, but Buddhism with its promise of the Lord Maitreya, and Greek speculations on Plato's hints of a future Teacher, were combined in this new forward movement. "Looking for and hasting the Coming"—this phrase of St Paul's may well have been one of their watchwords, as was that repeated exhortation in the Gospels: "Watch and pray—Watch." Modern theologians' opinions of Jewish Messianic expectations fall far short of the truth of that waiting for the Parousia—just as the Church also has failed to realise the hopes of those long-ago Watchers for the Dawn. Yet, since life and hope are eternal, there may be new watchers for a new dawn and a brighter day than has ever shone on humanity.

"The Sun of Righteousness with healing in his wings," the tree of life and of joyful sacrifice, the mount of trial and of vision, the cave of humiliation, the fire and incense of purification—many an ancient symbol was reborn during the Captivity, trans-

muted in the flame of suffering, to rise again in a new faith whose watchword was: "Arise, shine, for thy Light is come." For through the longing and the waiting of the Watchers a new consciousness was attained—the divine impatience that is Christianity.

CHAPTER V

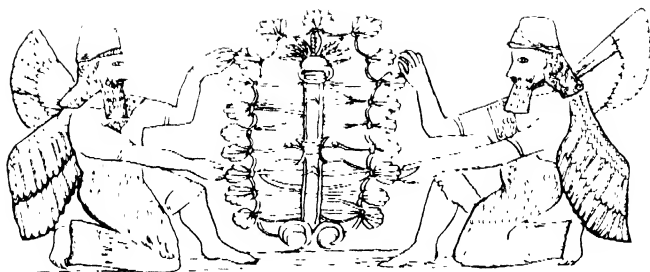
BYZANTINE SYMBOLS

IT was in the centuries known as the "Dark Ages," when Goths, Vandals, and Huns were wrecking the effete civilisation of Rome, that the key of knowledge held by the early Christians, the true Gnostics, was lost. Yet it may be sought and found in the relics of Byzantine art, that strange exotic style of architecture and ornament in which symbolism almost overcame beauty.

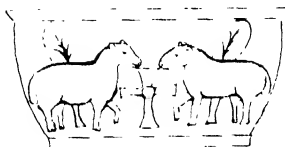
Therefore it was in the main a true instinct which led to the building of apparently inappropriate churches of Byzantine and Lombardic style, during the revival of mediævalism in the Church of England some forty years ago. The severity of the dome and campanile may not harmonise with the cloudy grey English skies as it does with the clear blue of Italy and Greece, and the interior decoration of mosaic and fresco seems foreign and archaic to the average person. But the piety which erected these apparent anomalies and anachronisms was before all things mystical, imaginative, and therefore intuitive. It knew, or more

probably guessed, that there were hidden meanings in the conventional forms of Byzantine ornament, and it had "sensed" in the ancient churches of Eastern Italy the presence of the secret wisdom of an older faith, revealed and concealed at once by the last priests and craftsmen who were in touch with the Gnostic tradition. No one could wish that a style almost as characteristic of another age and country as the pagoda should become general in England, but the symbolist who is not a traveller may well be grateful for the few "exotic" modern churches in which (though sometimes unintelligently) the style and decoration of that lost age and empire are imitated.

There were two great influences in early Byzantine art—Syria and Greece. From Constantinople, the meeting-place of East and West, and Hagia Sophia, the heart of the Christian world in that splendid autumn sunset of the ancient empire, the symbols of the lost wisdom of Gnosticism were spread east and west, into Italy and Gaul, and into North Africa and Southern Russia. Best known to us, next to Hagia Sophia, are the churches of Ravenna, and San Marco at Venice, and these are full of the symbolic ornament of Christian Byzantium. If there are sceptics who doubt the existence of a secret tradition, let them remember that it was within and near the centre of the Byzantine empire that the Cathari, or mediæval heretics, arose, and that these and the Albigenes flourished most in Provence, Lombardy, and South



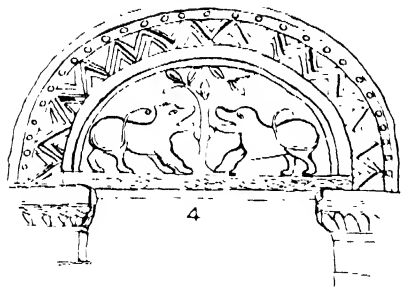
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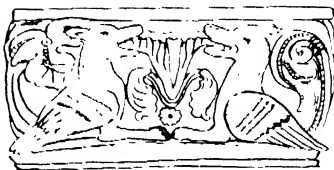
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M. F. H.

PLATE III.


To face p.

Germany, wherever the traditional symbolism had been carried on into Romanesque architecture. It was in Lombardic or Romanesque churches that the greatest mediæval saints and mystics—St Francis, St Clare, St Bernard, St Elizabeth, St Catherine of Siena—received their inspirations. And they were no mere ascetics, but lovers of the birds and beasts and flowers whose images haunt the rich carvings of Byzantine ornament. Religion for them meant abundant life—a flame so strong that it consumed the frail bodies that enshrined it.

The Byzantine empire was not a dreary and colourless abstraction ; it was gorgeous and stormy, passionate, even lurid, full of strange and beautiful or terrible happenings. It was a fitting consummation of all the great empires which were gathered up in that after-glow of the glories of the ancient world. Such was the power of its glamour that it overcame even its conquerors, and absorbed their vitality to endure for centuries longer. It was still full of the ancient joy in life—worldly and Epicurean perhaps, yet nearer to the exultant spirit of early Christianity than the morbid asceticism which spread over Christendom in later times. Solemn and gloomy faces look down from the mosaics of Ravenna, but their exaggerated seriousness is chiefly due to the limitations of material and skill in craftsmanship, and their rich robes show a naïve delight in colour and splendour. Great sorrows came to the rulers and people of Byzantium, but they were vivid souls who lived largely and

adventurously, knowing the value of the process of life, and scarcely touched by the sad self-consciousness and other-worldliness which came over the spirit of Europe before the millennium of Christianity. For by that time the wisdom or Gnosis was lost, except to a few heretics and fewer saints, and the ancient symbols were carved and painted unintelligently or not at all. In a few cases, new and obviously incorrect meanings were given to them by teachers of more zeal than knowledge, and so arose the "Bestiaries," and the *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine, and the *Biblia Pauperum*, which explain with toilsome literalness the symbols and doctrines of a wiser and happier age. Yet the monuments of those last craftsmen who knew, held—and still hold for us—the keys of the lost secrets of life, and those who have the clue to their cipher may read in their simple hieroglyphs something of the Gnosis of early Christianity.

"In this sign conquer": the vision of Constantine is the keynote, as it were, of the symbolism of Byzantine architecture. Everywhere the cross appears, sometimes within the circle in the Greek form, sometimes alone as the Tau or the "Maltese" or adapted svastika, but most often as the Christos monogram, which is called the Labarum or the standard of Constantine. But there was no crucifix in early times, and the cross had no mournful associations: it was a sign of triumph, a cosmic symbol of the redemption of matter and the

overcoming of the world. The cross was the symbol of the At-one-ment of nature through humanity with the Supreme. When this monogram  is placed within a circle, and accompanied by $A\omega$, we have a sacred monogram of the most mysterious kind, as significant as the secret Eastern names of Deity.

Obvious, and wild, guesses have been made about a cryptogram on an ancient throne at Ravenna : as it contains M, two As, and a separated X P, it has been surmised that it stands for a bishop Maximian. This is extremely improbable, and the simpler solution is that it is the combined monogram of MARIA and CHRISTOS—the Wisdom-Love aspect of the Trinity. This combination of Latin and Greek characters was usual in Byzantine cryptograms to increase their significations. In this case further researches reveal other possibilities, and an Asiatic Gnostic might have read into it meanings that would surprise the ordinary modern archæologist. It appears to be a mystic symbol of the real unity and apparent duality of life, and it must have come from one who knew the Eastern teachings that have been called pantheism or nature-worship.

The Greek cross watched by two animals, probably sheep, with trees indicated where their wings would have been in Assyrian treatments of the same design, is obviously a converted Chaldæan or Persian symbol of the tree of life. Very often this same tree appears in Byzantine art, sometimes as a vine, whose berries are pecked by small birds,

while peacocks watch or perch in the branches. Sometimes there is an urn or vase, guarded by these sacred birds of the Eastern Empire, which were symbols of immortality, the sacred birds of the Queen of Heaven (as of Hera or Juno), and the emblems of the Emperor and Empress.

The strange symbols of the Evangelists had for them a mystical and hierarchical significance, and represent also Archangels or great spiritual Powers. The eagle, apart from this, seems to mean the keen insight of high spiritual development, intuition; the lion, winged or not, had a prominent place in Byzantine architecture, and, as in Assyria, was usually the guardian of the door, and the supporter of pillars. The angels with great wings were of Eastern origin also, through Babylonian, Persian, and Jewish tradition.

The foliage of the capitals was generally adapted from the Greek acanthus—which was emblematic of Greece as the oak-leaf is of England—or the lotus of Egypt. The lotus is frequently found in Byzantine work, with the rosette or sunflower of Assyria and the fir-cone of Persia. The chains, spirals, and linked medallions of the borders were of Eastern origin. From Greek art came the characteristic and beautiful conception of Christ as the Good Shepherd—an Orphic symbol, but also a Johannine metaphor. The apostles and Christian souls were generally figured as sheep in the early and symbolic representations, in allusion to the tenth and the last chapters of St John's Gospel,

which, emanating from Ephesus, was specially the Gospel of the Eastern and semi-Asiatic Church. The vine, which enriches the capitals of pillars and the borders of tombs, is Greek also, as are the ivy-trails and the bay or olive wreaths which encircle sacred monograms.

No art is more symbolic or perhaps more varied than the Byzantine. Even the ornamental frets or lattices are no mere conventional chequer-work, but are made up of symbols—svastika, spiral, cross, square, and circle, geometrically arranged. Both symbolism and ornament are overdone, perhaps, yet the result is fascinating and mysterious, and the hints of a hidden and mystical meaning are a definite promise to the seeker.

And what do they mean, these crosses and circles, trees and vases and birds and beasts, lilies and lotuses, and vines and fir-cones, and angels and Evangelistic symbols?

Life, the glory of divine and immortal life, pulsing through all forms, all worlds, seen and unseen, through stones and trees and worms and angels, from the highest to the lowest, whirling down the spiral, slowly toiling back again with the spoils of earth's experiences. For above the quaint stiff saints of Ravenna or Mount Athos, and the rich-robed rulers of Byzantium, there sits enthroned upon the world the Christ in Majesty, the first-fruits of humanity, the reconciler and unifier, the At-one-ment of God and man. This was the meaning of the glory and pride of life, in the

view of this great empire to which in its early days the mystic Christianity was entrusted. Life was beautiful, joyful, sacred—both the forms and the souls they enshrined; but holier and more wonderful still was the spirit, the divine fire, of which the soul itself was the casket. Sacred as life was, sometimes the physical life must be given as a willing sacrifice—sometimes, maybe, even the soul might be broken to set the spirit free; but that is a mystery of the inner life of the saints. Deep within and far above all that is seen pulses that life which is divine, the spring and fountain of all, that which nourishes and sustains soul and body alike, purifies and regenerates—a power of which the sun with its light and life-giving influence is the chief symbol, but only the symbol.

Byzantine Christianity had its affinities with Mithraism—that is undeniable. But it would be truer to say that it was as a crucible, in which the older religions were mingled together and purged of their dross, to emerge in a gold that promised to be as bright as the backgrounds of the unfading mosaics in the Byzantine churches. Sun, serpent, stone and tree worship, all the so-called pantheism and polytheism of the ancient world, mixed with Greek philosophy, Jewish monotheism, and Christian mysticism, and formed a Church with a symbolic language that could be understood by all the peoples of the known world. That Church and Empire failed to fulfil its mission (as churches and empires have failed before and since), but, although the

message was garbled, it was carried far and wide by the craftsmen and the scribes who learnt their arts in the churches and monasteries of the Eastern Empire. Through the Celtic Church this symbolism found its way into Ireland, Cornwall, Wales, and Scotland—through Charlemagne's Empire to France and Germany, though in weaker and vaguer waves, losing the knowledge of its meaning, and becoming a conventional art-form, until it was superseded by a new and natural method of expression.

CHAPTER VI

NORMAN SYMBOLS

FROM the golden splendour of Byzantium we pass on to a grey Norman church in an English village. It was built during the twelfth century, with cathedral-like proportions, for Norman times, and very richly though somewhat roughly carved, so that it is the typical church of its period.

It is possible that its ornament was influenced by the fact that there was a house of Templars a mile or two distant, but there is little reason to suppose that any secret tradition was expressed in this or any other of the parish churches erected during this century of religious activity. Yet there are strange Oriental symbols mixed haphazard with apparently conventional ornament, showing links with older faiths, and perhaps even glimpses of other-world experiences.

Men travelled far in those days, and Constantinople or Jerusalem itself was nearer to a pious pilgrim or merchant than to a modern middle-class tourist. True, they meant perhaps a year's journeying and very many hardships, but the standard

of comfort was lower and that of endurance higher. A pilgrim might go forth provided only with staff and scrip and trust in the Lord and His saints, living and departed, as in modern days only a Buddhist monk or a pilgrim to Lourdes would dare to do. And these mediæval travellers who passed from convent to convent saw many things, and brought back strange devices, seeing the marvel and ingenuity rather than the meaning. But sometimes they also learnt Eastern wisdom and brought back doctrines which seemed to the bigoted and ignorant to be incompatible with the teachings of Holy Church. It was not only the avarice of kings but also the fanaticism of priests and people that crushed the Templars, and destroyed many of the carvings where they had represented their Eastern learning by symbols incomprehensible to those outside their order. There is no enmity more bitter than that between sects who do not understand each other's symbols.

But there is one sphere of mediæval symbolism which may not owe everything to Byzantine art. In those days of battles and plagues, rough surgery and nursing, there were men who had come very near to death, and had been in trance for hours or even days. Passing beyond earth-life and the limits of the senses, they had reached or sighted other spheres of consciousness, and yet returned to tell what they had seen. Here again are symbols, and there are always the same signs for suffering and joy in every vision of the soul in the under-

world. The Venerable Bede tells of Drithelm, sorely wounded in battle, who during three days of trance passed through Purgatory to the gates of a Paradise which is not the Heaven of the Beatific Vision, but a place of rest and preparation. In the same chronicle is a shorter account of Fursey, a shepherd, who passed through a similar experience. In the *Golden Legend* there is the story of St Patrick's journey to the underworld. There is also the vision of the Italian monk, Alberico, which must have helped to shape the *Divine Comedy* of Dante. Later still is the quaint and circumstantial account of the trance and vision experienced by the Monk of Evesham Abbey. All through these visions the same symbols appear—the alternate fierce heat and cold and raging winds of the regions in purgatory where the base passions of selfishness are expiated through vain desire and remorseful loathing. Invariable, too, are the fresh fields and gardens where good deeds are rewarded and fair visions of heavenly peace and beauty are vouchsafed to the pious and aspiring soul. All these are symbols found in almost every faith, but it would be hard to prove any connection between some of the traditions, and impossible to declare that the visions were not genuine psychic experiences. The Norman churches, with their rich carving and quaint archaic paintings, were full of reminiscences of far-off Eastern lands, and even of the hidden worlds. Surely travellers' tales of wild beasts and nightmare glimpses of astral

monsters inspired some of the hideous grotesques on corbels and gargoyles outside the churches, and the beak-heads—guardians of the threshold—in the mouldings of Norman doors, alternating with the zigzag moulding that in Egyptian art meant water and was the symbol of the astral plane? Probably it was not by chance that they carved the tree of life and its watching beasts in the tympanum of the doorways—the theme of the Hebrew poet who wrote of the lost garden of Eden where it grew and was guarded by heavenly Beings. No doubt the tree typified the spiritual life nourished by the sacraments of the Church, and the watching beasts may have meant either guardians of the mysteries, or the conflict between the watching angels and the attacking demons. But it may be surmised, from analogy with a Byzantine symbol in which a peacock and peahen watch beside a tree that is also a cross, that the mystery of earthly life may have been intended as well as the spiritual.

Within the door are the stoup and font, symbols of the water of purification, of death and rebirth, and of that mystic way of purgation which, to the Christian, lies within the gate of deliverance. Norman fonts are often plain, rough-hewn tubs, but sometimes they are richly carved with figures symbolical of the twofold nature of man. The mermaid, the centaur, the fish, or the tree of life again with its watchers, are the most frequent devices. But it would be futile to suggest that there is any consistent or intelligent scheme of symbology

in Norman parish churches. There are strong traces of Byzantine and Egyptian influences, and there are pateræ which are duplicates of Assyrian wheels and rosettes, but this does not mean that esoteric or Gnostic doctrines were taught or even known by the priesthood in general. It does not even prove that the guilds of Freemasons had all the knowledge that has been claimed for them, for signs of the Zodiac and the " Evangelistic symbols " are mingled unmeaningly with merely geometrical or fanciful devices. It is likely that many men guessed that there were mysteries implicit in Christianity, though known only to the few, but there is probably no Norman church in which the symbols are explicit and intelligible.

CHAPTER VII

GOTHIC ART

THE symbols in Norman churches are of Oriental or Byzantine origin, but a century or two later a new consciousness and a new ideal of life seemed to arise in Christianity. Even in the austere simplicity of Early English work a fresh spirit of joy appears. The tree of life is no longer the stiff palm or the stunted bush of the Eastern desert ; it has taken on the strength and beauty and graciousness of a tree in a Northern forest. The conventional zigzags of water and flame are carved no more. The curves of leaves and flowers inspire the Gothic tracery, and its ornament is frankly naturalistic, for the mediæval Church that produced St Francis and the mystics had realised that "Heaven and *earth* are full of His glory." The ancient world had given its highest worship to the sun, the creator and destroyer of life : the Gothic world loved and adored the divine miracle of earth, and symbolised it by the sacred tree of Life Manifest.

There was no decrease in the spirit of wonder,

but it had been transformed from fear of the unknown into delight in the familiar and obvious beauties of the world. The life of the fields and woods became interesting and significant, as it had been to the ancient Greeks; and even the saints dared to seek and love the beauty of that Nature which the Anglo-Saxons had dreaded, and the Normans defied in their pride and despised in their asceticism. Something of the spirit of Greek art is revealed in the pure beauty of early Gothic work—the soaring lines of the arcades, the stiff freshness of the foliage, as of the straight growth and crisp delicacy of woodlands in spring. In that earliest dawn of the Renaissance the revelation of life's mysteries seemed palpably nearer. A new light had reached the saints and the craftsmen, and the poets who sang of chivalry and the mystic way of love. Probably it came from the East again, by means of the later Crusades, and from Sicily and Provence through the troubadours and the cycles of romance that interpreted the vividly emotional and varied life of the time, by revealing the passionate idealism behind its outward Hedonism. It may be that the insight of the Celt also had its share in the awakening of the Western world to the significance of everyday wonders.

There was an outburst of spring songs and hymns to the Virgin—the mystical blue-robed goddess of Spring, the symbol of the world-soul, and the Mother of life. Demeter, Isis, Diana, Freya—each and all of them seem to find expression in

the mediæval symbol of the Madonna. Yet it was not the Nature-worship of Paganism, but the recognition of the mystery of Life manifest in Form—the Incarnation, in the phraseology of the theologians. Not Pantheism, but the spirit of St John's Gospel of the sacramental life, transfigured the world for the mediæval mystics and artists. Too often the idea behind asceticism is less renunciation than contempt of earth ; but it is reverence and love for the meaning and the purpose of the world that speaks in the restrained beauty of the sculptures of Chartres and Rheims and Ely and Lincoln. The wonder of life had not faded as the spirit of fear was transcended, but instead of the awe of unknown powers there had come the thrill of a new consciousness of unity. The divine seemed nearer to the human, less awful and more beautiful, when Nature was seen not as a hindrance but as a link in the universal order. There had been times when Nature had appeared to be the enemy of man, and he had sought in dreams of a transcendent God in a Heaven beyond the stars for a refuge from her wanton cruelty and ruthless punishment for broken laws. But as men learned to conquer Nature by obedience, this attitude changed, and the beauty of the world dawned upon the slow minds and childlike hearts of the mediæval poets and artists.

It is instructive to watch the gradual development of landscape painting in early Flemish and Italian art. At first it is almost as slight an indica-

tion of the scene as the notices hung in the Elizabethan theatres: "This is a forest," "This is a heath"; for a few stiffly drawn trees or conventional rocks gave enough for the imagination to work upon. There was little or no attempt to make anything more than a symbol of some aspect of Nature, until the time of Giotto. Then, slowly, the whole idea of the relation of Nature towards God and man was deepened. The unity of life, taught by the misunderstood cosmic symbols handed down through the Catholic Church, was glimpsed if not rediscovered, and everywhere in art there are hints and traces of this. Sometimes they are timid, as if still fearing heterodoxy; sometimes luxuriant and joyful, as at Auxerre and Southwell Minster, and many a smaller church where the craftsman worked his will untroubled by theological doubts and scruples. In painting this spirit expressed itself in a wonderful and exquisite care for detail—the flowers and grass of a foreground, the windings of a river, and the distant towers of tiny cities in a background. Art had conquered tradition and convention, though

“ Scarcely at once she dared to rend the mist
Of devious symbols : but soon having wist
How sky-breadth and field-silence and this day
Are symbols also in some deeper way,
She looked through these to God, and was God’s
priest.”

For symbolism is not theology, but art and poetry—truth enshrined by imagination as life is en-

shrined in form. Perhaps it is only in so far as priests, prophets, and philosophers have been poets and artists that they have revealed truth. It is not in abstract and mathematical terms that the great Teachers of the world have made known their doctrines, but in the homely language and with the familiar images of everyday life. The Way and the Path, the Kingdom and the City, the Gate, the House and Garden, Fire, Light, Water, Wine and Bread—all these symbols are in the Gospels, and many of them are also found in older Greek or Eastern religions. Clement of Alexandria wrote: "Let the dove, the fish, the vessel flying before the wind, the harmonious lyre used by Polycrates, and the marine anchor sculptured by Seleucus be signs unto you." Such are the homely yet significant symbols that have puzzled students of the art of the Catacombs.

Not Nature alone but use, and all that responds to the needs of humanity, has its degree of meaning. To a Buddhist, the wheel, the bowl, and the yellow robe are sacred emblems, as well as the rosary that aids his prayers and has its own esoteric interpretation. The Zoroastrian reveres not only the great forces of Nature, light, fire, the stars, and the four elements, but also the red Thread that symbolises the immortality of his soul. For man and his handiwork have their part in the cosmos which is the manifestation of the Supreme Life, and his immortality is the complementary doctrine to the divine immanence in Nature.

CHAPTER VIII

ROMANCE AND THE TROUBADOURS

MANY legends of mediæval romance are symbols of mystical truths, half known, half guessed. We are told that there are only two themes for the epic and romance—the conflict, or the wandering of the hero. Both of these themes have their mystical significance, because both are cosmic verities, laws by which life is made manifest. The conflict of light and darkness is rhythm or periodicity, the wandering is progress or evolution: together they make up the life of suns and stars and the body and soul of man and all creatures. The wandering or Quest is one, but the ways are many. The alchemist's search through study for the elixir of life is no less romantic than the knight-errant's search for adventure—truth through action—and the saint's endeavour to find it through holiness. It is the same Quest in the legend of the Holy Grail, in the *Little Flowers of St Francis*, in the *Romance of the Rose*, Wäinämöinen's search for the magic cauldron, or in the story of Faust. The spirit of adventure breathes not only

in the strange Saxon wander-story of St Andreas, in the Voyage of St Brandon, or *Beowulf*, but also in the mystical writings of hermits and anchoresses, enclosed in forest huts or caves, or in cells clinging snail-like to the walls of a church. Only theirs were soul-wanderings through unknown worlds, into heights and depths beyond the scope of knight-errant or early scientist, whose sphere was merely the world of men.

Conflict or quest—these are the two comprehensive symbols of life, and they are of universal and of personal value. They signify the conditions of the world of activity in which self-consciousness is won, the base of the triangle of manifestation, of which the two sides are the descent into matter by the soul, and the ascent after redemption or transmutation. Warrior, scientist, philanthropist—there is room for all these and more on that broad base. The fighter, the seeker, the lover, the sufferer, and the helper—all these are heroic figures, and where they are there is romance and poetry. And they are everywhere.

Wherever darkness is, there light strives to overcome it; wherever need arises, help will somewhere be seeking to reach it. Even where beauty has been sacrificed to greed, Nature or art will make their pathetic efforts to renew it. For where Nature fails in her difficult task of overcoming man-made hideousness, the human heart will still express its longing for the ideal beauty in some childish, uncouth way, or even it may be by the nobility and

stoicism of the soul in the face of despair. Warrior, seeker, lover, helper—these need no grandeur of environment for their battlefield or their wanderings. The great Nature-symbols have their equivalent in the heart and mind of man, and he has well been called the “microcosm.” Seas and mountains, gardens and deserts, clouds and stars—all these have their counterpart in the inner world of the soul. All these are to be found in that pilgrimage of the mystic way which all souls shall tread, yet each shall walk alone.

CHAPTER IX

SAINTS AND THEIR SYMBOLS

DOWN in a Devonshire valley, hidden amongst trees, stands a fifteenth-century church of red sandstone. It has a good tower and pleasing proportions, though its exterior is scarcely remarkable in that county of fine churches. But its most striking and interesting feature is the chancel screen, with its panel paintings of saints. These were a characteristic of the district, and it cannot be claimed that this is the best series of all, for high up on the moors there are panels with the jewel-like colouring of miniatures in missals, while down in the south and west there are more ambitious efforts and perhaps a wider choice of subjects. But this series has an animation and a spirituality which make it unique. These paintings are the result of a mind (whether that of a monk or mere craftsman) which dared to think, and an imagination which was not afraid to reveal its vision of the lives and souls of the saints. It is no prosaic set of apostles with emblems of their martyrdoms, or prophets with scrolls of prophecy

—the usual and almost hackneyed theme—but a popular collection of saints whose stories are told in the *Golden Legend*, which was the great religious romance of the Middle Ages. The characteristic of the panels is that these figures are not stiffly grouped or posed as decoration, but conceived as at some dramatic moment in their lives, so that each is a little picture and a symbol in itself. These are not visions of saints triumphant in the bliss of Heaven, but of the saints militant on earth, at some instant of conversion, ecstasy, or conflict with evil.

All are fascinating, but quaintest of all is St Juliana, a sturdy and cheerful maiden, thrashing a humorous little black demon—a panel that was evidently intended to be amusing as well as instructive. Scarcely less dramatic is the figure of St Hubert, a hunter with bow and arrows, starting in amazement at the hart with the crucifix between its horns. Did the artist really mean to convey the message that the Lord Himself suffered in the pain and distress of these little ones, the wild creatures of the woods? It may be, for the most beautiful of all these quaint panels is that of St Francis, the lover of Nature and friend of all creatures, beholding the vision of the Crucified Seraph. Whoever painted these saints was a Franciscan at heart, whether he wore the friar's russet garb or the cord of a Tertiary on the dress of a craftsman.

It is a wide and complex subject, this of saints and their symbols. Sometimes, as in St Catharine with her sun-wheel and sword, and St Ursula, the

“Little Bear” or star-maiden, with her eleven thousand virgins, slain by arrows (it may be of the Sun or of Orion the hunter), we seem to be in the region of solar and stellar mythology. Again, in the symbols of St Peter and St Andrew we touch the Greek Mysteries of the soul’s progress. In St Francis with the Stigmata, and St Catharine of Siena with the heart and crown of thorns, we see the typical saints of mediæval mysticism and Christian psychology. To them the Way is a Via Dolorosa for the body, though they may rejoice in the spirit unceasingly. They represent the sorrowful cults of the Middle Ages, after the Black Death had changed the face of Europe, and terrified men out of their growing joy in life by revealing its brevity and uncertainty. The Five Wounds, the Instruments of the Passion, and the rather gruesome “St John Heads,” with the accompanying representation of the Resurrection from the tomb—all these subjects, generally carved and painted on small alabaster slabs for use in private devotion, are typical of the mediæval cult of sorrow and death, with its resulting other-worldliness. It was a passing phase of reaction into asceticism, after a tendency to florid art and sensuousness in life; but this reaction is normal, and may well occur again. It is not wholly morbid, even when, as in the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries, it takes the art-form of shrouded skeletons, *Danses Macabres*, or the skull and cross-bones of Jacobean and Georgian monuments. This is but

the sign of the Balances—the knowledge that death is after all the reaction from life, as life is from death—that the swing of the pendulum brings each in its turn, the forthcoming and the withdrawal, the life visible and invisible.

We have seen how the lily-plant that stands between the angel and the Virgin at the Annunciation is linked with the Assyrian Tree of Life and its watchers, as well as with the crucifix of mediæval Christianity. This lily-plant or branch carried by the angel symbolises the going forth into manifestation—the cross and the reed are the same thyrsus of initiation again, heralding the entry into and manifestation on other planes of being. It is all one Life, though to us but one side is visible, and we may know the whole circle only as we journey along our own microcosmic orbit. The one great law of evolution holds sway throughout the worlds; light and darkness succeed each other rhythmically, action and reaction occur inevitably, and compensation is always made. And through the working of this law the “hidden steersman of the universe” makes his way, conquering by his obedience, ruling even while he submits to the inexorable decrees, and ringing endless changes on the same set of laws, which but for that divine force might mean nothing more than great monotonous cycles of events. We may call that Guide Hermes, or Christ, or the Spirit of Life, or Vishnu; but for all times and nations He is the great Ideal, and the Great Reality.

CHAPTER X

ALCHEMY AND NATURAL MAGIC

LIFE has taken form in order to transmute it into ever fairer and nobler shapes: in this divine alchemy is the revelation of the meaning of all creation. To hasten this transmutation was the real aim of the mediæval alchemists and magicians. Their quest was not for the gold that would give earthly power and pleasure, but for the "philosopher's stone," which would impart secret wisdom to interpret the mysteries of the visible and invisible universe. Was it anything less than Solomon's Seal of power over the angels and demons of Nature that they sought so earnestly? Was it not the secret of immortality that they desired when they spoke of the elixir of life? Are not these images mere hints and symbols of a hidden tradition, obscured in the dark ages, but never wholly forgotten?

Apparently it was from the East again that light first reached the early scientists. Averroes, an Arab physician, scholar, and mystic, was the teacher of many seekers in many lands and later centuries. From time to time there arose men of

knowledge—wizards and magicians to their contemporaries—who used and improved upon the scientific lore that came from the East: Abelard, Friar Bacon, Dr Faustus, Canon George Ripley, and at the Renaissance a group of mysterious wandering scholars, of whom Cornelius Agrippa and Paracelsus were pre-eminent for the originality of their thought and the scandals spread by their enemies. Undoubtedly these adepts in strange knowledge brought persecution upon themselves from the orthodox teachers and healers, as much by the mystery in which they clothed their teaching as by the evident “heresy” it contained. And that habit—assumed at first for reasons of prudence—remained a characteristic of scientific students, even in centuries and countries where heresy was tolerated or enjoined, and mediæval orthodoxy was persecuted in its turn. Few works are more elusive and studiously obscure than the little books on alchemy and “natural magic” printed in England during the seventeenth century. They often hold secrets of philosophy and religion and science which we are only now beginning to rediscover, but without the key of modern knowledge they would usually seem mere jargon. And this, again, is due to the loss or ignorance of the symbols employed. Sol, Luna, Mercury—sulphur, salt, quicksilver—body, soul, spirit—the red and green dragons, the eagle, the fire, the vessel, Hyliaster, Athanor—how are all these terms to be reconciled and applied so as to make sense, physical or mystical, out of

the recipes for experiments that may be either literal or allegorical? There are authors of whom it is certain that their aim was merely the gaining of wealth, or the discovery of a universal specific for disease; yet even in them some quaint homily or allegory will suddenly reveal that the writer knew that the elixir of life or the philosopher's stone was some occult power of renewing the life of the soul. Perhaps it may be suspected that the moral is only a blind to conceal the scientific secrets given to the world with too rash a generosity; yet the piety is undoubtedly sincere. Moreover, time after time it appears that knowledge and power were refused to an otherwise satisfactory pupil whose stability of character could not be trusted. It is definitely recorded of one seventeenth-century adept, whose career is a baffling mystery, that he gently rejected a promising student before whom he had performed experiments of transmutation, on the ground that he could not be trusted to use such knowledge entirely for the good of humanity.

In later times the secrets were less strictly kept, and therefore more easily lost. The reputed adventurers and charlatans who appeared and disappeared in France during the eighteenth century were probably not wholly unskilled in arts and sciences that then seemed miraculous, and are still unexplained or misunderstood. Mesmerism, hypnotism, clairvoyance, and mediumship were practised long before the researches of modern psychology had proved that the supernormal was not the supernatural.

CHAPTER XI

MODERN ART

MEDIÆVAL art was perhaps too slavishly faithful to ancient conventions in its use of symbolism. In fact, the symbol often became a mere ornament, traditional but meaningless to the artist or craftsman. Yet, from time to time, new interpretations must be given, or the symbol will either fade and die, or be preserved as an idol or fetish. Thus it is that new schools of art arise, to give new life to the old images, new interpretations of facts or dogmas, and, in so doing, to bring the truths discovered in the past into relation with the present needs of humanity.

Two artists of the nineteenth century have given us these new interpretations of ancient Greek myths and Christian symbols, and they were the disciples—direct and indirect—of the Pre-Raphaelite school, which professed to derive its inspiration from the simplicity and truth of mediæval art. Undoubtedly Watts derived the form of his art from the great Venetians, but none the less his spirit is in harmony with the Pre-Raphaelite movement.

though his technique is practically the antithesis of its teaching. His genius was for the large conceptions and magnificent outlines of sculpture, his outlook on life was the wide view of a prophet and seer. In Greek mythology he saw the great forces of Nature, in Christian dogma he saw high mystical truths, and when he looked at the world and humanity with his prophet's gaze, he found new symbols for the life of the soul. It is often denied by lovers of mediæval art that there is any beauty in his work at all, beyond that of the ideas, which are undoubtedly fine in their noble stoicism. His colouring is frequently unpleasing, misty and grey or brown and dirty-looking, while his drawing is often vague and sometimes incorrect. Nevertheless, he has created a new set of symbols for his generation—the sad and somewhat bewildered last quarter of the nineteenth century, suffering from the reaction after the brilliant and self-complacent accomplishments of the great Victorian period.

Love and Life, Love and Death, Love Triumphant, Hope, the All-Pervading, and the Dweller in the Innermost—these at least, with their stoical faith in the ultimate victory of goodness, truth, and beauty, after all the apparent failure of earth's promise of joy—these have permanently enriched the world's treasury of symbols. We may question their beauty, we may feel that their philosophy is that of a sensitive soul who has endured the greatest disillusionment of life, and is therefore out of tune

have ruled Art ; in France, a craving for realism and sensationalism, which has sacrificed the spirit to the flesh. Recently strange schools have arisen, and the professed mystics have made many vain attempts to embody profound or vague ideas. Sometimes the resulting forms are beautiful, but there are few, if any, that will endure to become permanent additions to the world's small treasury of symbols representing cosmic or eternal truths.

CHAPTER XII

THE USE OF SYMBOLS

THE great and ever-present danger in the use of symbols is anthropomorphism, which speedily degenerates into idolatry. In every religion this normally occurs, and is combated by iconoclasts, or puritans, or reformers, who invariably sweep away much that is true as well as that which is false. The faith is left purer perhaps, but cold and bare and weak after its strenuous purification.

Now, the root of the danger is this : symbols are not to be considered as facts, but as signs of laws and principles. These laws are not of the past alone but the present and future also. They are not static but dynamic. They are ever-present in perpetual motion, here and now and always during a cycle of manifestation ; they are only dormant during that mystery of Rest, the Sabbath or " Night of the Gods."

Hence, if we insist upon giving our symbols a local and temporal habitation, placing them definitely as historical events in some past century, disregarding the fact that these events were but

manifestations of laws and principles, and that our concern is chiefly with the laws, then we are in danger of idolatry. This is the special difficulty in the latest religions, Christianity and Moham-medanism, and even Buddhism in some degree, because their comparatively recent origin makes it possible for relics of their Founders to be preserved, and also because there is the temptation to supply historical details which might add weight to their doctrines and help conviction.

In Nature-worship the danger is equally great. Where, as in Greece and India and Egypt, strong emphasis was laid on the fact of divine immanence through the agency of angels or Devas and lesser spirits, immediately there came the tendency to confuse the actual mountain, river, or tree which was the sign or symbol, with the spirit that dwells within and around and overshadows the shrine. It may be well to pay reverence to the material symbol in Nature that is the physical expression of some great law or profound truth, but it must always be recognised as but the image, reflection, or sample of the whole truth which is beyond our comprehension. We may see the earth or even the universe as "a huge kind of Sacrament" (in the phrase of a seventeenth-century mystical divine), but that is not worship of earth nor pan-theism. It is nearer the Hebrew monotheism of the Psalms and the prophetic writings: "The Lord is in His holy Temple; let all the earth keep silence before him"; "Heaven and earth are full

of His glory." But this is a use of symbol which has escaped or passed the danger of idolatry, and become a high type of mysticism, which has its own possibilities of error and may relapse into materialism.

But for those who use in meditation simpler forms of symbol—either natural or geometrical forms—there are a few facts to remember. First, the symbol is only a shorthand note or scientific formula for a law or principle, governing many worlds visible and invisible. As the symbols are studied, they have a strange tendency to combine and become greater but fewer, until they all seem to be withdrawn into two processes—attraction and repulsion, or the centrifugal and centripetal forces—in symbolic language, the beating of the heart of God, or the outbreathing and inbreathing. But seen in detail there are other laws within that process, and all their symbols may be studied and meditated upon until, with Sir Thomas Browne, we “pursue (our) reason |to an ‘O altitudo!’”

For this purpose the use of symbols in meditation is highly to be commended, for, as the mind follows them from plane to plane, or from human life to history, and then to Nature and universal laws, truths will be seen anew, and knowledge will become wider and deeper. Gradually a truer perspective will be visible, and instead of the flat pictures of life as seen from the standpoint of our temporary personalities, the height and depth

will be realised, and the centre and circumference and that which lies between. This experience is sometimes called "cosmic consciousness," and supposed to be a mystical and inward development alone ; but the mystics themselves, by their own testimony, have often attained it by the use of symbol, until the ability for pure contemplation was developed by the practice.

CONCLUSION

SYMBOLISM is not theology, but the art and poetry of religion. It is truth clothed in beauty by the imagination; power made manifest in miniature; goodness expressed by tokens of love, eternity, and infinity revealed in the simplest terms of time and space.

The buried treasures of Egypt, India, Crete, Assyria, and Persia have disclosed the knowledge given far back in antiquity. And there is no contradiction in their doctrines, though the symbols vary from geometrical figures to the roughest and coarsest imitation and idolatry of natural forms. Always the object of reverence is Life, essential Life, revealed in the working of the laws of Nature, and hidden in the lowliest as well as the noblest forms. Spirit in matter, life in form, the God in His shrine or temple—it is all one and the same Life, whether the philosopher and scientist, the mystic or theologian defines it in words. The mysteries of the religions and the highest flights of the poets and philosophers lead to the same goal—the devout recognition of the divine immanence

in Nature, and the potentiality of the divine Manifestation in humanity.

There is Life transcendent and Life immanent, and the link between them is Life manifest in the divine consciousness of the spark of the soul. It is the same Life through all, from the Gods to the dust, but the potentiality of self-consciousness is not awake in all. This mystery of eternal Life, in which birth and death and all that lies between them are symbols and sacraments, is the pilgrim soul's progress in the search for that real and Divine Consciousness.

It may be objected that symbol even of the highest type is not the last word in religion, for the judgment of reason and "intuition" have a simpler way to declare. This is true, for beyond the Trinity of Light and Life and Love is the ultimate Reality, which no symbol can express, not only because it is inexpressible in Itself, but because that in us which is capable of response to it is of Its own nature and needs no intermediary. "Spirit with spirit can meet"—they are indeed always at one with each other, though not always conscious of it. It is the illuminated soul that demands symbolism, and finds it everywhere: the soul that has arrived at the consciousness of union has transcended this need and has knowledge in itself.

For us the ultimate symbol of God is therefore Life. Yet He is more than and includes Life as we know it, and not in the symbol shall we find Him, but rather in our dream about the symbol—that is, in the consciousness of our deepest Self.

We have seen that the symbols of early races were recognitions of divine immanence—the sun and moon and stars, the tree that typified earth, and the birds that represented that eternal wanderer the soul of man. Stars, clouds, rainbows, grass and flowers, birds and beasts—all these everyday wonders of the world were recognised as symbols of the divine life of the soul and of its immortality.

“ Earth’s crammed with heaven,
 And every common bush afire with God,
 But only he who sees takes off his shoes ;
 . . . We stand here witnessing for God’s
 Complete, consummate, undivided work,—
 That not a natural flower can grow on earth
 Without a flower upon the spiritual side.
 . . . If a man could feel,
 Not one day in the artist’s ecstasy,
 But every day, feast, fast, or working-day,
 The spiritual significance burn through
 The hieroglyphics of material shows,
 Henceforward he would paint the globe with wings,
 And reverence fish and fowl, the bull, the tree,
 And even his very body as a man.”

Not Nature alone, but all the simple and common objects of our daily round—the house, the path, the garden, the bridge, the wheel, the cup, the water of purification, the bread we eat, the wine we drink, with all the homely marvels of their tending and making, from the earliest miracle of grain in the ground and graft on the vine—all this is symbol and mystery.

“ God is seen God
 In the star, in the stone, in the flesh, in the soul and the
 clod.”

It is a strangely sincere and simple world that we have found revealed in the symbols of ancient races—of Egyptians, Aryans, Jews. These primitive worshippers of Life had a code of laws and a standard of moral values that shame the modern world. To them the most heinous crimes were the desecration and taking of life, because these crimes were sacrilege, irreverence for the highest known symbol of Deity. We, whose laws are based on the sanctity of property, are more likely to punish the theft of a handful of food or fuel than the desecration of innocent life—of the living temples of God. Have we not much to learn of true values and meanings from these far-off and simple peoples? There are so-called “savage” tribes to this day who have kept the ancient tradition of reverence for divine immanence, and whose chief care is still that their race may be preserved in health and strength, so that the returning souls of their greatest heroes may be attracted to the bodies prepared for them. To such heathen races, as to the ancient peoples whose symbols we have tried to bring once more into the stream of life, there was no hard-and-fast line between the sacred and the secular, for all life was a form of the divine power. Priests and ritual they may have had, but these were symbols of symbols, reminders of the great Temple-service of Nature.

To us as to them, Life is the great Hierophant of the soul. Though we hold no creed and acknowledge no authority or dogmas, still we must

tread the mystic Way, and the ritual of the ancient mysteries comes to each of us in his degree. We may shrink from the thyrsus-touch of the Master of the Ceremonies, may strive to escape, to disobey, or even to break his potent wand : none the less must we go through the initiations of the lesser Mysteries, though we think we are but treading the path of everyday life. In the end we may perceive the meaning of our own particular life—or it may be of all life visible and invisible, through that one symbol, ourself, in whom we may find at last the divine Life made manifest.

This then is the science of symbolism—it is the recognition of the real unity of the laws of Life in all spheres, spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical. Through all the worlds the divine Life flows, according to the laws which it both makes and obeys. Where its flow is checked there is tumult and delay ; but the river of Life flows on unchanged in its aim, though its course may be altered and its wanderings longer. Now and again in history we see that the worship of self-will, that is, sin, war, and death, has overcome the true worship of divine life and peace and joy ; but there is always a resurrection, and a new revelation of the Gospel of Life.

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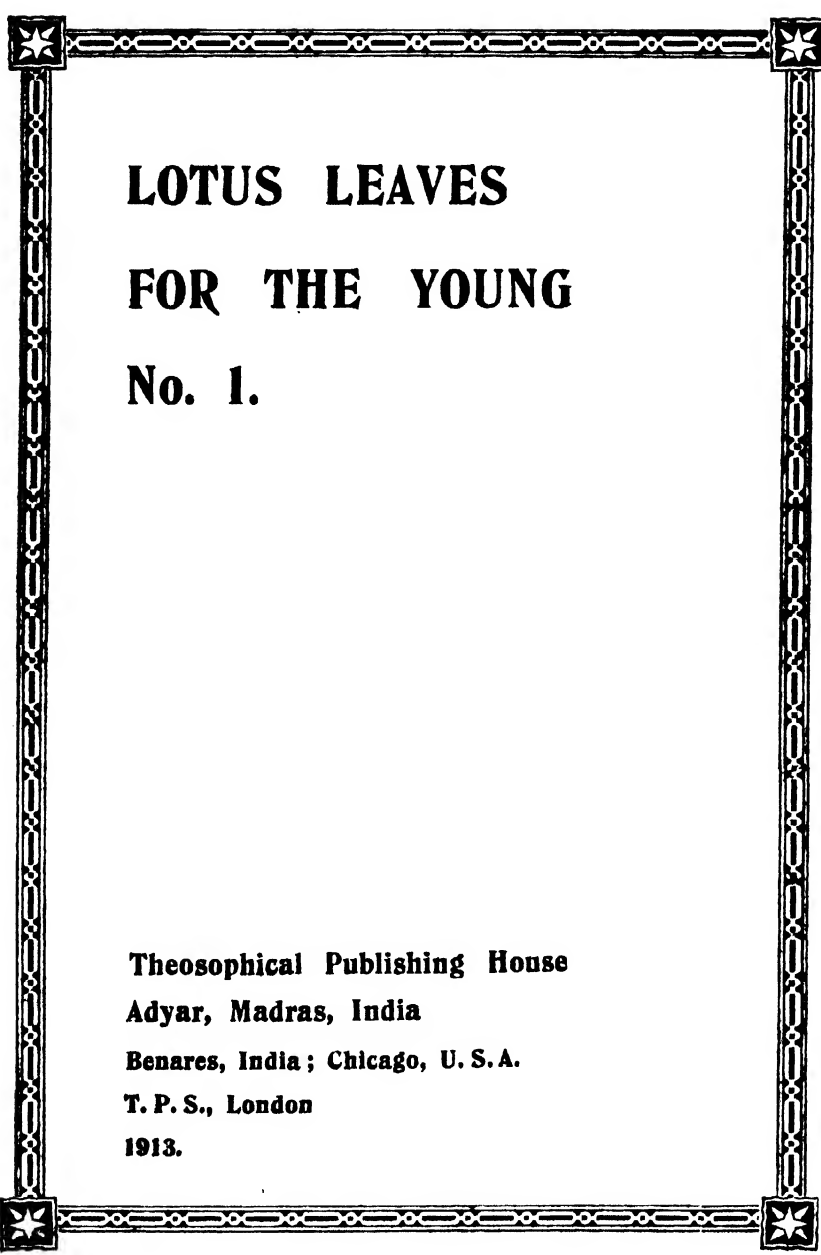
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