

BARING-GOULD SABINE

**CURIOUS MYTHS OF
THE MIDDLE AGES**

Sabine Baring-Gould

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The Wandering Jew

WHO, that has looked on Gustave Doré's marvellous illustrations to this wild legend, can forget the impression they made upon his imagination?

I do not refer to the first illustration as striking, where the Jewish shoemaker is refusing to suffer the cross-laden Savior to rest a moment on his door-step, and is receiving with scornful lip the judgment to wander restless till the Second Coming of that same Redeemer. But I refer rather to the second, which represents the Jew, after the lapse of ages, bowed beneath the burden of the curse, worn with unrelieved toil, wearied with ceaseless travelling, trudging onward at the last lights of evening, when a rayless night of unabating rain is creeping on, along a sloppy path between dripping bushes; and suddenly he comes over against a wayside crucifix, on which the white glare of departing daylight falls, to throw it into ghastly relief against the pitch-black rain-clouds. For a moment we see the working of the miserable shoemaker's mind. We feel that he is recalling the tragedy of the first Good Friday, and his head hangs heavier on his breast, as he recalls the part he had taken in that awful catastrophe.

Or, is that other illustration more remarkable, where the wanderer is amongst the Alps, at the brink of a hideous chasm; and seeing in the contorted pine-branches the ever-haunting scene of the Via Dolorosa, he is lured to cast himself into that black gulf in quest of rest, – when an angel flashes out of the gloom with the sword of flame turning every way, keeping him back from what would be to him a Paradise indeed, the repose of Death?

Or, that last scene, when the trumpet sounds and earth is shivering to its foundations, the fire is bubbling forth through the rents in its surface, and the dead are coming together flesh to flesh, and bone to bone, and muscle to muscle – then the weary man sits down and casts off his shoes! Strange sights are around him, he sees them not; strange sounds assail his ears, he hears but one – the trumpet-note which gives the signal for him to stay his wanderings and rest his weary feet.

I can linger over those noble woodcuts, and learn from them something new each time that I study them; they are picture-poems full of latent depths of thought. And now let us to the history of this most thrilling of all mediæval myths, if a myth.

If a myth, I say, for who can say for certain that it is not true? “Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom,”¹ are our Lord's words, which I can hardly think apply to the destruction of Jerusalem, as commentators explain it to escape the difficulty. That some should live to see Jerusalem destroyed was not very surprising, and hardly needed the emphatic Verily which Christ only used when speaking something of peculiarly solemn or mysterious import.

Besides, St. Luke's account manifestly refers the coming in the kingdom to the Judgment, for the saying stands as follows: “Whosoever shall be ashamed of Me, and of My words, of him shall the Son of Man be ashamed, when He shall come in His own glory, and in His Father's, and of the holy angels. But I tell you of a truth, there be some standing here, which shall not taste of death till they see the kingdom of God.”²

There can, I think, be no doubt in the mind of an unprejudiced person that the words of our Lord do imply that some one or more of those then living should not die till He came again. I do

¹ Matt. xvi. 28. Mark ix. 1.

² Luke ix.

not mean to insist on the literal signification, but I plead that there is no improbability in our Lord's words being fulfilled to the letter. That the circumstance is unrecorded in the Gospels is no evidence that it did not take place, for we are expressly told, "Many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book;"³ and again, "There are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written."⁴

We may remember also the mysterious witnesses who are to appear in the last eventful days of the world's history and bear testimony to the Gospel truth before the antichristian world. One of these has been often conjectured to be St. John the Evangelist, of whom Christ said to Peter, "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?"

The historical evidence on which the tale rests is, however, too slender for us to admit for it more than the barest claim to be more than myth. The names and the circumstances connected with the Jew and his doom vary in every account, and the only point upon which all coincide is, that such an individual exists in an undying condition, wandering over the face of the earth, seeking rest and finding none.

The earliest extant mention of the Wandering Jew is to be found in the book of the chronicles of the Abbey of St. Albans, which was copied and continued by Matthew Paris. He records that in the year 1228, "a certain Archbishop of Armenia the Greater came on a pilgrimage to England to see the relics of the saints, and visit the sacred places in the kingdom, as he had done in others; he also produced letters of recommendation from his Holiness the Pope, to the religious and the prelates of the churches, in which they were enjoined to receive and entertain him with due reverence and honor. On his arrival, he came to St. Albans, where he was received with all respect by the abbot and the monks; and at this place, being fatigued with his journey, he remained some days to rest himself and his followers, and a conversation took place between him and the inhabitants of the convent, by means of their interpreters, during which he made many inquiries relating to the religion and religious observances of this country, and told many strange things concerning the countries of the East. In the course of conversation he was asked whether he had ever seen or heard any thing of Joseph, a man of whom there was much talk in the world, who, when our Lord suffered, was present and spoke to Him, and who is still alive, in evidence of the Christian faith; in reply to which, a knight in his retinue, who was his interpreter, replied, speaking in French, 'My lord well knows that man, and a little before he took his way to the western countries, the said Joseph ate at the table of my lord the Archbishop of Armenia, and he has often seen and conversed with him.'

"He was then asked about what had passed between Christ and the said Joseph; to which he replied, 'At the time of the passion of Jesus Christ, He was seized by the Jews, and led into the hall of judgment before Pilate, the governor, that He might be judged by him on the accusation of the Jews; and Pilate, finding no fault for which he might sentence Him to death, said unto them, "Take Him and judge Him according to your law;" the shouts of the Jews, however, increasing, he, at their request, released unto them Barabbas, and delivered Jesus to them to be crucified. When, therefore, the Jews were dragging Jesus forth, and had reached the door, Cartaphilus, a porter of the hall in Pilate's service, as Jesus was going out of the door, impiously struck Him on the back with his hand, and said in mockery, "Go quicker, Jesus, go quicker; why do you loiter?" and Jesus, looking back on him with a severe countenance, said to him, "I am going, and you shall wait till I return." And according as our Lord said, this Cartaphilus is still awaiting His return. At the time of our Lord's suffering he was thirty years old, and when he attains the age of a hundred years, he always returns to the same age as he was when our Lord suffered. After Christ's death, when the Catholic faith gained ground, this Cartaphilus was baptized by Ananias (who also baptized the Apostle Paul), and was called Joseph.

³ John xx. 30.

⁴ John xxi. 25.

He dwells in one or other divisions of Armenia, and in divers Eastern countries, passing his time amongst the bishops and other prelates of the Church; he is a man of holy conversation, and religious; a man of few words, and very circumspect in his behavior; for he does not speak at all unless when questioned by the bishops and religious; and then he relates the events of olden times, and speaks of things which occurred at the suffering and resurrection of our Lord, and of the witnesses of the resurrection, namely, of those who rose with Christ, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto men. He also tells of the creed of the Apostles, and of their separation and preaching. And all this he relates without smiling, or levity of conversation, as one who is well practised in sorrow and the fear of God, always looking forward with dread to the coming of Jesus Christ, lest at the Last Judgment he should find him in anger whom, when on his way to death, he had provoked to just vengeance. Numbers came to him from different parts of the world, enjoying his society and conversation; and to them, if they are men of authority, he explains all doubts on the matters on which he is questioned. He refuses all gifts that are offered him, being content with slight food and clothing.”

Much about the same date, Philip Mouskes, afterwards Bishop of Tournay, wrote his rhymed chronicle (1242), which contains a similar account of the Jew, derived from the same Armenian prelate: —

“Adonques vint un arceveskes
De çà mer, plains de bonnes tèques
Par samblant, et fut d’Armenie,”

and this man, having visited the shrine of “St. Tumas de Kantorbire,” and then having paid his devotions at “Monsigour St. Jake,” he went on to Cologne to see the heads of the three kings. The version told in the Netherlands much resembled that related at St. Albans, only that the Jew, seeing the people dragging Christ to his death, exclaims, —

“Atendés moi! g’i vois,
S’iert mis le faus profète en crois.”

Then

“Le vrais Dieux se regarda,
Et li a dit qu’e n’i tarda,
Icist ne t’atenderont pas,
Mais saces, tu m’atenderas.”

We hear no more of the wandering Jew till the sixteenth century, when we hear first of him in a casual manner, as assisting a weaver, Kokot, at the royal palace in Bohemia (1505), to find a treasure which had been secreted by the great-grandfather of Kokot, sixty years before, at which time the Jew was present. He then had the appearance of being a man of seventy years.⁵

Curiously enough, we next hear of him in the East, where he is confounded with the prophet Elijah. Early in the century he appeared to Fadhilah, under peculiar circumstances.

After the Arabs had captured the city of Elvan, Fadhilah, at the head of three hundred horsemen, pitched his tents, late in the evening, between two mountains. Fadhilah, having begun his evening prayer with a loud voice, heard the words “Allah akbar” (God is great) repeated distinctly, and each word of his prayer was followed in a similar manner. Fadhilah, not believing this to be the result of an echo, was much astonished, and cried out, “O thou! whether thou art of the angel ranks,

⁵ Gubitz, Gesellsch. 1845, No. 18.

or whether thou art of some other order of spirits, it is well; the power of God be with thee; but if thou art a man, then let mine eyes light upon thee, that I may rejoice in thy presence and society.” Scarcely had he spoken these words, before an aged man, with bald head, stood before him, holding a staff in his hand, and much resembling a dervish in appearance. After having courteously saluted him, Fadhilah asked the old man who he was. Thereupon the stranger answered, “Bassi Hadhret Issa, I am here by command of the Lord Jesus, who has left me in this world, that I may live therein until he comes a second time to earth. I wait for this Lord, who is the Fountain of Happiness, and in obedience to his command I dwell behind yon mountain.” When Fadhilah heard these words, he asked when the Lord Jesus would appear; and the old man replied that his appearing would be at the end of the world, at the Last Judgment. But this only increased Fadhilah’s curiosity, so that he inquired the signs of the approach of the end of all things, whereupon Zerib Bar Elia gave him an account of general, social, and moral dissolution, which would be the climax of this world’s history.⁶

In 1547 he was seen in Europe, if we are to believe the following narration: —

“Paul von Eitzen, doctor of the Holy Scriptures, and Bishop of Schleswig,⁷ related as true for some years past, that when he was young, having studied at Wittenberg, he returned home to his parents in Hamburg in the winter of the year 1547, and that on the following Sunday, in church, he observed a tall man, with his hair hanging over his shoulders, standing barefoot, during the sermon, over against the pulpit, listening with deepest attention to the discourse, and, whenever the name of Jesus was mentioned, bowing himself profoundly and humbly, with sighs and beating of the breast. He had no other clothing, in the bitter cold of the winter, except a pair of hose which were in tatters about his feet, and a coat with a girdle which reached to his feet; and his general appearance was that of a man of fifty years. And many people, some of high degree and title, have seen this same man in England, France, Italy, Hungary, Persia, Spain, Poland, Moscow, Lapland, Sweden, Denmark, Scotland, and other places.

“Every one wondered over the man. Now, after the sermon, the said Doctor inquired diligently where the stranger was to be found; and when he had sought him out, he inquired of him privately whence he came, and how long that winter he had been in the place. Thereupon he replied, modestly, that he was a Jew by birth, a native of Jerusalem, by name Ahasverus, by trade a shoemaker; he had been present at the crucifixion of Christ, and had lived ever since, travelling through various lands and cities, the which he substantiated by accounts he gave; he related also the circumstances of Christ’s transference from Pilate to Herod, and the final crucifixion, together with other details not recorded in the Evangelists and historians; he gave accounts of the changes of government in many countries, especially of the East, through several centuries; and moreover he detailed the labors and deaths of the holy Apostles of Christ most circumstantially.

“Now when Doctor Paul v. Eitzen heard this with profound astonishment, on account of its incredible novelty, he inquired further, in order that he might obtain more accurate information. Then the man answered, that he had lived in Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion of Christ, whom he had regarded as a deceiver of the people, and a heretic; he had seen Him with his own eyes, and had done his best, along with others, to bring this deceiver, as he regarded Him, to justice, and to have Him put out of the way. When the sentence had been pronounced by Pilate, Christ was about to be dragged past his house; then he ran home, and called together his household to have a look at Christ, and see what sort of a person He was.

“This having been done, he had his little child on his arm, and was standing in his doorway, to have a sight of the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁶ Herbelot, *Bibl. Orient*, iii. p. 607.

⁷ Paul v. Eitzen was born January 25, 1522, at Hamburg; in 1562 he was appointed chief preacher for Schleswig, and died February 25, 1598. (*Greve, Memor. P. ab. Eitzen. Hamb. 1844.*)

“As, then, Christ was led by, bowed under the weight of the heavy cross, He tried to rest a little, and stood still a moment; but the shoemaker, in zeal and rage, and for the sake of obtaining credit among the other Jews, drove the Lord Christ forward, and told Him to hasten on His way. Jesus, obeying, looked at him, and said, ‘I shall stand and rest, but thou shalt go till the last day.’ At these words the man set down the child; and, unable to remain where he was, he followed Christ, and saw how cruelly He was crucified, how He suffered, how He died. As soon as this had taken place, it came upon him suddenly that he could no more return to Jerusalem, nor see again his wife and child, but must go forth into foreign lands, one after another, like a mournful pilgrim. Now, when, years after, he returned to Jerusalem, he found it ruined and utterly razed, so that not one stone was left standing on another; and he could not recognize former localities.

“He believes that it is God’s purpose, in thus driving him about in miserable life, and preserving him undying, to present him before the Jews at the end, as a living token, so that the godless and unbelieving may remember the death of Christ, and be turned to repentance. For his part he would well rejoice were God in heaven to release him from this vale of tears. After this conversation, Doctor Paul v. Eitzen, along with the rector of the school of Hamburg, who was well read in history, and a traveller, questioned him about events which had taken place in the East since the death of Christ, and he was able to give them much information on many ancient matters; so that it was impossible not to be convinced of the truth of his story, and to see that what seems impossible with men is, after all, possible with God.

“Since the Jew has had his life extended, he has become silent and reserved, and only answers direct questions. When invited to become any one’s guest, he eats little, and drinks in great moderation; then hurries on, never remaining long in one place. When at Hamburg, Dantzig, and elsewhere, money has been offered him, he never took more than two skillings (fourpence, one farthing), and at once distributed it to the poor, as token that he needed no money, for God would provide for him, as he rued the sins he had committed in ignorance.

“During the period of his stay in Hamburg and Dantzig he was never seen to laugh. In whatever land he travelled he spoke its language, and when he spoke Saxon, it was like a native Saxon. Many people came from different places to Hamburg and Dantzig in order to see and hear this man, and were convinced that the providence of God was exercised in this individual in a very remarkable manner. He gladly listened to God’s word, or heard it spoken of always with great gravity and compunction, and he ever revered with sighs the pronunciation of the name of God, or of Jesus Christ, and could not endure to hear curses; but whenever he heard any one swear by God’s death or pains, he waxed indignant, and exclaimed, with vehemence and with sighs, ‘Wretched man and miserable creature, thus to misuse the name of thy Lord and God, and His bitter sufferings and passion. Hadst thou seen, as I have, how heavy and bitter were the pangs and wounds of thy Lord, endured for thee and for me, thou wouldst rather undergo great pain thyself than thus take His sacred name in vain!’

“Such is the account given to me by Doctor Paul von Eitzen, with many circumstantial proofs, and corroborated by certain of my own old acquaintances who saw this same individual with their own eyes in Hamburg.

“In the year 1575 the Secretary Christopher Krause, and Master Jacob von Holstein, legates to the Court of Spain, and afterwards sent into the Netherlands to pay the soldiers serving his Majesty in that country, related on their return home to Schleswig, and confirmed with solemn oaths, that they had come across the same mysterious individual at Madrid in Spain, in appearance, manner of life, habits, clothing, just the same as he had appeared in Hamburg. They said that they had spoken with him, and that many people of all classes had conversed with him, and found him to speak good Spanish. In the year 1599, in December, a reliable person wrote from Brunswick to Strasburg that the same mentioned strange person had been seen alive at Vienna in Austria, and that he had started for Poland and Dantzig; and that he purposed going on to Moscow. This Ahasverus was at Lubeck

in 1601, also about the same date in Revel in Livonia, and in Cracow in Poland. In Moscow he was seen of many and spoken to by many.

“What thoughtful, God-fearing persons are to think of the said person, is at their option. God’s works are wondrous and past finding out, and are manifested day by day, only to be revealed in full at the last great day of account.

“Dated, Revel, August 1st, 1613.

“D. W.

“D.

“Chrysostomus Dudulæus,

“Westphalus.”

The statement that the Wandering Jew appeared in Lubeck in 1601, does not tally with the more precise chronicle of Henricus Bangert, which gives: “Die 14 Januarii Anno MDCIII., adnotatum reliquit Lubecæ fuisse Judæum illum immortalem, qui se Christi crucifixioni interfuisse affirmavit.”⁸

In 1604 he seems to have appeared in Paris. Rudolph Botoreus says, under this date, “I fear lest I be accused of giving ear to old wives’ fables, if I insert in these pages what is reported all over Europe of the Jew, coeval with the Savior Christ; however, nothing is more common, and our popular histories have not scrupled to assert it. Following the lead of those who wrote our annals, I may say that he who appeared not in one century only, in Spain, Italy, and Germany, was also in this year seen and recognized as the same individual who had appeared in Hamburg, anno MDLXVI. The common people, bold in spreading reports, relate many things of him; and this I allude to, lest anything should be left unsaid.”⁹

J. C. Bulenger puts the date of the Hamburg visit earlier. “It was reported at this time that a Jew of the time of Christ was wandering without food and drink, having for a thousand and odd years been a vagabond and outcast, condemned by God to rove, because he, of that generation of vipers, was the first to cry out for the crucifixion of Christ and the release of Barabbas; and also because soon after, when Christ, panting under the burden of the rood, sought to rest before his workshop (he was a cobbler), the fellow ordered Him off with acerbity. Thereupon Christ replied, ‘Because thou grudgest Me such a moment of rest, I shall enter into My rest, but thou shalt wander restless.’ At once, frantic and agitated, he fled through the whole earth, and on the same account to this day he journeys through the world. It was this person who was seen in Hamburg in MDLXIV. *Credat Judæus Apella! I did not see him, or hear anything authentic concerning him, at that time when I was in Paris.*”¹⁰

A curious little book,¹¹ written against the quackery of Paracelsus, by Leonard Doldius, a Nürnberg physician, and translated into Latin and augmented, by Andreas Libavius, doctor and physician of Rotenburg, alludes to the same story, and gives the Jew a new name nowhere else met with. After having referred to a report that Paracelsus was not dead, but was seated alive, asleep or napping, in his sepulchre at Strasburg, preserved from death by some of his specifics, Libavius declares that he would sooner believe in the old man, the Jew, Ahasverus, wandering over the world, called by some Buttadæus, and otherwise, again, by others.

He is said to have appeared in Naumburg, but the date is not given; he was noticed in church, listening to the sermon. After the service he was questioned, and he related his story. On this occasion he received presents from the burgers.¹² In 1633 he was again in Hamburg.¹³ In the year 1640, two citizens, living in the Gerberstrasse, in Brussels, were walking in the Sonian wood, when they

⁸ Henr. Bangert, *Comment. de Ortu, Vita, et Excessu Coleri, I. Cti. Lubec.*

⁹ R. Botoreus, *Comm. Histor. lii. p. 305.*

¹⁰ J. C. Bulenger, *Historia sui Temporis, p. 357.*

¹¹ *Praxis Alchymiaë. Francfurti, MDCIV. 8vo.*

¹² *Mitternacht, Diss. in Johann. xxi. 19.*

¹³ *Mitternacht, ut supra.*

encountered an aged man, whose clothes were in tatters and of an antiquated appearance. They invited him to go with them to a house of refreshment, and he went with them, but would not seat himself, remaining on foot to drink. When he came before the doors with the two burgers, he told them a great deal; but they were mostly stories of events which had happened many hundred years before. Hence the burgers gathered that their companion was Isaac Laquedem, the Jew who had refused to permit our Blessed Lord to rest for a moment at his door-step, and they left him full of terror. In 1642 he is reported to have visited Leipzig. On the 22d July, 1721, he appeared at the gates of the city of Munich.¹⁴ About the end of the seventeenth century or the beginning of the eighteenth, an impostor, calling himself the Wandering Jew, attracted attention in England, and was listened to by the ignorant, and despised by the educated. He, however, managed to thrust himself into the notice of the nobility, who, half in jest, half in curiosity, questioned him, and paid him as they might a juggler. He declared that he had been an officer of the Sanhedrim, and that he had struck Christ as he left the judgment hall of Pilate. He remembered all the Apostles, and described their personal appearance, their clothes, and their peculiarities. He spoke many languages, claimed the power of healing the sick, and asserted that he had travelled nearly all over the world. Those who heard him were perplexed by his familiarity with foreign tongues and places. Oxford and Cambridge sent professors to question him, and to discover the imposition, if any. An English nobleman conversed with him in Arabic. The mysterious stranger told his questioner in that language that historical works were not to be relied upon. And on being asked his opinion of Mahomet, he replied that he had been acquainted with the father of the prophet, and that he dwelt at Ormuz. As for Mahomet, he believed him to have been a man of intelligence; once when he heard the prophet deny that Christ was crucified, he answered abruptly by telling him he was a witness to the truth of that event. He related also that he was in Rome when Nero set it on fire; he had known Saladin, Tamerlane, Bajazeth, Eterlane, and could give minute details of the history of the Crusades.¹⁵

Whether this wandering Jew was found out in London or not, we cannot tell, but he shortly after appeared in Denmark, thence travelled into Sweden, and vanished.

Such are the principal notices of the Wandering Jew which have appeared. It will be seen at once how wanting they are in all substantial evidence which could make us regard the story in any other light than myth.

But no myth is wholly without foundation, and there must be some substantial verity upon which this vast superstructure of legend has been raised. What that is I am unable to discover.

It has been suggested by some that the Jew Ahasverus is an impersonation of that race which wanders, Cain-like, over the earth with the brand of a brother's blood upon it, and one which is not to pass away till all be fulfilled, not to be reconciled to its angered God till the times of the Gentiles are accomplished. And yet, probable as this supposition may seem at first sight, it is not to be harmonized with some of the leading features of the story. The shoemaker becomes a penitent, and earnest Christian, whilst the Jewish nation has still the veil upon its heart; the wretched wanderer eschews money, and the avarice of the Israelite is proverbial.

According to local legend, he is identified with the Gypsies, or rather that strange people are supposed to be living under a curse somewhat similar to that inflicted on Ahasverus, because they refused shelter to the Virgin and Child on their flight into Egypt.¹⁶ Another tradition connects the Jew with the wild huntsman, and there is a forest at Bretten, in Swabia, which he is said to haunt. Popular superstition attributes to him there a purse containing a groschen, which, as often as it is expended, returns to the spender.¹⁷

¹⁴ Hormayr, Taschenbuch, 1834, p. 216.

¹⁵ Calmet, Dictionn. de la Bible, t. ii. p. 472.

¹⁶ Aventinus, Bayr. Chronik, viii.

¹⁷ Meier, Schwäbischen Sagen, i. 116.

In the Harz one form of the Wild Huntsman myth is to this effect: that he was a Jew who had refused to suffer our Blessed Lord to drink out of a river, or out of a horse-trough, but had contemptuously pointed out to Him the hoof-print of a horse, in which a little water had collected, and had bid Him quench His thirst thence.¹⁸

As the Wild Huntsman is the personification of the storm, it is curious to find in parts of France that the sudden roar of a gale at night is attributed by the vulgar to the passing of the Everlasting Jew.

A Swiss story is, that he was seen one day standing upon the Matterberg, which is below the Matterhorn, contemplating the scene with mingled sorrow and wonder. Once before he stood on that spot, and then it was the site of a flourishing city; now it is covered with gentian and wild pinks. Once again will he revisit the hill, and that will be on the eve of Judgment.

Perhaps, of all the myths which originated in the middle ages, none is more striking than that we have been considering; indeed, there is something so calculated to arrest the attention and to excite the imagination in the outline of the story, that it is remarkable that we should find an interval of three centuries elapse between its first introduction into Europe by Matthew Paris and Philip Mouskes, and its general acceptance in the sixteenth century. As a myth, its roots lie in that great mystery of human life which is an enigma never solved, and ever originating speculation.

What was life? Was it of necessity limited to fourscore years, or could it be extended indefinitely? were questions curious minds never wearied of asking. And so the mythology of the past teemed with legends of favored or accursed mortals, who had reached beyond the term of days set to most men. Some had discovered the water of life, the fountain of perpetual youth, and were ever renewing their strength. Others had dared the power of God, and were therefore sentenced to feel the weight of His displeasure, without tasting the repose of death.

John the Divine slept at Ephesus, untouched by corruption, with the ground heaving over his breast as he breathed, waiting the summons to come forth and witness against Antichrist. The seven sleepers reposed in a cave, and centuries glided by like a watch in the night. The monk of Hildesheim, doubting how with God a thousand years could be as yesterday, listened to the melody of a bird in the green wood during three minutes, and found that in three minutes three hundred years had flown. Joseph of Arimathæa, in the blessed city of Sarras, draws perpetual life from the Saint Graal; Merlin sleeps and sighs in an old tree, spell-bound of Vivien. Charlemagne and Barbarossa wait, crowned and armed, in the heart of the mountain, till the time comes for the release of Fatherland from despotism. And, on the other hand, the curse of a deathless life has passed on the Wild Huntsman, because he desired to chase the red-deer for evermore; on the Captain of the Phantom Ship, because he vowed he would double the Cape whether God willed it or not; on the Man in the Moon, because he gathered sticks during the Sabbath rest; on the dancers of Kolbeck, because they desired to spend eternity in their mad gambols.

I began this article intending to conclude it with a bibliographical account of the tracts, letters, essays, and books, written upon the Wandering Jew; but I relinquish my intention at the sight of the multitude of works which have issued from the press upon the subject; and this I do with less compunction as the bibliographer may at little trouble and expense satisfy himself, by perusing the lists given by Grässe in his essay on the myth, and those to be found in "Notice historique et bibliographique sur les Juifs-errants: par O. B." (Gustave Brunet), Paris, Téchenet, 1845; also in the article by M. Mangin, in "Causeries et Méditations historiques et littéraires," Paris, Duprat, 1843; and, lastly, in the essay by Jacob le Bibliophile (M. Lacroix) in his "Curiosités de l'Histoire des Croyances populaires," Paris, Delahays, 1859.

Of the romances of Eugène Sue and Dr. Croly, founded upon the legend, the less said the better. The original legend is so noble in its severe simplicity, that none but a master mind could develop it with any chance of success. Nor have the poetical attempts upon the story fared better. It

¹⁸ Kuhn u. Schwarz Nordd. Sagen, p. 499.

was reserved for the pencil of Gustave Doré to treat it with the originality it merited, and in a series of woodcuts to produce at once a poem, a romance, and a chef-d'œuvre of art.

Prester John

ABOUT the middle of the twelfth century, a rumor circulated through Europe that there reigned in Asia a powerful Christian Emperor, Presbyter Johannes. In a bloody fight he had broken the power of the Mussulmans, and was ready to come to the assistance of the Crusaders. Great was the exultation in Europe, for of late the news from the East had been gloomy and depressing, the power of the infidel had increased, overwhelming masses of men had been brought into the field against the chivalry of Christendom, and it was felt that the cross must yield before the odious crescent.

The news of the success of the Priest-King opened a door of hope to the desponding Christian world. Pope Alexander III. determined at once to effect a union with this mysterious personage, and on the 27th of September, 1177, wrote him a letter, which he intrusted to his physician, Philip, to deliver in person.

Philip started on his embassy, but never returned. The conquests of Tschengis-Khan again attracted the eyes of Christian Europe to the East. The Mongol hordes were rushing in upon the west with devastating ferocity; Russia, Poland, Hungary, and the eastern provinces of Germany, had succumbed, or suffered grievously; and the fears of other nations were roused lest they too should taste the misery of a Mongolian invasion. It was Gog and Magog come to slaughter, and the times of Antichrist were dawning. But the battle of Liegnitz stayed them in their onward career, and Europe was saved.

Pope Innocent IV. determined to convert these wild hordes of barbarians, and subject them to the cross of Christ; he therefore sent among them a number of Dominican and Franciscan missionaries, and embassies of peace passed between the Pope, the King of France, and the Mogul Khan.

The result of these communications with the East was, that the travellers learned how false were the prevalent notions of a mighty Christian empire existing in Central Asia. Vulgar superstition or conviction is not, however, to be upset by evidence, and the locality of the monarchy was merely transferred by the people to Africa, and they fixed upon Abyssinia, with a show of truth, as the seat of the famous Priest-King. However, still some doubted. John de Plano Carpini and Marco Polo, though they acknowledged the existence of a Christian monarch in Abyssinia, yet stoutly maintained as well that the Prester John of popular belief reigned in splendor somewhere in the dim Orient.

But before proceeding with the history of this strange fable, it will be well to extract the different accounts given of the Priest-King and his realm by early writers; and we shall then be better able to judge of the influence the myth obtained in Europe.

Otto of Freisingen is the first author to mention the monarchy of Prester John with whom we are acquainted. Otto wrote a chronicle up to the date 1156, and he relates that in 1145 the Catholic Bishop of Cabala visited Europe to lay certain complaints before the Pope. He mentioned the fall of Edessa, and also "he stated that a few years ago a certain King and Priest called John, who lives on the farther side of Persia and Armenia, in the remote East, and who, with all his people, were Christians, though belonging to the Nestorian Church, had overcome the royal brothers Samiardi, kings of the Medes and Persians, and had captured Ecbatana, their capital and residence. The said kings had met with their Persian, Median, and Assyrian troops, and had fought for three consecutive days, each side having determined to die rather than take to flight. Prester John, for so they are wont to call him, at length routed the Persians, and after a bloody battle, remained victorious. After which victory the said John was hastening to the assistance of the Church at Jerusalem, but his host, on reaching the Tigris, was hindered from passing, through a deficiency in boats, and he directed his march North, since he had heard that the river was there covered with ice. In that place he had waited many years, expecting severe cold; but the winters having proved unpropitious, and the severity of the climate having carried off many soldiers, he had been forced to retreat to his own land. This king belongs to

the family of the Magi, mentioned in the Gospel, and he rules over the very people formerly governed by the Magi; moreover, his fame and his wealth are so great, that he uses an emerald sceptre only.

“Excited by the example of his ancestors, who came to worship Christ in his cradle, he had proposed to go to Jerusalem, but had been impeded by the above-mentioned causes.”¹⁹

At the same time the story crops up in other quarters; so that we cannot look upon Otto as the inventor of the myth. The celebrated Maimonides alludes to it in a passage quoted by Joshua Lorki, a Jewish physician to Benedict XIII. Maimonides lived from 1135 to 1204. The passage is as follows: “It is evident both from the letters of Rambam (Maimonides), whose memory be blessed, and from the narration of merchants who have visited the ends of the earth, that at this time the root of our faith is to be found in the lands of Babel and Teman, where long ago Jerusalem was an exile; not reckoning those who live in the land of Paras²⁰ and Madai,²¹ of the exiles of Schomrom, the number of which people is as the sand: of these some are still under the yoke of Paras, who is called the Great-Chief Sultan by the Arabs; others live in a place under the yoke of a strange people . . . governed by a Christian chief, Preste-Cuan by name. With him they have made a compact, and he with them; and this is a matter concerning which there can be no manner of doubt.”

Benjamin of Tudela, another Jew, travelled in the East between the years 1159 and 1173, the last being the date of his death. He wrote an account of his travels, and gives in it some information with regard to a mythical Jew king, who reigned in the utmost splendor over a realm inhabited by Jews alone, situate somewhere in the midst of a desert of vast extent. About this period there appeared a document which produced intense excitement throughout Europe – a letter, yes! a letter from the mysterious personage himself to Manuel Comnenus, Emperor of Constantinople (1143-1180). The exact date of this extraordinary epistle cannot be fixed with any certainty, but it certainly appeared before 1241, the date of the conclusion of the chronicle of Albericus Trium Fontium. This Albericus relates that in the year 1165 “Presbyter Joannes, the Indian king, sent his wonderful letter to various Christian princes, and especially to Manuel of Constantinople, and Frederic the Roman Emperor.” Similar letters were sent to Alexander III., to Louis VII. of France, and to the King of Portugal, which are alluded to in chronicles and romances, and which were indeed turned into rhyme, and sung all over Europe by minstrels and trouvères. The letter is as follows: —

“John, Priest by the Almighty power of God and the Might of our Lord Jesus Christ, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, to his friend Emanuel, Prince of Constantinople, greeting, wishing him health, prosperity, and the continuance of Divine favor.

“Our Majesty has been informed that you hold our Excellency in love, and that the report of our greatness has reached you. Moreover, we have heard through our treasurer that you have been pleased to send to us some objects of art and interest, that our Exaltedness might be gratified thereby.

“Being human, I receive it in good part, and we have ordered our treasurer to send you some of our articles in return.

“Now we desire to be made certain that you hold the right faith, and in all things cleave to Jesus Christ, our Lord, for we have heard that your court regard you as a god, though we know that you are mortal, and subject to human infirmities . . . Should you desire to learn the greatness and excellency of our Exaltedness and of the land subject to our sceptre, then hear and believe: – I, Presbyter Johannes, the Lord of Lords, surpass all under heaven in virtue, in riches, and in power; seventy-two kings pay us tribute . . . In the three Indies our Magnificence rules, and our land extends beyond India, where rests the body of the holy Apostle Thomas; it reaches towards the sunrise over the wastes, and it trends towards deserted Babylon near the tower of Babel. Seventy-two provinces, of which only a few are Christian, serve us. Each has its own king, but all are tributary to us.

¹⁹ Otto, Ep. Frising., lib. vii. c. 33.

²⁰ Persia.

²¹ Media.

“Our land is the home of elephants, dromedaries, camels, crocodiles, meta-collinarum, cametennus, tensevetes, wild asses, white and red lions, white bears, white merules, crickets, griffins, tigers, lamias, hyenas, wild horses, wild oxen and wild men, men with horns, one-eyed, men with eyes before and behind, centaurs, fauns, satyrs, pygmies, forty-ell-high giants, Cyclopes, and similar women; it is the home, too, of the phoenix, and of nearly all living animals. We have some people subject to us who feed on the flesh of men and of prematurely born animals, and who never fear death. When any of these people die, their friends and relations eat him ravenously, for they regard it as a main duty to munch human flesh. Their names are Gog and Magog, Anie, Agit, Azenach, Fommeperi, Befari, Conei-Samante, Agrimandri, Vintefolei, Casbei, Alanei. These and similar nations were shut in behind lofty mountains by Alexander the Great, towards the North. We lead them at our pleasure against our foes, and neither man nor beast is left undevoured, if our Majesty gives the requisite permission. And when all our foes are eaten, then we return with our hosts home again. These accursed fifteen nations will burst forth from the four quarters of the earth at the end of the world, in the times of Antichrist, and overrun all the abodes of the Saints as well as the great city Rome, which, by the way, we are prepared to give to our son who will be born, along with all Italy, Germany, the two Gauls, Britain and Scotland. We shall also give him Spain and all the land as far as the icy sea. The nations to which I have alluded, according to the words of the prophet, shall not stand in the judgment, on account of their offensive practices, but will be consumed to ashes by a fire which will fall on them from heaven.

“Our land streams with honey, and is overflowing with milk. In one region grows no poisonous herb, nor does a querulous frog ever quack in it; no scorpion exists, nor does the serpent glide amongst the grass, nor can any poisonous animals exist in it, or injure any one.

“Among the heathen, flows through a certain province the River Indus; encircling Paradise, it spreads its arms in manifold windings through the entire province. Here are found the emeralds, sapphires, carbuncles, topazes, chrysolites, onyxes, beryls, sardius, and other costly stones. Here grows the plant Assidos, which, when worn by any one, protects him from the evil spirit, forcing it to state its business and name; consequently the foul spirits keep out of the way there. In a certain land subject to us, all kinds of pepper is gathered, and is exchanged for corn and bread, leather and cloth. . . . At the foot of Mount Olympus bubbles up a spring which changes its flavor hour by hour, night and day, and the spring is scarcely three days’ journey from Paradise, out of which Adam was driven. If any one has tasted thrice of the fountain, from that day he will feel no fatigue, but will, as long as he lives, be as a man of thirty years. Here are found the small stones called Nudiosi, which, if borne about the body, prevent the sight from waxing feeble, and restore it where it is lost. The more the stone is looked at, the keener becomes the sight. In our territory is a certain waterless sea, consisting of tumbling billows of sand never at rest. None have crossed this sea; it lacks water altogether, yet fish are cast up upon the beach of various kinds, very tasty, and the like are nowhere else to be seen. Three days’ journey from this sea are mountains from which rolls down a stony, waterless river, which opens into the sandy sea. As soon as the stream reaches the sea, its stones vanish in it, and are never seen again. As long as the river is in motion, it cannot be crossed; only four days a week is it possible to traverse it. Between the sandy sea and the said mountains, in a certain plain is a fountain of singular virtue, which purges Christians and would-be Christians from all transgressions. The water stands four inches high in a hollow stone shaped like a mussel-shell. Two saintly old men watch by it, and ask the comers whether they are Christians, or are about to become Christians, then whether they desire healing with all their hearts. If they have answered well, they are bidden to lay aside their clothes, and to step into the mussel. If what they said be true, then the water begins to rise and gush over their heads; thrice does the water thus lift itself, and every one who has entered the mussel leaves it cured of every complaint.

“Near the wilderness trickles between barren mountains a subterranean rill, which can only by chance be reached, for only occasionally the earth gapes, and he who would descend must do it

with precipitation, ere the earth closes again. All that is gathered under the ground there is gem and precious stone. The brook pours into another river, and the inhabitants of the neighborhood obtain thence abundance of precious stones. Yet they never venture to sell them without having first offered them to us for our private use: should we decline them, they are at liberty to dispose of them to strangers. Boys there are trained to remain three or four days under water, diving after the stones.

“Beyond the stone river are the ten tribes of the Jews, which, though subject to their own kings, are, for all that, our slaves and tributary to our Majesty. In one of our lands, hight Zone, are worms called in our tongue Salamanders. These worms can only live in fire, and they build cocoons like silk-worms, which are unwound by the ladies of our palace, and spun into cloth and dresses, which are worn by our Exaltedness. These dresses, in order to be cleaned and washed, are cast into flames... When we go to war, we have fourteen golden and bejewelled crosses borne before us instead of banners; each of these crosses is followed by 10,000 horsemen, and 100,000 foot soldiers fully armed, without reckoning those in charge of the luggage and provision.

“When we ride abroad plainly, we have a wooden, unadorned cross, without gold or gem about it, borne before us, in order that we may meditate on the sufferings of Our Lord Jesus Christ; also a golden bowl filled with earth, to remind us of that whence we sprung, and that to which we must return; but besides these there is borne a silver bowl full of gold, as a token to all that we are the Lord of Lords.

“All riches, such as are upon the world, our Magnificence possesses in superabundance. With us no one lies, for he who speaks a lie is thenceforth regarded as dead; he is no more thought of, or honored by us. No vice is tolerated by us. Every year we undertake a pilgrimage, with retinue of war, to the body of the holy prophet Daniel, which is near the desolated site of Babylon. In our realm fishes are caught, the blood of which dyes purple. The Amazons and the Brahmins are subject to us. The palace in which our Supereminency resides, is built after the pattern of the castle built by the Apostle Thomas for the Indian king Gundoforus. Ceilings, joists, and architrave are of Sethym wood, the roof of ebony, which can never catch fire. Over the gable of the palace are, at the extremities, two golden apples, in each of which are two carbuncles, so that the gold may shine by day, and the carbuncles by night. The greater gates of the palace are of sardius, with the horn of the horned snake inwrought, so that no one can bring poison within.

“The other portals are of ebony. The windows are of crystal; the tables are partly of gold, partly of amethyst, and the columns supporting the tables are partly of ivory, partly of amethyst. The court in which we watch the jousting is floored with onyx in order to increase the courage of the combatants. In the palace, at night, nothing is burned for light but wicks supplied with balsam... Before our palace stands a mirror, the ascent to which consists of five and twenty steps of porphyry and serpentine.” After a description of the gems adorning this mirror, which is guarded night and day by three thousand armed men, he explains its use: “We look therein and behold all that is taking place in every province and region subject to our sceptre.

“Seven kings wait upon us monthly, in turn, with sixty-two dukes, two hundred and fifty-six counts and marquises: and twelve archbishops sit at table with us on our right, and twenty bishops on the left, besides the patriarch of St. Thomas, the Sarmatian Protopope, and the Archpope of Susa... Our lord high steward is a primate and king, our cup-bearer is an archbishop and king, our chamberlain a bishop and king, our marshal a king and abbot.”

I may be spared further extracts from this extraordinary letter, which proceeds to describe the church in which Prester John worships, by enumerating the precious stones of which it is constructed, and their special virtues.

Whether this letter was in circulation before Pope Alexander wrote his, it is not easy to decide. Alexander does not allude to it, but speaks of the reports which have reached him of the piety and the magnificence of the Priest-King. At the same time, there runs a tone of bitterness through the letter, as though the Pope had been galled at the pretensions of this mysterious personage, and perhaps

winned under the prospect of the man-eaters overrunning Italy, as suggested by John the Priest. The papal epistle is an assertion of the claims of the See of Rome to universal dominion, and it assures the Eastern Prince-Pope that his Christian professions are worthless, unless he submits to the successor of Peter. "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord," &c., quotes the Pope, and then explains that the will of God is that every monarch and prelate should eat humble pie to the Sovereign Pontiff.

Sir John Maundevill gives the origin of the priestly title of the Eastern despot, in his curious book of travels.

"So it befelle, that this emperour cam, with a Cristene knyght with him, into a chirche in Egypt: and it was Saterdag in Wyttson woke. And the bishop made orders. And he beheld and listened the servyse fulle tentyfly: and he asked the Cristene knyght, what men of degree thei scholden ben, that the prelate had before him. And the knyght answerede and seyde, that thei scholde ben prestes. And then the emperour seyde, that he wolde no longer ben clept kyng ne emperour, but preest: and that he wolde have the name of the first preest, that wente out of the chirche; and his name was John. And so evere more sittiens, he is clept Prestre John."

It is probable that the foundation of the whole Prester-John myth lay in the report which reached Europe of the wonderful successes of Nestorianism in the East, and there seems reason to believe that the famous letter given above was a Nestorian fabrication. It certainly looks un-European; the gorgeous imagery is thoroughly Eastern, and the disparaging tone in which Rome is spoken of could hardly have been the expression of Western feelings. The letter has the object in view of exalting the East in religion and arts to an undue eminence at the expense of the West, and it manifests some ignorance of European geography, when it speaks of the land extending from Spain to the Polar Sea. Moreover, the sites of the patriarchates, and the dignity conferred on that of St. Thomas, are indications of a Nestorian bias.

A brief glance at the history of this heretical Church may be of value here, as showing that there really was a foundation for the wild legends concerning a Christian empire in the East, so prevalent in Europe. Nestorius, a priest of Antioch and a disciple of St. Chrysostom, was elevated by the emperor to the patriarchate of Constantinople, and in the year 428 began to propagate his heresy, denying the hypostatic union. The Council of Ephesus denounced him, and, in spite of the emperor and court, Nestorius was anathematized and driven into exile. His sect spread through the East, and became a flourishing church. It reached to China, where the emperor was all but converted; its missionaries traversed the frozen tundras of Siberia, preaching their maimed Gospel to the wild hordes which haunted those dreary wastes; it faced Buddhism, and wrestled with it for the religious supremacy in Thibet; it established churches in Persia and in Bokhara; it penetrated India; it formed colonies in Ceylon, in Siam, and in Sumatra; so that the Catholicos or Pope of Bagdad exercised sway more extensive than that ever obtained by the successor of St. Peter. The number of Christians belonging to that communion probably exceeded that of the members of the true Catholic Church in East and West. But the Nestorian Church was not founded on the Rock; it rested on Nestorius; and when the rain descended, and the winds blew, and the floods came, and beat upon that house, it fell, leaving scarce a fragment behind.

Rubruquis the Franciscan, who in 1253 was sent on a mission into Tartary, was the first to let in a little light on the fable. He writes, "The Catai dwelt beyond certain mountains across which I wandered, and in a plain in the midst of the mountains lived once an important Nestorian shepherd, who ruled over the Nestorian people, called Nayman. When Coir-Khan died, the Nestorian people raised this man to be king, and called him King Johannes, and related of him ten times as much as the truth. The Nestorians thereabouts have this way with them, that about nothing they make a great fuss, and thus they have got it noised abroad that Sartach, Mangu-Khan, and Ken-Khan were Christians, simply because they treated Christians well, and showed them more honor than other people. Yet, in fact, they were not Christians at all. And in like manner the story got about that there was a great King John. However, I traversed his pastures, and no one knew anything about him, except a few

Nestorians. In his pastures lives Ken-Khan, at whose court was Brother Andrew, whom I met on my way back. This Johannes had a brother, a famous shepherd, named Unc, who lived three weeks' journey beyond the mountains of Caracatais."

This Unk-Khan was a real individual; he lost his life in the year 1203. Kuschhik, prince of the Nayman, and follower of Kor-Khan, fell in 1218.

Marco Polo, the Venetian traveller (1254-1324), identifies Unk-Khan with Prester John; he says, "I will now tell you of the deeds of the Tartars, how they gained the mastery, and spread over the whole earth. The Tartars dwelt between Georgia and Bargu, where there is a vast plain and level country, on which are neither cities nor forts, but capital pasturage and water. They had no chief of their own, but paid to Prester Johannes tribute. Of the greatness of this Prester Johannes, who was properly called Un-Khan, the whole world spake; the Tartars gave him one of every ten head of cattle. When Prester John noticed that they were increasing, he feared them, and planned how he could injure them. He determined therefore to scatter them, and he sent barons to do this. But the Tartars guessed what Prester John purposed . . . and they went away into the wide wastes of the North, where they might be beyond his reach." He then goes on to relate how Tschengis-(Jenghiz-)Khan became the head of the Tartars, and how he fought against Prester John, and, after a desperate fight, overcame and slew him.

The Syriac Chronicle of the Jacobite Primate, Gregory Bar-Hebræus (born 1226, died 1286), also identifies Unk-Khan with Prester John. "In the year of the Greeks 1514, of the Arabs 599 (A. D. 1202), when Unk-Khan, who is the Christian King John, ruled over a stock of the barbarian Hunns, called Kergt, Tschingys-Khan served him with great zeal. When John observed the superiority and serviceableness of the other, he envied him, and plotted to seize and murder him. But two sons of Unk-Khan, having heard this, told it to Tschingys; whereupon he and his comrades fled by night, and secreted themselves. Next morning Unk-Khan took possession of the Tartar tents, but found them empty. Then the party of Tschingys fell upon him, and they met by the spring called Balschunah, and the side of Tschingys won the day; and the followers of Unk-Khan were compelled to yield. They met again several times, till Unk-Khan was utterly discomfited, and was slain himself, and his wives, sons, and daughters carried into captivity. Yet we must consider that King John the Kergtajer was not cast down for nought; nay, rather, because he had turned his heart from the fear of Christ his Lord, who had exalted him, and had taken a wife of the Zinish nation, called Quarakhata. Because he forsook the religion of his ancestors and followed strange gods, therefore God took the government from him, and gave it to one better than he, and whose heart was right before God."

Some of the early travellers, such as John de Plano Carpini and Marco Polo, in disabusing the popular mind of the belief in Prester John as a mighty Asiatic Christian monarch, unintentionally turned the popular faith in that individual into a new direction. They spoke of the black people of Abascia in Ethiopia, which, by the way, they called Middle India, as a great people subject to a Christian monarch.

Marco Polo says that the true monarch of Abyssinia is Christ; but that it is governed by six kings, three of whom are Christians and three Saracens, and that they are in league with the Soudan of Aden.

Bishop Jordanus, in his description of the world, accordingly sets down Abyssinia as the kingdom of Prester John; and such was the popular impression, which was confirmed by the appearance at intervals of ambassadors at European courts from the King of Abyssinia. The discovery of the Cape of Good Hope was due partly to a desire manifested in Portugal to open communications with this monarch,²² and King John II. sent two men learned in Oriental languages through Egypt to

²² Ludolfi Hist. Æthiopica, lib. ii. cap. 1, 2. Petrus, Petri filius Lusitaniæ princeps, M. Pauli Veneti librum (qui de Indorum rebus multa: speciatim vero de Presbytero Johanne aliqua magnifice scripsit) Venetiis secum in patriam detulerat, qui (Chronologicis Lusitanorum testantibus) præcipuam Johanni Regi ansam dedit Indicæ navigationis, quam Henricus Johannes I. filius, patruus ejus, tentaverat, prosequendæ, &c.

the court of Abyssinia. The might and dominion of this prince, who had replaced the Tartar chief in the popular creed as Prester John, was of course greatly exaggerated, and was supposed to extend across Arabia and Asia to the wall of China. The spread of geographical knowledge has contracted the area of his dominions, and a critical acquaintance with history has exploded the myth which invested Unk-Khan, the nomad chief, with all the attributes of a demigod, uniting in one the utmost pretensions of a Pope and the proudest claims of a monarch.

The Divining Rod

FROM the remotest period a rod has been regarded as the symbol of power and authority, and Holy Scripture employs it in the popular sense. Thus David speaks of “Thy rod and Thy staff comforting me;” and Moses works his miracles before Pharaoh with the rod as emblem of Divine commission. It was his rod which became a serpent, which turned the water of Egypt into blood, which opened the waves of the Red Sea and restored them to their former level, which “smote the rock of stone so that the water gushed out abundantly.” The rod of Aaron acted an oracular part in the contest with the princes; laid up before the ark, it budded and brought forth almonds. In this instance we have it no longer as a symbol of authority, but as a means of divining the will of God. And as such it became liable to abuse; thus Hosea rebukes the chosen people for practising similar divinations. “My people ask counsel at their stocks, and their staff declareth unto them.”²³

Long before this, Jacob had made a different use of rods, employing them as a charm to make his father-in-law’s sheep bear pied and spotted lambs.

We find rhabdomancy a popular form of divination among the Greeks, and also among the Romans. Cicero in his “De Officiis” alludes to it. “If all that is needful for our nourishment and support arrives to us by means of some divine rod, as people say, then each of us, free from all care and trouble, may give himself up to the exclusive pursuit of study and science.”

Probably it is to this rod that the allusion of Ennius, as the agent in discovering hidden treasures, quoted in the first book of his “De Divinatione,” refers.

According to Vetranius Maurus, Varro left a satire on the “Virgula divina,” which has not been preserved. Tacitus tells us that the Germans practised some sort of divination by means of rods. “For the purpose their method is simple. They cut a rod off some fruit-tree into bits, and after having distinguished them by various marks, they cast them into a white cloth. . . . Then the priest thrice draws each piece, and explains the oracle according to the marks.” Ammianus Marcellinus says that the Alains employed an osier rod.

The fourteenth law of the Frisons ordered that the discovery of murders should be made by means of divining rods used in Church. These rods should be laid before the altar, and on the sacred relics, after which God was to be supplicated to indicate the culprit. This was called the Lot of Rods, or Tan-teen, the Rod of Rods.

But the middle ages was the date of the full development of the superstition, and the divining rod was believed to have efficacy in discovering hidden treasures, veins of precious metal, springs of water, thefts, and murders. The first notice of its general use among late writers is in the “Testamentum Novum,” lib. i. cap. 25, of Basil Valentine, a Benedictine monk of the fifteenth century. Basil speaks of the general faith in and adoption of this valuable instrument for the discovery of metals, which is carried by workmen in mines, either in their belts or in their caps. He says that there are seven names by which this rod is known, and to its excellences under each title he devotes a chapter of his book. The names are: Divine Rod, Shining Rod, Leaping Rod, Transcendent Rod, Trembling Rod, Dipping Rod, Superior Rod. In his admirable treatise on metals, Agricola speaks of the rod in terms of disparagement; he considers its use as a relic of ancient magical forms, and he says that it is only irreligious workmen who employ it in their search after metals. Goclenius, however, in his treatise on the virtue of plants, stoutly does battle for the properties of the hazel rod. Whereupon Roberti, a Flemish Jesuit, falls upon him tooth and nail, disputes his facts, overwhelms him with abuse, and gibbets him for popular ridicule. Andreas Libavius, a writer I have already quoted in my article on the Wandering Jew, undertook a series of experiments upon the hazel divining rod, and concluded that there was truth in the popular belief. The Jesuit Kircher also “experimentalized several

²³ Hos. iv. 12.

times on wooden rods which were declared to be sympathetic with regard to certain metals, by placing them on delicate pivots in equilibrium; but they never turned on the approach of metal.” (De Arte Magnetica.) However, a similar course of experiments over water led him to attribute to the rod the power of indicating subterranean springs and water-courses; “I would not affirm it,” he says, “unless I had established the fact by my own experience.”

Dechaies, another Jesuit, author of a treatise on natural springs, and of a huge tome entitled “Mundus Mathematicus,” declared in the latter work, that no means of discovering sources is equal to the divining rod; and he quotes a friend of his who, with a hazel rod in his hand, could discover springs with the utmost precision and facility, and could trace on the surface of the ground the course of a subterranean conduit. Another writer, Saint-Romain, in his “Science dégagée des Chimères de l’École,” exclaims, “Is it not astonishing to see a rod, which is held firmly in the hands, bow itself and turn visibly in the direction of water or metal, with more or less promptitude, according as the metal or the water are near or remote from the surface!”

In 1659 the Jesuit Gaspard Schott writes that the rod is used in every town of Germany, and that he had frequent opportunity of seeing it used in the discovery of hidden treasures. “I searched with the greatest care,” he adds, “into the question whether the hazel rod had any sympathy with gold and silver, and whether any natural property set it in motion. In like manner I tried whether a ring of metal, held suspended by a thread in the midst of a tumbler, and which strikes the hours, is moved by any similar force. I ascertained that these effects could only have rise from the deception of those holding the rod or the pendulum, or, may be, from some diabolic impulsion, or, more likely still, because imagination sets the hand in motion.”

The Sieur le Royer, a lawyer of Rouen, in 1674, published his “Traité du Bâton universel,” in which he gives an account of a trial made with the rod in the presence of Father Jean François, who had ridiculed the operation in his treatise on the science of waters, published at Rennes in 1655, and which succeeded in convincing the blasphemer of the divine Rod. Le Royer denies to it the power of picking out criminals, which had been popularly attributed to it, and as had been unhesitatingly claimed for it by Debrion in his “Disquisitio Magica.”

And now I am brought to the extraordinary story of Jacques Aymar, which attracted the attention of Europe to the marvellous properties of the divining rod. I shall give the history of this man in full, as such an account is rendered necessary by the mutilated versions I have seen current in English magazine articles, which follow the lead of Mrs. Crowe, who narrates the earlier portion of this impostor’s career, but says nothing of his *exposé* and downfall.

On the 5th July, 1692, at about ten o’clock in the evening, a wine-seller of Lyons and his wife were assassinated in their cellar, and their money carried off. On the morrow, the officers of justice arrived, and examined the premises. Beside the corpses, lay a large bottle wrapped in straw, and a bloody hedging bill, which undoubtedly had been the instrument used to accomplish the murder. Not a trace of those who had committed the horrible deed was to be found, and the magistrates were quite at fault as to the direction in which they should turn for a clew to the murderer or murderers.

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