

The Porta Magica, Rome

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THE PORTA MAGICA, ROME.¹

WHEN Christina of Sweden entered the city of Rome through the *Porta del Popolo*, on horseback, in the costume of an Amazon, she was received by the Papal magnates with great pomp, and created a sensation quite in keeping with her eccentric character.

A short time before this she had abdicated the throne, which she had occupied twenty-three years, although only twenty-nine years of age, and she had abandoned the religion of her distinguished father, Gustavus Adolphus, the northern champion of Protestantism, to embrace that of which the Eternal City was the fountain-head. With the exception of occasional visits to the north of Europe, Christina spent the remaining thirty-four years of her life in Rome, occupied with court intrigues, and with the cultivation of those branches of learning for which her masculine education had early given her a taste. Her mind was disciplined by contact with men of intellectual vigor, and gifted with an excellent memory, she showed aptitude for the severer studies of mathematics and the sciences, as well as belles-lettres and the fine arts. She made collections of works of art, of antiquities, and of rare books in every department of literature, and she assembled in her palatial villa the most learned men and witty women of the Papal Court.

In the garden of her villa she gathered poets, essayists, and philosophers of both sexes, who arrayed themselves in the costumes of shepherds and shepherdesses, to imitate the pastoral simplicity of Arcadia. One year after her death, this society was formally organized as the Arcadian Academy, by Gravina (1690).

In the large salon of her villa, another group assembled for "scientific discourse on all useful and agreeable, erudite and celestial subjects." In this group were the natural philosophers, mathematicians, astronomers, and naturalists, who later developed into the Clementine Academy, instituted on plans drawn up by Jean Justin Ciampini. Not only were all the meetings held in Queen Christina's palace, but she was the perpetual president and patron; she chose the members, appointed the officers, and drew up the laws which governed this unique society.

Christina's activity knew no bounds; she kept up correspondence with many savants of Europe, including Torricelli, the distinguished physicist, Alessandro Marchetti, the poet and astronomer, Dominico Cassini, Director of the Astronomical Observatory at Paris, and Viviani, the pupil of Galileo; she engaged the services of Vitale

¹ Read at a meeting of the American Folk-Lore Society, New York Branch, November 9, 1894.

Giordani and Alfonso Borelli, paying them stipends for making researches in science. When the son of Burgomaster Guericke sent Christina a copy of the well illustrated folio containing an account of experiments on the vacuum conducted in Magdeburg, she replied in a gracious and flattering epistle.

In the seventeenth century, science and philosophy were still encumbered with false doctrines and superstitious beliefs, which for hundreds of years held in bondage even the most enlightened minds. Mathematicians gravely discussed the squaring of the circle and perpetual motion, and were occupied in calculating future events by juggling with Biblical numbers. Astronomers, even while discovering fundamental laws of the motions of celestial orbs, gained a livelihood by casting horoscopes for the credulous rich, and practising astrology in its various phases. Physicians were dosing their unhappy patients with nauseous nostrums, and writing treatises on sympathetic powders and cures by transplantation. Naturalists discoursed of salamanders, phœnixes, barnacle geese, apparitions, and monsters. Alchemists wasted their means and energy in attempts to make a universal solvent, an elixir of life, and to transmute base metals into silver and gold. Traditions still lingered of the glories of the Gold House of Augustus, Elector of Saxony, and the triumphs of alchemy accomplished therein; memories still survived of the transmutation effected before Rudolph II., the Hermes of Germany, and his pseudo-scientific court at Prague. Dr. Dee, the Englishman, and Sendivogius, the Pole, had terminated their careers of imposture but a short time before.

Although the chemists of this period, Kunckel, Becher, and Homberg, in Germany, and Lemery in France, were developing a utilitarian science, the philosophy of chemistry was as yet unborn, and the mysterious art of alchemy still formed a legitimate portion of polite learning. Many eminent persons gave credence to the claims of its votaries,—Sir Isaac Newton dabbled in it when a youth, the Hon. Robert Boyle, “the Father of Chemistry and Brother to the Earl of Cork,” thought its theories reasonable; Leibnitz was secretary of the German Alchemical Society founded at Nüremberg in 1654; and Dr. Helvetius, the noted physician of Leyden, had recently published his “Brief of the Golden Calf,” narrating the curious circumstances leading to his conversion. Similar literature abounded.

In Christina’s northern home, alchemy had shown much vigor and was patronized by the crowned heads of the two political divisions of Scandinavia. Ferdinand III., King of Norway and Denmark, was zealous in cultivating hermetic science, and had employed an Italian alchemist, Borri, to conduct a search for the Philosophers’ Stone.

This Borri pretended to be assisted by a demon who appeared at his command, and he caused his patron extravagant outlays in time and money. After Ferdinand's death, in 1670, Borri fled to Rome, and as Christina had already employed his services when temporarily sojourning in Hamburg, it is highly probable the clever knave sought her in the Italian Capital.

Christina's father, the great Gustavus Adolphus, had favored alchemists and their pretensions. In the very year in which Christina succeeded to the throne, Ambrosius Muller had made a successful projection in the Royal presence, manufacturing, it is said, silver and gold to the value of 30,000 ducats, and to commemorate this the King caused to be struck coins of both metals, bearing alchemical symbols.

With such precedents, and in such an atmosphere, it is not surprising that the ex-queen followed the fashionable foible, and cultivated the pseudo-sciences of astrology and alchemy. She collected the rarest books on alchemy, and corresponded with the disciples of Hermes of high reputation. Johann Kunckel, who was afterwards invited to the Swedish capital by Charles XII., to superintend the mines of the kingdom, had discovered, in 1669, the marvelous substance, phosphorus, and for a while the process was kept secret. Knowing this, Christina wrote to the Elector of Brandenburg, to obtain for her the composition of the light-giving element.

Thus we see the mental attitude of this talented and eccentric woman towards alchemy. A short time before the year 1680, while residing in the Villa Palombara, situated on the Esquiline Hill, she was waited upon by an alchemist from Scandinavia, perhaps the very Borri mentioned above. This man hinted darkly at his mysterious knowledge, and showed her an antique illuminated manuscript, containing the secret of transmutation, expressed in symbolic characters. After much persuasion, the Queen obtained from the alchemist a promise to exhibit his powers, and at an appointed day and hour he actually accomplished a transmutation in her presence. The delighted Queen was speedily doomed to great disappointment, for the alchemist never appeared again in her circle, nor was any trace of him found. She had, however, retained the manuscript with its secret symbols, and this she studied, in hopes of learning the hermetic art. As, however, neither she nor her learned Academicians were able to interpret the symbols, she caused them to be engraved on the white marble gateway leading to her villa, in hopes that some passer-by might decipher them.

Though the Villa Palombara has long ago disappeared, this gateway, known as the *PORTA MAGICA*, is still preserved in a locality

formerly occupied by the gardens. The following description of the monument is from notes made by the writer, on the spot, in January, 1894. In a corner of the Piazza Vittorio Emmanuele, a square surrounded by modern buildings of no interest, are the lofty ruins of the so-called Trophies of Marius, but in reality they are the remains of the water-tower of the Aqua Julia, in the niches of which the trophies formerly stood. This ruin is now converted, in part, into a picturesque fountain, and is overgrown with shrubs and evergreens; opposite this, and separated only by a gravelled walk, are remains of the brick wall of the Villa Palombara, in which is built the Porta Magica. On each side of the gateway are grotesque marble statues in a mutilated state. At the base and in front are large, rough rocks, covered with shrubs and vines, and on top of the wall flourishes a tree of considerable size.

On the top, sides, and tread of the white marble doorway are carved alchemical symbols, with one Hebrew and twelve Latin inscriptions.¹ These symbols are partly simple signs of the metals and partly arbitrary combinations of these signs with each other, and with cabalistic characters. The inscriptions and symbols can be only partly interpreted, and it is hardly necessary to add they are entirely without real significance, either to the chemist or the philosopher.

Surmounting the doorway is carved a large ring within which are two crossed triangles, and within one of the triangles is a sign composed of a Latin cross joined to a ring itself containing a small circle. In the exterior large ring are the words:—

(A.) *Tria sunt mirabilia Deus et homo, mater et virgo, trinus et unus.*

“Three things are wonderful: [He who is] God and Man; [She who is] Mother and Virgin; [God who is] three and one.”

In the smaller ring at base of the cross:—

(B.) *Centrum in trigone centri.*

“The centre in the triangle of the centre.”

On the doorway itself, at top of the jamb, are the Hebrew words:—

רוח אלהים

“The Spirit of God.”

The first letter may have originally had a short projection, in which case it would be ל Lamedh instead of ר Resh, and the inscription would then read:—

“The Tablet of God.”

¹ Cancellieri, Francesco. Diss. epist. sopra la statua del Discobolo scoperte nella Villa Palombara. Rome, 1806.



HORTI · MAGICI · INGRESSVM ·
 · HESPERIVS · CUSTODIT · DRACO · ET · SINE ·
 · ALCEDE · COLEBICAS · DELICIAS ·
 · NON · GUSTASSET · JASON ·



QVANDO · IN · TVA ·
 DOMO · NIGRI ·
 CORVI · PARTVR ·
 IENT · ALBAS ·
 COLVMBAS ·
 TVNC ·
 VOCABERIS ·
 SAPIENS ·

DIAMETER ·
 SPHERE ·
 TRAV · CIRCVLI ·
 CAV · ORBIS ·
 NON · ORBIS ·
 PRO ·
 SVNT ·



QUI · CIT · COMBVR ·
 ERE · AQVA · ET ·
 LAVARE · IENI ·
 FACIT · DE · TERRA ·
 CAELVM · ET · DE ·
 CAELO · TERRAM ·
 PRETIOSAM ·

SI · FECERIS · VO ·
 LARE · TERRAM ·
 SVPER · CAPVI ·
 TVM · VS ·
 PENNIS · VAS ·
 TORRENTVM ·
 CONVERTES · IN ·
 PETRAM ·



AZOT · ET · IGNIS ·
 DE · ALBANDO ·
 LATONAM ·
 VENIET · SINE ·
 VESTE · DIANA ·

EST · OPVS ·
 VERI · SOPHI ·
 RAM · VT ·
 SALVTEM ·



OCCVLTVM ·
 APERIRE · TER ·
 CERTINET ·
 PRO · POPVLO ·

FLVVS · NOSTER ·
 MORTVVS ·
 VVIT · EX · AB ·
 IONE · REDIT ·
 I · CONVVGIO ·
 GAVDET · OCCVLS ·

On the door jamb, beneath the Hebrew words, is the inscription :—

(C.) *Horti magici ingressum Hesperius custodit draco et sine Alcide Colchicas delicias non gustasset Jason.*

“A dragon guards the entrance to the magic garden of Hesperius; and without the aid of Alcides [Hercules] Jason would not have tasted the delights of Colchis.”

Alchemistic authors were wont to claim that the Argonautic expedition symbolized the search for the Philosophers' Stone. This theory is as old as Dionysius of Mitylene, who lived about 50 B. C. Glauber, the German physician, records this interpretation in the following quaint language: “When ancient Philosophers by poetical parables described the laborious navigation of Jason to the island Colchos, where resided a huge dragon vomiting fire, which with eyes never closed, diligently watched the golden fleece, they added this, viz., that Jason was taught by his wife Medea to cast to this waking dragon an edible medicine to be swallowed, whereby he should be killed and burst; and that Jason should presently take the dragon (thus slain) and totally submerge him in the Stygian lake. Jason in this ingenious fable hieroglyphically represents the philosophers; Medea accurate meditations; the laborious and perilous navigation signifies manifold chymical labours; the watching dragon vomiting fire denotes salt-nitre and sulphur; and the golden fleece is the tincture or soul of sulphur, by the help of which Jason restored health to his aged father, and acquired to himself immense riches. By the pills of Medea is understood the preparation of sulphur and *sal mirabile*.¹ By the total submersion of the dragon in the Stygian lake is intimated the fixation of sulphur by Stygian water, that is, *Aqua Fortis*. Whence it is sufficiently clear how obscurely the ancient Philosophers did describe their fixation of sulphur by nitre, and how secretly they hid it from the eyes of the unworthy.”

The left hand post of the gateway has three symbols and three inscriptions; the first symbol is an alchemical sign not easily interpreted, beneath which we read :—

(D.) *Quando in tua domo nigri corui parturient albas columbas tunc vocaberis sapiens.*

“Whenever in your house black ravens shall hatch white doves then you shall be called wise.”

In the centre of the left door-post is the symbol for iron, supposed to denote the shield and buckler of Mars; but it is not correctly

¹ Glauber's own discovery, the substance still familiarly known as Glauber's Salts.

graven, for the arrow should be inclined to the circle thus ♂. Beneath is the inscription :—

(E.) *Qui cit comburere aqua et lavare igni facit de terra cælum et de cælo terram pretiosam.*

Reading "scit" for "cit;" He who knows how to burn with water and to wash with fire, makes heaven out of earth and precious earth out of heaven."

The third symbol on the left door-post is compounded of the sign for silver (a crescent) and that for gold (a circle with a central point), to which a small cross is attached, which signifies any corrosive substance. Beneath are the words :—

(F.) *Azot et ignis de albando Latonam veniet sine veste Diana.*

"Azoth and fire from the whitening of Latona will come an unclad Diana."

At the right hand upper corner of the doorway is an obscure sign with this inscription :—

(G.) *Diameter spheræ thau circuli crux orbis non orbis pro sunt.*

"The diameter of a sphere, the tau of a circle, the cross of an orb not an orb, these things avail."

Midway, on the right hand post, is the symbol for copper, sometimes called the looking-glass of Venus, with these words, in part obliterated :—

(H.) *Si feceris volare terram super caput tuum —us pennis —uas torrentum convertes in petram.*

"If you shall make the earth to fly above your head . . . with wings, you will turn . . . of torrents into rock."

At the lower right hand corner is a complex symbol composed of the silver crescent, the gold circle and the corrosive, together with an obscure addition. Beneath this is the inscription :—

(J.) *Filius noster mortuis vivit et ab igne redit —i conjugio gaudet oculis.*

"Our dead son lives and returns from the fire . . . rejoices in marriage with his eyes" (?).

On the bottom of the doorway is a complex symbol not resolvable, and an inscription partly to the left and partly to the right of the character :—

(K.) *Est opus occultum veri sophi aperire terram ut germinet salutem pro populo.*

"It is the hidden work of a truly wise man to open the earth and to cause salvation [or health] to bud forth for the people."

On the tread of the doorway are the barely legible words :—

(L.) *Sesedes nonis* (?), which are undecipherable.

I am indebted to the Rev. Prof. Samuel Hart, D. D., for assistance in translating the Hebrew and Latin inscriptions, and to Mr. Reginald Bolton, C. E., for the accompanying drawing made from a rough sketch by the writer.

Henry Carrington Bolton.