

Secrets of Cabalism

or

Ravenstone and Alice of Huntingdon

By William Child Green

On the evening of the 29th of June, 1555, in one of the narrow streets near the Poultry Compter, in London, a dark square-built ruffian, in a thrum cap and leathern jerkin, suddenly sprung forth from his hiding-place, and struck his dagger with all his force against the breast of a man passing by. 'By my holidam,' said the man, 'that would have craved no thanks if my coat-hardy had been thinner—but thou shalt have a jape (a fool's mark) for thy leman to know thee by,'—and flourishing a short gisarme, or double-pointed weapon, in his left hand, with his right, on which he seemed to wear an iron glove, he stamped a sufficient mark on the assassin's face, and vanished in a moment.

'Why, thou Lozel!' said another ruffian, starting from beneath a penthouse, 'wast playing at barley-break with a wooden knife? Thou wilt hardly earn twenty pounds this bout.'

'A plague on his cloak, Coniers!—he must have had a gainbason under it.—Thou mayest earn the coin thyself;—thou hast gotten a gold ring and twenty shillings in part payment.'

Get thee gone to thy needle and baudekin again, like a woman's tailor as thou art! Thou hast struck a wrong man, and he has taken away thy nose that he may swear to the right one.—That last quart of huff-cap made froth of thy brains.'

'My basilard is sharp enough for thee, I warrant,' muttered his disappointed companion, as he drew his tough hyke or cloak over his bruises, and slunk into a darker alley. Meanwhile, the subject of their discourse and of their villany strode with increased haste towards the Compter-prison, and inquired for the condemned prisoner, John Bradford. The keeper knew Bishop Gardiner's secretary, and admitted him without hesitation, hoping that he brought terms of grace to the pious man, whose meek demeanour in the prison had won love from all about him. The secretary found him on his knees, as his custom was, eating his square meal in that humble posture, and meditating with his hat drawn over his face. He rose to receive his visitors and his tall slender person, held gracefully erect, aided a countenance which derived from a faint bloom and a beard of rich brown, an expression of youthful beauty such as a painter would not have deemed unworthy the great giver of the creed for which he suffered. Gardiner's secretary uncovered his head, and, bending it humbly, kissed his hand with tears. 'Be of good comfort, brother,' said Bradford,—'I have done nothing in this realm except in godly quietness, unless at Paul's Cross, where I bestirred myself to save him who is now Bishop of Bath, when his rash sermon provoked the multitude.'

'Ah, Bradford! Bradford!' replied his visitor, 'thou didst save him who will now burn thee. Had it not been for thee, I had run him through with my sword that day!' Bradford started back, and looked earnestly,—'I know thy voice now, and I remember that voice said those same words in my ear when the turmoil was at Paul's Cross. For what comest thou now? A man of blood is no fit company for a sinner going to die.'

'Not while I live, my most dear tutor; I am Rufford of Edlesburgh.'

The old man threw his arms about his neck, and hung on it for an instant. 'It is twelve years since I saw thee, and my heart grieved when I heard a voice like thine in the fierce riot at Paul's

Cross. Art thou here bodily, or, do I only dream? There is a rumour abroad, that thy old enemy, Coniers, slew thee at Huntingdon last year.'

'He meant well, John Bradford, but I had a thick hilted pourpoint and a tough leathern cap; I have met his minions more than once, and they know what print my hand leaves. Enough of this—I am not in England now as Giles Rufford; I shall do thee better service as what I seem.'

'Seeming never was good service,' said the divine: 'what hast thou to do with me, who am in God's hands?'

'He makes medicines of asps and vipers,' answered his pupil; 'I shall serve him if I save his minister, though it be by subtlety. I have crept into Gardiner's favour by my skill in strange tongues and Hebrew secrets, therefore I am now his secretary: and I have an ally in the very chamber of our queen-mistress.'

'That woman is not unwise or unmerciful,' replied Bradford, 'in things that touch not her faith; but I will be helped by no unfair practice on her. Mercy with God's mercy will be welcome, but I am readier to die than to be his forsworn servant.'

'Master, there can be no evil in gathering the fruit Providence has ripened for us. Gardiner was Wolsey's disciple once, and bath more heathen learning in him than Catholic zeal. There is a leaven left of his old studies which will work us good. He believes in the cabalism of the Jews, and reads strange books from Padua and Antwerp, which tell him of lucky and lucky days. He shall be made to think tomorrow full of evil omens, and his superstition shall shake his cruelty.'

'Thou art but a green youth still,' rejoined Bradford, 'if thou knowest not that cruelty is superstition's child. Take heed that his heathenish witchcraft doth not shake both thy wit and thy safety. For though I sleep but little, and have few dreams of earthly things, there came, as I think, a vision raised by no holy art, into my prison last night. And it had such a touch of heaven's beauty in its face, and such rare music in its voice, that it well nigh tempted me to believe its promise. But I remembered my frailty, and was safe.'

The secretary's eyes shone brightly, and half a smile opened his lips. But he lowered both his eyes and his voice as he replied, 'What did this fair vision promise?'

'Safety and release, if I would trust her, and be pledged to obey her.'—There was a long pause before the young man spoke again.—'Do you not remember, my foster-father, the wild laurel that grew near my birthplace? An astrologer at Pisa told me it should not wither till the day of my death. And it seems to me, when I walked under its shade, that the leaves made strange music, as if a spirit had touched them. It is greener and richer than its neighbours, and the fountain that flows near its root has, as men believe, a rare power of healing—the dreams that visit me when I sleep near it are always the visitings of a courteous and lovely spirit. What if the legends of Greece and Syria speak truth? May we not both have guardian spirits that choose earthly shapes?'

'My son,' replied Bradford, 'those thoughts are the diamond-drops that lie on the young roses of life; but the Sun of Truth and Reason should disperse them. Man has one guardian, and he needs no more unless he forgets that One. Thou wast called in thy youth the silken pleader, because thy words were like fine threads spun into a rich tissue. Be wary lest they entangle thee, and become a snare instead of a banner fit to guide Christians. I am a blighted tree marked for the lire, and thou canst not save me by searing the freshness of thy young laurel for my sake.'

'I will shame the astrologer tomorrow,' said the pupil; 'and therefore I must make this hour brief. She who rules the queen's secrets has had a bribe to make Mary merciful. There is hope of a birth at court, and death ought not to be busy. Fare-ye-well! but do not distrust that fair

apparition if it should open these prison-doors tomorrow.’—So saying, the young man departed without heeding Bradford’s monitory gesture.

Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester, and High Chancellor by Mary’s favour, sat that night alone and thoughtful in his closet. He had been the chief commissioner appointed to preside at Bradford’s trial: and though he had eagerly urged his colleagues to condemn him, he secretly abhorred the timeserving cruelty of Bishop Bonner and the cowardice of Bourne, who had not dared to save the life of the benefactor but had begged to save his own. ‘You have tarried late,’ said Gardiner, as his secretary entered—‘the stars are waning, and their intelligence will be imperfect.’

‘I traced it before midnight,’ replied the secretary, ‘but I needed the help of your lordship’s science.’

‘It is strange,’ said the patron, leaning thoughtfully on one of Roger Bacon’s volumes, ‘that men in every age and climate, and of every creed, have this appetite for an useless knowledge—and it would be stranger, if both profane and sacred history did not shew us that such knowledge had been sometimes granted, though in vain.—What is that paper in thy hand?’

‘It is a clumsy calculation, my lord, of this night’s aspect. I learned in Araby, as your lordship knows, some small guesses at Chaldean astrology; but I deem the characters and engraven signs of the Hermetic men more powerful in arresting the intelligent bodies in the heavens. They were the symbols used by Pythagoras and Zoroaster, and their great master Apollonius.’

‘Ignatius Loyola and Athanasius Kircher did not disdain them,’ replied the Bishop, crossing himself—‘But what was the fruit of thy calculation?’

‘Nothing,’ answered his secretary humbly—‘nothing at least not already known to one more able than myself. The first of July is a day of evil omen, and the last day of June has a doubtful influence. My intelligence says, if life be taken on that day, a mitre will be among ashes.’

‘Ha! and the heretics will think it if Bradford dies, for they are wont to say, he is worthier of a bishopric than we of a parish priesthood. Thou hast not yet told all.’

‘My lord, I see the rest dimly.—There are symbols of a falling star and a flame quenched in blood. They tell of a gorgeous funeral soon.’

Gardiner was silent several minutes before he raised his head. ‘Thou knowest, Ravenstone, that I was like the Jesuit Loyola, a student of earthly things, and a servant in profane wars before I took the cross. Therefore I sinned not when I learned as he did. And thou knowest he thought much of heathen and Egyptian conjuration; but that is not my secret. Plato and Socrates had their attendant demons. I have seen, it may be, such a one in a dream last night. Methought there stood by me in an oratory a woman of queen-like beauty and strange beauty. She shewed me, as it were beyond a mist, a green tree growing near a fountain, and the star that shone on that fountain was the brightest in the sky; but presently the tree grew wide and broad, and the light of the star set behind it. Then I saw in my cathedral at Winchester my own effigies on a tomb, but all the inscription was effaced and broken except the date, and I read “the first day of July”—Is it not strange, Ravenstone, that a dream should so well tally with thy planetary reckoning? Yet I was once told by a witch-woman, that the Bishop of Winchester should read out Queen Mary’s funeral sermon.’

‘So he may, my lord,’ said the secretary, who called himself Ravenstone, ‘but there may be a White Bishop of Winchester.’

‘Ah! I trow thy meaning—White is a shrewd churchman, and looks for my place. Harken to me, then—I have a thought that evil is gathering against me tonight; to profit by a dream, I will go privily from London within this hour, and abide in secret at Winchester till the ides of June

are past. But take thou my signet-ring, and put my seal and countersign to Bradford's death-warrant when it comes from court.'

'Does my lord think it will be sent?' said the secretary calmly—'They say the queen's bedchamber-woman has told her, she will be the mother of no living thing if she harms ought that has life.'

'Tush—that woman is a crafty giglet, but we need such helps when a queen reigns. It was well done, Ravenstone, to promise her Giles Rufford's lands. Since the man is dead, and his heir murdered him, we will make Alice of Huntingdon his heiress.'

Not a muscle in the pretended Ravenstone's face changed, and his deep black eye was steady as he replied—'It will be well done, my lord, if she is faithful. At what hour is John Bradford to die?'

'Bid the marshal of the prison have a care of him till four o'clock tomorrow morning, for he is a gay and glorious talker; and so was his namesake, mad John of Munster, even among red hot irons. Look to the warrant, Ravenstone, and see it speedily sent to Newgate. That done—nay, come nearer—I would speak in thine ear. There is a coffer in my private chamber which I have left unlocked. Attach my signet-ring to the silver chain, and let me know what thou shalt hear; but let this be done in the very noon of night, when no eye nor ear but thine can reach it.'

Ravenstone promised, and his hand trembled with joy as he received the ring. It was already almost midnight, and Gardiner, as he stole out of his house, stopped to look at the moon's rainbow, then deemed a rare and awful omen. 'Alice of Huntingdon is busy,' said he, with a ghastly smile, 'but the dead man's land will be free enough for the blue-eyed witch—she cannot buy a husband without it.'—And stealing a look at Ravenstone, the Chancellor-bishop departed.

'I am a fool,' said young Ravenstone to himself, 'and worse than a fool, to heed how this wanton giglet may be made fit for a knave's bribe,—and yet that this dull bigot, this surly and selfish drone, should have such glimpses of a poet's paradise, is a wonder worth envying. I have heard and seen men in love with Platonic superstition under the hot skies of Spain, where the air seems as if it was the breathing of kind spirits and the waters are bright enough for the dwelling; but here in this foggy island—in this old man's dark head and iron heart! I will see what familiar demon stoops to hold converse with such a sorcerer.'

And young Ravenstone locked himself in his chamber, not ill-pleased that his better purpose would serve as covert and gilding for his secret passion to pry into his patron's mystery. He arrayed his person in the apparel he had provided to equip him as Gardiner's representative; and while he threw it over the close purpoint and tunic which fitted his comely figure, he smiled in scorn as he remembered the ugliness and decrepitude he meant to counterfeit. At the eleventh hour, when the darkness of the narrow streets, interrupted only by a few lanterns swinging above his head, made his passage safe, he admitted himself into the Bishop's house by a private postern, of which he kept a master-key. By the same key's help he entered the chamber, and ringing his patron's silver bell, gave notice to the page in waiting that his presence was needful. When this confidential servant entered, he was not surprised to see, as he supposed, the bishop seated behind his leathern screen muffled in his huge rochet or lawn garment, as if he had privately returned from council, according to his custom. 'Hath no messenger arrived from the court?' said the counterfeit prelate. 'None, my lord, for the queen, they say is sore sick.'—'Tarry not an instant if one cometh, and see that the marshal of the compter be waiting here to take warrant, and execute it at his peril before daybreak.' The page retired; and Ravenstone, alone, saw the coffer standing on its solitary pedestal near him. It was unlocked, and he found within it only a deep silver bowl with a chain poised exactly in its centre. Ravenstone was no stranger to

the mode of divination practised with such instruments. What could he risk by suspending the signet-ring as Gardiner had requested? His curiosity prevailed, and the ring when attached to the silver chain vibrated of itself, and struck the sides of the bowl three times distinctly. He listened eagerly to its clear and deep sound, expecting some response, and when he looked up, Alice of Huntingdon stood by his side.

This woman had a queen-like stature, to which the height of her volupure, or veil, twisted in large white folds like an Asiatic turban, gave increased majesty. Her supertunic, of a thick stuff, in those days called Stammel, hung from her shoulders with that ample flow which distinguishes the drapery of a Dian in ancient sculpture. 'You summoned me,' she said, 'and I attend you.'

Ravenstone, though he believed himself sporting with the superstition of Gardiner as with a tool, felt startled by her sudden appearance; and a thrill of the same superstitious awe he had mocked in his patron, passed through his own blood. But he recollected his purpose and his disguise; and still keeping the cowering attitude which befitted the bishop, he replied, 'Where is thy skill in divination if thou knowest not what I need?'

'I have studied thy ruling planet,' said Alice of Huntingdon, 'and as thy wishes are without number, so they are without a place in thy destiny. But I have read the signs of Mary Tudor's, and I know which of her high officers will lose his staff this night.'

'Knowest thou the marks of his visage, Alice?' asked the counterfeit bishop, bending down his head, and drawing his hood still farther over it.

'Hear them,' replied Mice: 'a swarthy colour, hanging look, frowning brows, eyes an inch within his head, hooked nose, wide nostrils, ever snuffing the wind, a sparrow-mouth, great hands, long talons rather than nails on his feet, which make shuffle in his gait as in his actions—these are the marks of visage and his shape; none can tell his wit, for it has all shapes. Dost thou know this portrait, my Lord of Winchester?'

'Full well, woman,' answered Ravenstone, 'and his trust is in a witch whose blue eyes shame heaven for lending its colour to hypocrisy; and her flattery has made boys think the tree she loved and the fountain she smiled on became holy. And now she serves two masters, one blinded by his folly, the other by his age.'

Ravenstone, as he spoke, dropped the rochet-hood from his shoulders, and shaking back his long jet-black hair, stood before her in the firmness and grace of his youthful figure. Alice did not shrink or recede a step. She laughed, but it was a laugh so musical, and aided by a glance of such sweet mirth, that Ravenstone relaxed the stern grasp he had laid upon her 'The warrant, Alice! It is midnight, and the marshal waits—where is the warrant for John Bradford's release?'

'It is in my hand,' she said, 'and needs only thy sign and seal; here is the handwriting of our queen.'

Ravenstone snatched the parchment, but did not rashly sign without unfolding it. 'Thou art deceived, Alice, or willing to deceive; this is a marriage contract, investing thee with the lands of Giles Rufford as thy dowry.'

'And to whom,' asked she, smiling, 'does my queen-mistress licence me to give it by her own manual sign?'

Ravenstone looked again, and saw his name entered, and himself described as the husband chosen for her maid of honour Queen Mary. 'Has she also signed,' he said, 'the reprieve of John Bradford?'

'It is in my hand, and now in thy sight Henry Ravenstone; but the seal that will save thy friend may not be placed till thou hast given sign and seal to this contract. Choose!—'

The warrant for Bradford's liberation was spread before him, and her other hand held the contract of espousals. He smiled as he met the gaze of her keen blue eyes, and wrote the name of Henry Ravenstone in the blank left for it. She added her own without removing those keen eyes from his; and placing the parchment in her gipsire, suffered him to take the warrant of his friend's release. It was full and clear, but when he turned to seek the chancellor's signet-ring, the coffer had closed upon it. 'Blame thyself, Ravenstone!' said Alice of Huntingdon; 'thou hast laughed at the tales of imps and fairies, yet thou hadst woman's weakness enough to pry into that coffer and expect a miracle. As if thy master had not wit sufficient to devise a safe place for his ring, which thy curiosity placed there more than thy obedience! Didst thou think I came into this chamber like a sylph or an elfin, without hearing the stroke on the silver bowl which gave notice thou wast here? Truly, Ravenstone, man's vanity is the only witch that governs him.'

'Beautiful demon! when the crafty churchman who tutors thy cunning has no need of it, will thy master, the great Prince of Fire, save thee from the stake?'

'My trust in myself,' she answered; and throwing her cloak and wimple on the ground, she loosened her bright hair till it fell to her feet, and waving round her uncovered shoulders, and amongst the thin blue silk that clung to her shape, like wreaths of gold. Her eyes, large and brilliant as the wild leopard's, shone with such imperial beauty as almost to create the triumph they demanded. 'Be no rebel to my power, Ravenstone, for it is thy safety. Gardiner has ordered Bradford's death without appeal, and feigned his dream of danger to decoy thee here! But I have earned a fair estate by serving him, and thou mayest share it with me.' 'Thy wages are not yet paid, Alice!' he replied, grinding his teeth. 'That fair estate is mine, and that contract can avail thee nothing without my will—Henry Ravenstone is a name as false as thy promise to save Bradford.' Alice paused an instant, then laughing shrilly, clapped her hands thrice. In that instant the chamber was filled with armed men, who surrounded and struck down their victim notwithstanding his desperate defence. 'This is not the bishop!' one of the men exclaimed, 'this is not Stephen of Winchester; we shall not be paid for this.' 'He is Giles Rufford of Huntingdon,' answered his companion, the ruffian Coniers, 'and I am already paid.' Alice would have escaped had not the length of her dishevelled hair enabled her treacherous accomplices to seize it. They twined it round her throat to stifle her cries, making her boasted beauty the instrument of her destruction. She was dragged to Newgate on a charge of sorcery, and executed the next morning by John Bradford's side, in male attire, lest her rare loveliness should excite compassion. He knew her, and looking at the laurel-stems mingled with the faggots, said, as if conscious of his young friend's death—'Alas! the green tree has perished for my sake!'—It was indeed his favourite laurel, which had been hewn down with cruel malice for this purpose. The people, just even in their superstitions to a good man's memory, still believe the earth remains parched and barren where John Bradford perished on the first of July 1555; and his heart, which escaped the flames, like his fellow martyr's, Archbishop Cranmer's, was embalmed and wrapped in laurel-leaves. His memory is sanctified by the religion honoured, while Alice of Huntingdon's sunk among dust and ashes, as a worthy emblem of the Cabalism she practised.