

# The Elixir of Life

By Richard Garnett

The aged philosopher Aboniel inhabited a lofty tower in the city of Balkh, where he devoted himself to the study of chemistry and the occult sciences. No one was ever admitted to his laboratory. Yet Aboniel did not wholly shun intercourse with mankind, but, on the contrary, had seven pupils, towardly youths belonging to the noblest families of the city, whom he instructed at stated times in philosophy and all lawful knowledge, reserving the forbidden lore of magic and alchemy for himself.

But on a certain day he summoned his seven scholars to the mysterious apartment. They entered with awe and curiosity, but perceived nothing save the sage standing behind a table, on which were placed seven crystal phials, filled with a clear liquid resembling water.

‘Ye know, my sons,’ he began, ‘with what ardour I am reputed to have striven to penetrate the hidden secrets of Nature, and to solve the problems which have allured and baffled the sages of all time. In this rumour doth not err: such hath ever been my object; but, until yesterday, my fortune hath been like unto theirs who have preceded me. The little I could accomplish seemed as nothing in comparison with what I was compelled to leave unachieved. Even now my success is but partial. I have not learned to make gold; the talisman of Solomon is not mine; nor can I recall the principle of life to the dead, or infuse it into inanimate matter. But if I cannot create, I can preserve. I have found the Elixir of Life.’

The sage paused to examine the countenances of his scholars. Upon them he read extreme surprise, undoubting belief in the veracity of their teacher, and the dawning gleam of a timid hope that they themselves might become participators in the transcendent discovery he proclaimed. Addressing himself to the latter sentiment—‘I am willing,’ he continued, ‘to communicate this secret to you, if such be your desire.’

A unanimous exclamation assured him that there need be no uncertainty on this point.

‘But remember,’ he resumed, ‘that this knowledge, like all knowledge, has its disadvantages and its drawbacks. A price must be paid, and when ye come to learn it, it may well be that it will seem too heavy. Understand that the stipulations I am about to propound are not of my imposing; the secret was imparted to me by spirits not of a benevolent order, and under conditions with which I am constrained strictly to comply. Understand also that I am not minded to employ this knowledge on my own behalf. My fourscore years’ acquaintance with life has rendered me more solicitous for methods of abbreviating existence, than of prolonging it. It may be well for you if your twenty years experience has led you to the same conclusion.’

There was not one of the young men who would not readily have admitted, and indeed energetically maintained, the emptiness, vanity, and general unsatisfactoriness of life; for such had ever been the doctrine of their venerated preceptor. Their present behaviour, however, would have convinced him, had he needed conviction, of the magnitude of the gulf between theory and practice, and the feebleness of intellectual persuasion in presence of innate instinct. With one voice they protested their readiness to brave any conceivable peril, and undergo any test which might be imposed as a condition of participation in their master’s marvellous secret.

‘So be it,’ returned the sage, ‘and now hearken to the conditions. Each of you must select at hazard, and immediately quaff one of these seven phials, in one of which only is contained the Elixir of Life. Far different are the contents of the others; they are the six most deadly poisons

which the utmost subtlety of my skill has enabled me to prepare, and science knows no antidote to any of them. The first scorches up the entrails as with fire; the second slays by freezing every vein, and benumbing every nerve; the third by frantic convulsions. Happy in comparison he who drains the fourth, for he sinks dead upon the ground immediately, smitten as it were with lightning. Nor do I overmuch commiserate him to whose lot the fifth may fall, for slumber descends upon him forthwith, and he passes away in painless oblivion. But wretched he who chooses the sixth, whose hair falls from his head, whose skin peels from his body, and who lingers long in excruciating agonies, a living death. The seventh phial contains the object of your desire. Stretch forth your hands, therefore, simultaneously to this table; let each unhesitatingly grasp and intrepidly drain the potion which fate may allot him, and be the quality of his fortune attested by the result.'

The seven disciples contemplated each other with visages of sevenfold blankness. They next unanimously directed their gaze towards their preceptor, hoping to detect some symptom of jocularly upon his venerable features. Nothing could be descried thereon but the most imperturbable solemnity, or, if perchance anything like an expression of irony lurked beneath this, it was not such irony as they wished to see. Lastly, they scanned the phials, trusting that some infinitesimal distinction might serve to discriminate the elixir from the poisons. But no, the vessels were indistinguishable in external appearance, and the contents of each were equally colourless and transparent.

'Well,' demanded Aboniel at length, with real or assumed surprise, 'wherefore tarry ye thus? I deemed to have ere this beheld six of you in the agonies of death!'

This utterance did not tend to encourage the seven waverers. Two of the boldest, indeed, advanced their hands halfway to the table, but perceiving that their example was not followed, withdrew them in some confusion.

'Think not, great teacher, that I personally set store by this worthless existence,' said one of their number at last, breaking the embarrassing silence, 'but I have an aged mother, whose life is bound up with mine.'

'I,' said the second, 'I have an unmarried sister, for whom it is meet that I should provide.'

'I,' said the third, 'have an intimate and much-injured friend, whose cause I may in nowise forsake.'

'And I an enemy upon whom I would fain be avenged,' said the fourth.

'My life,' said the fifth, 'is wholly devoted to science. Can I consent to lay it down ere I have sounded the seas of the seven climates?'

'Or I, until I have had speech of the man in the moon?' inquired the sixth.

'I,' said the seventh, 'have neither mother nor sister, friends nor enemies, neither doth my zeal for science equal that of my fellows. But I have all the greater respect for my own skin; yea, the same is exceedingly precious in my sight.'

'The conclusion of the whole matter, then,' summed up the sage, 'is that not one of you will make a venture for the cup of immortality?'

The young men remained silent and abashed, unwilling to acknowledge the justice of their master's taunt, and unable to deny it. They sought for some middle path, which did not readily present itself.

'May we not,' said one at last, 'may we not cast lots, and each take a phial in succession, as destiny may appoint?'

‘I have nothing against this,’ replied Aboniel, ‘only remember that the least endeavour to contravene the conditions by amending the chance of any one of you, will ensure the discomfiture of all.’

The disciples speedily procured seven quills of unequal lengths, and proceeded to draw them in the usual manner. The shortest remained in the hand of the holder, he who had pleaded his filial duty to his mother.

He approached the table with much resolution, and his hand advanced half the distance without impediment. Then, turning to the holder of the second quill, the man with the sister, he said abruptly:

‘The relation between mother and son is notoriously more sacred and intimate than that which obtains between brethren. Were it not therefore fitting that thou shouldst encounter the first risk in my stead?’

‘The relationship between an aged mother and an adult son,’ responded the youth addressed, in a sententious tone, ‘albeit most holy, cannot in the nature of things be durable, seeing that it must shortly be dissolved by death. Whereas the relationship between brother and sister may endure for many years, if such be the will of Allah. It is therefore proper that thou shouldst first venture the experiment.’

‘Have I lived to hear such sophistry from a pupil of the wise Aboniel!’ exclaimed the first speaker, in generous indignation. ‘The maternal relationship—’

‘A truce to this trifling,’ cried the other six; ‘fulfil the conditions, or abandon the task.’

Thus urged, the scholar approached his hand to the table, and seized one of the phials. Scarcely, however, had he done so, when he fancied that he detected something of a sinister colour in the liquid, which distinguished it, in his imagination, from the innocent transparency of the rest. He hastily replaced it, and laid hold of the next. At that moment a blaze of light burst forth upon them, and, thunderstruck, the seven scholars were stretched senseless on the ground.

On regaining their faculties they found themselves at the outside of Aboniel’s dwelling, stunned by the shock, and humiliated by the part they had played. They jointly pledged inviolable secrecy, and returned to their homes.

The secret of the seven was kept as well as the secret of seven can be expected to be; that is to say, it was not, ere the expiration of seven days, known to more than six-sevenths of the inhabitants of Balkh. The last of these to become acquainted with it was the Sultan, who immediately dispatched his guards to apprehend the sage, and confiscate the elixir. Failing to obtain admission at Aboniel’s portal, they broke it open, and, on entering his chamber, found him in a condition which more eloquently than any profession bespoke his disdain for the life-bestowing draught. He was dead in his chair. Before him, on the table, stood the seven phials, six full as previously, the seventh empty. In his hand was a scroll inscribed as follows:

‘Six times twice six years have I striven after knowledge, and I now bequeath to the world the fruit of my toil, being six poisons. One more deadly I might have added, but I have refrained.

‘Write upon my tomb, that here he lies who forbore to perpetuate human affliction, and bestowed a fatal boon where alone it could be innocuous.’

The intruders looked at each other, striving to penetrate the sense of Aboniel’s last words.

While yet they gazed, they were startled by a loud crash from an adjacent closet, and were even more discomposed as a large monkey bounded forth, whose sleek coat, exuberant playfulness, and preternatural agility convinced all that the deceased philosopher, under an inspiration of supreme irony, had administered to the creature every drop of the Elixir of Life.