

The Cabalist

By Unknown

Our professor of metaphysics, Hans Weinland, was what cabalists call an *archetype*,—tall, thin, of a leaden complexion, red-haired, hook-nosed, gray-eyed, with ironical lips, surmounted by a long Prussian moustache.

He astonished us by the method of his logic, by the train of his arguments, by his mocking sharp turns, which seemed as natural to him as thorns on a bramble bush.

Contrary to all university traditions, this original character habitually wore a kind of swivel hat surmounted by a long feather, a greatcoat with Brandenburg button-holes, very wide trousers, and hussar's boots, ornamented with little silver spurs, which gave him a somewhat martial appearance.

One fine morning, M. Hans, who was very fond of me, and who used to call me, winking his eyes in a funny fashion, 'son of the blue sky,' came into my room.

'Christian,' said he, 'I have come to tell you that it is necessary you should seek another teacher of metaphysics. In an hour I leave for Paris.'

'For Paris! What are you going there for?'

'To argue, to dispute, to wrangle—how do I know?'" said he, shrugging his shoulders.

'Well then! Stop here.'

'No. Great things are about to happen. And besides, I have very good reasons for running away.'

After he had opened the door and looked out to see that no one was listening, he came to me and whispered in my ear—

'You must know that this morning I passed three feet of cold steel through the body of Major Krantz.'

'You?'

'Yes. Just fancy! That animal yesterday had the impudence to maintain in opposition to me, before all the folk in Gambrinus's bar, that the soul is a merely imaginary thing. I naturally gave him a knock on the head, so this morning we met in a spot by the river, and there I obliged him with a materialistic argument of, I fancy, overwhelming force.'

I looked at him quite dazed

'And you are going to Paris?', said I, after a few moments' silence

'Yes. I have finished my quarter all but two or three days. This money will be sufficient for the journey. There is, however, not a moment to lose, for you know how severe the law against duelling is. The least I should get would be two or three years under lock and key, and, faith, I prefer the open fields.'

Hans Weinland, as he told me these things, sat beside my table and rolled a cigarette between his long skinny fingers. He gave me some further particulars respecting his rencounter with Major Krantz, and finished by asking me if I would let him have one of my passports, knowing that I had recently returned from a tour in France.

'It is true that I am eight or ten years older than you,' he said, 'but we are both red-haired and thin. I shall have, though, to shave off my moustaches.'

'M. Hans,' said I embarrassed, 'I would willingly do you any service in my power, but what you ask is really impossible. It is contrary to every teaching of philosophy. My passport is in the

drawer of my writing-desk, by the side of the *Pure Reason* of Kant. I am now off to take a walk in the Place des Acacias.'

'All right, all right,' said he. 'I understand your scruples, Christian. They do honour to you, but I do not share them myself. Let us say farewell. I will see to the rest.'

Some hours later the town knew with surprise that Hans Weinland, professor of metaphysics, had killed Major Krantz with a furious rapier-thrust.

The police set to work to capture the criminal. They hunted his little lodging in the Rue des Alouettes from top to bottom, but all their search was useless.

The Major was buried with all the honour due to his rank, and for six weeks nothing but this affair was talked of in all the inns. Then by degrees things settled down in their ordinary course.

About five months after this strange occurrence my worthy uncle, the pro-rector Zacharias, sent me to finish my studies at Paris. He wished me to some day succeed him in his high position, and nothing would satisfy him but the making me, as he used to phrase it, a scientific light.

I set out towards the end of the month of October 1831.

Upon the right bank of the Seine, between the Pantheon, the Val-de-Grace, and the Jardin-des-Plantes, extends a somewhat deserted quarter. The houses there are high and ruinous the streets are miry, and the folk are shabby.

As you set foot within the district the people stop at the corners of the streets to look at you, some come to the threshold of their melancholy decayed dwellings, others crane their necks out of their windows. They look at you with a covetous expression, and seem to aim at searching with their glances to the bottom of your pockets.

At the extremity of this quarter, in the Rue Copeau, is a narrow house standing by itself, surrounded by old enclosing walls, in the shade of which stand the black trunks of some ancient elms.

The entrance to this house is through a low arched door. Above the door burns at night a lantern suspended by an iron bar. Above that three blear-eyed looking windows reflect a dim light, higher up are three more, and so on till you reach the sixth story.

To that house, kept by Mother Genti, widow of Maitre Genti, ex-brigadier of the royal guard, I was transplanted with my trunk and my books by the express recommendation of Citizen van den Bach, who had a recollection of having himself lived there during the time of the Empire.

I often shiver as I think of the miserable days I passed in that abominable place, sitting in the winter before a little chimney which gave off more smoke than warmth, dejected, out of sorts, oppressed by that woman Genti, who robbed me with an almost incredible pertinacity.

I shall always remember how, when after six months of frost, of wet, of slush and snow, one morning there was a little sun, having entered the gate of the Jardin-des-Plantes, I saw the first leaves issuing from the buds, my emotion was so great that I sat down and cried like a child.

Twenty-two years before I had left behind me the green fir-trees of the Black Forest, but I was now dreaming of them. I could still hear the young girls sing in their merry tones—

'Tra, ri, ro, summer comes again!'

And I,—I was in Paris. I saw the sun no more. I was alone by myself in that big city! My heart overflowed, and I did not restrain myself. That little glimpse of verdure had moved me to the bottom of my soul. It is sweet to weep when one thinks of one's own native place.

After some moments of this weakness I returned to my lodgings with renewed hope, and commenced my work once more with courage. My heart seemed strengthened by new youth and life. I said to myself—

‘If uncle Zacharias could see me he would be proud of me!’

Then, however, occurred a strange terrible thing, the memory of which strikes me with consternation and completely baffles all my philosophical theories. A hundred times have I endeavoured to account for it, but it has been of no use.

In front of my little window, at the other side of the street between two high houses, was a wide spreading piece of ground where grew an abundance of wild herbs—thistles, moss, towering nettles and wide-spreading brambles—such wild herbs as grow in the shade.

Five or six plum trees flourished in the damp enclosure, protected in front by an old wall of decaying stone.

Over the crumbling wall peeped the following notice on a board:—

This ground to be sold.
425 mètres.
Address M^e Tirago, Notary,
&c., &c.

An old cask, broken and rotten, received the water from the spouts of the neighbouring houses, which might be used for watering the plants. A thousand insects with gauzy wings, gnats, day-flies, fluttered about that little green sea, and when a ray of sun, making its way between the high houses, chanced to fall upon it, one saw it pulsating with living atoms like grains of golden dust. Two big frogs would then show their flat noses on the surface, drag their long wet limbs over the water green-staff and gorge themselves with the insects, which were engulfed by thousands.

Well, at the back of this tank was a roof of damp mossy wood, upon which a big red cat used to promenade, listening to the birds sporting in the trees, yawning, stretching, and extending its claws with a sad air.

I now often look upon that little corner of the world with a kind of terror.

‘All life—all pulsation—consumes itself!’ I would say to myself. ‘What is the source of this inexhaustible stream of existence, of the atom which sports in the ray of the sun, of the star which lies hidden in the profundity of infinite space? What principle can give us an explanation of this prodigality without limit, incessant, eternal, of the first cause?’

And, my head buried in my hands, I would plunge into the abysses of the unknown.

One evening, however, in the month of June, towards eleven o’clock, as I was engaged in this kind of dreaming, my elbow on my window-sill, I thought I saw an indistinct form glide along the foot of the wall opposite. Then the gate opened and some one picked his way through the brambles until he reached the shelter of the shed.

All this took place amidst the shadows of the surrounding buildings, and I thought that perhaps it was a mere delusion of my sight. The next day, however, about five o’clock, looking out towards the water-tank, I saw, indeed, a tall fellow advance from below the shed, and, his arms crossed upon his breast, set himself to having a good look at me.

He was so tall, so thin, his clothes were so shabby, his hat so battered, that I did not doubt he was some scoundrel who had taken his quarters there in order to hide himself from the police, and who would leave his den at night to prey on and even throttle his fellow-men.

Judge how I was surprised when this man took off his hat to me and cried out—

‘Hulloa! Good-day, Christian, good-day!’

I stood motionless, my mouth open. The man stepped across the garden, opened the door, and came out into the empty street.

I noticed then that he carried a big bludgeon, and I congratulated myself that I had not to meet him at close quarters.

How was it he knew me? What did he want with me?

As soon as he had arrived opposite my windows he lifted up his long thin arms with a pathetic gesture.

‘Come down, Christian,’ said he; ‘come down, that I may embrace you. Ah! leave me not to languish!’

You may well imagine I did not feel very much disposed to respond to his invitation. Then he commenced to laugh, showing magnificent white teeth under his reddish—brown moustache.

‘Well,’ said he, ‘you do not recognise your professor of metaphysics, Hans Weinland? Shall I show you your own passport?’

‘Hans Weinland! Can it be? Hans Weinland with those hollow cheeks, those sunken eyes! Hans Weinland in those old rags!’

However, after a closer look I recognised him, and a feeling of inexpressible pity took possession of me.

‘What, is it you, my dear professor?’ I cried.

‘It is me! Come down, Christian, so that we may talk more at ease.’

I no longer hesitated to descend. My landlady was not yet up, so I opened the door myself, and Hans Weinland pressed me to his breast in the most affectionate manner possible.

‘Ah! dear master!’ cried I, my eyes full of tears, ‘in what a state have I found you.’

‘Bah! bah!’ said he; ‘I dress well enough. It is necessary.’

‘But come up into my room and change your clothes.’

‘What for! I look charming in these. Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Perhaps you are hungry?’

‘Not at all, Christian, not at all. I dined long ago at Flicoteau’s on rabbits’ heads and cocks’ feet. It was a species of schooling which the god Famine made me undergo. Now my trials are over. My stomach has become no more than a myth. It asks for nothing, knowing that did it make demands they would be useless. I eat no longer. I smoke now and then, that is all. The old fakir of Ellora made me envy him!’

As I looked at him with an incredulous air—

‘Why are you astonished?’ he went on. ‘Remember that initiation into the mysteries of Mythras imposes petty restrictions upon us before we may become invested with formidable powers.’

Chatting thus he drew me with him to the Jardindes-Plantes. They opened the gate for us, and the sentinel, seeing us approach, astonished by the appearance of my poor master, seemed in doubt whether he ought not to forbid us to enter. Hans Weinland did not, however, appear to notice his hesitation and walked on tranquilly.

The garden was at that time deserted. As we passed before a cage of serpents, Hans, pointing to them with his cudgel, said—

‘Those are pretty little things, Christian. I have always had a liking for that kind of reptile. They never cease gliding but to bite.’

Then, turning aside, he went on into the labyrinth which leads up to the cedar of Lebanon.

‘Let us stop here,’ said I, ‘at the foot of this tree.’

‘No, let us go on to the belvedere. There one can see around one. I love so much to look at Paris and breathe the fresh air, that I very often pass hours in that place. That it is alone which keeps me in this quarter. What then, Christian? Every one has his little weaknesses.’

We came to the place, and Hans Weinland took his place upon one of the two immense fossils which lean against the side of the hillock. I sat down beside him.

‘Well, Christian,’ said he, ‘what are you doing now? You are going through the courses of the Sorbonne and of the College de France, are you not? Ha! ha I ha! Metaphysics always amused you.’

‘Heavens—not much!’

‘Eh! I suspect it, I suspect it! But what course? what course? The first deals with Form and believes itself idealistic, since the beautiful, the beautiful ideal dwells in the form. Ha! ha! ha! The other treats of Substance. To it Substance is a primary idea. Do you understand, Christian, Substance is a primary idea? What blockheads there are! The chief of them is a man who does not want a certain merit. He has made out a little *bourgeois* system, with branches out to the right and to the left, just like one would cut out a punchinello’s dress. Him the French, who are very wise in metaphysics, have surnamed the modern Plato.’

And Hans Weinland, extending his long limbs, laughed nervously. Then, becoming suddenly calm again, he said—

‘Ah! my poor Christian, my poor Christian!’

‘What has become of the grand schools of Albert le Grand, of Raymond Lully, of Roger Bacon, of Arnaud de Villeneuve, of Paracelsus? What has become of the microcosm? What has become of the three principles—intellectual, celestial, elementary? Of the applications of Patrice-Tricasse, of Coclès, of André Cornu, of Goglénius, of Jean de Hâgen, of Moldénates, of Savanarole, and of so many others? And what has become of the curious experiences of Glaser, Le Sage, and Le Vigoureux?’

‘But my dear master, these last were poisoners,’ cried I.

‘Poisoners! They were the greatest astrologers of modern times, the sole inheritors of the Cabbala. The actual, the only poisoners, are all of them charlatans, who follow the teaching of sophistry and ignorance. Do you not know that all the secrets of the Cabbala are beginning to find their application? The pressure of vapour, the principle of electricity, the chemical decompositions, to whom can we ascribe all these admirable discoveries unless to the astrologers? Our psychologists, our metaphysicians, what have they discovered that is useful, that can be applied, that is true? What have they discovered that gives them a right to call others ignorant, and to think themselves worthy of the title of sages? However, let us leave the subject. It arouses my bile.’

And his face, which had hitherto appeared impassive, now took an expression of terrible ferocity.

‘It is necessary, Christian,’ said he, abruptly, ‘that you should get away from here; that you should return to Tübingen.’

‘Why?’

‘Because the hour of vengeance has arrived.’

‘What vengeance?’

‘Of mine.’

‘And on whom do you wish to be revenged?’

‘On all the world. Ah! They have mocked at me—they have spat upon my Maha-Dévi—they have repulsed it from their schools—they have treated me as a fool—they have denied the true in order to worship the false. Well then, curses on this race of sensualists.’

Rising up, he cast his glance over the whole of the immense city, his gray eyes glittered, and he smiled.

Some boats went on their way down the Seine. The garden was joyous in its verdure. The rolling carriages, the loads of wine, the carts full of vegetables, the herds of cows, of sheep, of pigs, caused clouds of dust to rise upon the roads in the distance. The city was all buzzing like a beehive. No more splendid or grander scene ever offered itself to my sight.

‘Paris! Ancient city! Sublime city!’ cried Weinland, with a bitter sarcastic tone. ‘Ideal Paris, sentimental Paris, open your wide jaws! Behold, there come, from all the quarters of heaven, liquids and solids to renew your animal strength. Eat, drink, sing, and do not concern yourself with more. All France is drained dry to nourish you. She digs with a mattock, this spirited nation, in order to provide you with pleasures. What do you want? She sends you generous wines, her herds, the first-fruits of every season, the beautiful girls, radiant in their youth, her hardy young Sons, and she only asks of you in return revolutions and bulletins.

Dear Paris! centre of lights, of civilisation, etc., etc., etc. Paris! Promised land of the paradox! the celestial Jerusalem of the Philistines! Intellectual Sodom! Chief sojourn of sensualism, of mammon! You may be proud of your destiny. You cough, the sun trembles! You awake, the world shakes! You gape, Europe is asleep! What is the Spirit but force embodied in material matter? Nothing! You brave the invisible powers—you scoff at them—but look out—look out—one of the sons of Maha-Dévi and of the goddess Kali is about to give you a lesson in metaphysics.’

So Hans Weinland went on with increasing animation, and I had now no doubt but that the wretched fellow had lost his wits.

What could a poor devil such as he, who had neither fire nor lodging, do against the city of Paris?

After having given utterance to these threats he suddenly became calm as he saw some promenaders ascend the labyrinth. He made a sign to me to follow him and we went out of the garden.

‘Christian,’ said he, as we walked on, ‘I have something to beg of you.’

‘What is it?’

‘You know my retreat There I will tell you all. But it is necessary that you should swear upon your honour to follow my orders exactly.’

‘I shall be willing—but there is one condition—it is—’

‘Oh! be calm. The affair will not touch your conscience.’

‘Well then, I promise.’

‘That is enough.’

We had by this time arrived at the enclosure. He pushed the door, and we went in.

It would be difficult for me to express the feeling of horror which took possession of me when, after having made our way across the high weeds surrounding the den, I discovered under the shed, in the shade, a quantity of heaped-up bones.

I should have liked to fly, but Hans Weinland had his eye upon me.

‘Sit down there,’ said he in a commanding voice, pointing to a large stone, between two posts which supported the roof.

I obeyed.

He then took a little earthen pipe out of his pockets and having filled it with some yellowish substance, commenced to smoke slowly. He sat in front of me, his legs stretched out, his big cudgel between his knees.

‘Christian,’ he said, in a low voice, while an indefinable muscular contraction multiplied the wrinkles of his cheeks and drew back his nostrils obliquely, ‘listen to me. In order that you may be able to fulfil my intentions it is necessary I should explain to you one of our mysteries.’

He was silent, his eye solemn, his forehead deeply wrinkled, his lips so firmly compressed that one could not see their borders.

‘Yes,’ said he, in a hollow voice, ‘it is necessary that you should learn one of the mysteries of Mythras; One of the strangest things in the world you see, Christian, is the fact that one half of the globe may be in the full light, and the other half in the shade. As a result of that, one half of living beings sleep while the others are awake. Nature, however, which does nothing that is useless; nature, which simplifies everything, and knows how to obtain, amidst infinite variety, absolute unity; nature, having decided that all life should sleep half the time, has decided at the same time that one spirit shall suffice for two living beings. This spirit transports itself, with the rapidity of thought, from one hemisphere to another, and develops by turn two states of existence. When the spirit is at the antipodes, the being sleeps, his faculties wander astray, the matter reposes. When the spirit returns to reassume the direction of the organic composition, the being awakens—the matter is forced to obey the spirit.

‘I need not speak to you, at length concerning this. Such a matter does not enter into your course of philosophy, since it is notorious that your professors are of that wise kind who comprehend nothing. What I have told you will, however, explain the strange ideas which very often possess your brain, the singularity of dreams, the intuitive knowledge of worlds you have never seen, and a thousand other phenomena of that kind. What are called catalepsies, swoons, ecstasies, magnetic lucidity—in fine, all the phenomena of sleep, in whatever form they occur, are subject to the same law. Do you understand me, Christian?’

‘Very well. it is a sublime discovery!’

‘It is the least of the mysteries of Mythras,’ said he, with an odd smile; ‘it is the very first initiatory step. But listen to the consequences of this principle about which I am concerned. The spirit which animates me belongs equally to one of the followers of Maha-Dévi, who lives at the foot of Mont-Abriji, in the province of Sirohi, upon the southern borders of Joundpour. He is an Agori, or, if you think fit, an Agaorapanti, celebrated for his austerity, his murders, and his sanctity. He, like myself, is initiated, to the third degree. When he sleeps, I wake; when he wakes, I sleep. Do you understand?’

‘Yes,’ said I, shivering.

‘Well then, this is what I ask of you. It is necessary that my spirit should live for two consecutive days at Déesa, in the cavern of the goddess Kâli. I will it. While that goes on, my body must rest inert. What I am smoking now is opium. My eyelids are already heavy—even now—my spirit is about to take its way. If I should begin to wake—before the time has passed—listen!—at that moment give me a new dose of opium—you, you have sworn it—evil fortune to you if—’

He had not time to finish, but at once fell into a profound stupor.

I laid him down, his head in the shade, his feet amongst the weeds. His breathing—now quick, now slow—made me tremble; and the mystery this man had revealed to me, the knowledge that his spirit had bounded, in a second, over immense space, inspired me with a mysterious dread, a feeling as if all the unknown world were open to my gaze. I felt myself grow pale. My fingers

shook and twitched without my willing it. The vital fluid seemed to penetrate through me to the ends of my hair.

Imagine the close heat of mid-day confined between those old buildings, the putrid fumes from the neighbouring tank, the croaking of the two frogs, which set up a melancholy duet in the green mud, the hum of the insects dancing perpetually round and round, and you will comprehend the sinister impressions which succeeded one another in my heart as evening closed in.

Sometimes I looked upon the pale face of Weinland, all covered with perspiration, and I know not what fear it was that suddenly seized upon me. He seemed to me to be a party in a terrible crime, and, contrary to my promise, I violently shook the body of the sleeper, which remained inert or merely inclined in another direction. Sometimes his breath seemed to come with strange sounds, and escaped with a hissing, like a diabolical sneer.

During the long hours, I began to think of the mysteries of Mystras. I said to myself that, without doubt, the first initiatory degree ought to be the comprehension of animal life; the second, that of the essence and the functions of the soul; the third, that of God! But what man would be bold enough to raise his eye to the uncreated force, or, in his pride, seek to explain it?

Time passed on while I meditated thus. It was not till the decline of day, till the clock of Sainte-Etienne-du-Mont had struck eight, that I went to my lodgings to take a few hours' sleep.

I never doubted but that the lethargic slumber of Hans Weinland would pursue its peaceful course till the next day.

In fact, on the next day at six o'clock in the morning, when I went to look at him, I found him in the same position. His breathing seemed to me more regular.

That day and the night following I passed in the same thoughts, the same anxiety as of the preceding day.

At the end of the second day, towards six o'clock in the evening, feeling worn out and faint, I hurried off to the cloister of Saint Benôit, to take a little nourishment. I stopped with Master Ober, the eating-house keeper, till nearly seven o'clock.

As I returned from the eating-house by the Rue Clovis it struck me all of a sudden that he was following me. Turning quickly round I was astonished to see no one.

Although the day was nearly done still an oppressive heat hung over the silent town. Not a single door was open to invite within the freshness of night. Not a single person appeared in the distance of the street. Not a movement, not a sound showed that there was life in the great district of the Jardin-des-Plantes.

Hurrying on, I soon found myself at the door of the enclosure. I pushed it open and entered in noiselessly. As I advanced across the tangled weeds, Hans Weinland, more pale than the dead, rushed towards me, crying—

'Save yourself, Christian, save yourself!'

With his hands he pushed me off. His face was contracted, his eyes glassy, and the trembling of his lips betrayed the most overwhelming terror.

I was thrust out into the street.

'Go—go!' he cried to me. 'Hide yourself.'

Old Mother Genti, running to the door of her house, set up some piercing cries, thinking no doubt that Weinland was about to rob me. He, however, taking her by the elbows and throwing her into the passage with me, burst out into a fit of diabolical laughter.

'Ha! ha! ha! The old woman, the old woman will pay for you. Up, Christian, be quick. The monster is already in the street; I feel it is.'

I went upstairs as if the angel of death had stretched out his clutches after me. I leaped, bounded on. The door opened and closed itself behind us, and I sank down into my easy-chair confounded.

‘Heavens!’ I cried, my hands over my face. ‘What is the matter? All this is horrible!’

‘I have,’ said Weinland coldly,—‘I have just returned from a distance. Six thousand leagues in two days! Ha! ha! ha! I came to the banks of the Ganges, Christian, and from there I have brought with me a pretty companion. Hark, hark! Listen to what is going on outside.’

Then listening I heard a crowd of people running down the Rue Copeau, and after that a confused hubbub.

My eyes at that moment met those of Hans. His were lighted up with a sombre infernal joy.

‘It is the blue cholera,’ said he, in a low voice, ‘the terrible blue cholera.’

Then, becoming suddenly excited, he went on—

‘From the heights of Mont-Abuji, beneath the green plumes of the palm trees, the pomegranate trees, the tamarind trees, at the foot of the gorge where old Ganges rolls himself along, I saw it floating slowly by on a corpse, surrounded by vultures. I beckoned to it—it has come—it has already set to work. Listen!’

A kind of fascination led me to throw my eyes into the street. A common man, his elbows bare, his hair dishevelled, was running along carrying a woman, her head thrown back, her feet hanging helpless, her arms swaying lifelessly. As he passed under my windows followed by a great number of people, I saw that the face of the wretched woman had a blue tint.

She was but young, and the cholera had stricken her down.

I turned away, trembling from head to foot. Hans Weinland had disappeared.

That very hour, without waiting to pack up my trunk, without taking the precaution to stock my pockets with money, I ran to the coach-office in the Rue Notre-Dame-des-Victoires.

A diligence was about to start for Strasbourg. I mounted it as a drowning man throws himself upon a plank.

We set off.

Folk laughed and sang around. No one was yet aware that the cholera had invaded France.

As for me, leaning out at the door, stage after stage, I asked—

‘Is the cholera here?’

And each time the people laughed at me.

‘Poor fellow! He is mad,’ whispered my fellow-travellers.

And they made merry over it.

But when, three days afterwards, I had the pleasure of throwing myself into the arms of my uncle Zacharias, and half foolish with fright told him of the strange things that had happened, he listened to me gravely, and said—

‘Dear Christian, you did well to come; yes, you did very well. Read that paper. Twelve hundred people have already perished. It is a fearful calamity.’