

THE ARTS OF THE ALCHEMISTS

by

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Foreword

Alchemy is a subject of which we have all heard of, and which is yet a mystery. In some ways it belongs to the world of mystery stories from the past. We remember perhaps the shade and wonderful light of Rembrandt's etching of the Alchemist, or the stories we read in Chaucer or Ben Jonson. Was the alchemist a philosopher, deep in a mysterious study where he discovered the secrets of transmutation? Was he just a charlatan involved in a particularly fantastic kind of mumbo-jumbo? Was he simply a forerunner of the scientists of today? Or had he an occult knowledge which we cannot hope to acquire in our materialistic environment?

The alchemist was all these things in the eyes of his contemporaries. We look at his books and marvel at the beauty of the illustrations, the care with which they were written, and the obscure allusions of the language. Yet when we begin to delve deeper we find a world of philosophy which almost amounts to a religion. The wise old man with his crucibles and furnaces also had his learned books which served to guide him in his experiments. He was impressed with the need to develop his own personality until he was in touch with the whole world of creation. The final revelation of the secret knowledge came with suddenness. The alchemist firmly believed that a power from above had enlightened him at the moment when he was at last fit to receive the knowledge. The making of gold was thought of as a seal of approval set on a lifetime of work and study. In terms of our civilization those ingots of alchemical gold were produced at an expense far in excess of the material value of the metal.

Yet for the alchemist there was a fascination which led him on. The journey of exploration was not so much a chemical process as a search for the inner meaning of the whole material universe. The quest brought its own satisfaction. The alchemist made a contribution to the development of scientific chemistry.

In this book we shall seek out the story of alchemy. In spite of the alchemist's belief that the methods they used in their laboratories were the same as those of their forerunners right back to the strange Hermes Trismegistus, we can see that the "Spagiric Art," as the alchemists called it, did develop through the centuries. To some extent the basic document, *The Emerald Tablet*, on which they said all their knowledge rested, had its origin in ancient Egyptian mysticism. The later developments filtered through to wise men in the outside world, and crystallized in that great meeting place of wisdom, the *Museion* in Alexandria. Thence the ideas spread through the Roman Empire. After Rome fell, the wisest of the Arabs continued the study of this curious scientific philosophy. Then in turn the European scholars of the Middle Ages learnt from the Arabs, and then brought their own scholastic interpretations to the subject. During the Renaissance thought was influenced both by the revival of ancient mystical beliefs and by the urge for practical results, so we can trace a new path of exploration which leads to the development of Christian mysticism through such men as Jakob Boehme, and also the development of science through such men as Sir Isaac Newton.

To accompany the alchemist in the study of his mysterious art is fascinating, because we follow a group of people who have transmitted to our modern times some of the knowledge and mystery of the ancient world a philosophy so ancient that we can only guess at its true origins.

It is fitting here to conclude our introduction with a translation of the words with which the studies of all good alchemists begin. They were said to have been given by Hermes Trismegistus (the Egyptian god Tehuti, Lord of Wisdom) to Maria Prophetissa, who many say was the beautiful Miriam, sister of Moses.

IT IS TRUTH; TRUTH WITHOUT LIES; CERTAIN TRUTH
THAT WHICH IS ABOVE IS LIKE THAT WHICH IS BELOW:
AND THAT WHICH IS BELOW IS LIKE THAT WHICH IS ABOVE
TO ACCOMPLISH THE MIRACLES OF ONE THING.

AS ALL THINGS CAME INTO BEING BY THE CONTEMPLATION OF ONE
SO ALL THINGS AROSE FROM THIS ONE THING,
BY A SINGLE ACT OF CREATIVE ADAPTATION.

**The Father thereof is the Sun.
The Mother is the Moon.
It was carried in the Womb by the Wind.
The Earth is the nurse.
It is the father of all works of wonder throughout the world.
It is the perfect power.
If it be cast on earth it will divide the element of Earth
From the element of Fire:
In its great wisdom it ascends gently from Earth to Heaven.
Again it descends to earth.
Then unites in itself the force from Things Above
To the force from Things Below.**

**Thus thou shalt possess the glory of the brightness of the whole world.
All obscurity and darkness shall fly from thee.
This thing is the might and power of all strength.
It will overcome every subtle thing
And has the power to penetrate every solid substance.
THUS WAS THE WORLD CREATED.**

**For this reason I am called *Hermes Trismegistus*
I hold three parts of the wisdom of this world.
That which I have to say about the operation of Sol
Is completed**

One may read this document in many ways; for the Alchemists it was their charter for a voyage of discovery in which we may hope to join them. True, our scientists have achieved transmutations of elements in atomic laboratories at great expense. Yet with all these intellectual victories behind us we have not yet found the key to that other alchemy which would set free the shining gold of the spiritual possibilities of mankind. We should consider whether we have opened the doors of knowledge for the benefit of material minded “puffers”, or whether we should continue the search for that “Gold which is not the common gold.” As we shall see in the following pages there is no easy answer.

(Foreword to *The Arts of the Alchemists*, C.A. Burland, MacMillan, New York 1986:1-3)

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