

The Soul of the Desert

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Dedicated
to Soror Alta Via
one who lives on the desert

*"I too am the Soul of the Desert;
thou shalt seek me yet again
in the wilderness of sand."*

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1

The Journey

The soul is, in its own nature, perfect purity, perfect calm, perfect silence; and as a well springs from the very veins of the earth itself, so is the soul nurtured of the blood of God, the ecstasy of things.

This soul can never be injured, never marred, never defiled. Yet all things added to it do for a time trouble it; and this is sorrow.

To this, language itself bears witness; for all words which mean unhappy mean first of all disturbed, disquieted, troubled. The root idea of sorrow is this idea of stirring up.

For many a year man in his quest for happiness has travelled a false road. To quench his thirst he has added salt in ever increasing quantities to the water of life; to cover the ant heaps of his imagination he has raised mountains wherein wild beasts and deadly prowl. To cure the itch, he has flayed the patient; to exorcise the ghost, he has evoked the devil.

It is the main problem of philosophy, how this began. The Rishis, seven that sat on Mount Kailasha and

considered thus, answered that the soul became self-conscious; and crying, "I am That!" became two even in the act of asserting it was One. This theory may be found not too remote from truth by whoso returns to that tower upon the ramparts of the soul and beholds the city.

But let us leave it to the doctors to discuss the cause of the malady; for the patients it is enough to know the cure and take it. Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, are not worth the simplicity of Jordan. The prophet has spoken; it is our concern now to obey: and so sweet and so full of virtue are these waters that the first touch thrills the soul with the sure foretaste of its cure.

Doubt not, brother! Reason indeed may elaborate complexities; are not these the very symptoms of the disease? Use but the rude common sense, heritage of simpler and happier forefathers, that they have transmitted to thee by the wand.

The cure of disease is ease; of disquiet, quiet; of strife, peace. And to attain horsemanship the study of folios aids not, but the mounting of a horse; as the best way to swim is to enter the water and strike out, so it is cool sense, not feverish reason, that says: to attain quiet, practice quiet.

There are men so strong of will, so able to concentrate the mind, to neglect the impressions that they do not wish to receive, that they can withdraw themselves from their surroundings, even when those are as multitudinous and insistent as those of a great city. But for the most part of men, it is best to begin in easier circumstances, to climb the mountain in fine weather before attacking it in the snowstorm.

And yet the eager aspirant will answer: Provided that the cure is complete. Provided that the sickness does not return when the medicine is stopped.

Ah! that were hard: so deepseated is the malady that years after its symptoms have passed, it seizes on a moment of weakness to blaze out again. It is malarial

fever that lurks low, that hides in the very substance of the blood itself, that has made the very fountain of life partaker with it in the sacrament of death.

“Has a spider found out the communion cup?”

“Was a toad in the christening font?”

No: the remedy cures surely enough; but not often does it cure once for all, beyond relapse. But it is simple; once the symptoms have properly abated, they never return with equal force; and if the patient has but the wit to stretch out the hand for another dose, the fever dies.

What is then the essential? To cure the patient once; to give him faith in the efficacy of the remedy, so that perchance he falls sick, and no doctor is near, he may be able to cure himself.

If Thought then be that which troubles the soul, there is but one way to take. Stop thinking.

It is the most difficult task that man can undertake. “Give me a fulcrum for my lever,” said Archimedes, “and I will move the earth.” But how, when one is within, and part of, that very system of motion which one had desired to stop? Newton’s first law drops like the headsman’s axe on the very name of our endeavour. Well for us that this is not true as it is obvious! For this fact saves us, that the resolution of all these is rest. The motion is but in reciprocal pairs; the sum of its vectors is zero. The knot of the Universe is a fool’s knot; for all it seems Gordian, pull but firmly, and it ravel out. It is this seeming that is all the mischief; gloomy is the gulf, and the clouds gather angrily in monstrous shapes; the false moon flickers behind them; abyss upon abyss opens on every hand. Darkness and menace; the fierce sound of hostile things!

One glimmer of starlight, and behold the golden bridge! Narrow and straight, keen as the razor’s edge and glittering as the sword’s blade, a proper bridge if thou leanest not to right or left. Cross it — good! but all this is in the dream. Wake! Thou shalt know that all

together, gulf, moon, bridge, dragon and the rest, were but the phantasms of sleep howbeit, remember this, that to cross the bridge in sleep is the only way to waking.

I do not know if many men have the same experience as myself in the matter of voluntary dreaming, or rather of contest between the sought and the unsought in dream. For instance, I am on a ridge of ice with Oscar Eckenstein. He slips to one side. I throw myself on the other. We begin to cut steps up to the ridge; my axe snaps, or is snatched from my hand. We begin to pull ourselves up to the ridge by the rope; the rope begins to fray. Luckily it is caught lower down on a cleft of rock. A Lammergeier swoops; I invent a pistol and blow its brains out. And so on through a thousand adventures, making myself master of each event as it arises. But I am grown old today and weary of thrills. Nowadays at the first hint of danger I take wing and sail majestically down to the glacier.

If I have thus digressed, it is to superimpose this triangle on that of the task, "Stop Thinking." Simple it sounds, and simple it is — when you have mastery. In the meantime it is apt to lead you far indeed from simplicity. I have myself written some million words in order to stop thinking! I have covered miles of canvas with pounds of paint in order to stop thinking. Thus may it be that I am at least to be considered as no mean authority on all the wrong ways; and so perhaps, by a process of exclusion, on the right way!

Unfortunately, it is not as easy as this:

There are nine and sixty ways of constructing tribal lays.

And every single one of them is right.

And right for A is often wrong for B.

But, luckily, the simpler the goal is kept, the simpler are the means. Elsewhere in my writings will be found a fairly painstaking and accurate account of the process. The present essay is but to advocate a mighty en-

gine adjuvant — the shoulder of Hercules to the cart-wheel of the beginner whose diffidence whispers that he is incapable of following those instructions in the difficult circumstances of ordinary life, or for the enthusiast who wisely determines like Kirkpatrick to “mak siccar.” Indeed, the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of the riches, the lusts of the flesh and the eye, the pride of life, and all the other enemies of the saint, do indeed choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful.

2

The Desert

As a monastery imposes the false peace of dullness by its unwholesome and artificial monotony, so is the desert nature's own cure for all the tribulations of thought.

There the soul undergoes a triplex weaving. First, the newness of the surroundings, their strange and salient simplicity, charm the soul. It has a premonition of its cure; it feels the atmosphere of home. It is sure of its vocation. Next, the mind, its frivolity once satiated with novelty, becomes bored, turns to acrimony, even to passionate revolt. The novice beats against the bars; the stranger to the desert flies to London or to Paris with the devil at his heels. A wise superior will not restrain the acolyte who cannot restrain himself; but in the desert, the refugee, if he doubts his own powers — still more, maybe, if he does not mistrust them! — would wisely make it impossible to return. But how should he do so? Believe me, who have tried it, the longest journey, the most bitter hardships, are as nothing, an arrow-light of joy, when the great horror lies behind and the sanctuary of Paris ahead!

For, indeed, this is the great horror, solitude, when the soul can no longer bathe in the ever-changing mind, laugh as its sunlit ripples lap its skin, but, shut up in the

castle of a few thoughts, paces its narrow prison, wearing down the stone of time, feeding on its own excrement. There is no star in the blackness of that night, no foam upon the stagnant and putrid sea. Even the glittering health that the desert brings to the body is like a spear in the soul's throat. The passionate ache to act, to think: this eats into the soul like a cancer. It is the scorpion striking itself in its agony, save that no poison can add to the torture of the circling fire, no superflux of anguish relieve it by annihilation. But against these paroxysms is an eightfold sedative. The ravings of madness are lost in soundless space; the struggles of the drowning man are not heeded by the sea.

These are the eight genii of the desert. They are the eight Elements of Fohi:

Male

The Lingam (Life)

The Sun

Fire

Air (Wood)

Female

The Yoni (Space, The Stars)

The Moon

Water

Earth

In the desert all these are single; all these are naked. They are pure and untroubled; not breaking up and dissolving by any commingling or communion; each remains itself and apart, harmonizing indeed with its fellows, but in no wise interfering. The lines of demarcation are crude and harsh; but softness is incomprehensibly the result. They are immitigable, these Eight Elements, and together they mitigate immeasurably. The mind that revolts against them is ground down by their persistent careless pressure. It is as when one throws a crystal — say of microscopic salt — into water: it is eaten silently and rapidly, and is no more; the water is untroubled always; its action is like Fate's, infinitely irresistible yet infinitely calm.

So the mind reaches out to think this or think that; it is brought back into silence by the eight great facts. The desert wind suffers no obstacle to impede it; the sun shines invincibly upon the baked earth of the village; the sand invisibly eats up the oasis, save for a moment where man casts up his earthworks against it. Yet despite this, the spring leaps unexpected from the sand, and no simoon can stifle, nor even evaporate it; nor can the immense sterility of the desert conquer life. Look where you will, every dune of sand has its inhabitants — not colonists, but natives of the inhospitable-seeming waste. The moon itself, serenely revolving around earth, changes in appearance, as if to say: "Even so goest thou about the sun. Am I new or full? Never think of it; that is but the point of view from which thou chancest to regard me. I am but a mirror of sunlight, dark or bright according to the angle of thy gaze. Does the mirror alter? Is it not always the untroubled silver? Have not I always one face turned sunward? Thou but mockest thyself if thou call me 'The Changeful.'"

With such reflections or their kin, it may be, shalt thou make an end of the revolt of the mind against the desert.

For life itself, here in the oasis, is a thing ordered by these elements. Night is for sleep; there is nothing whereat to wake. There is no artificial light; no artificial food — literature. There is no choice of meats; one is always hungry. The desert sauce is hunger unique as the Englishman's one sauce. Having eaten, one must walk; there is only one place to walk in. There is only one lesson to learn, peace; only one comment upon the lesson, thanksgiving. Love itself becomes simple as the rest of life. A glance in the Café Maure, a silent agreement with delight, a soft withdrawal to some hollow of the dunes under the stars where the village is blotted out as though it had never been, as are in that happy moment all the transgressions of the sinner, and all the woes of life, but the Virtue of the Holy One; or else to

some dim corner of a garden of the oasis by the stream, where through the softly stirring palms strikes the first moon-ray from the East, and life thrills in sleepy unison; all, all in silence, no names or vows exchanged, but with clean will an act accomplished. No more. No turmoil, no confusion, no despair, no self-tormenting, hardly even a memory.

And this too at first is horrible; one expects so much from love, three volumes of falsehood, a labyrinth rather than a garden. It is hard at first to realize that this is no more love than a carbuncle is part of a man's neck. All the spices wherewith we are wont to season the dish to our depraved palates, Maxim's, St. Margaret's, automobile rides, the Divorce Court, these are unwholesome pleasures. They are not love. Nor is love the exaltation of emotions, sentiment, follies. The stage door is not love (nor is the stile in Lovers' Lane); love is the bodily ecstasy of dissolution, the pang of bodily death, wherein the Ego for a moment that is an æon loses the fatal consciousness of itself; and becoming one with that of another, foreshadows to itself that greater sacrament of death, when "the spirit returns to God that gave it."

And this secret has also its part in the economy of life. By the road of silence one comes to the gate of the City of God. As the mind is the warring might (that is peace unshakeable) of these Eight Elements of the Desert, so at last the Ego is found alone, unmasked, conscious of itself and of no other thing. This is the supreme anguish of the soul; it realizes itself as itself, as a thing separate from that which is not itself, from God. In this spasm there are two ways: if fear and pride are left in the soul, it shuts itself up, like a warlock in a tower, gnashing its teeth with agony. "I am I," it cries, "I will not lose myself," and in that state damned, it is slowly torn by the claws of circumstance, disintegrated bitterly, for all its struggles, throughout ages and ages, its rags to be cast piecemeal upon the dungheap without the city. But the soul that has understood the blessed-

ness of that resignation, which grasps the universe and devours it, which is without hope or fear, without faith or doubt, without hate or love, dissolves itself ineffable into the abounding bliss of God. It cries with Shelley, as the "chains of lead about its flight of fire" drop molten from its limbs: "I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire," and in that last outbreaking is made one with the primal and final breath, the Holy Spirit of God.

Such must be the climax of any retirement to the Desert on the part of any aspirant of the Mysteries who has the spark of that fire in him.

He is drawn to physical quiescence (to regularity, simplicity, unity of motion) by the constant example and compulsion of the Elements. He is obliged to introspection by the poverty of exterior impression, perceptions behind the sensations, the laws underlying even the perception, and finally that consciousness which is the lawgiver. Sooner or later, according to his energy and the sanctification of his will, must he tear down the great veil and behold himself upon the shining walls of space, must he utter with shuddering rapture: "This is I!" Then let him choose!

From this moment of the annihilation of the Self in Pan, he is cured of the disease, "self-knowledge." He may return among his fellows, and move among them as a king, shine among them as a star. To him will they turn insensibly for light; to him will they come for the healing of their wounds.

He shall lift up the sacred Lance, and touch therewith the side of the king that was wounded by no lesser weapon; and the king shall be healed.

He shall plunge the point of the Lance into the Holy Grail, and it shall again glow with life and ecstasy, giving forth its bounty of mysterious refreshment to all the company of knights.

Then, should the rocks of life tear him, and its snow chill him, knoweth he not where to turn? Hath he not

attained the secret? Hath he not entered into the Sanctuary of the Most High?

Is he not chosen and armed against all things? Is he not master of Destiny and of the Event? What can touch him, who hath become intangible, being lost in God? Or conquer him, who hath become unconquerable, having conquered himself and given himself up to God? As well write upon the sand, as write sorrow in his soul. As well seek to darken the Sun, as to put out the Light that is in him.

Thus I wrote in the palm gardens of Tozeur, by the waters of its spring; thus I wrote while the sun moved mightily down the sky, and the wind whispered that it came no whence and went no whither, even as it listed from everlasting to everlasting.

Amen

Aleister Crowley

Tozeur

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