

# THE BOOKMAN

## CHRISTMAS NUMBER

1932

*Volume LXXV*

*Number 8*

# THE BOOKMAN

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VOL. LXXV

*December 1932*

NO. 8

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## MIRROR AND PIGEONS

THE FIRST OF A SERIES OF FIVE OPEN LETTERS

*by Branch Cabell*

**Y**OU, sir, have written me a wholly charming letter, the point of which, as you explain toward the end of the seventh page, is to ask about an odd alliance between white pigeons and a small mirror (three inches square, to be precise) which appears time and again in so many of my books. The envelope of your letter displays two English stamps, and it comes, I observe, from a village in Berkshire which I well remember as one of the former homes of the Branch family: though indeed very much the same letter has come to me before this morning, bearing hundreds of other postmarks.

The reader who wants to know what this or that passage "means" is rather constantly with me when I open the morning's mail. He requests omniscience and will be satisfied with nothing less, finding always in those eighteen volumes which compose the Biography of the life of Manuel an enigma or two for me to unravel by return post. He

implores (for example) a more particular account of the murder of Scott Musgrave: and anagrams he desiderates of the one or the other proper name. He assumes every name I mention to be an anagram. As an unfledged bird cries out from its nest, tirelessly, even so does he inquire from his half-sheet of paper, Who was Horvendile? He demands of me, What manner of talisman, formed with what shaping, did Jurgen show to the Brown Man? He desires to know of what nature were those beings whom Dom Manuel encountered outside the Window of Ageus? He interrogates if Maya should be regarded as Mother Eve, yet alive, in at least the nineteenth century? And he asks if the famed Sigil of Scoteia were not engraved with characters (it may be, of Dirghic origin) which when read upside down still harbour significance?

About such quite negligible riddles do my correspondents concern themselves. Such questions and some scores of allied questions

have been addressed to me off and on, now for twelve years, to my postman's wearying. Yet these questions vary somewhat, they arrive intermittently, and in a shifting volume, where one question alone does not vary, nor ever leave me unmolested for a reasonable breathing spell. I would count it a strange week which did not produce your letter, my dear sir, requesting that I explain my perpetual dealings with white pigeons and a small mirror.

To speak frankly, this is a matter which I have never made clear to anyone before today. This has been, until today, the secret which for me has unified the perpetuated life of Manuel in its innumerable manifestations; the secret which lay glowing at the inmost heart of my many books unseen by any beholder (I believe) save only me; the secret from which I drew a smug sense of superiority so long as I alone, to all seeming, still knew of its simplicity, its strength, its truth, and its splendour. I have preferred, in consequence (and, no doubt, selfishly) to keep this little matter of the mirror and the pigeons a secret known only to me.

But yours is an irresistible letter, in that you extol my literary achievements at appropriate length (in a wholly legible handwriting, too), and express your wonder that my books are not appreciated more widely by the literati of England. With such bait you may entrap the gratitude of any author known to me, so potent is the insatiable vanity of our fretting tribe, and to such bait I respond, smirking and garrulous. Yet before answering your question I really must pause to remark that, for an American, I have been treated with fair indulgence, I believe, by the reviewers indigenous to your island. I have fared a deal better than do most of my nation under their hortatory attention, and I have amassed indeed, during the last twelve years,

a full half-dozen quite civil press-cuttings to attest this fact.

Of all these, let me observe, the most frequently read by me remains a longish review which begins, "Although Mr. Cabell is an American writer, his books are not books to be despised". Thereafter every comment is favourable, and in a British fashion almost enthusiastic, but the rest of the notice is not to my immediate purpose. I delight only in the initial sentence, which embodies so perfectly the Englishman's attempt, in all circumstances, howsoever provocative, to be affable to an American.

To return now to that matter of the mirror and the pigeons, the postmark of your letter recalls to me very pleasantly those weeks which I once devoted, within six miles of your present home, to persuading the sexton of St. Helen's Church at Abingdon to unlock a corner cupboard. This cupboard contained parish records relative to the Branch family, of which I was then compiling a history; and these records were admittedly open to the public. But for an American gentleman, sir, to be wishful to see them, I gathered from their polite, fluttered, but firm custodian, raised points not satisfyingly covered by canonical precedent. Nor did the offering and the glib reception of a tip get us beyond the general statement that never in his time at least, sir, had any American gentleman—! I could infer at best from the sexton's slightly softened manner that just possibly, at some remote period, well prior to the Norman Conquest, one other inexplicable American had preceded me in barbaric presumptuousness. In any case, it developed, I could write to the vicar.

I erred. I admit that I erred. I offered to walk over to the vicar's near-by home and to

explain to him my simple need to have a cupboard door unlocked. For one chilling instant it was quite as though I had offered to set fire to the church. Then I was pitied. I was even humoured. The fact was again made clear to me, in the tones of one addressing a fractious and unusually dull-witted child, that I could write to the vicar.

It was my allotted part to cross no churchyard, babbling irresponsibly of high matters. It was my part, instead, through the more august channels of formal correspondence (after duly confessing my real name, and profession, and home address), to break the news to the vicar of St. Helen's Church, as tactfully as could be managed, that I wished to lay American eyes on the parish register dating from 1538 and the churchwardens' accounts beginning with the year 1555. The dates were essential. After his to-be-hoped-for rally, the vicar of St. Helen's, I gleaned (in the while that I reminded myself this was Abingdon, and not Titipu), would in proper form consult with himself, in his superior capacity as rector of St. Nicholas's church, about this (it was not hidden from me) distressing state of affairs. It was conceivable, if not likely, at least conceivable, that as vicar Dr. Maitland might request, and as rector accord, a benison on my prying curiosity. Then if the bishop approved, sir (out of, I gathered, a bishop's wide experience of human depravity, especially as it flourished in America), the matter might, it was just possible, be condoned.

I am afraid, though, that as a rector Herbert T. Maitland, D. D., was more cautious in judgment than as a vicar he was eloquent in pleading my case, or perhaps the Bishop of Oxford had to refer the imbroglio to the Archbishop of Canterbury, inasmuch as a fortnight passed by before the sexton of St. Helen's had all the needed permits which

would enable him to take the key out of his pocket and to unlock the corner cupboard in the vestry room. He sat by me then while I consulted the parish records; and I had the feeling, during my meek transcription of my remote relatives' births and marriages and deaths, that he was fully armed, with at least two pistols, and ready for any possible nonsense on my part.

In these fond reflections, sir (begotten inevitably by your postmark), I may seem to have wandered some little way from the secret of the mirror and the pigeons. But the case is otherwise: and to that theme I approach steadily. It is in a connection with this very theme that my thoughts now turn to yet further conflicts with British custom in that faraway time when I was getting together the material for my small book about the Branch family.

I think, for example, of my forlorn endeavours, while on this same quest, to procure a reader's ticket at the British Museum. I think of all those partially or resplendently bald-headed, those precise, and those pincez'd Under Librarians (each one of them remarkably like a brand-new and glossy wax figure, but, if anything, rather more animated than a wax figure) who made the fact plain that an unidentified American might quite as rationally have asked for the Elgin Marbles or the Portland Vase. I think of how repeatedly I was allowed to state, in writing, my name, profession, address, and purpose, and questioned as to the range of my acquaintanceship among householders in London. It is not possible, I then learned, to convince an Englishman that anybody exists who does not know a great many persons in London; the British mind simply does not grasp the idea. And I think of the

final reluctant compromise (reached, I have no doubt, at a special meeting of the Board of Directors, after a consultation with Scotland Yard) that my strange desire might, just conceivably, be considered with more or less seriousness after it had been officially endorsed by the American Ambassador.

I think too of how at the Embassy I encountered a marked reluctance (with which, at bottom, I sympathized) to make an international affair out of my reader's ticket. Passports were not obligatory in those days; and I had none: and nobody had ever heard of me at the Embassy, nor could the testimony of either *Who's Who* or of *Who's Who in America* be regarded as acceptable evidence of my actual existence. All the attachés were quite frank about that. Nor did I find that the interest of any attaché in historical research work was morbid. And when I eventually got my reader's ticket (which in the irrational outcome did come to pass) it was only through pure accident, in accord with no rule made and provided by the American Embassy or the British Museum.

I think also, I think with squirms and blushes, of how in Somerset House I paid properly enough my shilling to see the sixteenth-century will of one of my forebears in which I was interested; and of how, when this will was laid before me, I took out a pencil so that I might make an abstract. I do not recall, at this late date, just how many clerks and head clerks and sub-clerks, guards, office boys, policemen, stenographers, and porters, sprang into action, uproarious at the sight of that two-inch pencil. I am merely sure that in my country we lynch with less noisiness, and that had I produced a dynamite bomb no more officials could have leapt about me with such markedly un-British volubility. In fact, I have never since then been able to believe that an Englishman is

really phlegmatic. I learned at all events that at the Probate Registry in Somerset House one paid to look at this or the other will, hiring but a visual indulgence; and that to attempt a copy of any public record deposited there, was a crime punishable with hanging, castration, disembowelment, and quartering of the offender's body, under a statute enacted, I believe, by either Hengist or Horsa.

In the upshot, however, I was allowed to state, in writing, my name, profession, address, and purpose, and (after some little cross-examination relative to the householders of London) to procure official copies of all the wills I required, at eight pence the folio page. I received also (to my final and complete confusion) something like an apology. It developed that I had been in the right all along. I was right, not because the public records in the Probate Registry were preserved there for the benefit of the public, but because the will at which I was looking when I took out my pencil was dated prior to 1700. The remote dating of this will alone, it developed, had saved my life, and viscera, and other appurtenances.

You must bear with me. I am not really straying from my theme when I hark back to these trivial-seeming misadventures of a foreigner at loose ends in a land whose customs and faiths are strange to him. I believe, you see, that, as some profound philosopher or another has stated, "life is like that". I find that every man lives, and eventually dies, among an infinity of unexplained restraints and unexplained formulas. I, for example, I still do not understand why the sexton of St. Helen's could not unlock his cupboard without waiting to involve two parishes and one see (and, for all I know, an archbishop) of the Church of England. It is a mystery which still preys on my mind now and then when I lie awake at night. I

do not understand why my reader's ticket could not be granted, to a self-evidently harmless person, as an aid to consulting the books in the British Museum Library, rather than as a reward for knowing a well-to-do woman who lived in Berkeley Square. Nor do I understand how any one being, far less a mob, can be incited to madness by the sight of a pencil, and then pacified by a mention of 1700. I know only that there was a reason, not ever revealed to me, for each of these British mysteries. So I shrug and pass on.

Well, and in just this way lives the protagonist of each of my books. Each lives, during his travels in lands unfamiliar to him (precisely as you and I live, my dear sir, throughout the jogtrot of our daily vocation), in a welter of unexplained matters, of half-glimpsed human concernments with which he himself is not concerned, in so far as he knows, and of ever-present uncomprehended forces and affairs and plans, of which he divines the existence without fathoming their nature. I can but tell the reader what this protagonist heard or saw, or in other wise perceived and endured. Manuel no more understood Suskind than did I my sexton; how Kennaston came by the Sigil of Scoteia remained to Kennaston always as much an irrationality as to me remains the provenance of my reader's ticket at the British Museum; and to Jurgen the behaviour of the Brown Man after seeing a talisman appeared quite as unaccountable as I found the behaviour of the employees of Somerset House when I showed them a pencil.

It is so with the secret of the mirror and the pigeons. Since no one of my protagonists entirely fathomed this secret, there was no need, and I lacked any plausible occasion, to explain this matter to the reader. I can see

no hurt, though, nowadays, in my making clear to you, in a less formal fashion, and upon but one condition, this by-end of old magic.

What man discovered it, or what being first revealed it to man, I do not know. Like most true magic, as distinguished from hocus-pocus, it is older than any recorded history, it is older than what we described as "science". Nor is it at any real enmity with science, no matter how whole-heartedly the latest phases of immortal science may appear to assail it.

I mean of course that present-day science which, being of a practical turn, dismisses magic as an illusion and restricts itself to more sturdy novelties, such as airplanes and bacteria and evolution. I mean that science which accepts the aviation of Colonel Lindbergh, but denies the aviation of Simon Magus. I mean that wholly long-headed and matter-of-fact science which scoffs at any rumoured manifestations of "the occult" in the same moment that it pronounces such an everyday affair as a cold in the head to be caused by unknown agents; and which gets, somehow, out of its conviction that millions of monkeys were transformed into men, a proof that no one learned lady could be transformed into a cat. I mean, in brief, a remarkably transitory concatenation of faiths and teachings, all of which are just now in excellent standing, and the most of which will by-and-by consort with the science of Sir John Mandeville, the science of Albertus Magnus, the science of the Elder Pliny, the science of Aristotle, and the science of Moses. For, let it be repeated, science is immortal, and like most other immortals, science is much given to metamorphoses.

The secret of the mirror and the pigeons is based upon certain facts, upon three facts, before naming which I must pause to admit

that the facts of magic are, to be sure, not the same as the facts of science. For magic remains virtually stable, in a world wherein (as you have no doubt observed, my dear sir) the known truths of science vary perpetually. And to say that, is, of course, not to disparage science. Few blessings can long remain unaltered. Thus women vary perpetually, and so keep the world handsomely provided with gossip and milliners and lyric poetry. The weather varies from hour to hour; and if it failed to vary, we would all starve. Did a thermometer not vary, of what earthly good would it be? Well, and just so may the facts of science also vary, just as beneficently, with their own field of diurnal usefulness.

For, to return now to the mystery of the mirror and the pigeons, man, as I and a great many other people have pointed out, fares among ever-present mysteries. These necessarily perturb him. But science rationalizes all, and science explains everything, so that no educated person need any longer live in apprehension of the unknown. Science has thus soothed us. It has brought to us, at different times, the glad news that vaccination warded off smallpox, and that to wear an amethyst prevented drunkenness; that each man was a modified monkey, and that premature child birth was incited by the mother's stepping upon, or perhaps over, a fern leaf; the aurora borealis was due to positively charged corpuscles of helium, and that Earth was a large disk with a river running around its edges. It has found out the texture of the rainbow, the origin of the moon, the ninety-nine secret names of God, and the uses of gasoline. It has proved to us that an elephant has no joints, and that mosquitoes transmit yellow fever, and that suture of the alar bone

is peculiar to Japanese crania, and that to eat the brains of a camel will cure epilepsy. It has plugged our teeth to prevent decay, and then pulled them out to prevent focal infection. It has discovered vitamins, dissected the genitals of the male grasshopper, and revealed the ways of the basilisk.

To know, beyond any question, the true facts about these matters has been an unfailing comfort to mankind, in that the world and his wife no longer lived among ever-present mysteries. Science has made all clear, since the days of Nimrod. It has afforded to mankind that succour, that consolation, and that perennial inspiriting, which but too many unreflective people consider to be equally the fruitage of religion.

I am afraid, as a communicant of the Protestant Episcopal Church, that religion has never been quite so potent as science has always been to serve every cultured person who lives as yet, under a death sentence, as a tranquillizing narcotic. Religion can offer but a removed prospect, a hope, of escaping from the unexplained restrictions and the ever-present perils of our transient life upon earth, by-and-by, into more luxurious and more stable surroundings. But science goes straight to the root of our trouble: it removes, or it at worst ameliorates, all menaces forthwith by explaining them. It explains the restrictions, it explains the perils, it explains everything, in decisive terms, and it so rids man of his chief terror, his dread of the unknown.

I need hardly point out that the truthfulness of these explanations is an irrelevant matter. The Phœnician ship-captain sailed intrepidly about an Earth which he knew to be a large disk with an uncrossable river forever circling its edges, so that he could not possibly fall off: his ocean stream was an affair accounted for, set down plainly on an up-to-date, scientific map, with no im-

probable nonsense about it, nor any least element of the surprising. He knew just as well and just as firmly what a prosaic business engaged his working hours as may the captain of any modern ocean liner. The latter believes, to be sure, that, safely held on by the force of gravity, he steams about the exterior of an oblate spheroid, having a diameter of 7918 miles and a mean daily motion of slightly over 3548 miles, but the difference here is a mere matter of opinion. The point is that both skippers should be assured as to their whereabouts and as to exactly what they are doing, and in both instances their needs have been attended to by contemporaneous science.

No, it is the main function of science, as it is of religion, to create faith. And science possesses the large advantage that, where religion has to be explicit in its revealings, science need not tender us any such direct information in order to work its thaumaturgy. When no great while ago, for example, Herr Doktor Alfred Einstein explained the entire cosmos, and we heard there were but a dozen living persons who could understand his explanation, we all felt none the less the vast consolation of science. It was most reassuring to know at least that the cosmos had been found out and detected in all its doings, so that under the cold vigilance of twenty-six stern scientific eyes the cosmos would have to be more careful for the future. We all felt, I am sure, that the cosmos at any rate had been disposed of, and the weight of it was off our minds.

So does science continue to rid us of the unknown, in its old beneficent fashion, just as when that first great scientist, Moses, accounted rather more plainly for the cosmos, as a six-day job with all the necessary imperfections of such hurried work. So has science always begotten faith and under-

standing, with some slight assistance from human logic. It is for this reason, above all other reasons, that no one of us ought ungratefully to disparage science, and that I have been at pains to disavow any such intention before I answer at length the question you have asked about the mirror and the pigeons.

Yet in return for communicating this secret I shall ask, I repeat, in this regretably self-seeking world, one little favour. You live within a half-hour's jaunt of Abingdon. It should not deeply inconvenience you, who know the lay of pleasant Berkshire, to find out what rules do actually apply to the opening of that cupboard (to the south side of the building, on the same side as Holy Cross aisle, and facing a picture of Christ bearing His Cross) in the snug vestry room of St. Helen's Church? to what sesame move the hinges of that cupboard? and with what rites, what exsufflations, or what cantrips (apart, of course, from crude tips) should I have approached that cupboard's sanctity and sexton in due form?

It does not appear plausible that in no circumstances could a cupboard door be unclosed within less than a fortnight, and then only after a clergyman had weighed gravely his own recommendations to himself concerning that cupboard, with his Grace the Lord Bishop of Oxford serving as the final referee in all matters pertaining to that cupboard. I feel that, Aladdin-like, I evoked strange British djinns, unknowing. I feel, I still feel, perturbed about it.

In brief, nor science nor religion nor magic may quite explain the ways of you English to an American; and this matter has long puzzled me, now for some twenty years. So do you solve, if it be permitted, this secret for me, and by return post I will forward you the secret of the mirror and the pigeons.