

Hermetic Alchemy – Science and Practice
THE FIRST MATTER

Throughout the literature of Hermetic science there is perfect agreement among the adepts as to one fundamental tenet success in the Great Work depends upon what they call the "discovery" of the First Matter. Right here we must be alert. The meaning of words changes as the years pass, and we shall be led astray if we suppose that to "discover", in alchemical doctrine, is exactly the same as to "find." We must go back to the older meanings of the verb "discover," back to its derivation -- even back to the Hebrew verb which is translated "discover" in the Authorized Version of the Old Testament.

Literally, to discover is to lay bare, to denude, to strip of concealment. This is the exact significance of the Hebrew verb GLH, *galah*, which we have just mentioned. One of the meanings of this verb in Hebrew is "to open a book," and in this connection the reader familiar with Tarot will notice that the first letter of the verb is Gimel, represented in the Tarot Keys by the High Priestess, who holds in her lap an open book or scroll. The second letter is Lamed, represented by Key 11, Justice, which has equilibrium for its fundamental meaning. The last letter is Heh, typified by the Emperor, symbol of reason and of dominion over the conditions of physical existence.

Furthermore, since the first letter of GLH is that which is associated with memory, it appears that in order to

denude the First Matter of its veil of concealment, we must employ the power of recollection and association represented by the High Priestess. Indeed, the High Priestess herself is a symbol of the First Matter, as we shall see more clearly by the time we come to the end of this lesson. The discovery of the Matter is not the term of a quest undertaken in the world about us. It is the unveiling of the true nature of something within us, and it is accomplished in very truth by an act of recollection.

Deep in our sub-consciousness lies hidden the secret of the First Matter. To bring it to the surface is the primary object of Hermetic practice, just as it is the primary object of yoga. Thus the letter Lamed, among other things a symbol of that true faith which takes form in persevering action, enters into the composition of the verb GLH. Without faith in the actual existence of the First Matter, it will never be discovered. If we share the world's opinion that the alchemists were fools, we shall never participate in their wisdom, for we shall never be able to persist through the preliminary stages of the Great Work, sticking to our practice day in and day out, through that period of testing and trial in which no outward and visible signs of success reward our efforts. For, as the final letter of GLH shows, the discovery is to be made with the mind alone, even as we learned from the Upanishad quoted in the first lesson. In its initial stages it is a rational process.

We begin with the words of the sages. Over and over, in their books, they tell us what the First Matter is. At first what they say seems to be a meaningless mass of

verbiage. Then, as we persist in bringing our attention again and again to what they say, the inner significance begins to show, like the outline of a figure covered by a drapery. Then, by comparing the various descriptions, we are able to reason out what the First Matter *must* be.

The actual discovery, however, is by no means merely an inference. There is no guesswork about it. It is a vivid, unmistakable experience. When you have discovered the First Matter, you *know* that you have done so. Nobody can argue you out of that knowledge. It is not an opinion. It is not simply what you think. You share the experience of the sages. All that they have written on this topic becomes perfectly clear to you.

At the same time you understand why none of the adepts ever tells, in plain language, what the First Matter really is. You understand that the secret simply *cannot* be told, because it is a knowledge for which there are no adequate verbal expressions.

Perhaps you doubt this now. Perhaps you think that the ingenuity of man is equal to the task of finding a name for anything in his experience. True enough, but the point is that the name will convey no meaning to the person who has not also had the experience. Paracelsus and some others invented names for certain experiences that are familiar to every adept in the Hermetic practice. But how much do these names mean to their uninitiated readers? Less than nothing. Even to those who have made the discovery, these new terms are no better than the old ones. He who knows what the First Matter really

is never has any difficulty with the obscure language of the sages.

Well, if all this be true, you may ask, what's the use of reading the alchemical writers? You say they cannot tell the secret. Why bother with their attempts to do so? The answer to this is that what they do say leads us to the point where we can infer what they mean. Then our inference can be tested by experimental work. If the inference is wrong, it leads to nothing. When it is correct, it leads to the actual discovery.

What we aim to do for you in these lessons is to put you in the way of making the correct inferences from the words of the sages. Then we purpose indicating the methods whereby you may test those inferences for yourself. To this end we shall begin with a series of quotations from various alchemical texts. We have endeavored so to arrange these quotations that as you read them your mind may be led by the mere reading nearer to the truth. In addition to this careful arrangement of the material, we shall also give you a concise commentary which will assist you to arrive at your conclusions as to the real meaning.

Take your time about this. One of the reasons for our decision to make this a monthly course is that haste and impatience will but retard your progress. In separating the etherial spirit from the gross letter of these quotations, remember the admonition of the *Emerald Tablet*, and perform the operation with sweetness as well as with ingenuity. Bear ever in mind the truth that

the real object of the Hermetic practice is identical with the real object of yoga. That object is nothing less than the complete liberation of the alchemist from the bondage of delusion.

It is by no means an utter abandonment of the world, as many have supposed. As one Eastern writer puts it: "The knower of the Essence, enjoying the pleasures of the senses with moderation, *but knowing them for what they are*, may derive both temporal and spiritual pleasure, even like one having knowledge of two languages." (--*Panchadasi*) And what is it to know the enjoyments that come through the various channels of sensation for what they are? This is the answer given in the *Yogavasishtha*:

"The whole world is *Spirit*, there is no thing else in reality; -- Betake thyself to this view of things, and rest in peace, thus regaining thy real *Self*."

So much by way of introduction. Read the quotations starting on the following page slowly and very carefully. At first, let your main object be to grasp what they say. The adepts write carefully, and choose their words with great pains. Your first endeavor should be to impress those words upon your memory, without making any effort whatever to impress interpretation. The less you try to guess what these declarations mean, the quicker will the correct interpretation *dawn* upon you.

THE WORDS OF THE SAGES

CONCERNING THE FIRST MATTER

"The original matter is really a kind of stone, which, being hard and solid like a stone, may be pounded, reduced to powder, and resolved into its three elements (which Nature herself has joined together), and then again may be recombined into a solid stone of the fusibility of wax, by the skilled hand of the artist, adjusting the law of Nature."

--*The Sophic Hydrolith.*

"The Sages have, indeed, purposely concealed their meaning under a veil of obscure words, but it is sufficiently clear from their writings that the substance of which they speak is not of a special, but a general kind, and is therefore contained in animals, vegetables, and minerals. It would, however, be unwise to take a round-about road where there is a shorter cut; and they say that whereas the substance can be found in the animal and vegetable kingdoms only with great difficulty, and at the cost of enormous labour, in the bowels of the earth it lies ready to our hands. It is the matter which the Sages have agreed to call Mercury or Quicksilver. Our quicksilver, indeed, is truly a living substance, so called not because it is extracted from cinnabar, but because it is derived from the metals themselves."

--Edward Kelly, *The Humid Path.*

(N.B. This quotation from Kelly needs to be read with especial care, because it is apparently so open and

matter-of-fact. The key to it, which should unlock the mystery for students of Tarot, is the phrase, "in the bowels of the earth it lies ready to our hands." Observe, too, that Kelly says the sages have agreed to call this matter Mercury, and that he specifically declares that "our" quicksilver is not extracted from cinnabar, the ordinary mercurial ore of the mines.)

"The matter of our Stone, Mercury, is a commonly diffused subject, and though it is found with greater ease in some minerals, it may be discovered everywhere. In this sense Morienus, that illustrious Sage, answered King Calid's question as to the matter of the Stone in the following way: 'It is of thee, O King, and thou art its ore.' And Raymond asserted that he had extracted his substance from a vile and worthless thing.'

-- *Ibid.*

The First Matter is often called Magnesia, and is thus described in the glossary to A. E. Waite's translation of the *Hermetic and Alchemical Writings of Paracelsus*:

"MAGNESIA. This term which is occasionally used by Paracelsus in its alchemical, as distinct from its chemical sense, has received many explanations from the adepts. It is the matter of the stone, which the philosophers sometimes call their red, and sometimes their white magnesia. In the first preparation the chaos is blood-red, because the central sulphur is stirred up and discovered by the philosophical fire, In the second it is exceedingly white and transparent like the heavens. It is something like common quicksilver, but, of such a

celestial and transcendent brightness, that nothing on earth can be compared to it. It is a child of the elements, a pure virgin, from whom nothing has been generated as yet. When she breeds, it is by the fire of Nature, which is her husband, She is neither animal, vegetable, nor mineral, nor is she an extraction from these; she is pre-existent to them all, and is their mother. She is a pure simple substance, yielding to nothing but love, because generation is her aim, and that is never accomplished by violence. She produces from her heart a thick, heavy, snow-white water, which is the *Lac Virginis* (Virgin's Milk) and afterwards blood from her heart. Lastly she presents a secret crystal. She is one and three, but at the same time she is four and five. She is the Catholic Magnesia, the Sperm of the World, out of which all natural things are generated. Her body is in a sense incorruptible; the common elements will not destroy it, neither does she mix with them essentially. Outwardly she resembles a stone, and yet she is no stone. The philosophers call her their white gum, water of their sea, water of life, most pure and blessed water; she is a thick, permanent, saltish Water, which does not wet the hand, a dry water, viscous and slimy, and generated from the saline fatness of the earth. Fire cannot destroy her, for she is herself fire, having within her a portion of the universal fire of Nature, and a secret, celestial spirit, animated and quickened by God, She is a middle nature, between thick and thin, not altogether earthly, not wholly igneous, but a mean aerial substance, to be found everywhere and at all seasons."

"As concerns the matter, it is *one*, and contains within

itself all that is needed. Its birth is in the sand. It is the distilled moisture of the Moon joined to the light of the Sun and congealed.”

--Anastratus, *The Crowd*.

“Know that our Mercury is before the eyes of all men, Though it is known to few. When it is prepared its Splendor is most admirable; but the sight of it is vouchsafed to none, the sons of knowledge. Do not despise it, therefore, when you see it in sordid guise; of if you do, you will never accomplish our Magistry – and if you can change its countenance, the transformation will be glorious. For our water is a most pure virgin, and is loved of many, but meets all her wooers in foul garments, in order that she may be able to distinguish the worthy from the unworthy. Our beautiful Maiden abounds in inward graces; unlike the immodest woman who meets her lovers in splendid garments. To those who do not despise her foul exterior, she then appears in all her beauty, and brings them an infinite clever of riches and health.

--Philalethes.

Basil Valentino writes: "Cease to seek it in the animal kingdom; for Nature herself could not find it there." He also says it is a mineral, and incombustible. It cannot be found in the animal kingdom because there its real nature is too completely veiled. It is incombustible because no fire can burn the essence of fire. It is mineral, because it is actually the real substance of whatever is to be found in mines.

“It is a stone and no stone, Spirit, Soul, and Body; which if thou dissolvest, it will be dissolved, and if thou dost coagulate it, it will be coagulated, and if thou dost make it fly, it will fly, for it is volatile, or flying, and clear as a tear; afterwards it is made citrine, then saltish, but without shoots or crystals, and none may touch it with his tongue. Behold, I have described it truly to thee, but I have not named it.' Now, I will name it, and I say that if thou sayest it is Water, thou dost say the truth, and if thou sayest it is not Water, thou dost lie. Be not, therefore, deceived with manifold descriptions and operations, for it is but one thing, to which nothing extraneous may be added.”

--Arnoldus de Villa Nova.

"This Mercury of the Wisemen is a watery element, cold and moist. This is their permanent water, the spirit of the body, the unctuous vapour, the blessed water, the virtuous water, the water of the Wisemen, the philosopher's vinegar, the mineral water, the dew of heavenly grace, the virgin's milk, the bodily mercury, and with other numberless names it is named in the books of the philosophers, which names, though they are divers, notwithstanding, always signify one and the same thing, namely, the Mercury of the Wisemen. "

--Albertus Magnus.

"The object of your desire is the one thing out of which all things are made."

--Rosinus.

"The matter itself is found everywhere. It flies with fowls in the air, swims with fishes in the sea, it is

discerned by the reason of angels, and it governs man and woman."

--George Ripley.

"The matter lies before the eyes of all; everybody sees it, touches it, loves it, but knows it not. It is glorious and vile, precious and of small account, and is found everywhere. But, to be brief, our Matter has as many names as there are things in this world; that is why the foolish know it not."

--*The Golden Tract.*

"It is set up for the ruin of many and the salvation of some. To the crowd this matter is vile, exceedingly contemptible and odious, but to the philosophers it is more precious than gems or gold. It loves all, yet it is well-nigh an enemy of all; it is to be found everywhere, yet scarcely any one has discovered it."

--*A Rosicrucian Treatise.*

"The 'dew of heaven' and the 'oiliness of the earth' are the materials for our work. It is therefore neither a mineral nor a metal. The Pythagorean 'Y' indicates that there are two mercurial substances in one root, Fire and Water -- Ischamaim -- namely 'Y', extracted from the substance in which all metals are contained. It is a SALT dew of heaven, but a metallic dew, containing all colors. This dew can be coagulated by the Hermetic Art, and produces a sweet Salt, or MANNA. Its father is the Sun, its mother is the Moon, and from these two it receives its life, light, and brightness. From the Sun it receives its Fire, and from the Moon its light.

"We find this dew in a coagulated state, and also dissolved. It falls into the depths of the earth, and its substance is the most subtle and ethereal part of the earth. From above comes its soul and spirit, Fire and Light, and enters the body of Salt. Thus it receives the power of all things from above and from below.

"This mineral dew appears in all its colors of white, yellow, green, red, and black. It appears corporeal to the external eye, but to the miners in the mountains it appears sometimes thick, watery, and dripping. The best dew is the one which is coagulated like an Electrum, or like transparent Amber.

"This heavenly dew and its power is contained in everything. It is treated by the world with contempt and rejected by it. As it grows, it becomes divided into two branches, white and red, both springing from one root -- 'Y'. This substance grows out of that one root, appearing like a white and red rose of Jericho, and blooming like a lily in the Valley of Jehoshaphat.

"It is often prematurely broken by the miners, and tortured by the ignorant workmen. But the true artist observes its influence by his developed internal senses, and gathers it when it is ripe, with its flowers, seeds, root, trunk, and branches.

"Let these hints be sufficient.' It is neither a metal nor a mineral, but the mother of all metals and minerals, and their Prima Materia. It is nothing else but the coagulated blood of the Red Lion, and the Gluten of the Eagle. *If*

you discover it, be silent and keep it sacred."

--The Secret Symbols of the Rosicrucians.

"Our Mercury is not common Mercury or quicksilver; but our Mercury is a water which cannot be found upon earth, for it is not made or manifested in the ordinary course of Nature, but by the art and manual operations of man."

--Raymond Lully

"The seed of all things has been placed by God in water. This seed some exhibit openly, like vegetables, some keep in their kidneys, like animals, some conceal in the depths of their essential being, like minerals. The seed is stirred into action by a certain celestial influence, coagulates the material water, and passes through a series of fermentive processes (fermentation being the principle of all transmutation), until it has produced that for the production of which it was especially suited."

--Philaethes

"This mystery, because of the malice and wickedness of men, is given only to few; notwithstanding it lives and moves every day in the sight of the whole world, as it appears by the following parable:

"I am a poisonous dragon, present everywhere, and to be had for nothing. My water and my fire dissolve and compound; out of my body thou shalt draw the Green, and the Red Lion: but if thou dost not exactly know me, thou wilt with my fire destroy thy five senses. A most pernicious quick poison comes out of my nostrils,

which hath been the destruction of many. Separate therefore the thick from the thin artificially, unless thou dost delight in extreme poverty. I give thee faculties both male and female, and the powers both of heaven and earth. The mysteries of my art are to be performed magnanimously, and with great courage, if thou wouldest have me overcome the violence of the fire, in which attempt many have lost both their labour and their substance. I am the Ego of Nature, known only to the Wise, such as are pious and modest, who make of me a little world. Ordained I was by the Almighty God for men; but though many desire me, I am given only to few, that they may relieve the poor with my treasures, and not set their minds on gold that perisheth. I am called of the philosophers Mercury: my husband is Gold philosophical I am the old dragon that is present everywhere on the face of the earth; I am father and mother; youthful and ancient; weak, and yet most strong; life and death; visible and invisible; hard and soft; descending to the earth, and ascending to the heavens; most high and most low; light and heavy; in me the order of Nature is oftentimes inverted, in colour, number, weights and measure. I have in me the light of Nature; I am dark and bright; I spring from the earth, and I come out of heaven; I am well known, and yet a mere nothing; all colours shine in me, and all metals by the beams of the sun. I am the Carbunole of the Sun, a most noble clarified earth, by Which thou mayest turn copper, iron, tin, and lead into most pure gold."

--Quoted in Vaughan's *Coelum Terrae*,
from a Rosicrucian original.

"There exists a force in nature which is far more powerful than steam, by means of which a single man, who can master it and knows how to direct it, might throw the world into confusion and transform its face. It is diffused throughout infinity; it is the substance of heaven and earth; for it is either fixed or volatile according to its degrees of polarization. When it produces radiance it is called light. It is that substance which was created by God before all else when He said: Let there be light. It is substance and motion at one and the same time; it is a fluid and a perpetual vibration. The inherent force by which it is put into activity is called magnetism. In infinite space it is ether, or etherized light; it becomes astral light in the stars which it magnetizes, while in organized beings it becomes the magnetic light or fluid. In man it forms the astral body or plastic mediator. The will of intelligent beings acts directly on this light, and, by means thereof, upon all nature, which is made subject to the modifications of intelligence.

"This agent is precisely what the medieval adepts called the first matter of the Great Work. This Universal Agent, this vital and luminous caloric, this electromagnetic ether, is represented on ancient monuments by the girdle of Isis, which twines in a love-knot round two poles, by the bull-headed serpent, by the serpent with the head of a goat or a dog, and by the serpent devouring its own tail. It is the winged dragon of Medea, the double serpent of the caduceus, and the tempter of Genesis; but it is also the brazen snake of Moses, encircling the Tau; it is the Hyle of the Gnostics; and

lastly, it is the devil of exoteric dogmatism, and is really the blind force which souls must conquer, in order to detach themselves from the chains of earth."

--Eliphas Levi, *Mysteries of Magic*.

Very likely, after your first reading of the foregoing quotations, you will feel more bewildered than enlightened. In time, however, as you go over these words of the sages again and again, the inner meaning will begin to open itself to you. It would do so without any commentary, if you persisted long enough. In this day, however, there is particular need for the performance of the Great Work by just as many as may be made ready to undertake it. Thus what you would have had to learn by the slow method of repeated contemplation of the words of the adepts may now, in some measure at least, be made easier to grasp by means of commentary.

Let it be clearly understood, however, that it is just as impossible for us to discover the First Matter for you as it ever was. What we can and will do is to make it easier for you to draw the inferences which will prepare you to make that discovery. Be on your guard. As you proceed with this lesson, you may come to a point where you will say, "Why, of course! The First Matter is neither more nor less than ____" whatever you may decide. You may conclude that it is identical with the ether of space. Or you may suppose it to be the same as what Hindus term *Akasha*. Mind, we're not saying that if you arrive at either of these conclusions you will be mistaken. What we are warning you against is the

supposition that such a conclusion is the *discovery* of the First Matter.

Suppose you were at the entrance to an unlighted room, and you were hungry. Suppose you found on the door a cryptic description of the contents of the room, from which you drew the perfectly correct inference that on a table within you might find all manner of excellent food-supplies. Could you satisfy your hunger with that inference?

So it is with the First Matter. Reason will show you what it must be, and we shall do all we can to assist you to use your reasoning powers to that end. We may even be able to turn on the light for you. But only you can find and use the things required to perform the Great Work.

First of all we shall call on Paracelsus for an important piece of information, commonly neglected by those who try to interpret alchemical writings. He says, in his *Tincture of the Philosophers*:

"Now, if you do not understand the use of the Cabalists and the old astronomers, you are not born by God for the Spagyric art, or chosen by Nature for the work of Vulcan, or created to open your mouth concerning alchemical arts." He said this because he knew that the methods of the Qabalah, and the underlying ideas of astrology, are keys to the meaning of the alchemical cryptic language. The first use we shall make of his hint is to apply the Qabalah to the elucidation of our first

quotation from the sages.

There we read that the original matter is really a kind of stone, which may be reduced to powder, and resolved into its three elements. Remembering that many alchemical terms are derived from Hebrew, we look up the word for *stone* in that language, and find that it is composed of three elements, or letters: Aleph, Beth, and Nun, which form the word ABN, *Ehben*. The first letter, Aleph, according to Qabalists, represents *Ruach*, the Life-Breath, or Pure Spirit. The second represents Mercury. The third represents the zodiacal sign Scorpio, symbolized sometimes by the Eagle, which typifies the reproductive power in all living things, the principle of growth which is always associated in ancient occult writings with water.

Thus we find that in the Hebrew word for *stone* there are definitely indicated three characteristics which are often mentioned in alchemical descriptions of the First Matter. It is a vital essence (Aleph). It is something that the adepts have agreed to call Mercury (Beth). It is something which they also designate as the Sperm or Seed of the World, which they as often call Water, and which they likewise term the Gluten of the Eagle (Nun).

This is only a beginning. The word ABN, *Ehben*, is peculiar in that its first two letters form the noun AB, meaning "Father," while the last two spell BN, *Ben*, meaning "Son." Thus the First Matter is indicated as being something in which the Qabalistic ideas represented by these two words are conjoined. AB,

Father, is a special name given by Qabalists to that aspect of the Life-power which they name Chokmah, or WISDOM. BN, Son, is one of their names for that aspect of the same power which is termed Tiphareth, BEAUTY.

In Qabalistic psychology, Chokmah or Wisdom is held to be the seat of the life-force in man, while Tiphareth, or Beauty, is regarded as the seat of imagination. Thus the word ABN intimates that the First Matter is really identical with the life-force, and that it is also the power which expresses itself in our lives as the active principle in the production of mental imagery.

Here is a most important suggestion. For it is in full accord with the practical side of the yoga teaching. The latter is founded upon the idea that whatsoever exists is an expression of a conscious, vital energy which produces all the multiplicity of forms, on every plane, by precisely the same power that we exercise in the making of mental images. Patanjali tells us that Yoga is control of the thinking principle, and if this means anything it must mean that yoga is control of the power that takes form as mental imagery. For even the most abstract thinking requires imagery. To be sure, in such thinking the images of physical objects are replaced by symbols, as, for example, in mathematics. Yet the symbols are none the less images, and they are combined and arranged just as if they were actual objects.

It is also noteworthy that the numeral value of ABN is

53, which is also the value of the noun ChMH, *Khammaw*, which we have found to be a component part of the word *Alchemy*. As the word itself signifies "sun," we might say, Qabalistically, "Our Stone and the Sun are one," and we should be less cryptic than many of the alchemical writers. In this connection, also, we may note that the first letter of ChMH is Cheth, which correspond to the sign Cancer, ruled by the Moon; that the second represents the element water; and that the third corresponds to the sign Aries in which the Sun is exalted, according to astrologers. Thus the Hebrew word for *sun* contains Qabalistically the ideas of moon and water as well as that of sun. Hence the alchemists, who are continually reminding us that the matter of the Great Work, the materials, and the result, are all comprised in the right knowledge and use of what they call Sun, Water, and Moon, may well have had what we have just explained in mind when they formulated their cryptic statements.

Before leaving the word ABN, we may also note that the first part of the word (AB, Father) may be taken as a symbol of the universal Life-power, considered as the source, or parent, of all that exists. Similarly, the last half of the word (BN, the Son) is a symbol of Man, reproducing the essential characteristics of his heavenly parent. Needless to say that this should not be taken to mean what it does in ordinary theology. It is simply the idea that man is the offspring of the power which has brought the universe into existence, from which it follows that man shares in the fundamental nature of that power.

Passing now to Edward Kelly's remarks about the First Matter, let us point out more definitely what we had in mind in warning you not to take him too literally. Indeed, the opening words are a warning that no writing of the adepts is other than *intentionally* a veil that must be penetrated before the real meaning can be grasped. The cryptic portion of Kelly's writing, however, begins with the phrase, "in the bowels of the earth it lies ready to our hands." Kelly was a clever Qabalist and a first-rate astrologer. He knew why alchemists call their First Matter *Lac Virginis*, or Virgin's Milk. He understood their reason for describing it as an unctuous, or oily, water. He accepted their doctrine that man is a microcosm. So he had no difficulty in compressing the essence of the alchemical doctrine into a phrase. Understand by "earth" the microcosm, man, and you will easily solve the puzzle. "The bowels of the earth" are the human intestinal tract, ruled by the earthy sign Virgo, the Virgin. The Virgin's Milk, the oily water which will not wet the hand, is actually chyle, the product of stomach digestion, which enters the intestines (the Black Dragon of alchemy) in the form of a milky, fatty fluid, from which the lacteals in the small intestine absorb the various substances required for the replenishment of the blood-stream.

Basically, those substances are organic forms of various minerals. Thus Kelly is essentially correct when he says that the First Matter is derived from the metals themselves, and when he insists that it is a living substance. He shows himself an ingenious Qabalist by declaring that in the bowels of the earth the First Matter

is "ready to our hands." For in Qabalah the sign Virgo is attributed to the letter Yod, and the significance of the letter-name IVD, Yod, is "hand." We shall see that another of our alchemical authors also refers to the letter Yod in connection with the First Matter.

As soon as we have identified the First Matter with the contents of the intestinal tract, we can understand the answer given by Morienus to King Calid. We can also see why Raymond Lully, and many another, asserted that the substance might be extracted from something generally regarded as vile and worthless. We can understand why Philalethes, who also insists that the mysterious water is a virgin, declares that she meets her wooers in foul garments. And in the light of modern knowledge, which shows us that intestinal fermentation is one of the most fruitful sources of disease, we can understand the truth of the Rosicrucian declaration that the First Matter is set up for the ruin of many, and is well-nigh an enemy of all.

Yet here again we must guard ourselves against the unwarranted assumption that we have grasped the whole mystery when we have identified chyle as the *form* of the First Matter which is used in the alchemical process. Some readers of these pages, indeed, may doubt that anything so ordinary can possibly be the precious substance of the alchemists. Let them remember that Thomas Vaughan says that he knows most persons would regard the truth as laughable; and let them recall the story of Paracelsus, who promised to show the faculty of a university the Elixir of Life, and

scandalized them all by uncovering a jar filled with excrement. Most of his contemporaries believed that he was guilty of a gross practical joke. The essence of the joke was that he actually kept his promise. For when the alchemical process is understood and carried out, the adept is able to extract from the chyle a great number of essences which are of inestimable value. These are wasted by the average human being because he does not know how to extract them. By gaining conscious control of the process of intestinal digestion and assimilation, the adepts in alchemy are enabled to fill their veins with the veritable elixir of life, the priceless liquid "gold" (solar energy) that not only maintains the vital functions indefinitely, but also makes possible the preparation of the true Stone of the Wise.

We repeat, nevertheless, that although what we have explained is a revelation of the alchemical mystery more definite than any other which has been given in the plain language of modern times, it is by no means the *discovery* of the First Matter. The quotation from Waite's glossary to Paracelsus (consisting largely of unacknowledged borrowings from Thomas Vaughan) makes this evident. Yet you will notice that even here there is mentioned the production of the Virgin's Milk, followed by that of blood — the same sequence that occurs in the body when chyle is taken up by the lacteals.

At the same time, even a slight acquaintance with the alchemical texts is enough to show that although the *form* of the First Matter employed in the alchemical

operation is the Virgin's Milk, the Matter itself is not restricted to that form. It is therefore declared not to be an extraction from animal, vegetable, or mineral, but to be pre-existent to them all, and their mother. In this doctrine we have a close agreement with the Oriental idea, of Prakriti, the root-substance from which all existing objects are differentiated. Prakriti, which in the seventh chapter of the Bhagavad-Gita is termed the "mysterious power, difficult to cross over," is identical with the Maya of the *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, which declares: "Know nature to be Maya, and the Ruler of Maya as the Lord Himself."

Now, Maya is also the name of the mother of Hermes, so that from Greek mythology we get the hint that Maya is the root-principle which brings forth Mercury. It is not without significance, we think, that the mother of Buddha was also named Maya, for the illumination of Buddha is precisely the goal of the processes of alchemy and yoga.

Furthermore, there is a close connection between the words *Maya* and *Magia*, the latter being the Latin noun for *Magic*. In both words there is the dual conception of a power which manifests itself in changes and mutations, and of a power which is the cause of all human errors because its illusive nature, so long as it remains unrecognized, leads the mind of man into all sorts of mistaken judgments. Thus the alchemical texts tell us that the First Matter, in some of its aspects, is poisonous, and the enemy of all.

Jacob Boehme, himself steeped in alchemical literature, and blessed with that higher insight which leads to the actual discovery of the First Matter, employed the word *Magic* in the sense just explained. In the fifth chapter of his *Six Mystical Points* he writes: "Magic is the mother of eternity, of the being of all beings; for it creates itself, and is understood in desire... It is the original state of Nature, Its desire makes an imagination (*Einbildung*), and the imagination or figuration is only the will of desire... Magic is the formative power in the eternal wisdom. According as the will makes a model in wisdom, so does desiring Magic receive it; for it has in its property imagination as a longing. Imagination is gentle and soft, and resembles water."

Thus we see that Boehme perceived that the fundamental power which brings things into existence is like that which we know in ourselves as desire and imagination. Observe that he compares imagination to water, the commonest alchemical name for the First Matter. In his *Mysterium Pansophisum* he also says: "We recognize also from whence all things, evil and good, take their origin, namely from the Imagination in the great Mystery, where a wonderful essential life generates itself."

The term "Catholic Magnesia," mentioned on in a prior section, is often employed as a name for the First Matter. The adjective, "catholic," is to be understood as meaning "universal, infinite, all-pervading." As employed in alchemy, "magnesia" means *Magnos Lithos*, or lodestone and thus refers to the magnetic

power peculiar to that mineral. According to exoteric derivations, the magnet is named after the place Magnesia, in Thessaly. Occultists are aware, however, that both "magnet" and "magic" are related to the Sanskrit terms *Mahat* and *Maya*. The Catholic Magnesia, or Universal Magnet, is the universal attractive principle which holds things together. It is therefore represented in Tarot by the High Priestess, For this attractive principle is a mode of consciousness, or intelligence. Therefore it is correctly symbolized by that Tarot Key which represents the Uniting Intelligence. Furthermore, the title of that Key, High Priestess, means "chief feminine elder," and thus intimates what we have found to be a characteristic of alchemical and yoga descriptions of the *Prima Materia*. They all agree that the mysterious power is *feminine* in its quality, and again and again they use the pronoun "she" in referring to it.

Ordinary lode stone is a magnetic mineral which attracts iron, the metal of Mars. In mythology we read of a clandestine relationship between Mars and Venus. In your study of Tarot you learned that Venus is represented by the Empress, and that the Empress is really the High Priestess, become a mother by her association with the Magician. Thus you should have little difficulty in understanding what Thomas Vaughan means when he says the First Matter is a virgin substance, while in the same sentence he also declares it to be a "soft, prolific Venus, the very love and seed, the mixture and moisture of heaven and earth."

Of heaven, because the First Matter is "that which is above," and in that respect appears as the Tarot Magician, who represents the direction Above, and is a symbol also of what Eastern occultists call Purusha, the "superior nature" of the One Thing. So considered, the First Matter is called Mercury, as you will notice in the foregoing quotations. The First Matter is also of earth because it is likewise "that which is below," and then appears as the High Priestess, or virgin, who represents the direction Below, and is a symbol of the "inferior nature" of the One Thing, the Hindu Prakriti or Maya. In this aspect she is what the alchemists term their "Diana," and thus in Tarot the High Priestess wears the crescent, silver horns of the moon goddess. The Empress in Tarot represents the third aspect of the First Matter, as the prolific source of all sorts of forms, both good and evil. This is what Vaughan means when he calls the First Matter by the name Venus. Tarot students will also remember that the Empress represents imagination.

Do not relax your vigilance. It may seem to you that we have been sufficiently explicit. Have we not said that the First Matter is represented by the High Priestess and by the Empress, as well as by the Magician? Have we not told you that it is the power you employ daily in acts of desire and imagination? Is there anything more to know? Indeed there is! All this is no more than to tell you where to look, no more than to indicate to you the direction your research must take, before you may actually discover the First Matter. What we have written will enable you to become well grounded in alchemical

theory but it must not be confused with practice. Be sure that you do not misunderstand us. Although we call the power which is expressed as imagination identical with the First Matter, such identification is not by any means the actual perception of that power.

When Eliphas Levi tells you there is a force more powerful than steam, by means of which you may reduce the world to confusion and transform its face, he is not delivering himself of mere hypothesis, despite the ignorant criticisms of his traducers. He speaks of that which he actually knows, of that which he has actually seen and felt, though the sight and touch are other than ordinary human sensations.

It is not surprising that Levi's principal accuser, A. E. Waite, whose notes on the French adept's writings are a source of combined annoyance and amusement to competent readers, should also declare that the alchemical doctrine of the First Matter is also no more than mere theory. This he does in a footnote on page 113 of *The Secret Tradition in Alchemy*, where he says:

"It seems obvious that if the First Matter is everywhere and hence in all things it can be called by the names of all. But in reality its manifold denominations "rise from the fact that the First Matter is hypothetical and is hence without a name."

This is simply not true. The First Matter is not at all hypothetical, except for persons like Mr. Waite, who, being for one reason or another unable to make the

discovery, are thus brought to believe that want of experience of what the adepts write about is sufficient proof that there is nothing actually to experience. We can ourselves testify that the power which finds expression in desire and imagination is a real entity. We affirm, as the result of experience, that the force described by Eliphas Levi is by no means a mere theory. It is a force, an energy, a power – call it what you will – which is actually and really present, as the sages declare, "before the eyes of all, though seen by few."

The actual perception of this force is indispensable to success in the Great Work. For although we make use of the subtle powers of consciousness daily, though remaining ignorant of the force itself, true adeptship is founded on this actual perception. When the First Matter is, so to say, *seen and touched*, the first step toward adeptship is taken; and he who perseveres in the work until the end will be able, whenever a real need arises, to perform metallic transmutations on the physical plane. This without any metaphor whatever. He will be able to repeat, but it is our opinion that he will seldom find occasion to exercise that particular power.

We trust that we have made our position clear. It does not greatly matter whether or not anyone be convinced that we speak that which we know, and not that which is merely our opinion. Ours is a work of exposition, rather than of persuasion. As Ripley (not the alchemist) says: Believe it or not. Yet you can see how impossible it

would be for one who considers the First Matter to be merely hypothetical ever really to discover it. As we said early in this lesson, they who make up their minds that there is no such thing prevent themselves from finding it.

They who reject the idea that the First Matter is an actual perceptible entity can never hope to know whether it is or not. On the other hand, if you accept too readily, you will probably be lacking in that eagerness for certainty which will carry you to the point where you can obtain it. The ideal state of mind in which to approach the Hermetic doctrine is one of moderate agnosticism, in the true sense of that abused word. If you say to yourself, "I do not *know* that the First Matter is a perceptible reality, neither do I *know* that it is not, but I intend to find out," you will be adopting the mental attitude most favorable to success in this kind of research.

We approach the conclusion of this lesson, but we have by no means completed our commentary on the words of the sages. This will be continued and completed in Lesson 3, and will include an extended commentary on the Rosicrucian document referred to earlier. We have already issued a short explanation of this text in the alchemical section of the First Year Extension Course, but even if you have that, we believe you will find much that is of great interest in the next lesson.

During the coming month we advise you to familiarize yourself thoroughly with the various writings given in

this lesson. Read and re-read them. Have at hand a notebook, for as you read you are likely to find ideas arising in your mind, some of which may be seed-thoughts that will later on prove to be very valuable. Our own experience has been that the study of the words of the sages puts one *en rapport* with those members of the Inner School who have specialized in alchemy. We know very well that our own researches have been greatly aided from that source. The assistance often comes in the form of sudden inspirations or flashes of insight. These should be carefully recorded. The best way is to note them down as soon as they come. Otherwise the impression is apt to fade, sometimes beyond recovery.

We cannot impress too strongly upon you the thought that in taking up the study of Hermetic science and practice you are entering into an active circle of minds which includes various grades of adeptship. Every serious student of this subject attracts the attention of those who know more than himself, and if he shows ability and perseverance he will be helped.

The performance of the Great Work is no chimera, no figment of the imagination. It is being carried on by numbers of sane, sensible human beings throughout the world. You are in some sense a candidate for admission to the company of those who have completed the Great Work. The more clearly you are assured of their actual presence among us, the more likely will you be to succeed in this undertaking.

On the other hand, what we have just said should not be construed to mean that more or less interest in alchemy, such as might lead to taking this course of lessons, or to the perusal of alchemical books, is enough to gain recognition from adepts of the Inner School. What is required is a degree of earnestness by no means common in this era of superficial dabbling in things occult.

We counsel you to a serious consideration of your aims in undertaking this study. Think well what it means. To succeed in the Great Work is no small thing, If such success be possible – and we find all the sages perfectly agreed that it is – what can be more important? What other concerns of your life can possibly take precedence over it? What else, of all that interests you, can be so thoroughly worth all the time and effort spent upon it?

Since it is the Occidental form of yoga, alchemy leads to precisely the same result as do the Oriental systems. That result is thus described by Vivekananda: "When the Yogi become perfect there will be nothing in nature not under his control. If he orders the gods to come, they will come at his bidding; if he asks the departed to come, they will come at his bidding. All the forces of nature will obey him as his slaves, and when the ignorant see these powers of the Yogi they call them miracles." (*Raja Yoga*, p. 31).

It is to no less a goal than this that the Great Work is directed. May you persist in it unto the end, which is the realization of perfect mastery, the demonstration of freedom from every kind of bondage.