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Was Cagliostro a “Charlatan”?



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To send the injured unredressed away,
How great soe'er the offender, and the wrong'd.
Howe'er obscure, is wicked, weak and vile —
Degrades, defiles, and should dethrone a king.

— SMOLLETT

THE mention of Cagliostro's name produces a twofold effect. With the one party, a whole sequence of marvellous events emerges from the shadowy past; with others the modern progeny of a too realistic age, the name of Alexander, Count Cagliostro, provokes wonder, if not contempt. People are unable to understand that this "enchanter and magician" (read "Charlatan") could ever legitimately produce such an impression as he did on his contemporaries. This gives the key to the post-humous reputation of the Sicilian known as Joseph Balsamo, that reputation which made a believer in him, a brother Mason, say, that (like Prince Bismarck and some Theosophists) "Cagliostro might well be said to be the best abused and most hated man in Europe." Nevertheless, and notwithstanding the fashion of loading him with opprobrious names, none should forget that Schiller and Goethe were among his great admirers, and remained so to their deaths. Goethe while travelling in Sicily devoted much labour and time to collecting information about "Giuseppe Balsamo" in his supposed native land; and it was from these copious notes that the author of *Faust* wrote his play "The Great Kophta."

Why this wonderful man is receiving so little honour in England, is due to Carlyle. The most fearlessly truthful historian of his age — he, who abominated falsehood under whatever appearance — has stamped with the *imprimatur* of his honest and famous name, and thus sanctified the most iniquitous of historical injustices ever perpetrated by prejudice and bigotry. This owing to false reports which almost to the last emanated from a class he disliked no less than he hated untruth, namely the Jesuits, or — lie incarnate.

The very name of Giuseppe Balsamo, which, when rendered by cabalistic methods, means "He who was sent," or "The Given," also "Lord of the Sun," shows that such was not his real patronymic. As Kenneth R.H. MacKenzie, F.T.S., remarks, toward the end of the last century it became the fashion with certain theosophical professors of the time to transliterate into Oriental form every name provided by Occult Fraternities for disciples destined to work in the world. Whosoever then, may have been Cagliostro's parents, their name was not "Balsamo." So much is certain, at any rate. Moreover, as all know that in his youth he lived with, and was instructed by, a man named, as is supposed, Althotas, "a great Hermetic Eastern Sage" or in other words an Adept, it is not difficult to accept the tradition that it was the latter who gave him his symbolical name. But that which is known with still more certainty is the ex-

treme esteem in which he was held by some of the most scientific and honoured men of his day. In France we find Cagliostro — having before served as a confidential friend and assistant chemist in the laboratory of Pinto, the Grand Master of the Knights of Malta — becoming the friend and *protégé* of the Prince Cardinal de Rohan. A high born Sicilian Prince honoured him with his support and friendship, as did many other noblemen. “Is it possible, then,” pertinently asks MacKenzie, “that a man of such engaging manners could have been the lying impostor his enemies endeavoured to prove him?”

The chief cause of his life-troubles was his marriage with Lorenza [or Serafina] Feliciani, a tool of the Jesuits; and two minor causes, his extreme good nature, and the blind confidence he placed in his friends — some of whom became traitors and his bitterest enemies. Neither of the crimes of which he is unjustly accused could lead to the destruction of his honour and *posthumous* reputation; but all was due to his weakness for an unworthy woman, and the possession of certain secrets of nature, which he would not divulge to the Church. Being a native of Sicily, Cagliostro was naturally born in a family of Roman Catholics, no matter what their name, and was brought up by monks of the “Good Brotherhood of Castiglione,” as his biographers tell us; thus, for the sake of dear life he had to outwardly profess belief in and respect for a Church, whose traditional policy has ever been, “he who is not *with us* is *against us*,” and forthwith to crush the enemy in the bud. And yet, just for this, is Cagliostro even today accused of having served the Jesuits as their spy; and this by Masons who ought to be the last to bring such a charge against a learned Brother who was persecuted by the Vatican even more as a Mason than as an Occultist. Had it been so, would these same Jesuits even to this day vilify his name? Had he served them, would he not have proved himself useful to their ends, as a man of such undeniable intellectual gifts could not have blundered or disregarded *the orders of those whom he served*. But instead of this, what do we see? Cagliostro charged with being the most cunning and successful impostor and charlatan of his age; accused of belonging to the Jesuit Chapter of Clermont in France; of appearing (as a proof of his affiliation to the Jesuits) in clerical dress at Rome. Yet, this “cunning impostor” is tried and condemned — by the exertions of those same Jesuits — to an ignominious death, which was changed only subsequently to lifelong imprisonment, owing to a mysterious interference or influence brought to bear on the Pope!

Would it not be more charitable and consistent with truth to say that it was his connection with Eastern Occult Science, his knowledge of many secrets — deadly to the Church of Rome — that brought upon Cagliostro first the persecution of the Jesuits, and finally the rigour of the Church? It was his own honesty, which blinded him to the defects of those whom he cared for, and led him to trust two such rascals as the Marquis Agliato and Ottavio Nicastro, that is at the bottom of all the accusations of fraud and imposture now lavished upon him. And it is the sins of these two worthies — subsequently executed for gigantic swindles and murder — which are now made to fall on Cagliostro. Nevertheless it is known that he and his wife (in 1770) were both left destitute by the flight of Agliato with all their funds so that they had to beg their way through Piedmont and Geneva. Kenneth MacKenzie has well proven that Cagliostro had never mixed himself up with political intrigue — the very soul of the activities of the Jesuits. “He was most certainly unknown in that capacity to those

who have jealously guarded the preparatory archives of the Revolution, and his appearance as an advocate of revolutionary principles has no basis in fact.” He was simply an Occultist and a Mason, and as such was allowed to suffer at the hands of those who, adding insult to injury, first tried to kill him by lifelong imprisonment and then spread the rumour that he had been their ignoble agent. This cunning device was in its infernal craft well worthy of its primal originators.

There are many landmarks in Cagliostro’s biographies to show that he taught the Eastern doctrine of the “principles” in man, of “God” dwelling in man — as a potentiality *in actu* (the “Higher Self”) — and in every living thing and even atom — as a potentiality *in posse*,¹ and that he served the Masters of a Fraternity he *would not* name because on account of his pledge *he could not*. His letter to the new mystical but rather motley Brotherhood, the (Lodge of) Philalethes, is a proof in point. The Philalethes, as all Masons know, was a rite founded in Paris in 1773 in the *Loge des Amis Réunis*, based on the principles of Martinism,² and whose members made a special study of the Occult Sciences. The Mother Lodge was a philosophical and *theosophical* Lodge, and therefore Cagliostro was right in desiring to purify its progeny, the Lodge of Philalethes. This is what the *Royal Masonic Cyclopaedia* (p. 95) says on the subject:

. . . on the 15th of February, 1785, the Lodge of Philalethes (or Lovers of Truth), in solemn Session — with Savalette de Langes, royal treasurer; Tassin, the banker, and Tassin, an officer in the royal service — opened a Fraternal Convention at Paris . . . Princes (Russian, Austrian, and others), fathers of the Church, councillors, knights, financiers, barristers, barons, Theosophists, canons, colonels, professors of magic, engineers, literary men, doctors, merchants, postmasters, dukes, ambassadors, surgeons, teachers of languages, receivers general, and notably two London names — Boosie, a merchant, and Brooks of London — compose this Convention, to whom may be added M. le Comte de Cagliostro, and Mesmer, “the inventor,” as Thory describes him (*Acta Latomorum*, Vol. II, p. 95), “of the doctrine of magnetism!” Surely such an able set of men to set the world to rights, as France never saw before or since!

The grievance of the Lodge was that Cagliostro, who had first promised to take charge of it, withdrew his offers, as the “Convention” would not adopt the Constitutions of the Egyptian Rite, nor would the *Philalethes* consent to have its archives consigned to the flames, which were his conditions *sine qua non*. It is strange that his answer to that Lodge should be regarded by Brother K.R.H. MacKenzie and other Masons as emanating “from a Jesuit source.” The very style is Oriental, and no European Mason — least of all a Jesuit — would write in such a manner. This is how the answer runs:

. . . The unknown Grand Master of true Masonry has cast his eyes upon the Philaletheans . . . Touched by their piety, moved by the sincere avowal of their desire, he deigns to extend his hand over them, and consents to give a ray of

¹ [In possibility, not actuality.]

² The Martinists were Mystics and Theosophists who claimed to have the secret of communicating with (Elemental and Planetary) Spirits of the ultramundane Spheres. Some of them were practical Occultists.

light into the darkness of their temple. It is the wish of the unknown Grand Master *to prove to them the existence of one God* — the basis of their faith; *the original dignity of man; his powers and destiny* . . . It is by deeds and facts, by the testimony of the senses, that they will know GOD, MAN and *the intermediary spiritual beings [principles] created between them*; of which *true* Masonry gives the symbols and indicates the real road. Let then, the Philalethes embrace the doctrines of this real Masonry, submit to the rules of its supreme chief, and adopt its constitutions. But above all let the sanctuary be purified, let the Philalethes know that light can only descend into the Temple of Faith [based on knowledge], and not into that of scepticism. Let them devote to the flames that vain accumulation of their archives; for it is only on the ruins of the Tower of Confusion that the Temple of Truth can be erected.”³

In the Occult phraseology of certain Occultists “Father, Son and Angels” stood for the compound symbol of physical, and astro-Spiritual MAN.⁴ John G. Gichtel (end of XVIIth cent.), the ardent lover of Böhme, the Seer of whom de Saint-Martin relates that he was *married* “to the heavenly Sophia,” the Divine Wisdom — made use of this term. Therefore, it is easy to see what Cagliostro meant by proving to the Philalethes on the testimony of their “senses,” “God, man and the *intermediary* Spiritual beings,” that exist between God (*Atma*), and Man (the *Ego*). Nor is it more difficult to understand his true meaning when he reproaches the Brethren in his parting letter which says: “We have offered you the truth; you have disdained it. We have offered it for the sake of itself, and you have refused it *in consequence of a love of forms* . . . Can you elevate yourselves to (*your*) God and the *knowledge of yourselves* by the assistance of a Secretary and a Convocation?” etc.⁵

Many are the absurd and entirely contradictory statements about Joseph Balsamo, Count de Cagliostro, so called, several of which were incorporated by Alexander Dumas in his *Mémoires d'un Médecin*, with those prolific variations of truth and fact which so characterize Dumas *père's* romances. But though the world is in possession of a most miscellaneous and varied mass of information concerning that remarkable and unfortunate man during most of his life, yet of the last ten years and of his death, nothing certain is known, save only the legend that he died in the prison of the Inquisition. True, some fragments published recently by the Italian *savant*, Giovanni Sforza, from the private correspondance of Lorenzo Prospero Bottini, the Roman ambassador of the Republic of Lucca at the end of the last century, have somewhat filled this wide gap.⁶ This correspondance with Pietro Calandrini, the Great

³ *Royal Masonic Cyclopaedia*, p. 96

⁴ See the *Three Principles* and the *Seven Forms of Nature* by Böhme and fathom their Occult significance, to assure yourself of this.

⁵ The statement on the authority of Beswick that Cagliostro was connected with the *Loge des Amis Réunis* under the name of Count Grabianca is not proven. There was a Polish Count of that name at the time in France, a mystic mentioned in Madame de Krüdner's letters which are with the writer's family, and one who belonged, as Beswick says, together with Mesmer and Count de Saint-Germain, to the Lodge of the Philalethes. Where are Savalette de Langes' Manuscripts and documents left by him after his death to the Philosophic Scottish Rite? Lost?

⁶ [H.P.B.'s statement to the effect that the fragments she is about to quote had been *recently* published, presents a problem which has never been fully solved. Some of the excerpts which she quotes in this article have been published over the signature of Giovanni Sforza in a communication entitled: “La Fine di Cagliostro,” which appeared in the *Archivio Storico Italiano*, 5th Series, Vol. VII, February, 1891, pp. 144-51. This *Archive*

Chancellor of the said Republic, begins from 1784, but the really interesting information commences only in 1789, in a letter dated June 6, of that year, and even then we do not learn much.

It speaks of the

“celebrated Count di Cagliostro, who has recently arrived with his wife from Trent *via* Turin to Rome. People say he is a native of Sicily and extremely wealthy, but no one knows whence that wealth. He has a letter of introduction from the Bishop of Trent to Albani . . . So far his daily walk in life as well as his private and public status are above reproach. Many are those seeking an interview with him, to hear from his own lips the corroboration of what is being said of him.”

From another letter we learn that Rome had proven an ungrateful soil for Cagliostro. He had the intention of settling at Naples, but the plan could not be realised. The Vatican authorities who had hitherto left the Count undisturbed, suddenly laid their heavy hand upon him. In a letter dated 2nd January, 1790, just a year after Cagliostro’s arrival, it is stated that:

“last Sunday secret and extraordinary debates in council took place at the Vatican. It (the council) consisted of the State Secretary and Antonelli, Pallotta and Campanelli, Monsignor Vicegerente performing the duty of Secretary. The object of that Secret Council remains unknown, but public rumour asserts that it was called forth owing to the sudden arrest on the night between Saturday and Sunday, of the Count di Cagliostro, his wife, and a Capuchin, Fra Giuseppe da S. Maurizio. The Count is incarcerated in Castel Sant’ Angelo, the Countess in the Convent of Santa Apollonia, and the monk in the prison of Ara Coeli. That monk, who calls himself ‘Father Svizzero,’ is regarded as a confederate of the famous magician. In the number of the crimes he is accused of is included that of the circulation of a book by an unknown author, condemned to public burning and entitled, ‘The Three Sisters.’ The object of this work is ‘to pulverize certain three high-born individuals.’”

The real meaning of this most extraordinary misinterpretation is easy to guess. It was a work on Alchemy; the “three sisters” standing symbolically for the three “Principles” in their duplex symbolism. On the plane of occult chemistry they “pulverize” the triple ingredient used in the process of the transmutation of metals; on the plane of Spirituality they reduce to a state of pulverization the three “lower” *personal* “principles” in man, an explanation that every Theosophist is bound to understand.

The trial of Cagliostro lasted for a long time. In a letter of March the 17th, Bottini writes to his Lucca correspondent that the famous “wizard” has finally appeared before the Holy Inquisition. The real cause of the slowness of the proceedings was that the Inquisition, with all its dexterity at fabricating proofs, could find no weighty evidence to prove the guilt of Cagliostro. Nevertheless, on April the 7th, 1791, he was

was published in Florence by G.P. Vieusseux. Obviously, this source is over a year later than H.P.B.’s own article, and could not have been used by her at the time. She also brings up several points which are not mentioned in the above source. Further research is therefore required to identify the source she used. — Boris de Zirkoff.]

condemned to death. He was accused of various and many crimes, the chiefest of which were his being a Mason and an “Illuminate,” an “Enchanter” occupied with unlawful studies; he was also accused of deriding the *holy* Faith, of doing harm to society, of possessing himself by *means unknown* of large sums of money, and of inciting others, sex, age and social standing notwithstanding, to do the same. In short, we find the unfortunate Occultist condemned to an ignominious death for deeds committed, the like of which are daily and publicly committed now-a-days, by more than one Grand Master of the Masons, as also by hundreds of thousands of Kabbalists and Masons, mystically inclined. After this verdict the “arch heretic’s” documents, diplomas from foreign Courts and Societies, Masonic regalia and *family relics* were solemnly burned by the public hangmen in the *Piazza della Minerva*, before enormous crowds of people. First his books and instruments were consumed. Among these was the MS. on the *Maçonnerie Egyptienne*, which thus can no longer serve as a witness *in favour* of the reviled man. And now the condemned Occultist had to be passed over to the hands of the civil Tribunal, when a mysterious event happened.

A stranger, never seen by any one before or after in the Vatican, appeared and demanded a private audience of the Pope, sending him by the Cardinal Secretary a *word* instead of a name. He was immediately received, but only stopped with the Pope for a few minutes. No sooner was he gone than his Holiness gave orders to commute the death sentence of the Count to that of imprisonment for life, in the fortress called the Castle of San Leo, and that the whole transaction should be conducted in great secrecy. The monk Svizzero was condemned to ten years’ imprisonment; and the Countess Cagliostro was set at liberty, but only to be confined on a new charge of heresy in a convent.

But what was the Castle of San Leo? It now stands on the frontiers of Tuscany and was then in the Papal States, in the Duchy of Urbino. It is built on the top of an enormous rock, almost perpendicular on all sides; to get into the “Castle” in those days, one had to enter a kind of open basket which was hoisted up by ropes and pulleys. As to the criminal, he was placed in a special box, after which the jailors pulled him up “with the rapidity of the wind.” On April 23rd, 1792, Giuseppe Balsamo — if so we must call him — ascended *heavenward* in the criminal’s box, incarcerated in that living tomb for life. Giuseppe Balsamo is mentioned for the last time in the Bottini correspondence in a letter dated March 10th, 1792. The ambassador speaks of a marvel produced by Cagliostro in his prison during his leisure hours. A long rusty nail taken by the prisoner out of the floor was transformed by him without the help of any instrument into a sharp triangular *stiletto*, as smooth, brilliant and sharp as if it were made of the finest steel. It was recognized for an old nail only by its head, left by the prisoner to serve as a handle. The State Secretary gave orders to have it taken away from Cagliostro, brought to Rome, and to double the watch over him.

And now comes the last kick of the jackass at the dying or dead lion. Luigi Angiolini, a Tuscan diplomat, writes as follows:

“At last, that same Cagliostro, who made so many believe that he had been a contemporary of Julius Caesar, who reached such fame and so many friends, died from apoplexy, August 26, 1795. Semproni had him buried in a wood-barn below, whence peasants used to pilfer constantly the crown property. The crafty

chaplain reckoned very justly that the man who had inspired the world with such superstitious fear while living, would inspire people with the same feelings after his death, and thus keep the thieves at bay . . . ”

But yet — a query! Was Cagliostro dead and buried indeed in 1795, at San Leo? And if so, why should the custodians at Castel Sant’ Angelo of Rome show innocent tourists the little square hole in which Cagliostro is said to have been confined and “died”? Why such uncertainty or — imposition, and such disagreement in the legend? Then there are Masons who to this day tell strange stories in Italy. Some say that Cagliostro escaped in an unaccountable way from his aerial prison, and thus forced his jailors to spread the news of his death and burial. Others maintain that he not only escaped, but, thanks to the Elixir of Life, still lives on, though over twice three score and ten years old!

“Why,” asks Bottini, “if he really possessed the powers he claimed, has he not indeed vanished from his jailors, and thus escaped the degrading punishment altogether?”

We have heard of another prisoner, greater in every respect than Cagliostro ever claimed to be. Of that prisoner too, it was said in mocking tones, “He saved others; him self he cannot save . . . let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe . . . ”

How long shall charitable people build the biographies of the living and ruin the reputations of the dead, with such incomparable unconcern, by means of idle and often entirely false gossip of people, and these generally the slaves of prejudice!

So long, we are forced to think, as they remain ignorant of the Law of Karma and its iron justice.⁷

H.P.B.



⁷ *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, XII pp. 78-88