

Evil omens and mysterious diseases

**On the dread the Caesars and World-Potentates of old had for number 8,
which postulates the equality of all men, and of its fatal combination
with number 9, which represents the earth under an evil principle.**



Before any work of practical Theosophy, religion and dogma, theological and scholastic differences, nay even esoteric knowledge itself, are but secondary accessories, accidental details. All these must give precedence to and disappear before Altruism — real Buddha- and Christ-like altruism, of course, not the theoretical twaddle of Positivists — as the flickering tongue of gas light in street lamps pale and vanish before the rising sun.

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Frontispiece: Potentate and Son by Charles Bragg. Last page: Threatened Swan (c1650) by Jan Asselyn.

. . . I see before
My race an age or so; and I am sent
For the stern work, to hew a path among
The thorns — I take them in my flesh — to tread
With naked feet the road, and smoothe it o'er
With blood, and fainting, I shall lay my bones
In some sharp crevice of the broken way.
Men shall in better times stand where I fell,
And journey singing on in perfect bands,
Where I have trod alone, no arm but God's,
No voice but his. Enough! — His voice, his arm.

— THEODORE PARKER, *Human Misery. Heavenly Relief*.¹

Whence the poetical but very fantastic notion — even in a myth — about swans singing their own funeral dirges? There is a Northern legend to that effect, but it is not older than the middle ages. Most of us have studied ornithology; and in our own days of youth we have made ample acquaintance with swans of every description. In those trustful years of everlasting sunlight, there existed a mysterious attraction between our mischievous hand and the snowy feathers of the stubby tail of that graceful but harsh-voiced King of aquatic birds. The hand that treacherously offered biscuits, while the other pulled out a feather or two, was often punished; but so were the ears. Few noises can compare in cacophony with the cry of that bird — whether it be the “whistling” (*Cignus Americanus*) or the “trumpeter” swan. Swans snort, rattle, screech and hiss, but certainly they do not sing, especially when smarting under the indignity of an unjust assault upon their tails. But listen to the legend. “When feeling life departing, the swan lifts high its head, and breaking into a long, melodious chant — a heart-rending song of death — the noble bird sends heavenward a melodious protest, a plaint that moves to tears man and beast, and thrills through the hearts of those who hear it.”²

¹ [This introductory poem may be found in Parker's *Autobiography, Poems and Prayers*, edited by Rufus Leighton, Boston, Massachusetts. (no date). — *Boris de Zirkoff*.]

² [In Greek mythology, the swan was a bird consecrated to Apollo, and it was therefore considered a symbol of harmony and beauty and its limited capabilities as a singer were sublimated to those of songbirds. Aesop's fable of “The Swan Mistaken for a Goose” incorporates the swan song legend thus:

The swan, who had been caught by mistake instead of the goose, began to sing as a prelude to its own demise. His voice was recognized and the song saved his life.

There is a subsequent reference in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* from 458 BC. In that play, Clytemnestra compares the dead Cassandra to a swan who has “sung her last final lament.” Plato's *Phaedo* records Socrates saying that, although swans sing in early life, they do not do so as beautifully as before they die. Aristotle also noted

Just so, “those who hear it.” But who ever heard that song sung by a swan? We do not hesitate to proclaim the acceptance of such a statement, even as a poetical license, one of the numerous paradoxes of our incongruous age and human mind. We have no serious objection to offer — owing to personal feelings — to Fénélon, the Archbishop and orator, being dubbed the “Swan of Cambrai,” but we protest against the same dubious compliment being applied to Shakespeare. Ben Jonson was ill-advised to call the greatest genius England can boast of — the “Sweet swan of Avon”; and as to Homer being nicknamed “the Swan of Meander” — this is simply a post-humous libel, which *Lucifer* can never disapprove of and expose in sufficiently strong terms.

Let us apply the fictitious idea rather to things than to men, by remembering that the swan — a symbol of the Supreme Brahm and one of the *avatāras* of the amorous Jupiter — was also a symbolical type of cycles; at any rate, of the tail end of every important cycle in human history. An emblem as strange, the reader may think, and one as difficult to account for. Yet it has its *raison d'être*. It was probably suggested by the swan loving to swim in circles, bending its long and graceful neck into a ring, and it was not a bad typical designation, after all. At any rate the older idea was more graphic and to the point, and certainly more logical, than the later one which endowed the swan's throat with musical modulations and made of him a sweet songster and a seer to boot.

The last song of the present “Cyclic Swan” bodes us an evil omen. Some hear it screeching like an owl, and croaking like Edgar Poe's raven. The combination of the figures 8 and 9, spoken of in last month's editorial, has borne its fruits already. Hardly had we spoken of the dread the Caesars and World-Potentates of old had for number 8, which postulates the *equality of all men*, and of its fatal combination with number 9 — which represents the earth *under an evil principle* — when that principle began making sad havoc among the poor Potentates and the Upper Ten¹ — their subjects. The influenza has shown of late a weird and mysterious predilection for Royalty. One by one it has levelled its members through death to an absolute equality with their grooms and kitchen-maids. *Sic transit gloria mundi!*² Its first victim was the Empress Dowager of Germany; then the ex-Empress of Brazil, the Duke d'Aosta, Prince William of Hessen-Philippsthal, the Duke of Monpensier, the Prince of Swarsburg Rudolstadt, and the wife of the Duke of Cambridge; besides a number of

that swans “are musical, and sing chiefly at the approach of death.” By the third century BC the belief had become a proverb.

Ovid mentions it in “The Story of Picus and Canens”:

There, she poured out her words of grief, tearfully, in faint tones, in harmony with sadness, just as the swan sings once, in dying, its own funeral song.

The swan was also described as a singer in the works of the poets Virgil and Martial. — Cf. Wikipedia]

¹ [Or “Upper ten thousand,” a phrase coined in 1852 by American poet Nathaniel Parker Willis to describe the upper circles of New York, and hence of other major cities. In 1875, both Adam Bissett Thom and Kelly's Directory published books entitled *The Upper Ten Thousand*, which listed members of the aristocracy, the gentry, officers in the British Army and Navy, members of Parliament, Colonial administrators, and members of the Church of England. The usage of this term was a response to the broadening of the British ruling class which had been caused by the Industrial Revolution. — Wikipedia]

² [Thus passes the glory of the world!]

Generals, Ambassadors, Statesmen and their mothers-in-law. Where, when, at what victim shalt thou stop thy scythe, O “innocent” and “harmless” Influenza?

Each of these royal and semi-royal Swans has sung his last song, and gone “to that bourne” whence *every* “traveller returns,” — the aphoristical verse to the contrary, notwithstanding. Yea, they will now solve the great mystery for themselves, and Theosophy and its teaching will get more adherents and believers among royalty in “heaven,” than it does among the said caste on earth.

À propos of Influenza — miscalled the “Russian,” but which seems to be rather the scapegoat while it lasts, for the sins of omission and commission of the medical faculty and its fashionable physicians — what is it? Medical authorities have now and then ventured a few words sounding very learned, but telling us very little about its true nature. They seem to have picked up now and then a clue of pathological thread pointing rather vaguely, if at all, to its being due to bacteriological causes; but they are as far off a solution of the mystery as ever. The practical lessons resulting from so many and varied cases have been many, but the deductions therefrom do not seem to have been numerous or satisfactory.

What is in reality that unknown monster, which seems to travel with the rapidity of some sensational news started with the object of dishonouring a fellow creature: which is almost ubiquitous; and which shows such strange discrimination in the selection of its victims? Why does it attack the rich and the powerful far more in proportion than it does the poor and the insignificant? Is it indeed only “an agile microbe” as Dr. Symes Thomson would make us think? And is it quite true that the *influential* Bacillus (no pun meant) has just been apprehended at Vienna by Drs. Jolles and Weichselbaum — or is it but a snare and a delusion like so many other things? Who knoweth? Still the face of our unwelcome guest — the so-called “Russian Influenza” is veiled to this day, though its body *is* heavy to many, especially to the old and the weak, and almost invariably fatal to invalids. A great medical authority on epidemics, Dr. Zedekauer, has just asserted that that disease has ever been the precursor of cholera — at St. Petersburg, at any rate. This is, to say the least, a very strange statement. That which is now called “influenza” was known before as the *grippe*, and the latter was known in Europe as an epidemic, centuries before the cholera made its first appearance in so-called civilized lands. The biography and history of Influenza, *alias* “grippe,” may prove interesting to some readers. This is what we gather from authoritative sources.

The earliest visit of it, as recorded by medical science, was to Malta in 1510. In 1577 the young Influenza grew into a terrible epidemic, which travelled from Asia to Europe to disappear in America. In 1580 a new epidemic of *grippe* visited Europe, Asia and America, *killing the old people, the weak, and the invalids*. At Madrid the mortality was enormous; and in Rome alone 9,000 persons died of it. In 1590 the influenza appeared in Germany, thence passed in 1593 into France and Italy. In 1658-1663 it visited Italy only; in 1669, Holland; in 1675, Germany and England; and in 1691, Germany and Hungary. In 1729 all Europe suffered most terribly from the “innocent” visitor. In London alone 908 men died from it the first week; upwards of 60,000 per-

sons suffering from it, and 30 percent dying from catarrh or influenza at Vienna. In 1732 and 1733, a new epidemic of the *grippe* appeared in Europe, Asia and America. It was almost as universal in the years 1737 and 1743, when London lost by death from it, during one week, over 1,000 men. In 1762, it raged in the British army in Germany. In 1775 an almost countless number of cattle and domestic animals were killed by it. In 1782, 40,000 persons were taken ill *on one day*, at St. Petersburg. In 1830, the influenza made a successful journey round the world — the only time — as *the first pioneer* of cholera. It returned again from 1833 to 1837. In the year 1847 it killed more men in London than the cholera itself had done. It assumed an epidemic character once more in France, in 1858.

We learn from the St. Petersburg *Novoye Vremya* that Dr. Hirsh shows from 1510 to 1850 over 300 great epidemics of *grippe* or *influenza*, both general and local, severe and weak. According to the above given data, therefore, the influenza having been this year very weak at St. Petersburg, can hardly be called “Russian.” That which is known of its characteristics shows it, on the contrary, as of a most impartially cosmopolitan nature. The extraordinary rapidity with which it acts, secured for it in Vienna the name of *Blitz Catarrh*. It has nothing in common with the ordinary *grippe*, so easily caught in cold and damp weather; and it seems to produce no special disease that could be localized, but only to act most fatally on the nervous system and especially on the lungs. Most of the deaths from influenza occur in consequence of lung-paralysis.

All this is very significant. A disease which is epidemic, yet not contagious; which acts everywhere, in clean as in unclean places, in sanitary as well as in unsanitary localities, hence needing very evidently no centres of contagion to start from; an epidemic which spreads at once like an air current, embracing whole countries and parts of the world; striking at the same time the mariner in the midst of the ocean, and the royal scion in his palace; the starving wretch of the world’s Whitechapels, sunk in and soaked through with filth, and the aristocrat in his high mountain *sanitarium* (like Davos in Engadine),¹ where no lack of sanitary arrangements can be taken to task for it — such a disease can bear no comparison with epidemics of the ordinary common type, *e.g.*, such as the cholera. Nor can it be regarded as caused by parasites or microscopical microbes of one or the other kind. To prove the fallacy of this idea in her case, the dear old influenza attacked most savagely Pasteur, the “microbe-killer” himself, and his host of assistants. Does it not seem therefore, as if the causes that produced influenza were rather cosmical than bacterial; and that they ought to be searched for rather in those abnormal changes in our atmosphere that have well-nigh thrown into confusion and shuffled seasons all over the globe for the last few years — than in anything else?

It is not asserted for the first time now that all such mysterious epidemics as the present influenza are due to an abnormal exuberance of ozone in the air. Several physicians and chemists of note have so far agreed with the occultists, as to admit that the tasteless, colourless and inodorous gas known as oxygen — “the life-supporter” of all that lives and breathes — does get at times into family difficulties

¹ “Colonel the Hon. George Napier will be prevented from attending the funeral of his father, Lord Napier of Magdala, by a severe attack of influenza at Davos, Switzerland.” *The Morning Post* of January 21st, 1890.

with its colleagues and brothers, when it tries to get over their heads in volume and weight, and becomes heavier than is its wont. In short — oxygen becomes ozone.

That would account probably for the preliminary symptoms of influenza. Descending and spreading on earth with an extraordinary rapidity, oxygen would of course produce a still greater combustion; hence the terrible heat in the patient's body, and the paralysis of rather weak lungs. What says Science with respect to ozone: "It is the exuberance of the latter under the powerful stimulus of electricity in the air, that produces on nervous people that unaccountable feeling of fear and depression which they so often experience before a storm." Again: "the quantity of ozone in the atmosphere varies with the meteorological condition *under laws so far unknown to science.*" A certain amount of ozone is necessary, they wisely say, for breathing purposes, and the circulation of the blood. On the other hand, "too much of ozone irritates the respiratory organs, and an excess of more than 1% of it in the air kills him who breathes it." This is proceeding on rather occult lines. "The real ozone is the Elixir of Life," says *The Secret Doctrine*.¹ Let the reader compare the above with what he will find stated in the same work about oxygen viewed from the hermetic and occult standpoint² and he may comprehend the better what some Theosophists think of the present influenza.

It thus follows that the mystically inclined correspondent who wrote in *Novoye Vremya*³ giving sound advice on the subject of the influenza, then just appeared — knew what he was talking about. Summarizing the idea, he stated as follows:

. . . It becomes thus evident that the real cause of this simultaneous spread of the epidemic over all the Empire under the most varied meteorological conditions and climatic changes — are to be sought elsewhere than in the unsatisfactory hygienical and sanitary conditions . . . The search for the causes which generated the disease and caused it to spread is not incumbent upon the physicians alone, but *would be the right duty of meteorologists, astronomers, physicians, and naturalists in general*, separated officially and substantially from medical men.

This raised a professional storm. The modest suggestion was tabooed and derided; and once more an Asiatic country — China, this time — was sacrificed as a scapegoat to the sin of FOHAT and his too active progeny. When royalty and the rulers of this sublunary sphere have been sufficiently decimated by influenza and other kindred and unknown evils, perhaps the turn of the Didymoi⁴ of Science may come. This will be only a just punishment for their despising the "occult" sciences, and sacrificing truth to personal prejudices.

¹ Vol. I, p. 144, 2nd footnote.

² Vide Vol. II, pp. 113 & 114.

³ No. 4931, November 19th, old style, 1889.

⁴ [From *Διδυμα*, an ancient Greek oracular temple and sanctuary on the Ionian coast. Next to the Apollo of Delphi, the Apollo of Didyma (*Διδυμευς* or *Διδυμαιος*, Greek for twin), of the Branchidae line of priests, was the most renowned oracle of the Hellenic world. The *Classical Manual, a Mythological, Historical, and Geographical Commentary on Pope's Homer, and Dryden's Æneid of Virgil*, London: John Murray, Albemarle St., 1833, p. 21, says that Apollo was named Didymæus "from the double light imparted by him to mankind; the one directly and immediately from his own body; the other by reflection from the moon."]]

Meanwhile, the last death song of the cyclic Swan has commenced; only few are they who heed it, as the majority has ears merely not to hear, and eyes — to remain blind. Those who do, however, find the cyclic song sad, very sad, and far from melodious. They assert that besides influenza and other evils, half of the civilized world's population is threatened with violent death, this time thanks to the conceit of the men of *exact* Science, and the all-grasping selfishness of speculation. This is what the new craze of "electric lighting" promises every large city before the dying cycle becomes a corpse. These are facts, and not any "crazy speculations of ignorant Theosophists." Of late Reuter sends almost daily such agreeable warnings as this on electric wires in general, and electric wires in America — especially:

Another fatal accident, arising from the system of overhead electric lighting wires, is reported today from Newburgh, New York State. It appears that a horse while being driven along touched an iron awning-post with his nose, and fell down as if dead. A man, who rushed to assist in raising the animal, touched the horse's head-stall and immediately dropped dead; and another man who attempted to lift the first received a terrible shock. The cause of the accident seems to have been an electric wire had become slack and was lying upon an iron rod extending from the awning-post to a building, and that the full force of the current was passing down the post into the ground. The insulating material of the wire had become thoroughly saturated with rain.¹

This is a cheerful prospect, and looks indeed as if it were one of the "last songs of the Swan" of *practical* civilization. But, there *is* balm in Gilead — even at this eleventh hour of our jaw-breaking and truth-kicking century. Fearless clergymen summon up courage and dare to express publicly their actual feelings, with thorough contempt for "the utter humbug of the cheap 'religious talk' which obtains in the present day."² They are daily mustering new forces; and hitherto rabidly conservative daily papers fear not to allow their correspondents, when occasion requires, to fly into the venerable face of *Cant*,³ and Mrs. Grundy.⁴ It is true that the subject which brought out the wholesome though unwelcome truth, in the *Morning Post*, was worthy of such an exception. A correspondent, Mr. W.M. Hardinge, speaking of Sister Rose Gertrude, who has just sailed for the Leper Island of Molokai, suggests that — "a portrait of this young lady should somehow be added to one of our national galleries" and adds:

Mr. Edward Clifford would surely be the fitting artist. I, for one would willingly contribute to the permanent recording, by some adequate painter, of whatever

¹ *Morning Post*, January 21st

² Rev. Hugh B. Chapman, Vicar St. Luke's, Camberwell, in *Morning Post*, January 21st

³ [Singing in a whining way, from the Latin *cantāre*, to sing. Cant was at first a beggar's whine, hence hypocrisy. Cf. W.W. Skeat's *Etymological Dictionary of English*, 1835-1912. — ED. PHIL.]

⁴ [A figurative name for an extremely conventional or priggish person, a personification of the tyranny of conventional propriety. A tendency to be overly fearful of what the respectable might think is also referred to as Grundyism. Although she began life as a minor character in Thomas Morton's play *Speed the Plough* (1798), Mrs. Grundy was eventually so well established in the public imagination that Samuel Butler, in his novel *Erewhon*, could refer to her in the form of an anagram (as the goddess Ydgrun). As a figure of speech she can be found throughout European literature. — Wikipedia]

manner of face it may be that shrines so saintly a soul. Such a subject — too rare, alas, in England — should be more fruitful than precept.¹

Living the Life

Amen. Of precepts and tall talk in fashionable churches people have more than they bargain for; but of really practical Christ-like work in daily life — except when it leads to the laudation and mention of names of the would-be philanthropists in public papers — we see *nil*. Moreover, such a subject as the voluntary Calvary chosen by Sister Rose Gertrude is “too rare” indeed, anywhere, without speaking of England. The young heroine, like her noble predecessor, Father Damien,² is a true Theosophist in daily life and practice — the latter the greatest ideal of every genuine follower of the Wisdom-Religion. Before such work of practical Theosophy, religion and dogma, theological and scholastic differences, nay even esoteric knowledge itself, are but secondary accessories, accidental details. All these must give precedence to and disappear before Altruism (real Buddha- and Christ-like altruism, of course, not the theoretical twaddle of Positivists) as the flickering tongue of gas light in street lamps pale and vanish before the rising sun. Sister Rose Gertrude is not only a great and saintly heroine, but also a spiritual mystery, an EGO not to be fathomed on merely intellectual or even psychic lines. Very true, we hear of whole nunneries having volunteered for the same work at Molokai, and we readily believe it, though this statement is made more for the glorification of Rome than for Christ and His work. But, even if true, the offer is no parallel. We have known nuns who were ready to walk across a prairie on fire to escape convent life. One of them confessed in an agony of despair that death was sweet, and even the prospect of *physical tortures* in hell was preferable to life in a convent and its *moral* tortures. To such, the prospect of buying a few years of freedom and fresh air at the price of leprosy is hardly a sacrifice, but a choice of the lesser of two evils. But the case of Sister Rose Gertrude is quite different. She gave up a life of personal freedom, a quiet home and loving family, all that is dear to a young girl, to perform unostentatiously a work of the greatest heroism, a most ungrateful task, by which she cannot even save from death and suffering her fellowmen, but only soothe and alleviate their moral and physical tortures. She sought no notoriety, and shrank from the admiration or even the help of the public. She simply did the bidding of *her* MASTER — to the very letter. She prepared to go unknown and unrewarded in this life to an almost certain death, preceded by years of incessant physical torture from the most loathsome of all diseases. And she did it, not as the Scribes and Pharisees who perform their prescribed duties in the open streets and public Synagogues, but verily as the Master had commanded: alone, in the secluded closet of her inner life and face to face only with “her Father in secret,” trying to conceal the grandest and noblest of all human acts, as another tries to hide a crime.

Therefore, we are right in saying that — in this our century at all events — Sister Rose Gertrude is, as was Father Damien before her — a *spiritual mystery*. She is the

¹ *loc. cit.*

² Vide *The Key to Theosophy*, p. 239: What Theosophists think of Father Damien.

rare manifestation of a “Higher Ego” free from the trammels of all the elements of its Lower one; influenced by these elements only so far as the errors of her terrestrial sense-perceptions — with regard to religious form — seem to bear a true witness to that which is still human in her Personality — namely, her reasoning powers. Thence the ceaseless and untiring self-sacrifice of such natures to what appears *religious* duty, but which in sober truth is the very essence and *esse* of the dormant Individuality — “divine compassion,” which is “no attribute” but verily “the LAW of LAWS — eternal Harmony, Alaya’s SELF.”¹ It is this compassion, crystallized in our very being, that whispers night and day to such as Father Damien and Sister Rose Gertrude — “Can there be bliss when there are men who suffer? Shalt thou be saved and hear the others cry?” Yet, “Personality” — having been blinded by training and religious education to the real presence and nature of the HIGHER SELF — recognizes not its voice, but confusing it in its helpless ignorance with the external and extraneous Form which it was taught to regard as a divine Reality — it sends heavenward and outside instead of addressing them inwardly, thoughts and prayers, the realization of which is in its SELF. It says in the beautiful words of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, but with a higher application:

. . . For lo! thy law is passed
That this my love should manifestly be
To serve and honour thee;
And so I do; and my delight is full,
Accepted by the servant of thy rule.²

How came this blindness to take such deep root in human nature? Eastern philosophy answers us by pronouncing two deeply significant words among so many others misunderstood by our present generation — *Māyā* and *Avidyā*, or “Illusion” and that which is rather the opposite of, or the absence of knowledge, in the sense of esoteric science, and not “ignorance” as generally translated.

To the majority of our casual critics the whole of the aforesaid will appear, no doubt, as certain of Mrs. Partington’s learned words and speeches. Those who believe that they have every mystery of nature at their fingers’ ends, as well as those who maintain that official science alone is entitled to solve for Humanity the problems which are hidden far away in the complex constitution of man — will never understand us. And, unable to realize our true meaning they may, raising themselves on the patterns of modern negation, endeavour, as they always have, to push away with their scientific mops the waters of the great ocean of occult knowledge. But the waves of *Gupta Vidyā* have not reached these shores to form no better than a slop and puddle, and serious contest with them will prove as unequal as Dame Partington’s struggle with the waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Well, it matters little anyhow, since thousands of Theosophists will easily understand us. After all, the earth-bound watchdog, chained to matter by prejudice and preconception, may bark and howl at the bird taking its flight beyond the heavy terrestrial fog — but it can never stop its soaring, nor can our inner perceptions be prevented by our official and limited five senses

¹ *The Voice of the Silence*, pp. 69, 71

² [Quoting Rossetti’s translation of Pannuccio Dal Bagno Pisano’s *Of his Change through Love*. First line: “Madonna vostro altero piacimento”]

from searching for, discovering, and often solving, problems hidden far beyond the reach of the latter — hence, beyond also the powers of discrimination of those who deny a sixth and seventh sense in man.

The earnest Occultist and Theosophist, however, sees and recognizes psychic and spiritual mysteries and profound secrets of nature in every flying particle of dust, as much as in the giant manifestations of human nature. For him there exist proofs of the existence of a universal Spirit-Soul everywhere, and the tiny nest of the colibri offers as many problems as Brahmā's golden egg. Yea, he recognizes all this, and bowing with profound reverence before the mystery of his own inner shrine, he repeats with Victor Hugo:

Le nid que l'oiseau bâtit
Si petit
Est une chose profonde;
L'œuf, ôté de la forêt
Manquerait
À l'équilibre du monde.¹



¹ [*Chanson des oiseaux*]