

# THE GOLDEN CHIMERA

## DEALING WITH CERTAIN SECRETS OF THE SPHINX

BY EDGAR SALTUS



THE EASIEST WAY to make money is to earn it. But there is another way, easier still, or rather there used to be. It was called the transmutation of metals. How the transmutation was effected no one can tell. But recently Sir William Ramsay has announced that it may now be accomplished by means of cathode rays and vacuum tubes.

Concerning the efficacy of the process we have no learning to display and, what is worse, none to conceal; but, obviously if Sir William is right, then, there is the quintessence of things, the philosopher's stone, the solvent for extracting something out of nothing, over which, in days gone by, the world went mad and around which, under other names, it has since gone madder.

The madness is rational. Behind the philosopher's stone was mystery; about it romance and, above, a golden chimera. What is more to the point, there appears to have been an epoch when the chimera was snared and so choked that she stammered her secret.

That is a long time ago. Ultimately the secret evaporated. Its fading memories used to haunt the minds of man. They hallucinated the Middle Ages. They enthralled the Renaissance. Every thinker sat up with them. They fascinated even Bacon.

Bacon knew all that was going and a good deal that was not. He knew, for instance, that the world in which he lived was passing poor. He knew, also, that there had been an epoch when the world was just the reverse. He knew that the Mesopotamian monarchs built at will cities fairer than the uplands of dream, palaces more luminous than the signs of the zodiac, gardens that were retrospects of paradise.

But Bacon's knowledge was not universal. He did not know that the value of the treasure heaped on the pyre of Assurbanipal, who was one of these monarchs, amounted to eighty-four thousand millions of our money, which is a sum but a trifle inferior to the estimated wealth of the United States.

BACON did not know that, for the excellent reason that no one else did until a few years ago when it was demonstrated by excavated and attesting tablets. None the less, Bacon wondered what magic created the magnificence that had been and he concluded, perhaps sagely, that a thread had been dropped from the scheme of things that something, somewhere, was missing.

The deduction was logical. At the beginning of the present era, the amount of coin in circulation was less than that which, in earlier days, a single satrap squandered. Moreover, poverty thereafter continued and increased until Columbus, putting down an idea, borrowed a boat on it and brought back a world.

Things then began to look up. But just prior to the eruptions of gold from Mexico and Peru, thinkers generally decided that what was missing was some solvent, some element, perhaps primordial, which once had been known but which since had been lost, and

which effected the transmutation of metals. Then, presently, Europe became peopled with alchemists. Everywhere crucibles, alembics and aludels were at work. Every one was chasing the chimera.

Every one is perhaps an exaggeration. Spinoza, for instance, was too indolent to join in the hunt, but he approved of it. So did Leibnitz. Both were big men. But their approval was not expressed until the game was reported to have been cornered by two other big men, by Van Helmont and Helvetius. Van Helmont said that he had seen the philosopher's stone. Helvetius said that he not only had seen it, he had seen it at work, seen it turn lead into bullion.

These are magnificent instances. There are others still more so. There is the case of the Emperor Ferdinand III who, with gold alchemistically obtained, struck not merely oil, but medals, some of which, attesting the miracle, are on view in the Vienna mint today. There is the case of the Elector Augustus of

Saxony whose success in transmutation was such that he gave a lady twenty million thalers and a supper party that cost six million more. There is also the case of Henry VI of England who tried to do better, failed to do as well and consoled himself by counterfeiting.

These instances are not merely magnificent, they are historic. So also is the fact that throughout Europe there were mysterious stories of mysterious people from whom it was said that Ferdinand Augustus, and, with them, other kings and later princes, obtained the solvents from which their gold was produced.

Of these persons, the most notable is the least known. Without age, without identity, his presence, more often suspected than perceived, persisted for a century. He had as many names as Vishnu, perhaps as many masks. Of his names, the most probable is Lascaris. Of his masks, the most tangible is prelaicy.

He entered history clothed with the dignities of an Archimandrite. Otherwise, who and what he was, never has been and now never will be told. It is alone clear concerning him that his many and sufficiently attested transmutations were always effected for others.

Of this, two instances may be recited. In a village, at nightfall, a stranger appears. He has come unawaited, as death and thieves do. He enters the poorest house, asks for old iron, and turns it into gold. On the morrow, he is gone. It was Lascaris.

At the keep of an overlord a prelate knocks, signals abuses and, in exchange for their abolition, offers grams from the philosopher's stone. The offer is accepted. Gold is the result. The prelate is sought. Like the apparitions that sometimes visit the heart of man, he has vanished. It was Lascaris.

ANOTHER transmuter, less notable but better known, was Flamel, a Paris scrivener, desperately poor, who happening on a manuscript written in cipher, sat up with it, studied it and finally, after years of labor, solved it. In the *Traité des Lavures*, a work which he left and which today is in the Paris National Library, he tells all about it, all except the secret. For there was one. There must have been one. He himself admits it. Besides, previously poor, suddenly he became so rich that he erected and endowed hospitals and churches, the origin of which are still matters of record.

Then, like Lascaris, he became vaporous. One heard of him in Prague, in Vienna, in Benares, and ultimately one ceased to hear of him at all, until, long later, when, under the reign of the Pompadour, memories of him were revived by the Comte de Saint-Germain.

There you have another human enigma, a man apparently young yet known to be old, one who perhaps had not supped with Pilate, as he claimed he had, but whose resources were as uncertain as his age. Without income, rent roll, bank accounts or any visible means, he none the less tossed gold about as a fountain tosses water. He did more. He made little diamonds big, and old women young. Or at least so it is said, as it is said (Continued on Page 10)



## DREAMS

By  
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Illustration by T. Victor Hall

**MORNING, Beloved.** Across the dew-wet grass  
We two fare forth together, hand in hand.  
The birds with all their sweetest carols greet  
Our joyous coming. Well they understand  
Our happiness. And all about our feet  
The daisies nod a welcome as we pass.  
Morning, Beloved.

**NOONTIDE, Beloved.** Through lazy, drooping boughs  
We catch a fleeting glimpse of opal sky.  
The mellow sunlight's glittering, golden sheen  
Caresses us. How thick the shadows lie  
Beneath our arching tent of living green!  
From flower to flower the wild bees slowly drowse.  
Noontide, Beloved.

**EVENING, Beloved.** Now with reluctant feet  
Homeward we go, between the gold and dark.  
The sun has set behind the distant hill;  
On high, a lone belated meadow lark  
Thrills out, and else the world is very still.  
Only the night winds whisper, faint and sweet.  
Evening, Beloved.