

Stories of Alchemical Transmutation

By W.Fra.Greg Boag

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If we look back at the early history of the original Rosicrucians we cannot deny that they were deeply interested in the mysterious alchemical art. Without doubt it could be said that the primary subject of concern for the experienced alchemist is the confection of the philosophers stone and the elixir of life and of witnessing for himself the transmutation of base metals into gold and his own rejuvenation. There are many varying opinions about whether or not these goals were ever attained, whether they were fantasies or whether they were meant to be understood as allegories or metaphors designed to veil some deep spiritual secret. One thing we do know though is that the alchemists themselves didn't say *we are looking to attain these goals but as yet nobody has achieved them*. On the contrary they insist that they have already been attained many times. Alternatively it is the regular stance of modern science to insist that the philosopher's stone (primarily) has never been discovered and was merely a dream developed by early attempts at chemistry in a technologically barren age.

An important part of the evidence concerning the question of whether or not the alchemists of old, or for that matter those of today, ever attained the philosopher's stone, and with it performed transmutations, are the eye witness stories describing various historical transmutations. Whether we personally believe an actual physical philosopher's stone exists, or whether we believe it is a metaphor, some of the stories concerning transmutation, that have been preserved and handed down to our own time, make for interesting reading, and if nothing else, provide us with a unique glimpse at a very private and secret side of the esoteric occupations of the adepts of the alchemical tradition. For this reason I thought it might be interesting to relate in detail, in this paper, a respected and curious story that has come down to us from the classic age of alchemy, and something from our present day.

Most scholars on the subject of alchemy agree that the origin of the art reaches back beyond recorded history. What we do not know, though, with any degree of accuracy, is when the idea that base metals could be changed into gold and silver first became important to alchemists. What we can say though is that information about the philosopher's stone and transmutation falls roughly into two categories. First there are alchemical recipes that claim to describe how the Philosophers stone is confectioned, and therefore by inference, the existence of these recipes implies transmutation as a reality. Then there are the actual stories themselves that are told by eyewitnesses about what happened on occasions when master alchemists have performed transmutations. It is with this latter subject that I am concerned here.

The earliest story I could find describing an alchemical transmutation was told by Bernard, the Count of the Mark of Treviso, sometime between 1406 and 1490AD. Quite a bit of information has survived about Bernard's alchemical career, but as far as I know

the description of transmutation he left us was brief, a simple statement on his part that he had attained the philosopher's stone and had performed a transmutation.

Since Bernard's time there have been many eye witness accounts of transmutations but there are three in particular that are given a lot of credit and which contain a lot of detail. Arguably the best of these stories comes from the Hague in 1667 and involved a gentleman by the name of John Frederick Helvetius. John Fredrick Helvetius was the grandfather of the celebrated philosopher of the same name. He was a Doctor of medicine, and the physician to the Prince of Orange.

The most famous (alchemical) publication by Helvetius that has survived him to our day is titled *The Golden Calf* and was written in 1670. It is in this little book that his famous description of his experience with transmutation appears. The story goes like this:

At the Hague, on the 27th of December, in the year 1666, a man unknown to me came to my house in the afternoon. He seemed an honest and serious man, clothed like a Mennonite. He was of average height, his visage somewhat long, with some pock-holes here and there. His hair was very black, yet not curled, little or no hair on his chin, and about forty-four years of age. His country (as far as I am able to conjecture) is the Septentrional Batavia, vulgarly called Nord-Holland.

After we had exchanged salutations, he asked me whether he might have some conversation with me. He wished to say something to me about the Pyrotechnic Art, (*note: a name by which alchemy has often been known because alchemy is considered a 'philosophy by fire'*) as he had read one of my tracts (directed against the sympathetic powder of Dr. Digby), in which I hinted a suspicion whether or not the Grand Arcanum (*sic: greatest secret*) of the Sages was not after all a gigantic hoax. This visitor, therefore, took that opportunity of asking me whether I could not believe that such a grand mystery might exist in the nature of things, by means of which a physician could restore any patient whose vital organs were not irreparably destroyed. I answered: 'Such a Medicine would be a most desirable acquisition for any physician; nor can any man tell how many secrets there may be hidden in Nature; yet, though I have read much about the truth of this Art, it has never been my good fortune to meet with a real Master of the Alchemical Science.' I also enquired whether he was a medical man ... In reply, he described himself as a *brassfounder*¹. After some further conversation, the Artist Elias (for it was he)² thus addressed me: 'Since you have read so much in the works of the Alchemists about this Stone, its substance, its colour, and its wonderful effects, may I be allowed the question, whether you have not yourself prepared it?' On my answering his question in the negative, he took out of his bag a cunningly-worked ivory box, in which there were three large pieces of a substance resembling glass, or pale sulphur, and informed me that here was enough of the Tincture (*sic: philosophers stone, in the little box*) for the production of 20 tons of gold. When I had held the precious treasure in my hand for a quarter of an hour

¹ The actual word used in the original text was "*a melter of Orichalcum*". Orichalcum is described in chemical texts of that time as an alloy resembling gold and *similar* to brass.

² The artist Elias was an alchemist Paracelsus prophesied would appear in the future.

(during which time I listened to a recital of its wonderful curative properties), I was compelled to restore it to its owner, which I could not help doing with a certain degree of reluctance. After thanking him for his kindness in showing it to me, I then asked how it was that his stone did not display that ruby colour, which I had been taught to regard as characteristic of the philosopher's stone. He replied that the colour made no difference, and that the substance was sufficiently mature for all practical purposes. My request that he would give me a piece of his stone (though it were no larger than a coriander seed), he somewhat brusquely refused, adding, in a milder tone, that he could not give it me for all the wealth I possessed, and that not on account of its great preciousness, but for some other reason which it was not lawful for him to divulge.

When my strange visitor had concluded his narrative, I besought him to give me a proof of his assertion, by performing the transmutatory operation on some metals in my presence. He answered evasively, that he could not do so then, but that he would return in three weeks, and that, if he was then at liberty to do so, he would show me something that would make me open my eyes.

He reappeared punctually on the promised day, and invited me to take a walk with him, in the course of which we discoursed profoundly on the secrets of Nature in fire, though I noticed that my companion was very reluctant to impart information about the Grand Arcanum. At last I asked him point-blank to show me the transmutation of metals. I besought him to come and dine with me, and to spend the night at my house; I entreated; I expostulated; but in vain. He remained firm. I reminded him of his promise. He retorted that his promise had been conditional upon his being permitted to reveal the secret to me. At last, however, I prevailed upon him to give me a piece of his precious stone -- a piece no larger than a grain of rape seed. He delivered it to me as if it were the most princely donation in the world. Upon my uttering a doubt whether it would be sufficient to tinge more than four grains of lead³, he eagerly demanded it back. I complied, in the hope that he would exchange it for a larger piece; instead of which he divided it in two with his thumb, threw away one-half and gave me back the other, saying: 'Even now it is sufficient for you.' Then I was still more heavily disappointed, as I could not believe that anything could be done with so small a particle of the medicine.

He, however, bade me take two drachms, or half an ounce of lead, or even a little more, and to melt it in the crucible; for the Medicine would certainly not tinge more of the base metal than it was sufficient for. I answered that I could not believe that so small a quantity of Tincture could transform so large a mass of lead. But I had to be satisfied with what he had given me, and my chief difficulty was about the application of the Tincture. I confessed that when I held his ivory box in my hand, I had managed to scrape off a few crumbs of his stone under my fingernail, but that they had changed my lead, not into gold, but only into glass. He laughed, and said that I was more expert at theft than at the application of the Tincture. 'You should have protected your spoil with "yellow wax," then it would have been able to penetrate the lead and to transmute it into gold.'

³ Four grains is roughly 240milligrams.

With a promise to return at nine o'clock the next morning, he left me. But at the stated hour on the following day he did not make his appearance; in his stead, however, there came, a few hours later, a stranger, who told me that his friend the Artist was unavoidably detained, but that he would call at three o'clock in the afternoon. The afternoon came; I waited for him till half-past seven. He did not appear. Thereupon my wife came and tempted me to try the transmutation myself. I determined, however, to wait till the morrow, and in the meantime, ordered my son to light the fire, as I was now almost sure that he was an impostor. On the morrow, however, I thought that I might at least make an experiment with the piece of 'tincture' which I had received; if it turned out a failure, in spite of my following his directions closely, I might then be quite certain that my visitor had been a mere pretender to a knowledge of this art. So I asked my wife to put the tincture in wax, and I myself, in the meantime, prepared six drachms of lead; I then cast the tincture, enveloped as it was in wax, on the lead; as soon as it was melted, there was a hissing sound and a slight effervescence, and after a quarter of an hour I found that the whole mass of lead had been turned into the finest gold. Before this transmutation took place, the compound became intensely green, but as soon as I had poured it into the melting pot it assumed a hue like blood. When it cooled, it glittered and shone like gold.

We immediately took it to the goldsmith, who at once declared it to be the finest gold he had ever seen, and offered to pay fifty florins an ounce for it.

The rumor, of course, spread at once like wildfire through the whole city; and in the afternoon, I had visits from many illustrious students of this art; I also received a call from the master of the mint and some other gentlemen, who requested me to place at their disposal a small piece of the gold, in order that they might subject it to the usual tests. I consented, and we betook ourselves to the house of a certain silversmith, named Brechtil, who submitted a small piece of my gold to the test called 'the fourth': three or four parts of silver are melted in the crucible with one part of gold, and then beaten out into thin plates, upon which some strong aqua fortis [nitric acid] is poured. The usual result of this experiment is that the silver is dissolved, while the gold sinks to the bottom in the shape of a black powder, and after the aqua fortis has been poured off, [the gold,] melted once again in the crucible, resumes its former shape. When we now performed this experiment, we thought at first that one-half of the gold had evaporated; but afterwards we found that this was not the case, but that, on the contrary, two scruples of the silver had undergone a change into gold.

Then we tried another test, viz., that which is performed by means of a septuple of Antimony⁴; at first it seemed as if eight grains of the gold had been lost, but afterwards, not only had two scruples of the silver been converted into gold, but the silver itself was greatly improved both in quality and malleability. Thrice I performed this infallible test, discovering that every drachm of gold produced an increase of a scruple of gold, but the silver is excellent and extremely flexible. Thus I have unfolded

⁴ Antimony is a semi-metal that was commonly used to purify gold.

to you the whole story from beginning to end. The gold I still retain in my possession, but I cannot tell you what has become of the artist Elias. Before he left me, on the last day of our friendly intercourse, he told me that he was on the point of undertaking a journey to the Holy Land. May the Holy Angels of God watch over him wherever he is, and long preserve him as a source of blessing to Christendom! This is my earnest prayer on his and our behalf.

The final short quote I will give concerning this subject is not about the transmutation of metals, but is about the rejuvenation of man by the elixir of life. The elixir of life is a medicine made (usually) by dissolving a tiny portion of the philosophers stone in wine. This following quote is especially interesting because it was paraphrased from a correspondence I entered into a few years ago with a man who had ingested a crude form of this elixir. These are his words on the experience:

I had produced this transmutation agent about five years ago. To look at it it is a rose-red liquid. At first transmutation held no real interest for me I was concerned only with discovering the elixir of regeneration. So I decided to ingest some of the preparation by taking two drops in about 150mls of white wine. Almost immediately my body started to get warm and I started to sweat. Within two hours I had become so hot that I had to sit in a bath of cold water for fear that I was going to pass out from the fever-like temperature. But a few more hours later not even cold water was enough to cool me down and I had to fill the bath with ice. At this point I became very afraid that I had done something very stupid. I didn't have much ice in the house and I had no idea how long this was going to last. Twelve hours later my temperature was back to normal and I hoped, with relief, that all the effects from the medicine were completed.

Exhausted I went to bed and discovered that the effects were far from over. But I discovered that when I closed my eyes I could see through my eyelids into the darkened room. After about an hour of anxiety I felt as if I was drifting off to sleep but strangely I did not lose consciousness (as is normal in sleep) but remained fully aware as I slipped from a waking state into the dream world. That night of sleep was the greatest education of my life. Not only did I understand exactly how sleep worked, but during my dream state I found myself being talked to by a small group of men who recognised what I had done and described in great detail how I could chemically improve the method I had discovered for producing my elixir. From that night to this, although I have only ingested a few drops more of that elixir, I have never again lost consciousness in sleep.

Over the next few months I decided to carry out the instructions I had obtained through those strange dreams and they proved to be chemically exact resulting in my producing an agent that is vastly superior to that which I first made by my own means.

Over the next few months, after that first ingestion, I lost what remained of my grey hair and it grew back thick and black, as it had been in my youth. I also discovered that I had gradually developed the ability not only to read minds but also to put

thoughts into other people's minds. This whole development concerned me greatly and caused me a lot of anxiety. As you know I have had no previous occult study and my reading on the subject of alchemy, although wide, obviously suffered from my not believing many of the spiritual claims the old alchemists had made about their work. The result of these experiences I have described to you is that nowadays I live a reclusive life, avoiding contact with other people. I have not seen many of my old friends for many months due to the fact that as the elixir affected me more over time my behaviour and appearance altered greatly and other people began to notice this and ask questions I could not or would not answer.

In closing I should point out that the author of this letter had no formal study, as he said, in the occult, at all. His background was in electro-chemistry and he had become interested in alchemy about 15 years ago, but his reading on the subject was limited to a few popular texts. His isolation from the mainstream of alchemical research meant that his eventual success was obtained through totally unorthodox or untraditional methods. The original rose-red elixir he obtained produced three transmutations of copper into silver, of silver into gold and of silver into uranium in late 1999.

Sources:

The Catholic Encyclopedia (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07212b.htm>)

Adam Mclean's website (www.levity.com/alchemy)

Private correspondence, from 'Jerel', March 1999