

**HIEROGLYPHICS; A  
NOTE UPON ECSTASY  
IN LITERATURE**

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Hieroglyphics; a note upon ecstasy in literature by Arthur Machen

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**ARTHUR MACHEN**

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# *HIEROGLYPHICS*

*A NOTE UPON ECSTASY IN LITERATURE*

*BY*

*ARTHUR MACHEN*



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## *PREFATORY NOTE*

**I**T was my privilege, many years ago, to make the acquaintance of the obscure literary hermit whose talk I have tried to reproduce in the pages that follow. Our first meeting was one of those chance affairs that now and then mitigate the loneliness of the London streets, and a second hazard led to the discovery that we had many interests in common. I think that the Hermit (as I shall call him) had begun to find the perpetual solitude of his years a growing terror, and he was not sorry to have a listener; at first, indeed, he talked almost with the joy of a child, or rather of a prisoner who has escaped from the house of silence, but as he chose subjects which have always interested me intensely, he gave as much pleasure as he received, and I became an assiduous visitor of his cell.

He had found an odd retreat. He avoided personalities, and had a happy knack of forgetting any that I vouchsafed on my side (he forgot my name three times on the first evening that

we spent together, and succeeded in repeating this feat over and over again since then), and I never gathered much of his past history. But I believe that "something had happened" many years before, in the prehistoric age of the 'seventies. There had been a break of some sort in the man's life when he was quite young; and so he had left the world and gone to Barnsbury, an almost mythical region lying between Pentonville and the Caledonian Road. Here, in the most retired street of that retired quarter, he occupied two rooms on the ground floor of a big, mouldy house, standing apart from the street and sheltered by gaunt-grown trees and ancient shrubs; and just beside the dim and dusty window of the sitting-room a laburnum had cast a green stain on the decaying wall. The laburnum had grown wild, like all the trees and shrubs, and some of its black, straggling boughs brushed the pane, and of dark, windy nights while we sat together and talked of art and life we would be startled by the sudden violence with which those branches beat angrily upon the glass.

The room seemed always dark. I suppose that the house had been built in the early eighteenth century, and had been altered and added to at various periods, with a final "doing up" for the comparative luxury of someone

in the 'tens or 'twenties; there were, I think, twenty rooms in it, and my friend used to declare that when a new servant came she spent many months in finding her way in the complicated maze of stairs and passages, and that the landlady even was now and then at fault. But the room in which we sat was hung with flock paper, of a deep and heavy crimson colour, and even on bright summer evenings the crimson looked almost black, and seemed to cast a shadow into the room. Often we sat there till the veritable darkness came, and each could scarcely see the white of the other's face, and then my friend would light two lonely candles on the mantelpiece, or if he wished to read he set one on a table beside him; and when the candles were lighted I thought that the gloom grew more intense, and looking through the uncurtained window one could not see even the friendly twinkle of the gas-lamp in the street, but only the vague growth of the laburnum, and the tangle of boughs beyond.

It was a large room and gave me always a sense of empty space. Against one wall stood a heavy bookcase, with glass doors, solid and of dark mahogany, but made in the intermediate period that came between Chippendale and the modern school of machine-turned rubbish.



In the duskiest corner of the room there was a secretaire of better workmanship, and two small tables and three gaunt chairs made up the furnishing. The Hermit would sometimes pace up and down in the void centre of the room as he talked, and if I chanced to be sitting by the window his shape would almost disappear as he neared the secretaire on his march, and I heard the voice, and used to wonder for a moment whether the man had not vanished for ever, having been resolved into the shadows about him.

I have spent many evenings in that old mouldering room, where, when we were silent for an instant, the inanimate matter about us found a voice, and the decaying beams murmured together, and a vague sound might come from the cellars underneath. And it always seemed to me as if the crypt-like odour of the cellar rose also into the room, mingling with a faint suggestion of incense, though I am sure that my friend never burned it. Here then, with such surroundings as I have indicated, we held our sessions and talked freely and with enjoyment of many curious things, which, as the Hermit would say, had the huge merit of interesting no one but ourselves.

He would sometimes, whimsically, compare himself to Coleridge, and I think that he often

deliberately talked in S. T. C.'s manner with delight in the joke. For I need hardly say that the comparison was not in any way a serious one; he had a veneration for Coleridge's achievement, with a still greater veneration for that which Coleridge might have achieved, which would have caused him to regard any such comparison, seriously entertained, as unspeakably ludicrous. Still, he liked to regard himself as a very humble disciple in Coleridge's school; he was fond, as I have said, of imitating his master's manner as well as he could, and I think that he cherished, in the fashion of S. T. C., the notion that he had a "system," an esoteric philosophy of things. He sought for a key that would open, and a lamp that would enlighten all the dark treasure-houses of the Universe, and sometimes he believed that he held both the Key and the Lamp in his hands.

It is a confession of mysticism, but I incline to think that he was right in this belief. I recall the presence of that hollow, echoing room, the atmosphere with its subtle suggestion of incense sweetening the dank odours of the cellar, and the tone of the voice speaking to me, and I believe that once or twice we both saw visions, and some glimpse at least of certain eternal, ineffable Shapes. But these matters, the more esoteric doctrines of the "system,"

have entered hardly or not at all into the very imperfect and fragmentary notes that I have made of his conversations on literature.

I should scarcely be justified in calling him a literary monomaniac. But it is true that Art in general and the art of literature in particular had for him a very high significance and interest ; and he was always ready to defend the thesis that, all the arts being glorious, the literary art was the most glorious and wonderful of all. He revered music, but he was firm in maintaining that in perfect lyrical poetry there is the subtlest and most beautiful melody in the world.

I can scarcely say whether he wrote much himself. He would speak of stories on which he was engaged, but I have never seen his name on publishers' lists, and I do not think that he had adopted a pseudonym. One evening, I remember, I came in a little before my accustomed time, and in the shadowy corner of the room a drawer in the secretaire was open, and I thought that it looked full of neat manuscripts. But I never spoke to him about his literary work ; and I noticed that he did not much care to talk of literature from the commercial standpoint.

It is perhaps needless to say that I consulted my friend before publishing these notes of his