

KALKI

Studies in James Branch Cabell



"Now, the redemption which we as yet await (continued Imlac), will be that of Kalki, who will come as a Silver Stallion: all evils and every sort of folly will perish at the coming of this Kalki: true righteousness will be restored, and the minds of men will be made clear as crystal."

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The Spell of Mirror and Pigeons



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Source Notes

The Mirror and Pigeons Resolved

The last chapter of Warren A. McNeill's CABELLIAN HARMONICS (Random House, 1928) is devoted not to Cabell's buried experiments in contrapuntal prose, but to the mystery of the mirror and the white pigeons, which probably has baffled almost every reader of the Biography. McNeill asked Cabell to explain; JBC, of course, sensibly refused.

In tackling the problem, McNeill drew together and reprinted all the pertinent references, a highly useful exercise in itself. Some of his assembled clues are, as it turns out, simply accidents of association, but there are a number which are real. They are as follows:

1. The mirror is square.
2. The ritual involves the blood of white pigeons.
3. The mirror is (or can be) made of metal.
4. The ritual involves six words of power and wisdom (not five, for McNeill loses count here) which were known to Solomon, and a seventh which Solomon did not know.
5. The mirror is associated with the Hidden Children.

Having assembled all this, and a good deal more which does not turn out to be relevant, McNeill is unable to draw any definite conclusion. I believe, however, that the problem is soluble by reference to any of several magical compilations; the following account is drawn largely from the Grimorium Verum, with emphases supplied by me.

The process is a method for composing something called "the Mirror of Solomon," in which "ye shall behold...all things whatsoever that ye may desire." The operator is instructed to take a shining and well-polished plate of fine steel, slightly concave, and inscribe four names at the four corners of this with the blood of a white pigeon. The steel is then placed in a clean white cloth (Mother Sereda's dish-towel?) At the proper time, four spells follow.

Not four but seven words of power are involved. The grimoire's text mentions only those to be written on the mirror. However, an illustration in another text shows that a fifth word must be written on the pedestal of the mirror, and that the mirror must be flanked by two candles, the bases of each of them inscribed. Thus, the total is seven, just as Cabell's count requires. Now, why was one of these words unknown to Solomon? Simply because in each of the known accounts of the process there is one word which is not common to the others. Finally, the illustration is important because it shows the mirror to be square, though this could have been deduced without the illustrations, from the polishing instructions.

After these directions are followed, the angel Anaël will arise after 45 (or 14) days "under the form of a beautiful child." Thereafter, it is necessary only to perfume the mirror and repeat one invocation, and Anaël will return for further divination.

If this attribution seems desperately banal to the reader, I can assure him that I quite agree. Even as magic, this is one of the most minor of processes. The true marvel lies in what Cabell has made of such unpromising material, almost entirely by implication. -- J. B.

In Charteris' Library

In BEYOND LIFE, the author is admiring the library of John Charteris at Willoughby Hall, and discovers a shelf devoted to "the books of the gifted writers of Bookland." Identification of these literary characters provides an insight into the extent of Cabell's reading, as well as a challenge to the modern reader.