
King's Evil

<2>by Avram Davidson

When I first saw the copy of *The Memoirs of Dr. Mainauduc, the Mesmerist* (bound in flaking leather, the spine in shreds, and half the title page missing: which is why I was able to buy it cheap), I assumed it to be a work of fiction. There is something extremely Gothick about "Mainauduc, the Mesmerist." It sets one in mind at once of Melmoth, the Wanderer. No one today would venture to invent such a name for such a person. (Unless, of course, he were writing for television or the movies, in which case he might venture anything.) But the times bring forth the man, and the man bears the name. Consider, for example, "the Jesuit Hell." This is not a theological conception, it was a man, a Jesuit, whose family name was Hell. Father Hell devised a system or theory of healing based on "metallic magnetism"; he passed it on to Franz Anton Mesmer, who almost at once quarreled with him, produced the countertheory of "animal magnetism." Mesmer begat (so to speak) D'Eslon, D'Eslon begat Mainauduc. Full of enthusiasm, Mainauduc came to England, and settled in, of all places, Bristol. All this, I admit, sounds most improbable. Truth so often does. Who is not familiar with the bewildered cry of the novice writer, "But that's the way it happened!"? Not altogether trusting to my own ability to convince the reader that there really was such a person as the Jesuit Hell or such a person as Mainauduc, the Mesmerist, I refer him to Mackay's *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*; but should he (the reader) not be able to credit that this work exists either, then I must throw up my hands. Mackay, in my opinion, was really too hard on "The Magnetisers," as he called them. Himself so great a sceptic, he could have little cause for complaint if other, later, sceptics should not care to believe that any book bearing such a title ever existed. In a way, it would serve him right....

In Bristol Dr. Mainauduc flourished to the degree that his reputation went on ahead of him to London. In a short time London was coming to him; he cured dukes of the dropsy and generals of the gout, he magnetized countesses into convulsions and they emerged from them free of the phthisic, while vicountesses left their vapors behind them or so he says. At any rate he determined upon going to London and setting up practice there. He recounts in detail his plans for setting up something called "the Hygienickal Society... for Females of high Position... the fees, Fifteen Guineas" at his house in the capital. And he describes, amongst many other cases, one where he cured a longseated complaint ("pronounced beyond help") entirely by proxy.

It may be that Dr. Mainauduc's success in Bristol was perhaps not quite so dazzling as his memory in later years led him to fancy. He had come up to London, to discuss his setting up practice there, at the invitation of a Mr. Wentworth, "a Bachelor of Physick," who lived in Rosemary Lane; and despite its pretty name, Rosemary Lane was not located in a pretty district. We might consider it a depressed area. And Mr. Wentworth had arranged to meet him, not in his own quarters, but at an inn called the Mulberry Tree, where they were to dine. Mr. Wentworth had made the necessary arrangements, but Mr. Wentworth was late.

"Dr. Mainauduc? To meet Mr. Wentworth? Certainly, sir," the waiter said. "If the Doctor will only please to step in here, Mr. Wentworth will be along presently." And he led him along to a medium-sized room, with paneled walls, and a fire which seemed to beckon pleasantly from the grate, for it was the first of October, and the air was chill. He had scarcely had the time to give his full attention to the flames licking greedily at the greasy black slabs of coal when he noticed that there was someone already in the room. This person came forward from his corner, where he had been engaged in softening the nether end of one candle in the flame of another so that it might hold fast in its sconce and not wobble, with his hand extended.

"Have I, sir," he asked, with the slightest of smiles, and an air of deference and courtesy, "the honor of

beholding the author of the great treatise on the magnetical fluid?"

"You are too kind, sir," said Mainauduc, indicating to the waiter with but a flick of his eye that there was no objection taken to the stranger's presence and that the waiter might leave. "I am sensible of the complaint you pay me merely by having heard of my little pamphlet." And he bowed.

"Heard of it, Doctor?" cries the other, a smallish, slender man, clad in dark garments. He holds up his finger as if to command attention, and begins to speak.

"The magnet attracts iron, iron is found everywhere, everything is therefore under the influence of magnetism. It is only a modification of the general principle, which establishes harmony or foments discord. It is the same agent that gives rise to sympathy, antipathy, and the passions.' Have I not the passage right, sir? My name is Blee, sir: James Blee."

"I am enchanted to meet you, Mr. Blee. I commend your memory. However " he seated himself at right angles to the fire "you will doubtless recall that the passage you quote is not mine. *I* was quoting from the Spaniard, Balthazar Graciano." He spread his long fingers to the blaze. "Are you a physician, sir?"

Mr. Blee perhaps did not hear the question.

"Then try my memory on this, Doctor," he said. "There is a flux and reflux, not only in the sea, but in the atmosphere, which affects in a similar manner all organized bodies through the medium of a subtile and mobile fluid, which pervades the universe, and associates all things together in mutual intercourse and harmony.' Were you... dare we hope... is it that... ?"

Dr. Mainauduc raised his dark brows.

"What is your question, Mr. Blee?"

"Can it be that London is destined to enjoy the great fortune which has hitherto been Bristol's alone, Dr. Mainauduc? The reluctant tones of my voice must discover to you that I know I have no right to enquire, but..."

The mesmerist smiled. "It may be," he began; but at this moment the door was thrown open and two gentlemen entered, one nervously, the other laughing.

"Oh, pray, pray forgive me, Dr. Mainauduc how d'ye do, Mr. Blee? for my lateness," said the nervous gentleman, taking off his hat so hurriedly his wig came with it He struggled to replace it, and, at the same time, gestured towards his companion, who rubbed his hands as he looked about the room and laughed. "This is Mr. Fanner, sir; Mr. Farmer Dr. Mainauduc, Mr. Blee." He smiled faintly. His face was pale.

"Dr. Mainauduc, Mainauduc, very pleased. Mr. Blee, I hope you do well, well, well. Farmer by name, gentlemen," the other man said, "and fanner by profession, farmer by profession. What, what?" He then laughed once more at length and proceeded to repeat his remarks all over again. His face was ruddy.

Mr. Blee courteously asked if he had had good crops, and while Mr. Farmer was merrily discussing corn, hay, and wallfruit with his questioner, Mr. Wentworth drew Dr. Mainauduc to one side, and spoke closely to his ear.

"The fact of the matter is that I never saw this gentleman in my life before, till just above an hour ago, when he came into the barber's where I was having my hair attended to, and desired to be shaved. Tis my belief, sir, that he is some country squire unused to London ways," Mr. Wentworth said; "for when the man was finished, the gentleman said, oh, as blandly as you please, that he had no money. I presume he'd had his pocket picked, for one can see by his clothes that he is--"

"Oh, quite so," murmured Dr. Mainauduc.

"Have you not often wondered," Mr. Fanner chattered to Mr. Blee, "how the people do? How they live? What their lives are like? What they think, really think? Hey, sir? What, what?"

"Oh, frequently, Mr. Farmer!"

Wentworth murmured, "And so I thought best to pay for the barber, and then I really did not know how to get rid of him."

Dr. Mainauduc saw that his fellow physician was considerably embarrassed at the introduction of two extra men to what was intended for a private meeting. He assured him that he did not mind, and said that, indeed, it was just as well, for they might get a lay opinion on the subject of introducing to London the practice of the Mesmeric therapy. And so they all four sat down to supper. There was beef and brawn and game pie and goose.

"I little thought to have this honor, Doctor," Mr. Blee said; "but, chancing to hear from Mr. Wentworth, of whose professional parts I bear the highest opinion, that you were to be here, I felt I must hazard it, and come to see the prophet of the newfound philosophy."

Wentworth, who had treated Blee for an amorous distemper, kept silence, but his principal guest smiled.

"Newly re-found philosophy, I should rather term it," Mainauduc said. "What was the laying on of hands but animal magnetism, anciently practiced? And in what other way did Eltsha bring to life the dead child, but by conveyance of the magnetical fluid?" Wentworth nodded gravely.

Mr. Fanner, who had been talking with his mouth full, and smiling happily, suddenly threw down his knife. His face fell.

"Suppose d'ye see, gentlemen suppose a man makes mistakes eh? bad ones, very bad, bad, bad. Terrible losses. What? Now, now, oughtn't he have the chance, the chance, I say, to do better? Better? What, what? Well, so he must see for himself how things go. See for himself. Eh? How things go. Terrible losses. Was it not a thing to break your heart? It broke my heart I never meant it to happen so "

"Gaining!" Wentworth whispered to Mainauduc.

"To what losses do you refer, Mr. Farmer?" Blee asked, in a solicitous tone. "Did I not understand you to say the harvest was good this year?"

"The Mesmeric method " Wentworth began, rather loudly. Abashed, he lowered his voice. "Dr. Mainauduc is desirous of opening in London an institute for the practice of the Mesmeric method of healing. In this, it is contemplated, I am to assist him." The faintest shadow of color came and went in his face. "What think you of the scheme, gentlemen? We, that is he, should like to know."

Blee rose from the table and gave the fire a poke. The gray pyramid collapsed and the coals blazed up again, making the shadows dance. Mr. Farmer laughed.

"Is not this pleasant?" he cried. "I am so very much obliged to you for the pleasure. Pleasure. We dine simply at home. At home ek? we dine very simply. But there is such a degree of stiffness. Strain. Stiffness and strain."

Mr. Blee tapped the poker on the iron dogs, "Such an institution, if headed by such a man as Dr. Mainauduc, can not possibly do otherwise than succeed." The two physicians looked at one another, pleased. Their faces quickened.

"You will make a deal of money," Blee told the fire.

Wentworth looked hastily at a darned place on his hose, and crossed his legs. "It is the science, not the money. The money is not of any consequence to us."

"Not of the least consequence," Mainauduc said easily. His coat and waistcoat were of French flowered silk. Blee turned from the fire. He drew up his chak and sat, facing Dr. Mainauduc.

"Gentlemen," he said in low tones, "pray give me leave to speak openly. The alchemists strove for centuries to make gold; that they succeeded, no one can say with certainty. But magnetism is the new alchemy. It will make gold, I know it Already London is atremble with the reports of its success. People who would never go so far as Hackney to consult the best physician of the old school ever known, have gone all the way to Bristol to be magnetized by Dr. Mainauduc. You have only to throw open your doors in London, sir, to have your chambers thronged with the richest... and the wealthiest..." His voice hissed upon the sibilants. He brought his dark, clever face nearer. "You will need a man of business. May I serve you?"

The two physicians looked at one another. Dr. Mainauduc's lips parted. Mr. Wentworth inclined his head to the side. And, then, as abrupt as the bursting of a bubble, the mood or spell was shattered: Mr. Farmer, seemingly from nowhere, had produced a grubby child, and was patting its head and stroking its cheeks and asking what its name was and if it would like a glass of wine all in a tone of boisterous good cheer, his eyes popping with joy.

"Now, damme, sir!" cries Blee, jumping to his feet in a rage and overturning the chak. The child begins to weep.

"Oh, pray, don't" Farmer implores. "I love children. Don't fret, poppet."

"Take care, Mr. Farmer," Wentworth warns him. "Do you not see the child is diseased? See the lesions it is certainly scrofulous. Have done, Mr. Fanner!"

Then the waiter came, with many apologies, for it was his child, begged their pardon, took the boy away.

"Well, we shall think of your proposal, Mr. Blee." Dr. Mainauduc sat back, languid from food and fire, tired from his journey. "What, Wentworth, was the child with scrofulas?"

"Assuredly, sir. Shall I call it back? Perhaps you wish to examine, or treat it?" But the Doctor waved his hand. "King's Evil, is what the common people call it, you know. Scrofula, I mean to say. Some of them profess to regard it as beyond medical aid. They still remember that the monarchs of the former dynasty, as late as Queen Anne, used to 'touch' for it. An interesting ceremony it must have been. The touch of an anointed king, the common people say, is the only cure for it. Now what think you, Doctor, of sympathetical mummy, or capons fed with vipers?"

Dr. Mainauduc, who had been listening with a trace of impatience, cleared his throat Blee stood once more by the fire.

"You mentioned, sir, my pamphlet, earlier in the evening my pamphlet entitled, A Treatise on the Magnetickal Fluid, Whilst I was in Paris I met the eminent American sage, Mr. Franklin, and I presented him a copy, for it seems to me evident that what he calls the positive and negative of electricity is none other than the intension and remission of which that great giant of natural philosophy, Franz Anton Mesmer, writes. Mr. Blee Mr. Blee?" But that gentleman was staring, his lower lip caught up beneath his teeth, at Mr. Farmer; and Mr. Farmer was weeping.

"Directly you mentioned Franklin, Doctor, he began to shed tears," whispered Wentworth. Do you know, Doctor, I commence to think that he is an American himself a Loyalist and that the loss he spoke of was his property or perhaps his son in the Rebellion there. What think you, sir?"

"I commence to think, sir, that he is a man whom I am shortly to magnetize, for it is plain he is in need of it"

Dr. Mainauduc rose and blew out all but one of the candles. Wentworth's eyes glistened and he stepped nearer, but Blee retreated further into the gloom. Only a dull red glow now came from the fire. Dr. Mainauduc seated himself facing Mr. Fanner, touching him knee to knee. He took his hands in his.

"Attend to me now, sir," Dr. Mainauduc said.

"My head does ache," Mr. Fanner murmured.

"It shall presently ache no more... Attend"

He gently placed Farmer's hands so they rested, palms up, on his knees, and slowly began to stroke them with the palms of his own hands. He did this for some time, then drew his hands along Mr. Fanner's arms, leaning forward, until they rested with the fingers touching the neck. Slowly his hands passed up the sides of the man's face, then withdrew till they were opposite his eyes. Again and again he repeated these passes. The candle's light glittered on the single ring he wore, and Wentworth saw the glitter reflected in Mr. Farmer's wide-open eyes. Mr. Farmer was motionless, and the noise of his heavy breathing died away. It seemed to Wentworth, as he watched, that a smoke or vapor, like a thin mist, or the plume from a tobacco-pipe, was exuded from the mesmerist's face and hands. It moved slowly and sluggishly and

hung in the air about Mr. Farmer's head.

And as Wentworth watched, he fancied that he saw strange scenes take form for fleeting moments in this miasmatic suspiration: a procession of people in heavy robes and men with miters, a phantasm of silent men in violent riot, and noiseless battles on land and sea. Then all vanished, ghosts and mists alike. He heard once more the sound of Mr. Farmer's breathing, and Dr. Mainauduc had lit the candles and the light was reflected on the paneled walls.

Wentworth cleared his throat Mainauduc looked at him, and there was terror in his eyes. He started to speak, and his voice caught in his throat.

"We had better leave, you and I," he said, at last. "Do you know who your country squire is, your Loyalist?"

"I know," said Blee's voice from the door. He stood there, his sallow skin gone paler than Wentworth's, but a look of determination fixed upon his face. Behind him were two broadshouldered, shifty-looking men. "We will take charge of Mr. Farmer, if you please."

"No, I think not," Mr. Fanner said. He stood up, an air of dignity upon him. "There has been enough taking charge of Mr. Farmer, and Mr. Farmer has a task to do."

"Oh, sir, you are unwell," Blee said, in a fawning tone, and he sidled forward, followed by his minions. And then, without warning, the room was filled with men: constables with their staves in their hands, soldiers in red coats, Mr. Martinson, the magistrate, a tall young man looking very much like Mr. Farmer himself, and others.

"You had better come with us, sir, I think," said the tall young man. Mr. Farmer slumped. The air of dignity fell from him. Then he laughed vacantly.

"Very well, Fred, very well," he said. "Very well, very well. You tfrinV it best, what, what?" He shambled forward, stopped, looked over his shoulder. "These two gentlemen " he indicated Dr. Mainauduc and Mr. Wentworth, "treated me with great consideration. They are not to be bothered, d'ye hear?" The magistrate bowed. Mr. Farmer went out slowly, leaning on the arm of the tall man, and muttering, "Bothered, bothered, bothered..."

Let us return to the Memoirs.

"On this occasion [Mainauduc writes] the entire Atmosphere was so saturated with the Magnetickal Fluid that there was cured in another part of the House a Child suffering from a Complaint long-seated and pronounced beyond help, vfe., Scrofula, or King's Evil. There was not a Lesion or Scar or Mark left, and all this without my even having touched him."

As to the identity of Mr. Farmer, Dr. Mainauduc is coy. He says only that he was "a Gentleman of exceedingly high Station, exceedingly afflicted. Had I been allowed to treat him further, a Privilege denied me, he might have been spared the terrible Malady which had already begun its Ravages, and which, save for a few brief periods, never entirely left him.

Thus far, on this subject, The Memoirs of Dr. Mainauduc, the Mesmerist, a man of his time or behind his time, if you prefer; or, considering that mesmerism was the forerunner of hypnotism and that the study of hypnotism led Freud on to psychoanalysis, perhaps a man ahead of his time. Could he, perchance or could anyone really have cured Mr. Farmer"? It is impossible to say. If certain private papers of Frederick, Duke of York, still sealed to public inspection, could be opened, we might learn what truth there was if any to a curious legend concerning his father. Is it really so that he evaded all who surrounded him, and for six hours one day in early October 1788 wandered unrecognized through London on some strange and unsuccessful quest of his own, in the month when it was finally deemed impossible to doubt any longer that he was mad that longest-lived and most unfortunate of British Kings, George III?

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