

## Roses from the Ashes: Four "Lost" Novels of Violet M. Firth (Dion Fortune)

In 2009, a brief period of unexpected leisure in London gave me an opportunity to begin to look into some novels of which I had heard, but which I had never seen: novels that Violet Mary Firth published under the name V. M. Steele.

For some years afterward, to no avail, I tried to interest publishers in these novels, which I thought had been unfairly ignored. Just when I had finally decided to give up, the owner of Twin Eagles Publishing told me that he was interested in resurrecting them. For various practical reasons, he decided to bring out the last, and least known, novel first. He asked me to write an Afterword to it – and then asked me to write Forewords to the other three as they were reprinted over the course of the following year.

What follows is substantially those essays, in the order in which they appeared. As published, they were ungraced, or unburdened, by any academic apparatus, and they remain so. I have made some small corrections and adjustments, but there are many points that might have been amplified, and issues that might have been explored, that could not reasonably be addressed in a foreword or afterword, and that remain unaddressed here. If I have the opportunity, I may do so in some future, more specialized, paper. There is some redundancy between the essays, since they were written to be read individually; this remains in the versions attached here.

In order, these essays are:

1. Out of the Shadows: Afterword to *The Yellow Shadow*
2. The Teller of Tales: Foreword to *The Scarred Wrists*
3. The Thrill of the Hunt: Foreword to *Hunters of Humans*
4. Chaste in Martaban: Foreword to *Beloved of Ishmael*

For clarity's sake, I have started each essay on a separate page.

Because I wanted to avoid distressing readers by giving away key plot points, some of the discussion is less direct than it might be in an analytic treatment of the texts. Nevertheless, I think it will still be possible to see why I think these books are worth more serious treatment in the light of the whole body of the author's work. Although this is not a thorough treatment of the texts, I am making it available for those who may find it of interest.

Richard Brzustowicz

London-Taipei-Seattle  
2009-2018

## 1: Out of the Shadows

### Afterword to *The Yellow Shadow*

The novels that Violet Mary Firth (1890-1946) published under the name V.M. Steele have long been dismissed by those who write about her as negligible, if not embarrassing. In part, this is because most people who write about her are primarily interested in her career as Dion Fortune, the occultist, and the three novels usually mentioned are not "occult novels". In part, too, it is because the novels deal with issues and situations that are currently often regarded as disreputable or taboo.

Several years ago, I had a chance to stop in London and do some reading in the British Library and the Wellcome Foundation Library. I took the opportunity to look at *The Scarred Wrists* (1935), *Hunters of Humans* (1936), and *Beloved of Ishmael* (1937), the V.M. Steele novels held by the British Library, and the only ones I had ever seen mentioned in connection with Dion Fortune.

Groggy from travel, I still managed to read all three novels. It was immediately clear that they were not, in fact, negligible, and that they should be regarded as a significant component of Violet Firth's writing – as significant as the novels published under the name Dion Fortune. As I read, I took what notes I could, thinking to write a brief article about them.

After getting back to Seattle, I returned to my notes, intending to write an extended memorandum to flesh out the notes before more complete memories of the books faded away. To make sure I had the bibliographic details correct, I checked the entries under V.M. Steele in WorldCat, the library collection database of the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC).

Much to my surprise, I found that there was a fourth V.M. Steele novel: *The Yellow Shadow*. Few libraries other than the British Library held any of them, and of the few that held the fourth, the National Library of Scotland seemed the most accessible to me.

After some correspondence, and with the gracious assistance of Mr. Gareth Knight, the permission of the Society of the Inner Light (who also were surprised to hear that a fourth V.M. Steele novel existed), and the patient assistance of librarians at the National Library of Scotland, I was able to get a photocopy of *The Yellow Shadow*. As soon as I read it, I realized that it completely justified my impression of the significance of these novels.

Although *The Yellow Shadow* was published in 1942, internal evidence suggests that it was written before that, probably before or around 1937. It deals with a China already invaded by Japan (so at least 1932), but before the seizure of Shanghai or the Nanking Massacre (so before 1937). That there is no mention of the Blitz (making it before 1940), nor of the war in Europe (thus before 1938), also suggests a date before 1937. I suspect that the fourth novel was originally intended to follow *Beloved of Ishmael* (1937); unlike the first three novels, however, the fourth was not (for whatever reason) published by Stanley Paul, and it may be that publication was delayed until 1942 in part due to the need to find another publisher, and in part due to wartime conditions.

Where in China? The presence of discrete foreign communities would suggest Shanghai, but the Battle of Shanghai (1932) and its results do not seem to have influenced the story. Hong Kong would be an obvious alternative, but the island setting is nowhere mentioned, and Hong Kong was very largely British, and did not contain other European concessions. Stella's first Chinese tutor, Mr. Fook, by his name is clearly from the south of China, but whether he taught her Cantonese, or some form of Mandarin, is unclear; if the latter, Stella's ability to understand servants' chatter (unlikely to have been in Mandarin either in Shanghai or Hong Kong) is unexplained. If the author had any specific place in mind, it was perhaps Canton.

It is tempting to suppose that the author was simply setting the story "somewhere in China". Certain oddities (the so-called tea ceremony, for example) do suggest occasional uninformed reaching after local color. In other respects, however, she has clearly done her research, and probably relied on consultants who had been in China (perhaps even the very interesting psychiatrist and occultist Dr. Alexander Cannon, with whom she had several acquaintances in common).

Even more intriguing is her acquaintance with lore about the Bodhisattva Guan Yin (Kuan Yin). Just as the Virgin Mary is associated with the sea (and the name Stella Morris is clearly reminiscent of one of the titles of the Virgin Mary, "Stella Maris", Star of the Sea) so is Guan Yin, especially in the sailing and fishing communities of southern China. In more recondite lore, Guan Yin, often manifesting as "fish basket Guan Yin" is sometimes said to use sexual desire as a "skillful means" to save men who might otherwise be doomed to wander in the world of delusion. It is in this sense, as well as the connection with the sea, that some mythologists have linked Guan Yin with Aphrodite. In a way quite compatible with the symbolism of Tibetan Buddhism, then, Stella provides the Wisdom component, and Li the Action component, finally released and effective in the final scenes of the book.

This connection is not merely speculation. The main male character gives Stella the pet name "Yan Tai", which, she learns from an art book, is an appellation of Guan Yin as a cognate of Aphrodite, as "the Supremely Desirable One". This appellation is perhaps 豔太, in Pinyin romanization "Yen Tai", with "yen" meaning desirable, voluptuous, and so on, and "tai" being the word for "great". (The fact that the modifier appears after the modified -- not a feature of Mandarin -- also suggests a southern Chinese dialect. However, appearing in an art book as it supposedly does, it might also be a calque on a word from another language, perhaps Tibetan, with "Tai" perhaps representing something like "Chenma".)

This chain of symbols, explicitly set out in the text, makes it clear that the theme of this novel is not that far from those of *The Sea Priestess*, *Moon Magic*, or some of the earlier Dion Fortune novels: the revitalization and enlightenment of an isolated and afflicted man through the wisdom conveyed by a woman who herself embodies supra-personal, divine energies. The difference, perhaps, is that the Dion Fortune novels use romance to sweeten the medicine of explicit occult teaching, while the V. M. Steele novels forego explicit teaching, but nonetheless transmit an initiatory seed through the romance itself.

It is, in other words, the same mind, the same intent, at work through the writings of Violet Mary Firth, Dion Fortune, and V.M. Steele. One cannot properly appreciate Violet Firth's life and work while refusing to engage with the V.M. Steele novels. We are very fortunate that Twin Eagles Publishing has undertaken the task bringing this book back from exile, so that this opportunity will at last be available to everyone.

## 2: The Teller of Tales Foreword to *The Scarred Wrists*

You, gentle reader, hold in your hands an invitation to an unusual, twofold adventure.

This novel, *The Scarred Wrists*, is an adventure story, and even a fairy tale, one in which the lowly are raised up, the mighty rebuked, and the evil get what they deserve. But the fact that you are able to read it is also an adventure, since the book itself has been for so long itself ignored, disavowed, and rejected.

Now, through the kind offices of the British Library, and the work of Twin Eagles Publishing, the V. M. Steele novels are becoming available to a wider audience than they have ever known.

It is very likely that, if you are looking at this book, you are interested in it because of the author, so it's probably useful first to talk about this novel in the context of her other works.

*The Scarred Wrists* is the first of a set of four novels published by Violet Mary Firth (1890-1946) under the name V. M. Steele. Unlike the novels she published under her most famous pen-name, Dion Fortune, these are not, overtly, "occult".

*The Scarred Wrists* was published in 1935, in the same year as *The Winged Bull*, the first of Dion Fortune's series of initiatory novels: novels deliberately constructed to provide not only the emotional reorientation but also some of the information that might be transmitted in an initiation. Two articles, describing her aims and methods in the initiatory novels, were published in her *Society of the Inner Light* magazine. These have recently been republished in *Dion Fortune's Rites of Isis and of Pan* (edited by Gareth Knight, 2013). They are well worth reading.

Those articles do not mention her V. M. Steele books at all; however, when the novels are read in the light of the articles, and set next to the Dion Fortune novels published at the same time, it is hard to avoid feeling that the same project was at work in both sequences of books. In other words, the V.M. Steele novels are very likely also intended, through imaginative identification with a central character, to trigger in the reader an initiatory awakening.

There are clear similarities in certain bits of stage machinery between *The Winged Bull* and *The Scarred Wrists*: both involve a slum-based "secret hideout" that is far nicer inside than out; both involve characters caught between the spiritual destructiveness of an oppressive, self-satisfied respectability and vengeful, underworld criminality; both involve a romance between a man and woman who are of very different classes and backgrounds, but who are brought together by other qualities.

A major difference, however, is that *The Scarred Wrists* has no initiating adept: it is less *The Tempest* than it is "Beauty and the Beast." If there is a stage-managing Prospero, it is the voice of the storyteller, which calls forth the whole extravagant drama — and finishes it off with a casual gesture.

The novel takes place in a Britain well after the First World War: internal evidence suggests it occurs after 1920, when the post-War gun control legislation took effect. This is not the stereotypical Britain of subtlety and sophisticated restraint, but the Britain of riverside gangs, blackmailers, and detectives (and police) who work very close to, and across, the borders of legality. The male protagonist suffers from poor health, and from what is now called post-traumatic stress — not as a result of the War, but as a result of serving hard time in prison, preceded by a difficult childhood. The female protagonist has had a similar experience of familial rejection; for this and other reasons, the two characters are immediately drawn to each other when they meet through a plot device no doubt borrowed from a Sherlock Holmes Story.

The story that unfolds is something of a pell-mell combination of madcap comedy and film noir, and comedy it ultimately is. Despite the generally unapologetic violence, the casual cruelty, and

neurotic self-destructiveness, there is underneath and within it all a sense of glee, and the coming into its own of a kind of savage innocence that makes a place for its new life in the decaying ruins of the old.

§

It has been said that the difference between an expert in a field and a scholar of the field is that an expert knows everything worth knowing about a subject, and a scholar knows everything. Things are not so clear-cut: even mere experts have to know more than what's worth knowing in order to be sure they haven't missed anything.

I make no claim to being a scholar, or even an expert, but I am vastly curious. Violet Firth—Dion Fortune—is a very interesting figure for anyone curious about the overlap between the daylight world of psychology and psychotherapy, and the night, or twilight, world of occultism and magic. And for the curious, there are few things as intriguing as those one is warned away from, or solemnly told are not worth knowing, or are better not known. This is especially true for someone with even a little of the old-fashioned psychoanalytic suspiciousness that finds bored dismissal almost as much of a red flag as passionate rejection.

When I had a little extra time, then, in London, I made a special point of looking up these novels. I was fully prepared to find them as trivial as they were said to be—but *I wanted to see for myself*. I set myself a program of reading at both the British Library and at the Wellcome Library up the street (which holds books and papers by significant early practitioners of psychotherapy and medical psychology). I did spend some time at the Wellcome, looking into its collection of materials on and by Dr. Lillias Hamilton, who was Warden of Studley Agricultural College when Violet Firth was there. But, finally, I was unable to tear myself away from the V.M. Steele novels. I had to get through them: even if it cut into my time at the Wellcome, I thought the time well spent. I still do.

I have come to see these novels as energetic expressions of the same project that shaped the later occult novels: not the work of someone in decline or in retreat, not simply the work of a compulsive story teller, but the work of someone for whom psychoeducational intervention and initiatory drama had become two aspects of one pursuit.

But this is now your book, awaiting your response. For you, dear reader, the curtain is about to rise. See what you shall see; hear what you shall hear, and enjoy the tale.

### 3: The Thrill of the Hunt: Foreword to *Hunters of Humans*

In her "Introduction" to *The Sea Priestess*, Dion Fortune says,

People read fiction in order to supplement the diet life provides for them. If life is full and varied, they like novels that analyse and interpret it for them; if life is narrow and unsatisfying, they supply themselves with mass production wish fulfilments from the lending libraries. I have managed to fit my book in between these two stools so neatly that it is hardly fair to say that it falls between them. It is a novel of interpretation and a novel of wish-fulfilment at the same time.

In many ways, this is also true of *Hunters of Humans*; although it is not an "occult novel", it is at least as much a novel of interpretation as it is one of wish-fulfilment. Although it is certainly a romance, it is not really a thriller. It is more a police-procedural, but it might well be described as a "police-procedural of manners".

*Hunters of Humans* is the second novel that Violet Firth published under the name V.M. Steele. According to *The English Catalogue of Books*, the novel was first published (at 7s. 6d.) in February of 1936, and in a cheap edition (2s. 6d.) in March of 1937.

Like *The Scarred Wrists*, it includes Chief Inspector Saunders (thus nudging him toward an appearance as a "series character" in Hubin's *Bibliography of Crime Fiction*). However, at the end of *The Scarred Wrists*, Saunders has retired; in *Hunters of Humans*, he is still quite active as a senior policeman. Nonetheless, it is clearly set "after the War," and very much in the atmosphere of the social changes occurring at that time.

Saunders and his subordinate, Austen, come down from London (by motorcycle) to investigate a suspicious rural death; they take rooms with Ann Studley (of all the possible surnames in Britain, one has to wonder why the author chose that one, given her experiences at the Studley Horticultural and Agricultural College) and her father, whose very reduced circumstances require them to take in boarders to make ends meet.

Ann and Austen provide the romantic interest, but the death in the local manor house (which belonged to Ann's family, before her father's intemperance forced him to sell it, and live in a small house that was Ann's mother's) provides the overall plot. Austen comes from a working class family, but almost finished a university-level technical education before being forced by family circumstances to go to work; he has brought sophisticated chemical testing processes into the force. One of the tensions between Ann and Saunders is their mutual anxiety about whether the other will take their class differences be insurmountable.

"Ann's class was dying out; its day was over; there was no employment for it in a post-war, mechanized universe. Its children, when it intermarried with itself, were hard to rear. Saunder's type was dying out too, owing to better housing, better education and the passing of starvation wages. His sons, if he had had any, would have been like Austen. Austen's class was spreading hand over fist, absorbing Saunders, absorbing Ann; establishing new standards of aristocracy within itself -- standards of vigour and efficiency and technical expertness."

"Blue blood has its points when it is really blue, but when it gets like watered claret, honest red blood is much to be preferred."

The death at the manor house was only recognized as suspect because the local doctor had been away when it happened, and a more up-to-date physician had become suspicious and reported the

death to the authorities. It turns out that in fact the death was a case of poisoning, involving the use of foxglove to produce symptoms of heart disease to mask the later effects of potassium cyanide. (This novel was published a year or two before Agatha Christie's *Appointment with Death*, which also features digitalis poisoning, but through injection rather than through home-made foxglove extract.)

As the story unfolds, Ann comes to realize that the murderer is probably her father, and that he has probably murdered her mother and grandmother, using the same technique -- one which has implicated her as an unwitting accomplice. This realization is another impediment to the developing romantic relationship, since Ann reasonably enough supposes that it might create difficulties for Austen to be connected with the daughter of a murderer.

The difficulties that arise between Austen and Ann put her under extreme stress, described in a comment that, in isolation, is utterly typical of Dion Fortune.

"Ann could not think. Her mind worked in a series of pictures, as minds do when life is driven down to its foundations."

The scene shifts to London, to court, and newspapers, providing more occasion for tart observations about manners and customs, the foibles of attorneys and jurors, and the use of extra-judicial interventions by otherwise well-disciplined line police when their supervisors make it clear that they aren't noticing. The difficulties between Austen and Ann are resolved, as are the legal issues, and the replacement of an older, corrupt and decaying social order by a newer and more vigorous one is clearly under way.

## §

As a novel, *Hunters of Humans* lacks some of the ease and focus of the other V.M. Steele novels: it is almost as though it were a first effort to tell a story that was both analytic and romantic. The narrative, analytic voice is much more present, and in fact there are really several strands of narration: the story of Austen and Ann; the story of the wily Saunders, whose passion is the game of hunting other human beings; and the story of the transformation of British society, both in the country and in the city, as different classes fall and rise.

There is also a stream of psychological, even psychotherapeutic, observation. It is hard, for example, not to wonder about Ann's belated realization of her father's activities, and her own involvement in them. It is as though she is living in a fairy-tale enchantment, as though compelled by an ogre in a dream. It is her involvement with Austen that begins to awaken her, to give her a way out of the ogre's cave.

At the same time, Austen is also under a spell -- one of extended adolescence or immaturity, indicated not only by his intense focus on his work, but also in his odd role as a kind of beef-cake figure for press photographers, emblematic of a self-absorption that is only overcome when he is forced to deal with his relationship with Ann.

Finally, the narrator is well-equipped with tart observations about manners and customs, and the difference between the official and the actual (especially in legal matters), and an untroubled disregard for conventions (social and legal) when they do not align with the inner truth of a situation.

As Dion Fortune, Violet Firth wrote several statements about her occult novels. Unfortunately, if she wrote anything about the novels she published under the name V.M. Steele, it does not seem to have survived.

However, in her article, "The Novels of Dion Fortune" (reprinted in *Dion Fortune's Rites of Isis and of Pan*, Skylight Press, 2013), in the course of discussing her occult novels, she also described her own background as a writer, and it may be helpful to refer to some of those statements.

She describes herself as, "by temperament and training a journalist and fiction writer," and further mentions that,

... a hard and exacting discipline, first of quality and then of quantity, ...furnished me with a literary style that was an absolutely pliable tool in my hand; rapid, effortless, requiring the minimum of revision, so that the first draft can generally go to the printers uncopied. In fact, constant unceasing paper-covering resulted in a facility that allowed my subconscious getting itself down on paper. Consequently my novels are dramatised day-dreams. They are not written; they are lived and recorded. Everything is seen and heard exactly as if I were watching a play at the theatre.

She also states, "I would write novels anyway, even if I did not write occult novels," as indeed she did.

I have a story-teller's imagination, and must write novels, whether they serve any useful purpose or not, in the same way that a hen must lay eggs, for otherwise the poor creature would burst. But because I have a purpose in my life, which is the work of initiation organised as The Fraternity of the Inner Light, my novels have a purpose, which is the purpose of initiation. Therefore my novels have not got a purpose stuck on like a luggage label, after the dreadful manner of the allegorists, but spring from my purpose as the seed from the soil in which it germinates, into which it strikes its roots, and from which it draws its vitality.

The V.M. Steele novels are not occult novels, in other words, they do not embody explicit initiatory formulae. However, it may be possible to apply another remark to these novels.

We have, then, two types of novel – the novels of interpretation, and the novels of wish-fulfilment. Knowing this as a novelist, and also knowing as a psychologist the part played by the day-dream, I decided to put the two together and produce novels that should come as near to an initiation ceremony as possible; that is to say, it should produce in receptive persons something of the same result as produced by the experience of going through a ritual initiation.

And later:

I have tried to make use of the dramatic form of the thriller-romance, as a vehicle for a mystic and cosmic interpretation. Read by a person who has it in him to respond, these stories will put him in touch with the corresponding cosmic factor through his day-dream identification of himself with the hero who is put in touch with cosmic factors in the course of the story; in fact each story is the story of an initiation, and if the reader identifies himself with the hero, or herself with the heroine, they will be taken through that initiation as surely as a young sporting dog is trained to be coupled to an obedient and gun-wise beast who knows the words of command.

In the V. M. Steele novels, it is not cosmic factors but social factors and forces that are analyzed, and around which the thriller-romance is built. The novels use the vehicle of dual identification (with the male or female protagonist) to transmit, not cosmic initiation, but social initiation: awakening to a world in flux – and, even more, awakening through an empowering romantic relationship into an adult ability to deal with that world. Love and work: in this, at least, Violet Firth did not end up far from her psychoanalytic roots.



#### 4: Chaste in Martaban: Foreword to *Beloved of Ishmael*

If ... there is no capacity for response, the reader will probably classify the stories with *Tarzan of the Apes*. If there is a capacity for response, and at the same time repressions and dissociations of psychopathology corresponding to the thesis of the book the reader ... will have the equivalent of a fairly severe psychic shock because the book has spoken to their subconsciousness words they do not desire to hear. ... One of these days I may be lucky enough to be reviewed by a reviewer with a complex, and then my fortune is made!

Dion Fortune, "The Novels of Dion Fortune" (reprinted in *Dion Fortune's Rites of Isis and of Pan*, Skylight Press, 2013)

As little as Violet Firth could have expected it, of all the V.M. Steele novels, or of the Dion Fortune novels, this is the one most likely to tread firmly and relentlessly on the complexes of the early 21st century reader. Furthermore, although she expected readers to be shocked for essentially Freudian reasons due to her relative bluntness about sexual mores, readers of the early 21st century are more likely to be shocked for Adlerian reasons.

One currently popular approach to reading has been described as, "Skim until offended," and people given to this approach will not have to read very far into the novel before their complexes have been well and truly trod on. To explain why, however, I'll first have to describe the novel.

#### **Power and the Land**

The story begins with Nina, daughter of a country vicar, on her way by ship to Africa to meet her fiancé, who has insisted that they be married in Africa. During the voyage, she becomes acquainted with a woman missionary, whose strength of character she admires without finding her altogether congenial. She hears that Africa has a generally deleterious effect on whites, who become prey to disease and drink, and general demoralization. When she asks whether it is possible to avoid this effect, she hears that there are few people who manage to do so. There are for example some missionaries whose dedication and discipline carries them through. There is also a deplorable example, a renegade Briton, one Cassalis, who has engaged in a career of lawlessness -- slaving, rum-running, gun-running, and so on. He has also "unified the Juju lodges" and established "African Tammany," an extensive network of crime and corruption that has worked to keep him safe from official retaliation. He has also, somehow, managed to keep himself healthy and vigorous -- perhaps too vigorous, if it is true that he has half-breed children scattered along the coast.

When she finally arrives at the river settlement to which her fiancé has summoned her, Nina gradually discovers several things, none of them welcome. First, it becomes clear that her fiancé is falling apart. He has become an alcoholic wreck, and is barely able to function. Second, it seems that he is all too familiar with people like himself, or worse; the hotel he has arranged seems a very dubious establishment. All the Europeans she encounters seem at best pathetic ruins, and often much worse. Nevertheless, she finds herself delighted and enthralled by Africa itself, feeling that she has finally awakened from a long, dreary dream.

Her fiancé takes her out for a bit, and is met by an old acquaintance, one Lewis, who is a vivid contrast to everyone else. He seems vigorous and healthy; he is dressed in a kind woolen garment that, he explains, is far more suitable to the climate than those worn by the Europeans, and he seems to have an acute and ironical turn of mind. During their conversation, she shares her sense of delight at the vitality that seems to well up from the very soil, and Lewis suddenly stops treating her as a negligible accessory to her fiancé, and begins to engage in a real conversation -- about Africa, the difference between heaven-oriented religion and earth-oriented religion, and other matters. He also

makes some remarks that lead Nina to think that he might be someone useful to know -- and far more likely to be helpful than her fiancé.

When she and her fiancé return to the hotel, two other things become clear. All the material that he has asked her to buy and bring out to set up their new household is actually being sold off to raise money -- and he has no intentions of marrying her at all, but (she suspects, and the general attitude of the hotel patrons suggests) is probably looking to sell her off as well.

She manages to get away from her fiancé, and meet up with Lewis, explain her situation, and throw herself on his self-interested and ironical mercy. He offers to get her out of town on his launch (with a very competent black African crew), and they manage to escape their pursuers and make off up the river. After some further conversation, Lewis proposes that they stop at a mission on the river and get married. She agrees. They do -- but in the course of the proceedings she discovers that "Lewis" is not his surname, as she'd assumed -- his full name is in fact "Lewis Cassalis". Difficulties ensue.

The story then proceeds on three main tracks.

First, the account of the vicissitudes of the relationship between Nina and Cassalis, which suffers a series of impediments and resolutions that have nothing to do with suspense about getting married or having sexual relations -- rather reminiscent of the Edgar Rice Burroughs plots in many of the Tarzan novels, in which Lord Greystoke and his wife are always being separated by chance events and by villainy, and have to struggle to be reunited.)

Second, the gradual elucidation of Cassalis' backstory -- his fall from colonial grace, his adoption by Ibrahim, an Arab slave trader, his deep delight with the vitality of Africa and his initiation into the ways of African life, his acculturation to, and mastery of, the system, his complete alienation from "respectable" colonial life and avoidance of it when he is not preying on it, and his pleasure in being part of a counter-system that is African rather than colonial.

Third, there is the contemporary track -- Cassalis' trading activities, their stay in his secret highland retreat, the recurrent attempts of the colonial authorities to capture and prosecute him, and several episodes of capture and escape.

The tangle of villainies and misunderstandings must be resolved by three parties: Nina, Cassalis, and a newly-appointed senior colonial official and his wife (who both know a surprising amount about what goes on, and are utterly unfazed by the gritty realities of life). In the end, the couple is reunited and their union strengthened, the legal tangles are resolved, the rebellion redirected, and Cassalis is offered a job tailored to his particular skills and quirks.

This story has several features that have probably caused more recent readers to squirm. First, the it takes the colonial situation more or less as a given, and does not offer any overt or explicit critique of it; in fact, the resolution involves a re-integration with it. Second, the story features not only stock characters and ethnic stereotypes, but a substantial vocabulary of casual ethnic disparagement (Portuguese traders are "dagoes"; black Africans are generally "niggers", or occasionally "bucks" or "mammies", although "picaninny" is also used at one point to refer to Lewis' and Nina's child). Third, the "Juju lodge" subplot, in which Africans are manipulated through their belief in the cult of the ape messiah, seems to rely on an insulting view of African gullibility. (On the other hand, there is no use of the comedic stereotype of the eye-rolling, horrified, superstitious black; the black Africans of the novel are not figures of fun.) Fourth, the two main characters have very little interest in the proprieties -- either of their time or of ours. For example, it is at one point mentioned in passing that Cassalis has stopped patronizing brothels after his marriage -- but this is not mentioned in a way that suggests that there is any ethical weight in either course of action. When someone asserts to Nina, in the course of an attempt to alienate her from him, that Cassalis has half-breed offspring up and down the coast, it barely registers with her as an issue. In a setting that nowadays would be heavily moralized (or "politicized"), none of the characters indulges in moralizing

reflection. Cassalis turns away from slave-trading because it displeases him; while he was involved with it, he tried to treat his chains of slaves fairly well because it made good business sense, and because it pleased him to do so. The main characters act from their energies; they enact their desires. They act on the basis of taste and distaste, alliance and enmity, honor and dishonor. Corruption is not immoral: it is weak, ignoble, distasteful -- and occasionally useful enough. Except for the occasional righteous missionary, an explicit concern with proprieties and morality is usually an attribute of the degenerate and corrupt.

In many ways, the plausibility and motive force of the novel depend on the idea of individual reactions to the elemental force and energy of the African soil, presented in a way reminiscent of CG Jung's accounts of his own African experiences, and not unlike Charles Williams' novel *Shadows of Ecstasy* (1933), in which there is an incursion of African energy into sleepy England.

Three questions arise. First, what can a reader in the early 21st century make of this story? Second, what was the author intending to do? And third, how does it fit into the body of her work?

### **In the Foreign Country of the Past**

In the English-speaking world of the early 21st century, there are several issues that are so embedded in a tissue of cultural contradictions that they are hard to examine, or discuss, dispassionately – and any attempt to do so is often felt to be itself illegitimate. One of these is the issue of race.

It is almost inevitable that a reader nowadays will read this book through the filter of the conflicting, even paradoxical, demands of these cultural contradictions. Modern publishers tend to vet carefully books that touch on issues of race, sexuality, cultural conflict, and so on, even trying them out on focus groups or consulting sensitivity committees before committing to publishing them. Encountering a book that has clearly not been through such a process can be at very least disconcerting, and for some people quite distressing.

Of course, no one is obliged to read this book. For those who undertake the adventure, however, it may be helpful to remember that it was written in a time when the modern complex fabric of anxiety, guilt and hostility was still to be woven, and before people had become to treating such issues with exquisite delicacy.

The book will, unavoidably, be at least a bit jarring. But that can be a positive, even instructive experience, if one reads mindfully, being aware of one's own reactions as the story unfolds. By an accident of history, this novel has come to achieve a kind of distancing effect that will tend to keep readers from naive immersion, and lead them to be instead to be aware of the interplay of the thriller-romance fantasy and their own reactions.

Most people who read this book will be doing so because they wish to know more of the author, rather than because they simply want to pass the time with a romance or adventure. For such readers, then, this distancing effect will be a positive feature, rather than a defect.

### **The Only Thing We Learn From History**

Our author was not a denizen of the early 21st century: she was born toward the end of 1890, and died at the beginning of 1946. As far as anyone knows, the farthest she ever went from England was Wales; it is not clear that she ever reached Scotland. What, then, was she doing writing of Africa?

Africa featured frequently in the fiction and journalism of the early 20th century – Edgar Rice Burroughs and Edgar Wallace come to mind, along with Lawrence G. Green. Furthermore, at least two of the author's teachers, Dr. Lillias Hamilton (the unscrupulous "Warden" in *Psychic Self-Defense*) and Dr. Theodore Moriarty (the model for Dr. Taverner), had spent time in Africa before she knew them.

Despite this, it is important to remember that she was not writing about Africa as an ethnographic and historical reality. She was using the African setting to write about something else, and in doing so she makes certain assumptions that were part of the tradition (exoteric as well as esoteric) from which she wrote.

First, it is clear that "Africa" in the novel stands for energy and power: that those who thrive there are those for whom energy and power are congenial, and those who fail are those who are weak, or who cannot open themselves to the abundance of energy offered by the land. In the terms of the novel, virtue is, and comes from, strength; vice is, and comes, from weakness – as indeed the roots of the words suggest. The primary motivators for all characters are issues of strength and power: even sexuality is lived in terms of power and weakness, honor and dishonor. In psychological terms, the novel is cast in Adlerian rather than Freudian or even Jungian, terms. Superiority and inferiority are the issues, not desire, or a quest for meaning. Cassalis, the hero, is bad and dangerous to know, and arguably a bit mad, and the heroine recognizes, and responds immediately to, the difference between the alpha male Cassalis and her less-than-beta fiancé.

But "Africa" also means something in the esoteric context from which she was writing. Esotericists have often claimed to see beyond, or better than, the natural science of their day, using current natural science to interpret the esoteric tradition, and using the esoteric tradition to "correct" or re-vision those natural sciences. In the early to mid-20th century, one such process occurred with respect to the relationship that was posited to exist between the energy centers of the body (as depicted, for example, in Theosophical works, or in the Indian works from which they derived) and the endocrine glands, the functions of which were coming under scientific investigation at that time. Esotericists linked the endocrine glands to the "psychic centers" (whichever version they were inclined to use), and used the lore of the psychic centers to re-interpret the function of the endocrine glands.

At that time, the older idea of characteristic constitutional humoral balances (phlegmatic, choleric, and so on) became reinterpreted as characteristic types of constitutional endocrine balance: thus, Dr. Rupert Malcolm, in *Moon Magic*, spends time in the National Gallery reflecting on the endocrine balances of the nudes.

Beyond this, however, it was thought that races each had a characteristic endocrine balance or constitutional type. (See, for example, Ivor Geike Cobb's 1928 book, *The Glands of Destiny*). This is one of the sources of the idea that, since occult training works on the "energy centers" (endocrine glands), certain modes of training are better suited to one racial type (endocrine constitution) than another, and using the inappropriate mode of training could lead to serious disturbances – not just psychological, but physiological as well. Racial hybridization, too, was looked on as a source of physiological unbalance, as though well-established equilibria would be put into disarray by indiscriminate blending.

As is generally the case in medicine, every new discovery leads to a rush of excited speculation that is often treated as fact, until practical application reveals the shortcomings of the premature synthesis (when the shiny new tool you have is a hammer, the world presents a multitude of thumbs). By the early 21st century, the simplicities of the earlier synthesis have become untenable. Endocrinology, pharmacology, and genetics no longer much resemble what they were in the 1920s, and esoteric notions based in century-old biology have become more of a puzzle than a key.

A very full scholarly career could be devoted to tracing out the history of the interaction between esotericism and biomedicine; no doubt before the end of that career, new material would still be becoming available.

## Final Overview

With the publication of the fourth V.M. Steele novel, all known works written under that name are available again.

What can be said of the whole body of work?

All four novels are quite congruent with the novels of Dion Fortune, in that they are explorations of the struggles of, and choices made by, people who are decidedly outcast and marginal. In three of the four, the male protagonist has been outcast and stigmatized; only in *Hunters of Humans* is the male protagonist a part of the respectable world -- and even so, his position is a transitional one. In all four, the female protagonist is a young, displaced woman who chooses -- or is led by circumstances to be almost forced to choose -- inner truth over outer respectability, to make her own system lest she be enslaved by another's.

In all four, the authority of the conventional or respectable world is itself called into question not only by the choice of life over convention, but by the frequent ironical observations made by the narrative voice about the ways in which the conventional world itself is maintained by back-stage manipulations and accommodations. Finally, the reintegration at the end is achieved on the outcasts' own terms, and represents a partial surrender on the part of the forces of conventional authority (and the authority of convention).

However, there is a sharp break between first two, set in England and the last two, set in Africa and China. The world of the first two is English; in the last two, although the story involves an Englishwoman going into a strange land, that strange land also comes, in effect, to England, in the English imagination of the writer and readers.

The last two also suggest an uncompleted thematic pattern. In some occult lore, there are three major energies underlying reality, Power, Wisdom and Love, and these are associated respectively with the religious systems of Africa, "the East" (Buddhism), and "the West" (Christianity). It is conceivable that the novel set in Africa was intended to exemplify the theme of Power, and that set in China was meant to exemplify the theme of Wisdom. If so, it may also be that the author's unexpected death prevented her from writing yet another novel, one dealing with the energies of Love.

We have the author's own remarks about her aim in writing her occult novels; unfortunately, nothing survives about any larger aim in writing these seemingly non-occult novels. However, given her testimony about the initiatory agenda of the major occult novels, we might well speculate that these secular novels also contained an initiatory intent.

In the absence of evidence, such speculations are likely to be arbitrary at best. Still, the pattern in all four novels is that of a romance-thriller, a union of male and female, in the context of a reconciliation of the lower with the higher, the old with the new, individual energy and power with the world of convention, and, finally, the foreign with the domestic.

It would hardly be going too far to suppose that our perceptive and analytic author, aware of the transformations that her country and her world were undergoing, was hoping to provide certain seed ideas to the minds of her readers, and through them, to the "group mind" of her nation. Her hope would have been that such seed ideas would enable her readers, and the people of her nation, to hold in a single image the integration of opposites, and thereby provide a pattern to resolve those conflicts on an inner level, so that they would not have to work themselves out more disastrously in the outer world.