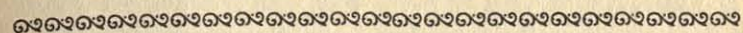


THE DERMIS PROBE

OVER eight hundred years ago, the philosopher Hakim Majdud Sanai of Ghazna (Afghanistan), in his *Walled Garden of Truth*, published this tale in a form corresponding to the needs of his time. His pupil and fellow-countryman, Jalaludin Rumi, immortalized his version in the incomparable *Mathnavi*, towards the end of the thirteenth century. In 1965 this adaptation was filmed by the celebrated producer-director Richard Williams on the basis of a twentieth-century version by Idries Shah.

The film won a citation as an Outstanding Film of the Year, being chosen for exhibition at the London and New York Film Festivals.

The Dermis Probe



MEMBERS of the Commission of World Scientists gaze at a bewildering sight, brought to us by television, using cameras equipped with close-up lenses of inordinate power.

The picture pans across a greyish, striated surface, a vista of solid in space, broken here and there by fissures, sometimes curving, sometimes obscured by flat shadows. Nothing moves, nothing grows on the barren area. The harsh roughness of the sight hints at a silent, empty mass, an outer skin as of a larva or a pachyderm, gnarled as though with immemorial age.

As we watch, the American commentator's voice sets the scene of this documentary report:

'From the beginning of time, man has consistently and untiringly explored his environment, he has striven to extend the threshold of his knowledge, even driving probes deep into outer space ...'

The British voice of the Chairman of the Commission is now heard, as the pictures of the object alternate, the angles varying, to give as complete a view as possible of the intimidating, silent bulk:

'What we are considering here is the, er, topography of the outer husk, as it were, the skin of the, er, bulk of a mass whose characteristics are ...'

Now fades in the matter-of-fact report of the laboratory astro-physicist, giving a fragment of his results:

'... Microscopic sections of this undoubtedly organic material betray a cellular structure strikingly akin to Dermic tissue.'

The viewers can hear sounds corresponding with the laboratory operation. The astro-physicist continues:

'Staining the section with Von Glauben's Fluid ...'

He is interrupted, for this is a democratic discussion.

The German Scientist's rejoinder is clearly heard:

'Von Glauben's Fluid? May I point out that this was found to be a totally arbitrary method in early nineteen hundred and sixty-three, when it was superseded by Kauffer and Blakmann's Traumatic Method. It is totally out of date.'

The Chairman, like all good chairmen, switches the discussion to bring in another constructive scientist:

'Er, no, yes, er, quite; however, pending further corroboration, er, to resume, we can be safe, and, indeed, germane, in asking Professor Markarjee to give us some data on the basis of his Indian experiences with this material.'

Dr Markarjee is brisk and to the point:

'I can categorically state that positively this material cannot be conclusively classified by conventional categorization. All personnel engaged in the combined Calcutta and Benares project were objective in their subjectivity because they had been subjected to an intense programme of induced Nirvana. It is also incumbent upon me to say ...'

But time is running short, and the director of the programme fades in the unemotional voice of the American Space Expert, to give another view:

'We have recently found that the radio-carbon/90 dating of this material gives us one-two-three years on the relative timescale with a calculated error of plus or minus six point-zero. Tensile strength is directly proportional to bulk and destruct temperature demonstrates little resistance. Since this material cannot be milled or rolled, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration considers it unsuitable for the fabrication of nose-cones. It is therefore declassified.'

Now for the radio-astronomer's results:

'We have definitely established that it is not a quasi-stellar source of radio propagation, but by employing our double-basin transmitter we have been able to record marked scatter, and it could conceivably be used as a selective reflector, if a

substance with these characteristics were needed for advanced and extremely specialized work.'

The German Scientist, asked for his opinion again, remarks:

'But Kauffer and Blakmann have consistently shown that cellular differentiation can be more accurately demonstrated by high-magnetic differential illumination and spectroscopic micro-analysis.'

The Chairman feels that the time has come to bring the programme to a graceful end:

'Ah, well, er. I think that, er, we can all safely conclude that while knowing nothing of the overall picture, all evidence tends to suggest that the specific material in question, while not static and—seemingly—singularly obstructive and of a rather fibrous character, will undoubtedly reveal itself in its own good time: and, indeed, take its rightful place in the scheme of things.'

The camera zoom-lenses are beginning to retreat as the American Commentator gives his final ringing phrase:

'... And will eventually fall before Man's ever-questing search.'

While the credit lists of participants are being rolled across the picture, it is possible to see that the lenses have retracted to such an extent that, for the first time, the whole of the object, not just its skin, is visible. It is a large, African, elephant.

But the Motto of the Institute of Comparative Dermatography now nearly obscures the picture, getting larger as we read:

THE PARTS ARE GREATER THAN THE
WHOLE