

LADY PERNELLE

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The home of Lady Pernelle and Nicolas Flamel, the oldest house in Paris.

In this excerpt from her book Great Women Initiates, Soror Hélène Bernard introduces us to the fourteenth century Alchemist Pernelle Flamel (1326 – 1397) and her husband, Nicolas.

Justice being most often administered in heaven, very rarely on earth, and still less in history, Lady Pernelle had a famous husband: Nicolas Flamel. In this article there are no great alchemical treatises or magical formulae, but only a few lines on the life of one of the most mysterious couples of the fourteenth century and perhaps even of past and future centuries.

Born in Pontoise, in the year 1330, young Nicolas Flamel opened a shop in Paris on the right bank, near the Cemetery of the Innocents, where many of his colleagues were established. But very soon an epidemic of the black plague forced the writers' guild to leave the neighborhood of the cemetery, then overpopulated, and to settle in the district of the Church Saint-Jacques de la Boucherie. It was in this agitated Paris that a "damned" science called *alchemy* thrived. One night, an angel, all clad in white, appeared to Flamel,

presenting to him a richly illustrated ancient manuscript and saying: "Flamel, look at this book, you do not understand it at all, but the day will come when you shall see therein what no other could even catch a glimpse of."

Time passed, and one day, in 1357, he was given the opportunity to buy, for two florins, a strange book in which he recognized the obscure language he had seen in his initiatory dream. This large golden book puzzled Flamel. The finely engraved copper cover concealed enigmatic illustrations and beautifully formed letters.

During that same year, the eminent writer courted Lady Pernelle, twice a widow of rich merchants in the district. Four years his elder, the well-to-do Pernelle took a deep interest in the new sciences. More than a devoted companion, both a patron of the arts and letters and an adviser, she transformed young Flamel, a simple bookseller and copyist of the Petit Marais district, as well as a zealous student of hidden knowledge, into one of

the most famous masters of divine magic. Like a queen, her first name was also her last. The name *Pernelle*, from “perpetual” or “perpetuity,” had a highly symbolical meaning for this “immortal” personage. Married in Saint-Jacques Church around 1360, the couple led a simple life in their home bearing the sign of “La Fleur de Lys.” Trade and good deeds occupied their days, while they devoted part of their nights to the search for the Philosopher’s Stone.

In 1372, husband and wife officially willed their property to each other, as Pernelle’s family looked with a suspicious eye at the eventual heritage that her two husbands had left her and that she exclusively devoted to research and mysticism. Only altruism, love for science, and the perfection of the philosopher’s stone motivated Pernelle’s and Flamel’s devotion. To decipher the great *Book of Abraham the Jew* – to be able to understand and become imbued with each sign and each symbol of the mysterious pages – this was what these two people (walking questions marks) aspired to! The building of Notre-Dame de Paris was completed, and this monumental temple was an inexhaustible source of inspiration to these adepts of light, condemned to act in the darkness of night and secret caves.

In 1378, Pernelle encouraged her husband to undertake the initiatory journey leading to Saint-Jacques de Compostella in Spain. Wearing a cloth coat and large hat and carrying a scroll and a walking stick, the pilgrim Nicolas Flamel began his journey departing from the parvis of Saint-Jacques de la Boucherie Church, on his way south, around Easter in the year 1379.

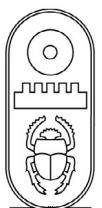
Inside his cloak, adorned with shells – symbols of his station as a devoted pilgrim to Saint-Jacques – he had sewn copies of the precious pages of his book. He hoped to meet, in the course of his journey, the

person capable of enlightening him on the meaning of these hermetic messages. The meeting took place in the province of Léon in Spain, through the agency of a merchant in Boulogne-sur-Mer, who introduced him to Master Canches, a learned man whose knowledge seemed to be boundless.

Enthused by the few sketches that Flamel showed him, Master Canches decided to undertake the journey back to Paris in order to see, consult, and press to his heart the sacred book whose existence he had heard about, and which he believed was lost. The two traveling companions returned to France. All during their long trek throughout the kingdom, Master Canches revealed to his fortunate friend the meaning of the ancient symbols. Alas, the old Master Canches did not have the chance to fulfill his dream: to examine the divine manuscript. After seven days of agony during which his faithful disciple did not leave his side for one minute, he died in Orleans. The Sainte-Croix Church in Orleans received his body while his soul walked beside Nicolas Flamel, who sadly went on his way.

During all that time, what was the bookseller pilgrim’s wife doing? She too was working for science. The alchemist Pernelle was busy studying the book and deciphering one hundred secrets therein. In December, after a few months’ absence, Flamel was back, rich with experiences and a newly acquired knowledge. The union of two individual but similar quests, and the power of the alchemical combination formed by the magic couple, guided these two seekers toward the apogee of the science of Hermes.

In the spring of 1380, Charles V, upon the advice of the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church, forbade the practice of alchemy. By no means did this decree prevent Lady Pernelle and



Nicolas Flamel from continuing their experiments. After three years of working together, of ceaseless efforts, of joys and disappointments, on January 17, at noon, in the year 1382, the couple had the great happiness to accomplish their first transmutation: a strange projection upon mercury and the element was transmuted into half a pound of silver. On April 25 of the same year, at 5:00 pm, the ultimate experiment of the “magi” Pernelle and Flamel took shape. After the white stone, the red stone was born from their fingers and their inspired minds. Awed, Pernelle did not tire of gazing at and touching this pure gold, a wonderful product from divine nature and their labor.

The goal of these true alchemists was not the lure of profit. After having repeated their great feat three times, the Flamels intensified their good deeds already begun, owing to Pernelle’s dowry. In spite of their new resources, they continued to lead a modest yet fascinating life. Like all the French people at that time, they went through the troubled and dark Middle Ages. Cruelty and intolerance were evident at all times about them, and if it had not been for Pernelle’s prudent vigilance, “La Fleur de Lys” would have been ransacked like a great many of the neighboring homes, and their sanctuary profaned.

Under the benevolence of these two “gold-makers,” fourteen hospitals were established in the city of Paris, and several churches, chapels, and cemeteries benefited from their generosity. The poor from the nearby parishes, as well as from other districts in the country, gained from their kindness. Hieroglyphs, paintings, and carvings appeared in various parts of the old city. The benefactors of the street of the writers thus hoped to perpetuate, in an initiatory language, the knowledge whose

key they withheld during these years of obscurity.

More determined than ever to see truth and the happiness of others blossom forth, Lady Pernelle drew up her last will and testament in 1386, in favor of her mystical companion. Her sixty years did not seem to have altered her vitality, and her face did not show the signs of old age. Had they discovered the elixir of eternal youth? It was declared so at the end of the fourteenth century. If the kings officially rebelled against the “alchemists,” they nonetheless were very much interested in their research, from which they hoped to benefit. But nothing can turn away the sincere seekers of the philosopher’s stone from the right path. The discovery of the philosopher’s stone was different and much superior to the plain transmutation of common elements into precious metals. Their true wealth was not of this world, although they actively contributed to humankind’s acceptance of it.

On September 11, 1397, Lady Pernelle and Nicolas Flamel’s “alchemical marriage” ended in its earthly expression. To Flamel, only the continuance of their common work filled the void created in his home and heart by the passing of the wise Pernelle. Upon her tomb, in the Cemetery of the Innocents, the bereaved Nicolas erected a pyramid in her memory.

For him initiation continued. Alone, he lived another twenty long years. He went through transition on March 22, 1417.

Where did immortal Pernelle go? Did she, as a few traveling witnesses stated, retire with her beloved companion to the high plateaus of an Eastern land? Perhaps she has returned to the Cosmic Oneness where she now reigns.

History ends, legend begins...