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978-1-108-04417-2 - Lives of the Necromancers: Or, an Account of the Most Eminent Persons in Successive Ages, who have Claimed for Themselves, or to whom has been Imputed by Others, the Exercise of Magical Power

William Godwin

Excerpt

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LIVES  
OF THE  
NECROMANCERS

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**T**HE improvements that have been effected in natural philosophy have by degrees convinced the enlightened part of mankind that the material universe is every where subject to laws, fixed in their weight, measure and duration, capable of the most exact calculation, and which in no case admit of variation and exception. Whatever is not thus to be accounted for is of mind, and springs from the volition of some being, of which the material form is subjected to our senses, and the action of which is in like manner regulated by the laws of matter. Beside this, mind, as well as matter, is subject to fixed laws; and thus every phenomenon and occurrence around us is rendered a topic for the speculations of sagacity and foresight. Such is the creed which science has universally prescribed to the judicious and reflecting among us.

It was otherwise in the infancy and less mature state of human knowledge. The chain of causes

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and consequences was yet unrecognized; and events perpetually occurred, for which no sagacity that was then in being was able to assign an original. Hence men felt themselves habitually disposed to refer many of the appearances with which they were conversant to the agency of invisible intelligences; sometimes under the influence of a benignant disposition, sometimes of malice, and sometimes perhaps from an inclination to make themselves sport of the wonder and astonishment of ignorant mortals. Omens and portents told these men of some piece of good or ill fortune speedily to befall them. The flight of birds was watched by them, as foretokening somewhat important. Thunder excited in them a feeling of supernatural terror. Eclipses with fear of change perplexed the nations. The phenomena of the heavens, regular and irregular, were anxiously remarked from the same principle. During the hours of darkness men were apt to see a supernatural being in every bush; and they could not cross a receptacle for the dead, without expecting to encounter some one of the departed uneasily wandering among graves, or commissioned to reveal somewhat momentous and deeply affecting to the survivors. Fairies danced in the moonlight glade; and something preternatural perpetually occurred to fill the living with admiration and awe.

All this gradually reduced itself into a system. Mankind, particularly in the dark and ignorant

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ages, were divided into the strong and the weak ; the strong and weak of animal frame, when corporeal strength more decidedly bore sway than in a period of greater cultivation ; and the strong and weak in reference to intellect ; those who were bold, audacious and enterprising in acquiring an ascendancy over their fellow-men, and those who truckled, submitted, and were acted upon, from an innate consciousness of inferiority, and a superstitious looking up to such as were of greater natural or acquired endowments than themselves. The strong in intellect were eager to avail themselves of their superiority, by means that escaped the penetration of the multitude, and had recourse to various artifices to effect their ends. Beside this, they became the dupes of their own practices. They set out at first in their conception of things from the level of the vulgar. They applied themselves diligently to the unravelling of what was unknown ; wonder mingled with their contemplation ; they abstracted their minds from things of ordinary occurrence, and, as we may denominate it, of real life, till at length they lost their true balance amidst the astonishment they sought to produce in their inferiors. They felt a vocation to things extraordinary ; and they willingly gave scope and line without limit to that which engendered in themselves the most gratifying sensations, at the same time that it answered the purposes of their ambition.

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As these principles in the two parties, the more refined and the vulgar, are universal, and derive their origin from the nature of man, it has necessarily happened that this faith in extraordinary events, and superstitious fear of what is supernatural, has diffused itself through every climate of the world, in a certain stage of human intellect, and while refinement had not yet got the better of barbarism. The Celts of antiquity had their Druids, a branch of whose special profession was the exercise of magic. The Chaldeans and Egyptians had their wise men, their magicians and their sorcerers. The negroes have their foretellers of events, their amulets, and their reporters and believers of miraculous occurrences. A similar race of men was found by Columbus and the other discoverers of the New World in America; and facts of a parallel nature are attested to us in the islands of the South Seas. And, as phenomena of this sort were universal in their nature, without distinction of climate, whether torrid or frozen, and independently of the discordant manners and customs of different countries, so have they been very slow and recent in their disappearing. Queen Elizabeth sent to consult Dr. John Dee, the astrologer, respecting a lucky day for her coronation; King James the First employed much of his learned leisure upon questions of witchcraft and demonology, in which he fully believed; and sir Matthew Hale in the year 1664 caused two old

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women to be hanged upon a charge of unlawful communion with infernal agents.

The history of mankind therefore will be very imperfect, and our knowledge of the operations and eccentricities of the mind lamentably deficient, unless we take into our view what has occurred under this head. The supernatural appearances with which our ancestors conceived themselves perpetually surrounded must have had a strong tendency to cherish and keep alive the powers of the imagination, and to penetrate those who witnessed or expected such things with an extraordinary sensitiveness. As the course of events appears to us at present, there is much, though abstractedly within the compass of human sagacity to foresee, which yet the actors on the scene do not foresee: but the blindness and perplexity of short-sighted mortals must have been wonderfully increased, when ghosts and extraordinary appearances were conceived liable to cross the steps and confound the projects of men at every turn, and a malicious wizard or a powerful enchanter might involve his unfortunate victim in a chain of calamities, which no prudence could disarm, and no virtue could deliver him from. They were the slaves of an uncontrollable destiny, and must therefore have been eminently deficient in the perseverance and moral courage, which may justly be required of us in a more enlightened age. And the men (but these were few compared with

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the great majority of mankind), who believed themselves gifted with supernatural endowments, must have felt exempt and privileged from common rules, somewhat in the same way as the persons whom fiction has delighted to pourtray as endowed with immeasurable wealth, or with the power of rendering themselves impassive or invisible. But, whatever were their advantages or disadvantages, at any rate it is good for us to call up in review things, which are now passed away, but which once occupied so large a share of the thoughts and attention of mankind, and in a great degree tended to modify their characters and dictate their resolutions.

As has already been said, numbers of those who were endowed with the highest powers of human intellect, such as, if they had lived in these times, would have aspired to eminence in the exact sciences, to the loftiest flights of imagination, or to the discovery of means by which the institutions of men in society might be rendered more beneficial and faultless, at that time wasted the midnight oil in endeavouring to trace the occult qualities and virtues of things, to render invisible spirits subject to their command, and to effect those wonders, of which they deemed themselves to have a dim conception, but which more rational views of nature have taught us to regard as beyond our power to effect. These sublime wanderings of the mind are well entitled to our labour to trace

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and investigate. The errors of man are worthy to be recorded, not only as beacons to warn us from the shelves where our ancestors have made shipwreck, but even as something honourable to our nature, to shew how high a generous ambition could soar, though in forbidden paths, and in things too wonderful for us.

Nor only is this subject inexpressibly interesting, as setting before us how the loftiest and most enterprising minds of ancient days formerly busied themselves. It is also of the highest importance to an ingenuous curiosity, inasmuch as it vitally affected the fortunes of so considerable a portion of the mass of mankind. The legislatures of remote ages bent all their severity at different periods against what they deemed the unhallowed arts of the sons and daughters of reprobation. Multitudes of human creatures have been sacrificed in different ages and countries, upon the accusation of having exercised arts of the most immoral and sacrilegious character. They were supposed to have formed a contract with a mighty and invisible spirit, the great enemy of man, and to have sold themselves, body and soul, to everlasting perdition, for the sake of gratifying, for a short term of years, their malignant passions against those who had been so unfortunate as to give them cause of offence. If there were any persons who imagined they had entered into such a contract, however erroneous was their belief, they must of necessity

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have been greatly depraved. And it was but natural that such as believed in this crime, must have considered it as atrocious beyond all others, and have regarded those who were supposed guilty of it with inexpressible abhorrence. There are many instances on record, where the persons accused of it, either from the depth of their delusion, or, which is more probable, harassed by persecution, by the hatred of their fellow-creatures directed against them, or by torture, actually confessed themselves guilty. These instances are too numerous, not to constitute an important chapter in the legislation of past ages. And, now that the illusion has in a manner passed away from the face of the earth, we are on that account the better qualified to investigate this error in its causes and consequences, and to look back on the tempest and hurricane from which we have escaped, with chastened feelings, and a sounder estimate of its nature, its reign, and its effects.

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#### AMBITIOUS NATURE OF MAN.

MAN is a creature of boundless ambition.

It is probably our natural wants that first awaken us from that lethargy and indifference in which man may be supposed to be plunged previously to the impulse of any motive, or the accession of any uneasiness. One of our earliest wants may be conceived to be hunger, or the desire of food.

From this simple beginning the history of man in all its complex varieties may be regarded as proceeding.

Man in a state of society, more especially where there is an inequality of condition and rank, is very often the creature of leisure. He finds in himself, either from internal or external impulse, a certain activity. He finds himself at one time engaged in the accomplishment of his obvious and immediate desires, and at another in a state in which these desires have for the present been fulfilled, and he has no present occasion to repeat those exertions which led to their fulfilment. This is the period of contemplation. This is the state which most eminently distinguishes us from the brutes. Here it is that the history of man, in its exclusive sense, may be considered as taking its beginning.

Here it is that he specially recognises in himself the sense of power. Power in its simplest acceptation, may be exerted in either of two ways, either

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in his procuring for himself an ample field for more refined accommodations, or in the exercise of compulsion and authority over other living creatures. In the pursuit of either of these, and especially the first, he is led to the attainment of skill and superior adroitness in the use of his faculties.

No sooner has man reached to this degree of improvement, than now, if not indeed earlier, he is induced to remark the extreme limitedness of his faculties in respect to the future; and he is led, first earnestly to desire a clearer insight into the future, and next a power of commanding those external causes upon which the events of the future depend. The first of these desires is the parent of divination, augury, chiromancy, astrology, and the consultation of oracles; and the second has been the prolific source of enchantment, witchcraft, sorcery, magic, necromancy, and alchemy, in its two branches, the unlimited prolongation of human life, and the art of converting less precious metals into gold.

#### HIS DESIRE TO PENETRATE INTO FUTURITY.

Nothing can suggest to us a more striking and stupendous idea of the faculties of the human mind, than the consideration of the various arts by which men have endeavoured to penetrate into the future, and to command the events of the future, in ways that in sobriety and truth are entirely out of our