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Thomas Wright

Excerpt

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SORCERY AND MAGIC.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY.

IF the universality of a belief be a proof of its truth, few creeds have been better established than that of sorcery. Every people, from the rudest to the most refined, we may almost add in every age, have believed in the kind of supernatural agency which we understand by this term. It was founded on the equally extensive creed, that, besides our own visible existence, we live in an invisible world of spiritual beings, by which our actions and even our thoughts are often guided, and which have a certain degree of power over the elements and over the ordinary course of organic life. Many of these powerful beings were supposed to be enemies of mankind, fiendish creatures which thirsted after human blood, or demons whose constant business it

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was to tempt and seduce their victim, and deprive him of the hope of salvation. These beings were themselves subject to certain mysterious influences, and became the slaves even of mortals, when by their profound penetration into the secrets of nature they obtained a knowledge of those influences. But more frequently their intercourse with man was voluntary, and the services they rendered him were only intended to draw him to a more certain destruction. It is a dark subject for investigation ; and we will not pretend to decide whether, and how far, a higher Providence may, in some cases, have permitted such intercourse between the natural and supernatural world. Yet the superstitions to which this creed gave rise have exerted a mighty influence on society, through ages, which it is far from uninteresting to trace in its outward manifestations.

The belief of which we are treating manifested itself under two different forms, sorcery and magic. The magician differed from the witch in this, that, while the latter was an ignorant instrument in the hands of the demons, the former had become their master by the powerful intermediation of a science which was only within reach of the few, and which these beings were unable to disobey. In the earlier ages, this mysterious science flourished widely, and there were noted schools of magic in several parts of Europe. One of the most famous was that of Toledo in Spain, nearly on the confines which divided Christendom from Islam, on that spiritual neutral ground where the demon might then bid defiance to the Gospel or the Koran. It was in this school that Gerbert, in the tenth century, is said to have ob-

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GERBERT THE PHILOSOPHER.

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tained his marvellous proficiency in knowledge forbidden by the Church. Gerbert lived at Toledo, in the house of a celebrated Arabian philosopher, whose book of magic, or "grimoire," had unusual power in coercing the evil one. Gerbert was seized with an ardent desire of possessing this book, but the Saracen would not part with it for love or money, and, lest it might be stolen from him, he concealed it under his pillow at night. The Saracen had a beautiful daughter; and Gerbert, as the last resource, gave his love to the maiden, and in a moment of amorous confidence learnt from her the place where the book was concealed. He made the philosopher drunk, stole the grimoire, and took to flight. The magician followed him, and was enabled, by consulting the stars, to know where he was, either on earth or water. But Gerbert at last baffled him, by hanging under a bridge in such a manner that he touched neither one element nor the other, and finally arrived in safety on the sea-shore. Here he opened his book, and by its powerful enchantment called up the arch-fiend himself, who at his orders carried him in safety to the opposite coast.

The science of the magician was dangerous, but not necessarily fatal, to his salvation. The possession of one object led naturally to the desire of another, until ambition, or avarice, or some other passion, tempted him at length to make the final sacrifice. Gerbert is said to have sold himself on condition of being made a pope. Magicians were, in general, beneficent, rather than noxious to their fellow-men; it was only when provoked, that they injured or tormented them; and their vengeance

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was in most cases of a ludicrous character. A magician of the twelfth century, named Eustace the Monk, who also had studied in Toledo, was ill received in a tavern, in return for which he caused the hostess and her gossips to expose themselves in a disgraceful manner to the ridicule of their fellow-towns-people; the latter had shown him disrespect, and he set them all by the ears with his conjurations; a waggoner, in whose vehicle he was riding, treated him with insolence, and he terrified him by his enchantments. Another necromancer, according to a story of the thirteenth century, went to a town to gain money by his feats; the townspeople looked on, but gave him nothing; and in revenge, by his magic (*arte dæmonica*), he made them all strip to the skin, and in this condition dance and sing about the streets.

Sometimes the evil one had intercourse with men who were not magicians; when they were influenced by some unattainable desire, he appeared to them, called or uncalled, and bought their souls in exchange for the gratification of their wishes. Not unfrequently the victim had fallen suddenly from wealth and power, to extreme poverty and helplessness, and the tempter appeared to him when he had retired to some solitary spot to hide the poignancy of his grief. This circumstance was a fertile source of stories in the Middle Ages, in most of which the victim of the fiend is rescued by the interference of the Virgin. Sometimes he sought an interview with the demon through the agency of a magician. Thus Theophilus, a personage who figures rather extensively in medieval legends, was the seneschal of a

bishop, and, as such, a rich and powerful man; but his patron died, and the new bishop deprived him of his place and its emoluments. Theophilus, in his distress, consulted a Jew, who was a magician; the latter called in the fiend, and Theophilus sold himself on condition of being restored to his old dignity, with increased power and authority. The temper of men raised in the world in this manner was generally changed, and they became vindictive, cruel, and vicious. It was one of the articles of the compact of Theophilus with the demon, that during the remainder of his life, he should practise every kind of vice and oppression; but before his time came, he repented, and from a great sinner, became a great saint. We have in the legend of Faust, ("Dr. Faustus,") the general type of a medieval magician.

The witch held a lower degree in the scale of forbidden knowledge. She was a slave without recompense; she had sold herself without any apparent object, unless it were the mere power of doing evil. The witch remained always the same, poor and despised, an outcast from among her fellow-creatures. It is to this class of persons that our work will be more especially devoted; and in the present chapter we will endeavour to trace, amid the dim light of early medieval history, the ideas of our forefathers on this subject, previous to the time when trials for sorcery became frequent.

It has been an article of popular belief, from the earliest period of the history of the nations of Western Europe, that women were more easily brought into connexion with the spiritual world

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than men : priestesses were the favourite agents of the deities of the ages of paganism, and the natural weakness and vengeful feelings of the sex made their power an object of fear. To them especially were known the herbs, or animals, or other articles which were noxious to mankind, and the ceremonies and charms whereby the influence of the gods might be obtained to preserve or to injure. After the introduction of Christianity, it was the demons who were supposed to listen to these incantations, and they are strictly forbidden in the early ecclesiastical laws, which alone appear at first to have taken cognizance of them. We learn from these laws that witches were believed to destroy people's cattle and goods, to strike people with diseases, and even to cause their death. It does not appear, however, that previous to the twelfth century, at least, their power was believed to arise from any direct compact with the devil. In the adventures of Hereward, a witch is introduced to enchant a whole army, but she appears to derive her power from a spirit which presided over a fountain. The Anglo-Saxon women seem, from allusions met with here and there in old writers, to have been much addicted to these superstitious practices, but unfortunately we have very little information as to their particular form or description. The character of Hilda, a in Bulwer's noble romance of "King Harold," is a faithful picture of the Saxon sorceress of a higher class. During the period subsequent to the Norman conquest, we are better acquainted with the general character of witchcraft in England, and among our neighbours on the continent, be-

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THE WITCH OF BERKELEY.

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cause more of the historical monuments of that period have been preserved.

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the power of the witches to do mischief was derived from a direct compact with the demon, whom they were bound to worship with certain rites and ceremonies, the shadows of those which had in remoter ages been performed in honour of the pagan gods. Southey's ballad has given a modern popularity to the story of the witch of Berkeley, which William of Malmsbury, an historian of the first-half of the twelfth century, relates from the information of one of his own acquaintance, who assured him that he was an eye-witness, and whom William "would have been ashamed to disbelieve." * No sooner had her unearthly master given the miserable woman warning that the hour had approached when he should take final possession, than she called to her death-bed her children and the monks of a neighbouring monastery, confessed her evil courses and her subjection to the devil, and begged that they would at least secure her body from the hands of the fiends. "Sew me," she said, "in the hide of a stag, then place me in a stone coffin, and fasten in the covering lead and iron. Upon this place another stone, and chain the whole down with three heavy chains of iron. Let fifty psalms be sung each night, and fifty masses be said by day, to break the power of the demons. If you can thus keep my body three nights, on the fourth day you may securely bury it in the ground." These directions were exe-

* Ego illud a tali audivi, qui se vidisse juraret, cui erubescerem non credere.

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cuted to the letter ; but psalms and masses were equally unavailable. The first night the priests withstood the efforts of the fiends ; the second they became more clamorous, the gates of the monastery were burst open in spite of the strength of the bolts, and two of the chains which held down the coffin were broken, though the middle one held firm. On the third night the clamour of the fiends increased till the monastery trembled from its foundations ; and the priests, stiff with terror, were unable to proceed of with their service. The doors at length burst open of their own accord, and a demon, larger and more terrible than any of the others, stalked into the church. He stopped at the coffin, and with a fearful voice ordered the woman to arise. She answered, that she was held down by the chain ; the demon put his foot to the coffin, the last chain broke asunder like a bit of thread, and the covering of the coffin flew off. The body of the witch then arose, and her persecutor took her by the hand, and led her to the door, where a black horse of gigantic stature, its back covered with iron spikes, awaited them, and, seating her beside him on its back, he disappeared from the sight of the terrified monks. But the horrible screams of his victim were heard through the country for miles as they passed along.

At this period the witches met together by night, in solitary places, to worship their master, who appeared to them in the shape of a cat, or a goat, or sometimes in that of a man. At these meetings, as we are informed by John of Salisbury, they had feasts, and some were appointed to serve at table, while others received punishment or reward, accord-

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THE NIGHT RIDERS.

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ing to their zeal in the service of the evil one. Hither, also, they brought children which they had stolen from their cradles, and which were sometimes torn to pieces and devoured. We see here the first outlines of the witches' "Sabbath" of a later age. The witches came to these assemblies riding through the air, mounted on besoms. William of Auverne, who wrote in the thirteenth century, informs us that when the witches wished to go to the place of rendezvous, they took a reed or cane, and, on making some magical signs and uttering certain barbarous words, it became transformed into a horse, which carried them thither with extraordinary rapidity. It was a very common article of belief in the middle ages, that women of this class rode about through the air at night, mounted on strange beasts; that they passed over immense distances in an incredible short space of time; and that they entered men's houses without opening doors or windows, and destroyed their goods, and injured their persons while asleep, sometimes even causing their death. Vincent of Beauvais, in the thirteenth century, tells a story of one of these wandering dames, who one day went to the priest in the church, and said, "Sir, I did you a great service last night, and saved you from much evil; for the dames with whom I am accustomed to go about at night, entered your chamber, and if I had not interceded with them, and prayed for you, they would have done you an injury." Says the priest, "The door of my chamber was locked and bolted, how could you enter it?" To which the old woman (for we are assured that it was an old woman) an-

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swered, " Sir, neither door nor lock can restrain or hinder us from freely going in and out wherever we choose." Then the priest shut and bolted the church doors, and seizing the staff of the cross, " I will prove if it be true," said he, " that I may repay you for so great a service," and he belaboured the woman's back and shoulders. To all her outcries, his only reply was, " Get out of the church and fly, since neither door nor lock can restrain you?" It was an argument that could not be evaded. A writer of the twelfth century, however, relates, *from his own knowledge*, an incident where a woman in France had been seized for her wicked opinions, and condemned to the fire; but, with a word or two of contempt for her keepers and judges, she approached the window of the room in which she was confined, uttered a charm, and instantly disappeared in the air.

Another faculty possessed by the witches of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, was that of taking strange shapes, as those of different animals, or of transforming others. It was a very prevalent belief that such persons turned themselves into ravenous wolves, and wandered about by night to devour people. They took many other shapes to indulge passions which could not be otherwise gratified. They sometimes revenged themselves upon their enemies, or those against whom they bore ill-will, by turning them into dogs or asses, and they could only recover their shapes by bathing in running water. William of Malmsbury, in the earlier part of the twelfth century, tells us, that in the high road to Rome there dwelt two old women, of no