

THE
BOOK OF
WITCHES

BY
OLIVER MADDOX HUEFFER

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FOREWORD

LEST any reader should open this volume expecting to read an exhaustive treatise on witches and witchcraft, treated scientifically, historically, and so forth, let me disarm him beforehand by telling him that he will be disappointed. The witch occupies so large a place in the story of mankind that to include all the detail of her natural history within the limits of one volume would need the powers of a magician no less potent than was he who confined the Eastern Djinn in a bottle. I have attempted nothing so ambitious as a large-scale Ordnance Map of Witchland; rather I have endeavoured to produce a picture from which a general impression may be gained. I have chosen, that is to say, from the enormous mass of material only so much as seemed necessary for my immediate purpose, and on my lack of judgment be the blame for any undesirable hiatus. I have sought, again, to show whence the witch came and why, as well as what she was and is; to point out, further, how necessary she is and must be to the happiness of mankind, and how great the responsibility of those who, disbelieving in her themselves, seek to infect others with their scepticism. We have few picturesque excrescences left upon this age of smoothly-running machine-wheels, certainly we cannot spare one of the most time-honoured and romantic of any. And if anything I have written about her seem incompatible with sense or fact, I would plead in extenuation that neither is essential to the firm believer in witchcraft, and that to be able to enter thoroughly into the subject it is above all things necessary to cast aside such nineteenth-century shibboleths.

I would here express my gratitude to the many friends who have assisted me with material, and especially to Miss Muriel Harris, whose valuable help has done much to lighten my task.

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THE BOOK OF WITCHES

CHAPTER I

ON A POSSIBLE REVIVAL OF WITCHCRAFT

To the superficial glance it might seem that he who would urge a revival of witchcraft is confronted by a task more Herculean than that of making dry bones live—in that the bones he seeks to revivify have never existed. The educated class—which, be it remembered, includes those who have studied in the elementary schools of whatever nation—is united in declaring that such a person as a witch never did, never could, and never will exist. It is true that there are still those—a waning band—who, preserving implicit faith in the literal exactitude of revealed religion, maintain that witchcraft—along with Gardens of Eden, giants, and Jewish leaders capable of influencing the movements of sun and moon—flourished under the Old Dispensation, even though it has become incredible under the New. Yet, speaking generally, the witch is as extinct in civilised men's minds as is the dodo; so that they who accept as gospel the vaticinations of race-course tipsters or swallow patent medicines with implicit faith, yet moralise upon the illimitability of human superstition when they read that witch-doctors still command a following in West Africa, or that Sicilian peasants are not yet tired of opening their purses to sham sorcerers.

Were the reality of sorcery dependent upon a referendum of our universities—or, for that matter, of our elementary school mistresses—it were at once proclaimed a clamant imposture. Fortunately for the witch, and incidentally for a picturesque aspect of the human intellect, the Enlightened, even if we include among them those who accept their dogma as the New Gospel, are but a

small—a ridiculously small—item of the human race. Compared with the whole population of the world, their numbers are so insignificant as to be for all practical purposes nonexistent. There are villages but a few miles beyond the boundary of the Metropolitan Police District, where the witch is as firmly enthroned in the imaginations of the mobility as in those of their ancestors three centuries ago. There are many British legislators who would refuse to start an electioneering campaign upon a Friday. I myself have known a man—and know him still—a Romney Marshlander, who, within the last decade, has suffered grievously—himself and through his children—at the hands of witches whose names and whereabouts he can detail. And I have known a woman—she kept a lodging-house in the Kennington Road—who, if not herself a witch, was yet the daughter of one, and of acknowledged power. It is true that, if the daughter's tale—told to me in the small front parlour in intervals between the crashing passage of electric trams and motor-lorries—may be accepted, her mother's gifts were put to no worse use than the curing of her Devonshire neighbours' minor ailments.

There is no need to go fifty, nor five, miles from London to find material for a revival in Black Magic. Scarcely a week passes but some old crone is charged before a Metropolitan police magistrate with having defrauded silly servant-girls on the pretence of telling them their futures. You cannot pass down Bond Street during the season without encountering a row of sandwich-men—themselves preserving very few illusions—earning a meagre wage in the service of this, that, or the other Society crystal-gazer, palmist, or clairvoyant. Who has not seen some such advertisement as the following—quoted from a current journal—proffering information about the future, "calculated from astrological horoscopes," at the

very moderate charge of half-a-crown. The advertiser—in deference to modern convention he is described as a "Professor" rather than a sorcerer—further protests his mastery of Phrenology, Graphology, Clairvoyance, and Psychometry. And this advertiser is but one of many, all seeking to gain some humble profit by following in the footsteps of Diana and Mother Demdyke of Pendle Forest.

Are there not a hundred and one select Societies, each with its band of earnest adherents—many with official organs, published at more or less regular intervals and commanding circulations of a sort—openly furthering "arts" such as would, two centuries ago, have entailed upon their members the charge of Witchcraft? Is not spiritualism exalted into an international cult? The very existence of such a coterie as the "Thirteen Club," with a membership sworn to exhibit, *hic et ubique*, their contempt of degrading superstitions, is the strongest testimony to their ubiquitous regard. Most curious fact of all, it is in America, the New World, home of all that is most modern and enlightened, that we find superstitions commanding most implicit faith. It is only necessary to glance through the advertisement pages of an American popular magazine to realise how far the New World has outstripped the Old in its blind adherence to this form of faith. Nowhere has the Hypnotic, the Mesmeric, the Psychic Quack such unchallenged empire.

In Lady Charlotte Bury's "Memoirs of a Lady in Waiting," we find an example of the belief in Witchcraft cherished in the most exalted circle in the nineteenth century. Writing of the unhappy Princess—later Queen—Caroline, wife of George IV., she says as follows:—"After dinner her Royal Highness made a wax figure as usual, and gave it an amiable addition of large horns; then took three pins out of her garment and stuck them through and through,

and put the figure to roast and melt at the fire.... Lady — says the Princess indulges in this amusement whenever there are no strangers at table, and she thinks her Royal Highness really has a superstitious belief that destroying the effigy of her husband will bring to pass the destruction of his Royal Person." We laugh at this instance of Royal credulity; yet is not the "mascot" a commonplace of our conversation? Madame de Montespan, it is recorded, had recourse—not without success—to the Black Mass as a means towards gaining the affections of Louis XIV. It is but a few years since the attention of the police was directed towards the practices of those—Society leaders for the most part—who had revived, in twentieth-century Paris, the cult of Devil worship. The most widely circulated London newspapers of the day gravely discuss in "special articles" the respective value of various mascots for motorists, or insert long descriptive reports of the vaticinations of this spiritualist or that wise-woman as to the probable perpetrators of mysterious murders. This is no exaggeration, as he may prove for himself who has patience to search the files of the London daily Press for 1907. And, be it remembered, the self-proclaimed mission of the contemporary Press is to mirror the public mind as the most obvious way of instructing it.

Under these circumstances it is easy to credit the possibility of a revival of the belief in witchcraft even in the most civilised countries of the modern world. What is more, it is far from certain that such a revival would be altogether deplorable. Granted that oceans of innocent blood were shed in the name of witchcraft—the same might be said of Christianity, of patriotism, of liberty, of half a hundred other altogether unexceptionable ideals. And, as with them, the total extinction of the witchcraft superstition might, not impossibly, have results no less disastrous than, for instance, the

world-wide adoption of European fashions in dress. This quite apart from any question of whether or no witches have ever existed or do still exist. Even if we grant that superstition is necessarily superstitious in the more degraded sense of the word, we need not therefore deny it some share in alleviating the human lot.

A very large—perhaps the greater—share of human happiness is based upon "make believe."

The world would be dull, miserable, intolerable did we believe only what our unfeeling stepmother Science would have us believe. It is already perceptibly less endurable—for those unfortunate enough to be civilised—since we definitely abandoned judgment by the senses in favour of algebraical calculations. While it might be too much to say that the number of suicides has increased in proportion to the decline of witchcraft, it is at least certain that superstition of whatever kind has, in the past, played a notable part in making humanity contented with its lot. The scientist has robbed us of Romance—he has taken from many of us our hope of Heaven, without giving us anything to put in its place; he reduces the beauty of Nature to a formula, so that we may no longer regard a primrose as a primrose and nothing more; he even denies us the privilege of regarding our virtues and vices as anything more than the inevitable results of environment or heredity. Every day he steals away more and more of our humanity, strips us of yet another of the few poor garments of phantasy shielding us from the Unbearable. He is indeed the Devil of modern days, forcing knowledge upon us whether we will or no. And we, instead of execrating him after the goodly fashion of our forefathers, offer our happiness upon his altars as though he were indeed the God he has explained away. And why? Purely on the faith of his own asseverations.

Why should we accept the scientist more than his grandmother, the witch? We have no better reason for accepting him than for rejecting what he tells us are no more than idle dreams. Let him discover what he will, it does but vouch the more decidedly for the illimitability of his, and our, ignorance. It is true he can perform apparent miracles; so could the witch. He pooh-poohs the arts that were so terrible to former generations; our posterity will laugh at his boasted knowledge as at a boastful child's. Already there are world-wide signs that whatever his success in the material world, mankind is ready to revolt against his tyranny over the Unseen. The innumerable new religious sects, the thousand and one ethical fads, the renaissance of so many ancient faiths—the Spiritualist and the Theosophist, the Christian Scientist and the Cooneyite, the Tolstoyan and the Salvationist—laugh at them individually who may—are all alike outward and visible signs of the revolt of man against being relegated to the insignificance of a scientific incident. And among such troubled waters witchcraft may well come into its own again. For it, as much as any, has brought happiness out of misery. Consider the unsuccessful man. Under the régime of enlightenment he can find no one to blame for his sorrows, nor anywhere to look for their solacement. Everything works according to immutable laws; he is sick, poor, miserable, because the Law of the Inevitable will have it so; he has no God to whom he can pray for some capricious alleviation; he cannot buy good fortune from the Devil even at the price of his soul—there is no God, nor Devil, nor good fortune nor ill; nothing but the imperturbably grinding cog-wheels upon whose orbit he is inevitably bound. Were he not a happier man if he might find an old-time witch whose spells, being removed, would leave him hope, even though fulfilment never come? Undoubtedly. We have been told that had there been no God, it would have been necessary

to invent one. Yes, and along with Him a Devil and good and evil spirits, and good luck and bad, and superstitions as many as we can cram into our aching pates—anything, everything that may save us from the horrible conception of a machine-like Certainty, from which there is no escape, after which there is no future. Surely it were better that a few thousand old women be murdered in the name of superstition, a few millions of human beings butchered in the name of religion, than that all mankind be doomed to such a fate.

Be it remembered, too, that even the witch has her grievance against the learned numbskulls who have undone her. For the witch-life was not without its alleviations. Consider. Without her witchcraft she was no more than a poor old, starved, shrunken woman, inconsiderable and unconsidered, ugly, despised, unhappy. With it she became a Power. She was feared—as all mankind wishes to be—hated perhaps, but still feared; courted, also, by those who sought her help. She was again Somebody, a recognisable entity, a human being distinguished from the common ruck. Surely that more than outweighed the chances of a fiery death. Nor was the method of her death without its compensations. Painful indeed it was, though scarcely more so than slow starvation. But if she knew herself innocent, she knew as well that her short agony was but the prelude to the eternal reward of martyrdom. If she believed herself, with that poor weary brain of hers, sold to the Devil, what a world of consolation in the thought that he, the Prince of the Powers of Darkness, scarcely inferior to the Almighty Himself, and to Him alone, should have singled her out as the one woman whose help he needed in all the countryside. And this being so, was there not always the hope that, as he had promised, he might appear even at the eleventh hour and protect his own. If

he failed, the witch had but little time to realise it and all the Hereafter, full of infinite possibilities, before her. Few witches, I think, but would have preferred their grim pre-eminence, with its sporting interest, to being made the butt of doctors little wiser than themselves in the sight of infinity, held up to mockery as silly old women, cozening or self-cozened.

If witches do not in fact exist for us, it is because we have killed them with laughter—as many a good and evil cause has been killed. Had we laughed at them from the beginning of things it is even possible that they had never existed. But, as between them and Science, the whole weight of evidence is in their favour. There is the universal verdict of history. For untold centuries, as long as mankind has lorded it over the earth, their active existence was never held in doubt, down to within the last few generations. The best and wisest men of their ages have seen them, spoken with them, tested their powers and suffered under them, tried, sentenced, executed them. Every nation, every century bears equal testimony to their prowess. Even to-day, save for a tiny band of over-educated scoffers sprung for the most part from a race notorious for its wrong-headed prejudice, the universal world accepts them without any shadow of doubt. In August of the present year a police-court case was heard at Witham, an Essex town not fifty miles from London, in which the defendant stood accused of assaulting another man because his wife had bewitched him. And it was given in evidence that the complainant's wife was generally regarded as a witch by the inhabitants of the Tiptree district. Nor, as I have already pointed out, does Tiptree stand alone. Dare we, then, accept the opinion of so few against the experience, the faith, of so many? If so, must we not throw all history overboard as well? We are told that an Attila, a Mahomet, an Alexander, or, to come

nearer to our own days, a Napoleon existed and did marvellous deeds impossible to other men. We read of miracles performed by a Moses, a Saint Peter, a Buddha. Do we refuse to believe that such persons ever existed because their recorded deeds are more or less incompatible with the theories of modern science? The witch carries history and the supernatural tightly clasped in her skinny arms. Let us beware lest in turning her from our door she carry them along with her, to leave us in their place the origin of species, radium, the gramophone, and some imperfect flying-machines.

Those same flying-machines provide yet another argument in the witch's favour. Why deny the possibility that she possessed powers many of which we possess ourselves. The witch flew through the air upon a broomstick; Mr. Henry Farman and Mr. Wilbur Wright, to mention two out of many, are doing the same daily as these lines are written. The vast majority of us have never seen either gentleman; we take their achievements on trust from the tales told by newspaper correspondents—a race of men inevitably inclined towards exaggeration. Yet none of us deny that Mr. Farman exists and can fly through the air upon a structure only more stable than a broomstick in degree. Why deny to the witch that faith you extend to the aeronaut? Or, again, a witch cured diseases, or caused them, by reciting a charm, compounding a noxious brew in a kettle, making passes in the air with her hands. A modern physician writes out a prescription, mixes a few drugs in a bottle—and cures diseases. He could as easily cause them by letting loose invisible microbes out of a phial. Is the one feat more credible than the other? The witch sent murrains upon cattle—and removed them. He were a poor M.R.C.V.S. who could not do as much. In a story quoted elsewhere in this volume, a sorcerer of Roman days bewitched his horses and so won chariot-races. We refuse him the tribute of our

belief, but we none the less warn the modern "doper" off our racecourses. The witch could cause rain, or stay it. Scarcely a month passes but we read well attested accounts of how this or that desert has been made to blossom like the rose by irrigation or other means. But a few months since we were told that an Italian scientist had discovered a means whereby London could be relieved of fogs through some subtle employment of electricity. It is true that since then we have had our full complement of foggy weather; but does anyone regard the feat as incredible?

In all the long list of witch-attainments there is not one that would gain more than a passing newspaper paragraph in the silly season were it performed in the London of to-day. Why, then, this obstinate disbelief in the perfectly credible? Largely, perhaps, because the witch was understood to perform her wonders by the aid of the Devil rather than of the Dynamo. But must she be therefore branded as an impostor? Certainly not by those who believe in a personal Spirit of Evil. I do not know the proportion of professing Christians who to-day accept the Devil as part of their faith, but it must be considerable; and the same is the case with many non-Christian beliefs. They who can swallow a Devil have surely no excuse for refusing a witch. Nor is the difficulty greater for those who, while rejecting the Devil, accept the existence of some sort of Evil Principle—recognise, in fact, that there is such a thing as evil at all. For them the picturesque incidentals of witch-life, the signing of diabolical contracts, aerial journeyings to the Sabbath, and so forth, are but allegorical expression of the fact that the witch did evil and was not ashamed, are but roundabout ways of expressing a great truth, just as are the first three chapters of Genesis or the story that Hannibal cut his way through the Alps by the use of vinegar.

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