

The book of witches

The book of witches
ON A POSSIBLE REVIVAL OF WITCHCRAFT
A SABBATH-GENERAL
THE ORIGINS OF THE WITCH
THE HALF-WAY WORLDS.
THE WITCH'S ATTRIBUTES
SOME REPRESENTATIVE ENGLISH WITCHES
THE WITCH OF ANTIQUITY
THE WITCH IN GREECE AND ROME
FROM PAGANISM TO CHRISTIANITY
THE WITCH-BULL AND ITS EFFECTS
THE LATER PERSECUTIONS IN ENGLAND
PERSECUTIONS IN SCOTLAND
OTHER PERSECUTIONS
PHILTRES, CHARMS AND POTIONS
THE WITCH IN FICTION
SOME WITCHES OF TODAY
Copyright

The book of witches Oliver Madox Hueffer

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 Marsh

lander, who, within the last decade, has suffered grievously—himself and through his children—at the hands of witches whose names and whereabout 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 sorcererfurther 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

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 unsuc cessful 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 pre ferred 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 Han nibal cut his way through the Alps by the use of vinegar. The conscientious agnostic, again, has no greater reason for disbelieving in witches and all their works than for refusing his belief to such historical characters as Cleopatra and Joan of Arc—eminent witches both, if contemporary records may be trusted. I pass over the great army of heterodox sects, Unitarians, Christian Scientists, and the like, many of whom unite with the orthodox in accepting the principle of Evil in some form or other, and with it, as a natural corollary, the existence of earthly agencies for its better propagation; while, for the rest, witchcraft stands in no worse position than do the other portions of revealed religion which they accept or do not accept, as their inclinations lead them.

It is sometimes held out as an argument for implicit belief in the Biblical legend of the Deluge that its universality among all races of mankind from China to Peru can only be accounted for by accepting Noah and his Ark. How much more forcibly does the same argument uphold the bona fides of the witch. Not only has she been accepted by every age and race, but she has everywhere and always been dowered with the same gifts. We find the witch of ancient Babylon an adept in the making of those same waxen or clay images in which, as we have seen, a nineteenth-century Queen of England placed such fond reliance. Witch-knots, spells, philtres, divination—the witch has been as conservative as she has been enduring. Every other profession changes and has changed its aspects and its methods from century to century. Only the witch has remained faithful to her original ideals, confident in the perfection of her art. And for all reward of such unexampled steadfastness we, creatures of the moment, deny that this one unchanging human type, this Pyramid of human endeavour, has ever existed at all! Buttressed, then, upon the Scriptures, to say nothing of the holy writings of Buddhist, Brahmin, Mahometan, and every other religion of the first class, countenanced, increasingly though unwittingly, by the researches of science into the vastness of our ignorance; acceptable to orthodox and heterodox alike, vouched for by history and personal testimony of the most convincing, our rejection of the witch is based but upon the dogmaticisms of one inconsiderable class, the impenitent atheist, blinded by the imperfection of his senses into denying everything beyond their feeble comprehension. To deny our recognition to a long line of women who, however mistakenly, have yet, in the teeth of prodigious difficulties, persevered in their self-allotted task with an altruistic enthusiasm perhaps unrivalled in the history of the world—to relegate those who have left such enduring marks upon the face of history to an obscure

corner of the nursery, and that upon such feeble and suspect testimony, were to brand ourselves as materialists indeed. Rather let us believe—and thus prove our belief in human nature—that long after the last atheist has departed into the nothingness he claims as his birthright, the witch, once more raised to her seat of honour, will continue to regulate the lives and destinies of her devotees as unquestioned and as unquestionable as she was in the days of Saul and of Oliver Cromwell. It is to women that we must look chiefly for the impetus towards this renaissance. Always the more devout, the more faithful half of humanity, there is yet another peculiar claim upon her sympathies towards the witch. In days such as ours, when the whole problem of the rights and wrongs of women is among the most urgent and immediate with which we have to deal, it were as anachronistic as unnatural that Woman should allow the high purpose, the splendid endurance, the noble steadfastness in inquiry, of a whole great section of her sex —including some of the most deservedly famous women that ever lived—should allow all this not only to be forgotten, but to be absolutely discredited and denied. Persecuted by man-made laws as she has ever been, and as eternally in revolt against them, there could be no more appropriate or deserving figure to be chosen as Patroness of the great fight for freedom than the much-libelled, much-martyrised, long-enduring, eternally misunderstood Witch.

No. The time has come when we can appreciate the artistic temperament of Nero; when Bluebeard is revealed to us in the newer and more kindly aspect of an eccentric Marshal of France; when many of us are ready to believe that Cæsar Borgia acted from a mistaken sense of duty; and that Messalina did but display the qualities natural to a brilliant Society leader. Surely among them all not one is more deserving of "whitewashing" than that signal instance of the _femme incomprise_, the Witch. We may not approve all

her actions, we may not accept her as an example to be generally followed; let us at least so far escape the charge of narrow-mindedness and lack of imagination as to pay her the tribute, if not of a tear, at least of respectful credulity.

A SABBATH-GENERAL

It is wild weather overhead. All day the wind has been growing more and more boisterous, blowing up great mountains of grey cloud out of the East, chasing them helter-skelter across the sky, tearing them into long ribbons and thrashing them all together into one whirling tangle, through which the harassed moon can scarcely find her way. The late traveller has many an airy buffet to withstand ere he can top the last ascent and see the hamlet outlined in a sudden glint of watery moonlight at his feet. Those who lie abed are roused by the moaning in the eaves, to mutter fearfully, "The witches are abroad to-night!" The witch lives by herself in a dingle, a hundred vards beyond the last cottage of the hamlet. The dingle is a wilderness of brush-wood, through which a twisted pathway leads to the witch's door. Matted branches overhang her roof-tree, and even when the moon, breaking for a moment from its net of cloud, sends down a brighter ray than ordinary, it does but emphasise the secretiveness of the ancient moss-grown thatch and the illomened plants, henbane, purple nightshade, or white bryony, that cluster round the walls. He were a bold villager who dared venture anywhere within the Witch's dingle on such a night as this. The very wind wails among the clashing branches in a subdued key, very different from its boisterous carelessness on the open downs beyond. There is but one room—and that of the barest—in the witch's cottage. The village children, who whisper of hoarded wealth as old Mother Hackett passes them in the gloaming, little know how scant is the fare and small the grace they must look for who have sold themselves to such a master. She sleeps upon the earthen floor, with garnered pine-needles for mattress. She has a broken stool to sit on,

and a great iron pot hangs above the slumbering embers on the clay hearth.

It wants still an hour to midnight, this eve of May Day, when there comes a stirring among these same embers. They are thrust aside, and up from beneath them Something heaves its way into the room. It is the size of a fox, black and hairy, shapeless and with many feet. From somewhere in its middle two green eyes shed a baleful light that horribly illuminates the room. It moves across the floor, after the manner of a

great caterpillar, and as it nears her the witch casts a skinny arm abroad and mutters in her sleep. It reaches the bed, lifts itself upon it, and mumbles something in her ear. She awakes, rises upon her elbow, and replies peevishly. She has no fear of the Thing—it is a familiar visitant. She is angry, and scolds it in a shrill old voice for disturbing her too soon. Has she not the Devil's marks upon her—breast and thigh—round, blue marks that are impervious to all pain from without, but itch and throb when it is time for her to go about her devilish business? The Thing takes her scoldings lightly, twitting her with having overslept herself at the last Sabbath—which she denies. They fall a-jesting; she calls it Tom—Vinegar Tom; and they laugh together over old exploits and present purposes.

A moonbeam glints through a hole in the thatch. Where the witch has lain now sits a black cat, larger than any of natural generation—as large, almost, as a donkey. It talks still with the witch's voice, and lingers awhile, the two pairs of green eyes watching each other through the darkness. At last, with a careless greeting, it bounds across the floor, leaps up the wall to the chimney opening, and is gone. The shapeless Thing remains upon the bed. Its sides quiver, it chuckles beneath its breath in a way half-human, yet altogether inhuman and obscene.

The black cat is hastening towards the hamlet under the shadow of the brush-wood. When she comes

within sight of the end house, she leaves the path and strikes out into the gorse-clad waste beyond the pasture, keeping to it until she is opposite the cottage of Dickon the waggoner. A child has been born, three days back, to Dickon and Meg his wife. It is not yet baptised, for the priest lives four miles away, beyond the downs, and Dickon has been too pressed with work to go for him. To-morrow will be time enough, for it is the healthiest child, not to say the most beautiful, the gossips have ever set eyes upon. Perhaps, if Meg had not forgotten in her new-found happiness how, just after her wedding, when old Mother Hackett passed her door, she made the sign of the cross and cried out upon the old dame for a foul witch, she might not be sleeping so easily now with her first-born on her bosom.

The black cat creeps on under the shadow of a hedge. Old Trusty, the shepherd's dog, left to guard the flock during the night, sees where she goes, and, taking her for a lurking fox, charges fiercely towards the hedge, too eager to give tongue. But at the first flash of the green eyes as she turns her head, he knows with what he has to deal, and flies whimpering for shelter in the gorse, his tail between his legs. For a dog can tell a witch more readily than can his master—and fears her as greatly.

The black cat being come to Dickon's cottage, waits for a moment to be sure that all is quiet, then leaps upon the low roof, gains the summit, and so descends by way of the chimney to the room where lie the sleeping family. Again it waits, listening to their regular breathing, its tail whipping to and fro in suppressed excitement. It rises upon its hinder legs and makes certain passes in the air, North and South and East and West. It approaches the bed, and softly, softly draws the child from its sleeping mother's arms. It makes again for the chimney, and in two bounds is in the open air, carrying the child nestled against its warm black fur. Scarcely has it gained the shadow of the hedge when the

mother, her sleep disturbed, it may be, by some vague presentiment of danger, opens her eyes. But the warm weight is still upon her breast, and she drops off to sleep again in security. Did you peep into the witch's cottage now, you would find that the black shapeless Thing is gone. For the Devil's imps can take what shape they will in their master's service.

The black cat, with its sleeping charge, hastens back towards the dingle. Reaching the cottage, it places the child upon the bed, turns twice, and in that moment the witch, clad only in her shift, stands where the cat has been. She is awaiting something, and grows anxious and uneasy, hobbling hither and thither about the room, mumbling below her breath, and once, when the child wakes and wails, taking it in her arms and hushing it, almost as might a woman. It is close upon midnight, yet the sign has not come. For the Evil One, being above all things inconstant, never lets his servants know time or place until the last moment, and that in some unlooked-for way. At last, when she is guite tormented with anxiety lest she have unwittingly angered her master, comes a stealthy clattering of wings upon the thatch, and down through the hole that serves for chimney rustles a black raven with fiery eyes. It flutters straight for the witch's shoulder and there settles, whispering hoarsely in her ear, while the light from its eyes throws her lean features, with their twitching muscles, into pale relief against the darkness. Nodding eager assent to the message, Mother Hackett hobbles to her bed, and, from a safe hiding-place among the rustling pine-needles, draws out a phial. Next she makes for the corner beside the hearth, and picks up the broomstick leaning against the wall. The raven guits her shoulder for the pillow, thence to watch her with its head at an approving angle. She opens the phial and smears the contents on the broomstick, head and handle. It is an ointment, and it shines with the phosphorescent light that

is born of corruption. Well it may, for it is compounded of black millet and the

dried powdered liver of an unbaptised child, just such a one as now lies upon the witch's bed, with the grim raven gazing down on it. The witch—deluded wretch—believes the ointment to have magic powers; that, smeared upon her broomstick, it gives the senseless wood volition and the power to carry her sky-high; or, if she swallow it, that it will render her insensible to pain, so that the worst efforts of the torturer and the executioner shall force her to confess nothing. The Devil, her master, knows—none better—that no such potency is in any ointment, but that his own hellish magic supports his minions in the air and comes, and he so will, to their aid in time of trial. But this he hides from them, so that in their folly they may be led to murder babes—the sacrifice he loves above all other.

The witch takes a broken eggshell and smears it also with the ointment. She goes to the bed and picks up the child, the broomstick hopping after her across the floor. Being now ready to set out, she steps astride the broom-handle, that holds itself aslant for her easier mounting. She waves her hand to the attendant raven, and with a rush that sends a spirtle of bright sparks up from the embers, she is away—up the chimney, through the overhanging branches, through the ragged clouds, and far on her journey under the stars. Yet, if any should enter the witch's hut then or thereafter till the dawn, they would

find her sleeping peacefully upon the bed. The raven, having carried their master's message, has this further duty: to take upon himself the witch's shape until her return, lest any, finding her from home, should scent out her errand.

The wind is from the East. The witch must steer across it, for the Sabbath-General, as the corvine messenger has told her, is to be held on a lonely peak of the Cevennes, in mid-France. Her task is not of the easiest, for the gusts come

fierce and sudden, and the broomstick dips and leaps before them like a cockle-boat on a rough sea. The witch's scanty locks and scantier clothing stream out almost at a right angle, and once the baby in her arms raises its voice in a tiny wail that would soften the heart of any but a servant of the Devil. Up here the moonlight wells down unchecked, turning the clouds below into the shifting semblance of snow mountains and lakes of silver. They open out now and again at the wind's bidding to allow glimpses of the dark, silent earth far down beneath. So for a time—a little time, for Devil's messengers fly fast the witch drives onward in mid-air. At last the broomstick slackens speed, seems to hesitate, circles twice or thrice, and then dives earthwards. The hag alights upon the seashore, upon a pebbly beach whereon the waves fling themselves in white fury at the lashings of the wind, now grown so high that Mother

Hackett can scarcely stand against it. Whether because he foresees some chance of evil-doing, or from mere inconstancy, for he works without method and against reason, the Devil has ordered that she shall not cross the Channel on her broomstick. She seizes the interval between two waves to launch the eggshell she has brought with her, steps into it, raises the broomstick aloft as sail or ensign, and puts out to sea in the teeth of the gale. The great waves roar far above her head, in foaming whirlpools that might sink a war-fleet, but the eggshell rides triumphantly among them, dancing upon their crests and shipping never a drop of water on its passage. Nor can the best efforts of the wind stay its speed. Only once does it deviate from its course, when a straining ship, its spars and sails all splintered and riven, drives through the mist to leeward. As she nears it, the witch rises to her feet, throws out one skinny hand towards it, and shrieks an incantation down the wind. A flicker of lightning shows itself in the East, and a cloud drives over the face of the moon. When

its shadow is past, there is no more sign of the ship or its toiling crew upon the lonely face of the waters. Mother Hackett mews gleefully as she speeds Francewards. Coming to where the low grey coast rises from the waves, she once more sets herself astride the broomstick. As she speeds on, sky-high, towards

the meeting-place, she falls in with company bent on the same errand. From all sides they come, converging to the goal, old, lean hags like herself, women in the prime of life, young girls not yet out of their teens. Some bear with them unweaned babes, others children of a larger growth, yet others youths or grown men, as offerings to Satan. These they carry pillion-wise before them, for in the Devil's kingdom all is awry, imperfect, contrariwise to the ways of Christian folk. Some of them are mounted on goats, some upon great toads, or flying snakes, or reptiles of uncertain shape, or simple broomsticks, as fancy has directed their imperious despot. One—a man—rides side-seated upon a great fiery dragon, that in the distance glows like a newlyrisen star. He is a mighty sorcerer, one who commands Satan instead of serving him, coming to the Sabbath for some reason of his own, and mounted on a steed of his own providing.

The meeting-place of the Sabbath-General, as Satan, in mockery of Christian ritual, chooses to call this foregathering of his servants, is a bare peak in the loneliest part of the Cevennes. It stands a little removed from the centre of a great mountain amphitheatre, and just below the summit is a mountain tarn, crystal-pure and casting back the starlight as peacefully as though there were no such things as witch or warlock beneath God's Heaven. Yet it is not the first

time the same meeting-place has been chosen, for not a blade of grass, not the humblest creeping plant, grows upon the sterile rocks. Every growing thing withered away, root and branch, when last the forces of Hell gathered here. So must the place remain, desert and bare, mute witness of its desecration, until the Judgment Day. The witches come skirling down from the sky like a flight of unclean birds, circling above the crags, hovering to choose a settling-place where no sharp-pointed rock shall gash their naked feet, chattering shrilly the while. Those already arrived are seated in a wide circle on a flat rock-ledge jutting from the mountain side. They are mostly witches of the neighbourhood, who have come afoot and have set out betimes lest they be detained upon the way. As more and more join the circle you may find proof that they lie who declare the Devil's servants mostly women. It is true that woman, by reason of the frailty of her nature, seeks more often to pry into forbidden things, to her own destruction, and thus there are many more witches than warlocks or magicians. Yet of those gathered for this Sabbath-General, for every witch there is one mortal man, to say nothing of demons; for while some, as Mother Hackett, have come alone, others, being the younger and fairer of the witches, have brought with them two or even three youths or young men, ready to take service with the Evil One and cast away their hope of salvation, as did our Father Adam, at the bidding of these Delilahs. Thus it is that, in the unholy dances which are to follow, every witch will have a man for her partner, save the most favoured who dance with the superior demons, for thus the Devil will have it. Mother Hackett, when she dismounts from her broomstick, takes her place beside one Luckie, a gossip of former Sabbaths, ill-favoured as herself, who comes from the kingdom of Fife, where she is much feared for the sudden tempests she raises when the fishing-fleets are sailing homeward with full catches. Next to her is a younger witch, fair and well-born, Sidonia by name, of a noble house in Mecklenburg. She is a tall, pale girl, with hair the colour of ripe wheat, and grey-blue eyes. She is held in high esteem by Satan, both for her beauty and for the number of well-