

WILLIAM GODWIN



LIVES OF THE
NECROMANCERS

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.

Contents:

Preface.

Lives Of The Necromancers

Ambitious Nature Of Man

Examples Of Necromancy And Witchcraft From The Bible.

Greece.

Rome.

Revolution Produced In The History Of Necromancy And Witchcraft Upon The Establishment Of Christianity.

History Of Necromancy In The East.

Communication Of Europe And The Saracens

Revival Of Letters.

Sanguinary Proceedings Against Witchcraft.

Conclusion.

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PREFACE.

The main purpose of this book is to exhibit a fair delineation of the credulity of the human mind. Such an exhibition cannot fail to be productive of the most salutary lessons.

One view of the subject will teach us a useful pride in the abundance of our faculties. Without pride man is in reality of little value. It is pride that stimulates us to all our great undertakings. Without pride, and the secret persuasion of extraordinary talents, what man would take up the pen with a view to produce an important work, whether of imagination and poetry, or of profound science, or of acute and subtle reasoning and intellectual anatomy? It is pride in this sense that makes the great general and the consummate legislator, that animates us to tasks the most laborious, and causes us to shrink from no difficulty, and to

be confounded and overwhelmed with no obstacle that can be interposed in our path.

Nothing can be more striking than the contrast between man and the inferior animals. The latter live only for the day, and see for the most part only what is immediately before them. But man lives in the past and the future. He reasons upon and improves by the past; he records the acts of a long series of generations: and he looks into future time, lays down plans which he shall be months and years in bringing to maturity, and contrives machines and delineates systems of education and government, which may gradually add to the accommodations of all, and raise the species generally into a nobler and more honourable character than our ancestors were capable of sustaining.

Man looks through nature, and is able to reduce its parts into a great whole. He classes the beings which are found in it, both animate and inanimate, delineates and describes them, investigates their properties, and records their capacities, their good and evil qualities, their dangers and their uses.

Nor does he only see all that is; but he also images all that is not. He takes to pieces the substances that are, and combines their parts into new arrangements. He peoples all the elements from the world of his imagination. It is here that he is most extraordinary and wonderful. The record of what actually is, and has happened in the series of human events, is perhaps the smallest part of human history. If we would know man in all his subtleties, we must deviate into the world of miracles and sorcery. To know the things that are not, and cannot be, but have been imagined and believed, is the most curious chapter in the annals of man. To observe the actual results of these imaginary phenomena, and the crimes and cruelties they have caused

us to commit, is one of the most instructive studies in which we can possibly be engaged. It is here that man is most astonishing, and that we contemplate with most admiration the discursive and unbounded nature of his faculties.

But, if a recollection of the examples of the credulity of the human mind may in one view supply nourishment to our pride, it still more obviously tends to teach us sobriety and humiliation. Man in his genuine and direct sphere is the disciple of reason; it is by this faculty that he draws inferences, exerts his prudence, and displays the ingenuity of machinery, and the subtlety of system both in natural and moral philosophy. Yet what so irrational as man? Not contented with making use of the powers we possess, for the purpose of conducing to our accommodation and well being, we with a daring spirit inquire into the invisible causes of what we see, and people all nature with Gods "of every shape and size" and angels, with principalities and powers, with beneficent beings who "take charge concerning us lest at any time we dash our foot against a stone," and with devils who are perpetually on the watch to perplex us and do us injury. And, having familiarised our minds with the conceptions of these beings, we immediately aspire to hold communion with them. We represent to ourselves God, as "walking in the garden with us in the cool of the day," and teach ourselves "not to forget to entertain strangers, lest by so doing we should repel angels unawares."

No sooner are we, even in a slight degree, acquainted with the laws of nature, than we frame to ourselves the idea, by the aid of some invisible ally, of suspending their operation, of calling out meteors in the sky, of commanding storms and tempests, of arresting the motion of the heavenly bodies, of producing miraculous cures upon the bodies of

our fellow-men, or afflicting them with disease and death, of calling up the deceased from the silence of the grave, and compelling them to disclose "the secrets of the world unknown."

But, what is most deplorable, we are not contented to endeavour to secure the aid of God and good angels, but we also aspire to enter into alliance with devils, and beings destined for their rebellion to suffer eternally the pains of hell. As they are supposed to be of a character perverted and depraved, we of course apply to them principally for purposes of wantonness, or of malice and revenge. And, in the instances which have occurred only a few centuries back, the most common idea has been of a compact entered into by an unprincipled and impious human being with the sworn enemy of God and man, in the result of which the devil engages to serve the capricious will and perform the behests of his blasphemous votary for a certain number of years, while the deluded wretch in return engages to renounce his God and Saviour, and surrender himself body and soul to the pains of hell from the end of that term to all eternity. No sooner do we imagine human beings invested with these wonderful powers, and conceive them as called into action for the most malignant purposes, than we become the passive and terrified slaves of the creatures of our own imaginations, and fear to be assailed at every moment by beings to whose power we can set no limit, and whose modes of hostility no human sagacity can anticipate and provide against. But, what is still more extraordinary, the human creatures that pretend to these powers have often been found as completely the dupes of this supernatural machinery, as the most timid wretch that stands in terror at its expected operation; and no phenomenon has been more common than the confession of these allies of hell, that they have verily and indeed held commerce and formed plots and conspiracies with Satan.

The consequence of this state of things has been, that criminal jurisprudence and the last severities of the law have been called forth to an amazing extent to exterminate witches and witchcraft. More especially in the sixteenth century hundreds and thousands were burned alive within the compass of a small territory; and judges, the directors of the scene, a Nicholas Remi, a De Lancre, and many others, have published copious volumes, entering into a minute detail of the system and fashion of the witchcraft of the professors, whom they sent in multitudes to expiate their depravity at the gallows and the stake.

One useful lesson which we may derive from the detail of these particulars, is the folly in most cases of imputing pure and unmingled hypocrisy to man. The human mind is of so ductile a character that, like what is affirmed of charity by the apostle, it "believeth all things, and endureth all things." We are not at liberty to trifle with the sacredness of truth. While we persuade others, we begin to deceive ourselves. Human life is a drama of that sort, that, while we act our part, and endeavour to do justice to the sentiments which are put down for us, we begin to believe we are the thing we would represent.

To shew however the modes in which the delusion acts upon the person through whom it operates, is not properly the scope of this book. Here and there I have suggested hints to this purpose, which the curious reader may follow to their furthest extent, and discover how with perfect good faith the artist may bring himself to swallow the grossest impossibilities. But the work I have written is not a treatise of natural magic. It rather proposes to display the immense wealth of the faculty of imagination, and to shew the extravagances of which the man may be guilty who surrenders himself to its guidance.

It is fit however that the reader should bear in mind, that what is put down in this book is but a small part and scantling of the acts of sorcery and witchcraft which have existed in human society. They have been found in all ages and countries. The torrid zone and the frozen north have neither of them escaped from a fruitful harvest of this sort of offspring. In ages of ignorance they have been especially at home; and the races of men that have left no records behind them to tell almost that they existed, have been most of all rife in deeds of darkness, and those marvellous incidents which especially astonish the spectator, and throw back the infant reason of man into those shades and that obscurity from which it had so recently endeavoured to escape.

I wind up for the present my literary labours with the production of this book. Nor let any reader imagine that I here put into his hands a mere work of idle recreation. It will be found pregnant with deeper uses. The wildest extravagances of human fancy, the most deplorable perversion of human faculties, and the most horrible distortions of jurisprudence, may occasionally afford us a salutary lesson. I love in the foremost place to contemplate man in all his honours and in all the exaltation of wisdom and virtue; but it will also be occasionally of service to us to look into his obliquities, and distinctly to remark how great and portentous have been his absurdities and his follies.

May 29, 1834.

LIVES OF THE NECROMANCERS

The 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 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 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.

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 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 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 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 show how high a generous ambition could sour, 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 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.

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 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 competence. We spurn impatiently against the narrow limits which the constitution of things has fixed to our aspirings, and endeavour by a multiplicity of ways to accomplish that which it is totally beyond the power of man to effect.

DIVINATION.

Divination has been principally employed in inspecting the entrails of beasts offered for sacrifice, and from their appearance drawing omens of the good or ill success of the enterprises in which we are about to engage.

What the divination by the cup was which Joseph practised, or pretended to practise, we do not perhaps exactly understand. We all of us know somewhat of the predictions, to this day resorted to by maid-servants and others, from the appearance of the sediment to be found at the bottom of a tea-cup. Predictions of a similar sort are formed from the unpremeditated way in which we get out of bed in a morning, or put on our garments, from the persons or things we shall encounter when we first leave our chamber or go forth in the air, or any of the indifferent accidents of life.

AUGURY.

Augury has its foundation in observing the flight of birds, the sounds they utter, their motions whether sluggish or animated, and the avidity or otherwise with which they appear to take their food. The college of augurs was one of the most solemn institutions of ancient Rome.

CHIROMANCY.

Chiromancy, or the art of predicting the various fortunes of the individual, from an inspection of the minuter variations of the lines to be found in the palm of the human hand, has been used perhaps at one time or other in all the nations of the world.

PHYSIOGNOMY.

Physiognomy is not so properly a prediction of future events, as an attempt to explain the present and inherent qualities of a man. By unfolding his propensities however, it virtually gave the world to understand the sort of proceedings in which he was most likely to engage. The story of Socrates and the physiognomist is sufficiently known. The physiognomist having inspected the countenance of the philosopher, pronounced that he was given to intemperance, sensuality, and violent bursts of passion, all of which was so contrary to his character as universally known, that his disciples derided the physiognomist as a vain-glorious pretender. Socrates however presently put them to silence, by declaring that he had had an original propensity to all the vices imputed to him, and had only conquered the propensity by dint of a severe and unremitted self-discipline.

INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS.

Oneirocriticism, or the art of interpreting dreams, seems of all the modes of prediction the most inseparable from the nature of man. A considerable portion of every twenty-four hours of our lives is spent in sleep; and in sleep nothing is at least more usual, than for the mind to be occupied in a thousand imaginary scenes, which for the time are as

realities, and often excite the passions of the mind of the sleeper in no ordinary degree. Many of them are wild and rambling; but many also have a portentous sobriety. Many seem to have a strict connection with the incidents of our actual lives; and some appear as if they came for the very purpose to warn us of danger, or prepare us for coming events. It is therefore no wonder that these occasionally fill our waking thoughts with a deep interest, and impress upon us an anxiety of which we feel it difficult to rid ourselves. Accordingly, in ages when men were more prone to superstition, than at present, they sometimes constituted a subject of earnest anxiety and inquisitiveness; and we find among the earliest exercises of the art of prediction, the interpretation of dreams to have occupied a principal place, and to have been as it were reduced into a science.

CASTING OF LOTS.

The casting of lots seems scarcely to come within the enumeration here given. It was intended as an appeal to heaven upon a question involved in uncertainty, with the idea that the supreme Ruler of the skies, thus appealed to, would from his omniscience supply the defect of human knowledge. Two examples, among others sufficiently remarkable, occur in the Bible. One of Achan, who secreted part of the spoil taken in Jericho, which was consecrated to the service of God, and who, being taken by lot, confessed, and was stoned to death. The other of Jonah, upon whom the lot fell in a mighty tempest, the crew of the ship enquiring by this means what was the cause of the calamity that had overtaken them, and Jonah being in consequence cast into the sea.

ASTROLOGY.

Astrology was one of the modes most anciently and universally resorted to for discovering the fortunes of men and nations. Astronomy and astrology went hand in hand, particularly among the people of the East. The idea of fate was most especially bound up in this branch of prophecy. If the fortune of a man was intimately connected with the position of the heavenly bodies, it became evident that little was left to the province of his free will. The stars overruled him in all his determinations; and it was in vain for him to resist them. There was something flattering to the human imagination in conceiving that the planets and the orbs on high were concerned in the conduct we should pursue, and the events that should befall us. Man resigned himself to his fate with a solemn, yet a lofty feeling, that the remotest portions of the universe were concerned in the catastrophe that awaited him. Beside which, there was something peculiarly seducing in the apparently profound investigation of the professors of astrology. They busied themselves with the actual position of the heavenly bodies, their conjunctions and oppositions; and of consequence there was a great apparatus of diagrams and calculation to which they were prompted to apply themselves, and which addressed itself to the eyes and imaginations of those who consulted them.

ORACLES.

But that which seems to have had the greatest vogue in times of antiquity, relative to the prediction of future events, is what is recorded of oracles. Finding the insatiable curiosity of mankind as to what was to happen hereafter, and the general desire they felt to be guided in their conduct by an anticipation of things to come, the priests pretty generally took advantage of this passion, to increase their emoluments and offerings, and the more

effectually to inspire the rest of their species with veneration and a willing submission to their authority. The oracle was delivered in a temple, or some sacred place; and in this particular we plainly discover that mixture of nature and art, of genuine enthusiasm and contriving craft, which is so frequently exemplified in the character of man.

DELPHI.

The oracle of Apollo at Delphi is the most remarkable; and respecting it we are furnished with the greatest body of particulars. The locality of this oracle is said to have been occasioned by the following circumstance. A goat-herd fed his flocks on the acclivity of mount Parnassus. As the animals wandered here and there in pursuit of food, they happened to approach a deep and long chasm which appeared in the rock. From this chasm a vapour issued; and the goats had no sooner inhaled a portion of the vapour, than they began to play and frisk about with singular agility. The goat-herd, observing this, and curious to discover the cause, held his head over the chasm; when, in a short time, the fumes having ascended to his brain, he threw himself into a variety of strange attitudes, and uttered words, which probably he did not understand himself, but which were supposed to convey a prophetic meaning.

This phenomenon was taken advantage of, and a temple to Apollo was erected on the spot. The credulous many believed that here was obviously a centre and focus of divine inspiration. On this mountain Apollo was said to have slain the serpent Python. The apartment of the oracle was immediately over the chasm from which the vapour issued. A priestess delivered the responses, who was called Pythia, probably in commemoration of the exploit which had been

performed by Apollo. She sat upon a tripod, or three-legged stool, perforated with holes, over the seat of the vapours. After a time, her figure enlarged itself, her hair stood on end, her complexion and features became altered, her heart panted and her bosom swelled, and her voice grew more than human. In this condition she uttered a number of wild and incoherent phrases, which were supposed to be dictated by the God. The questions which were offered by those who came to consult the oracle were then proposed to her, and her answers taken down by the priest, whose office was to arrange and methodize them, and put them into hexameter verse, after which they were delivered to the votaries. The priestess could only be consulted on one day in every month.

Great ingenuity and contrivance were no doubt required to uphold the credit of the oracle; and no less boldness and self-collectedness on the part of those by whom the machinery was conducted. Like the conjurors of modern times, they took care to be extensively informed as to all such matters respecting which the oracle was likely to be consulted. They listened probably to the Pythia with a superstitious reverence for the incoherent sentences she uttered. She, like them, spent her life in being trained for the office to which she was devoted. All that was rambling and inapplicable in her wild declamation they consigned to oblivion. Whatever seemed to bear on the question proposed they preserved. The persons by whom the responses were digested into hexameter verse, had of course a commission attended with great discretionary power. They, as Horace remarks on another occasion, divided what it was judicious to say, from what it was prudent to omit, dwelt upon one thing, and slurred over and accommodated another, just as would best suit the purpose they had in hand. Beside this, for the most part they clothed the apparent meaning of the oracle in

obscurity, and often devised sentences of ambiguous interpretation, that might suit with opposite issues, whichever might happen to fall out. This was perfectly consistent with a high degree of enthusiasm on the part of the priest. However confident he might be in some things, he could not but of necessity feel that his prognostics were surrounded with uncertainty. Whatever decisions of the oracle were frustrated by the event, and we know that there were many of this sort, were speedily forgotten; while those which succeeded, were conveyed from shore to shore, and repeated by every echo. Nor is it surprising that the transmitters of the sentences of the God should in time arrive at an extraordinary degree of sagacity and skill. The oracles accordingly reached to so high a degree of reputation, that, as Cicero observes, no expedition for a long time was undertaken, no colony sent out, and often no affair of any distinguished family or individual entered on, without the previously obtaining their judgment and sanction. Their authority in a word was so high, that the first fathers of the Christian church could no otherwise account for a reputation thus universally received, than by supposing that the devils were permitted by God Almighty to inform the oracles with a more than human prescience, that all the world might be concluded in idolatry and unbelief, and the necessity of a Saviour be made more apparent. The gullibility of man is one of the most prominent features of our nature. Various periods and times, when whole nations have as it were with one consent run into the most incredible and the grossest absurdities, perpetually offer themselves in the page of history; and in the records of remote antiquity it plainly appears that such delusions continued through successive centuries.

THE DESIRE TO COMMAND AND CONTROL FUTURE EVENTS.

Next to the consideration of those measures by which men have sought to dive into the secrets of future time, the question presents itself of those more daring undertakings, the object of which has been by some supernatural power to control the future, and place it in subjection to the will of the unlicensed adventurer. Men have always, especially in ages of ignorance, and when they most felt their individual weakness, figured to themselves an invisible strength greater than their own; and, in proportion to their impatience, and the fervour of their desires, have sought to enter into a league with those beings whose mightier force might supply that in which their weakness failed.

COMMERCE WITH THE INVISIBLE WORLD.

It is an essential feature of different ages and countries to vary exceedingly in the good or ill construction, the fame or dishonour, which shall attend upon the same conduct or mode of behaviour. In Egypt and throughout the East, especially in the early periods of history, the supposed commerce with invisible powers was openly professed, which, under other circumstances, and during the reign of different prejudices, was afterwards carefully concealed, and barbarously hunted out of the pale of allowed and authorised practice. The Magi of old, who claimed a power of producing miraculous appearances, and boasted a familiar intercourse with the world of spirits, were regarded by their countrymen with peculiar reverence, and considered as the first and chiefest men in the state. For this mitigated view of such dark and mysterious proceedings the ancients were in a great degree indebted to their polytheism. The Romans are computed to have acknowledged thirty thousand divinities, to all of whom was

rendered a legitimate homage; and other countries in a similar proportion.

SORCERY AND ENCHANTMENT.

In Asia, however, the Gods were divided into two parties, under Oromasdes, the principle of good, and Arimanius, the principle of evil. These powers were in perpetual contention with each other, sometimes the one, and sometimes the other gaining the superiority. Arimanius and his legions were therefore scarcely considered as entitled to the homage of mankind. Those who were actuated by benevolence, and who desired to draw down blessings upon their fellow-creatures, addressed themselves to the principle of good; while such unhappy beings, with whom spite and ill-will had the predominance, may be supposed often to have invoked in preference the principle of evil. Hence seems to have originated the idea of sorcery, or an appeal by incantations and wicked arts to the demons who delighted in mischief.

These beings rejoiced in the opportunity of inflicting calamity and misery on mankind. But by what we read of them we might be induced to suppose that they were in some way restrained from gratifying their malignant intentions, and waited in eager hope, till some mortal reprobate should call out their dormant activity, and demand their aid.

Various enchantments were therefore employed by those unhappy mortals whose special desire was to bring down calamity and plagues upon the individuals or tribes of men against whom their animosity was directed. Unlawful and detested words and mysteries were called into action to conjure up demons who should yield their powerful and

tremendous assistance. Songs of a wild and maniacal character were chaunted. Noisome scents and the burning of all unhallowed and odious things were resorted to. In later times books and formulas of a terrific character were commonly employed, upon the reading or recital of which the prodigies resorted to began to display themselves. The heavens were darkened; the thunder rolled; and fierce and blinding lightnings flashed from one corner of the heavens to the other. The earth quaked and rocked from side to side. All monstrous and deformed things shewed themselves, "Gorgons, and Hydras, and Chimeras dire," enough to cause the stoutest heart to quail. Lastly, devils, whose name was legion, and to whose forms and distorted and menacing countenances superstition had annexed the most frightful ideas, crowded in countless multitudes upon the spectator, whose breath was flame, whose dances were full of terror, and whose strength infinitely exceeded every thing human. Such were the appalling conceptions which ages of bigotry and ignorance annexed to the notion of sorcery, and with these they scared the unhappy beings over whom this notion had usurped an ascendancy into lunacy, and prepared them for the perpetrating flagitious and unheard-of deeds.

The result of these horrible incantations was not less tremendous, than the preparations might have led us to expect. The demons possessed all the powers of the air, and produced tempests and shipwrecks at their pleasure. "Castles toppled on their warder's heads, and palaces and pyramids sloped their summits to their foundations;" forests and mountains were torn from their roots, and cast into the sea. They inflamed the passions of men, and caused them to commit the most unheard-of excesses. They laid their ban on those who enjoyed the most prosperous health, condemned them to peak and pine, wasted them into a melancholy atrophy, and finally consigned them to a

premature grave. They breathed a new and unblest life into beings in whom existence had long been extinct, and by their hateful and resistless power caused the sepulchres to give up their dead.

WITCHCRAFT.

Next to sorcery we may recollect the case of witchcraft, which occurs oftener, particularly in modern times, than any other alleged mode of changing by supernatural means the future course of events. The sorcerer, as we shall see hereafter, was frequently a man of learning and intellectual abilities, sometimes of comparative opulence and respectable situation in society. But the witch or wizard was almost uniformly old, decrepid, and nearly or altogether in a state of penury. The functions however of the witch and the sorcerer were in a great degree the same. The earliest account of a witch, attended with any degree of detail, is that of the witch of Endor in the Bible, who among other things, professed the power of calling up the dead upon occasion from the peace of the sepulchre. Witches also claimed the faculty of raising storms, and in various ways disturbing the course of nature. They appear in most cases to have been brought into action by the impulse of private malice. They occasioned mortality of greater or less extent in man and beast. They blighted the opening prospect of a plentiful harvest. They covered the heavens with clouds, and sent abroad withering and malignant blasts. They undermined the health of those who were so unfortunate as to incur their animosity, and caused them to waste away gradually with incurable disease. They were notorious two or three centuries ago for the power of the "evil eye." The vulgar, both great and small, dreaded their displeasure, and sought, by small gifts, and fair speeches, but insincere, and the offspring of terror only, to

avert the pernicious consequences of their malice. They were famed for fabricating small images of wax, to represent the object of their persecution; and, as these by gradual and often studiously protracted degrees wasted before the fire, so the unfortunate butts of their resentment perished with a lingering, but inevitable death.

COMPACTS WITH THE DEVIL.

The power of these witches, as we find in their earliest records, originated in their intercourse with "familiar spirits," invisible beings who must be supposed to be enlisted in the armies of the prince of darkness. We do not read in these ancient memorials of any league of mutual benefit entered into between the merely human party, and his or her supernatural assistant. But modern times have amply supplied this defect. The witch or sorcerer could not secure the assistance of the demon but by a sure and faithful compact, by which the human party obtained the industrious and vigilant service of his familiar for a certain term of years, only on condition that, when the term was expired, the demon of undoubted right was to obtain possession of the indentured party, and to convey him irremissibly and for ever to the regions of the damned. The contract was drawn out in authentic form, signed by the sorcerer, and attested with his blood, and was then carried away by the demon, to be produced again at the appointed time.

IMPS.

These familiar spirits often assumed the form of animals, and a black dog or cat was considered as a figure in which the attendant devil was secretly hidden. These subordinate devils were called Imps. Impure and carnal ideas were

mingled with these theories. The witches were said to have preternatural teats from which their familiars sucked their blood. The devil also engaged in sexual intercourse with the witch or wizard, being denominated *incubus*, if his favourite were a woman, and *succubus*, if a man. In short, every frightful and loathsome idea was carefully heaped up together, to render the unfortunate beings to whom the crime of witchcraft was imputed the horror and execration of their species.

TALISMANS AND AMULETS.

As according to the doctrine of witchcraft, there were certain compounds, and matters prepared by rules of art, that proved baleful and deadly to the persons against whom their activity was directed, so there were also preservatives, talismans, amulets and charms, for the most to be worn about the person, which rendered him superior to injury, not only from the operations of witchcraft, but in some cases from the sword or any other mortal weapon. As the poet says, he that had this,

Might trace huge forests and unhallowed heaths,—
Yea there, where very desolation dwells,
By grotts and caverns shagged with horrid shades,

may, in the midst of every tremendous assailant, "might pass on with unblenched majesty," uninjured and invulnerable.

NECROMANCY.

Last of all we may speak of necromancy, which has something in it that so strongly takes hold of the imagination, that, though it is one only of the various

modes which have been enumerated for the exercise of magical power, we have selected it to give a title to the present volume.

There is something sacred to common apprehension in the repose of the dead. They seem placed beyond our power to disturb. "There is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave."

After life's fitful fever they sleep well:
Nor steel, nor poison,
Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing,
Can touch them further.

Their remains moulder in the earth. Neither form nor feature is long continued to them. We shrink from their touch, and their sight. To violate the sepulchre therefore for the purpose of unholy spells and operations, as we read of in the annals of witchcraft, cannot fail to be exceedingly shocking. To call up the spirits of the departed, after they have fulfilled the task of life, and are consigned to their final sleep, is sacrilegious. Well may they exclaim, like the ghost of Samuel in the sacred story, "Why hast thou disquieted me?"

There is a further circumstance in the case, which causes us additionally to revolt from the very idea of necromancy, strictly so called. Man is a mortal, or an immortal being. His frame either wholly "returns to the earth as it was, or his spirit," the thinking principle within him, "to God who gave it." The latter is the prevailing sentiment of mankind in modern times. Man is placed upon earth in a state of probation, to be dealt with hereafter according to the deeds done in the flesh. "Some shall go away into everlasting punishment; and others into life eternal." In this case there is something blasphemous in the idea of intermeddling with

the state of the dead. We must leave them in the hands of God. Even on the idea of an interval, the "sleep of the soul" from death to the general resurrection, which is the creed of no contemptible sect of Christians, it is surely a terrific notion that we should disturb the pause, which upon that hypothesis, the laws of nature have assigned to the departed soul, and come to awake, or to "torment him before the time."

ALCHEMY.

To make our catalogue of supernatural doings, and the lawless imaginations of man, the more complete, it may be further necessary to refer to the craft, so eagerly cultivated in successive ages of the world of converting the inferior metals into gold, to which was usually joined the *elixir vitae*, or universal medicine, having the quality of renewing the youth of man, and causing him to live for ever. The first authentic record on this subject is an edict of Dioclesian about three hundred years after Christ, ordering a diligent search to be made in Egypt for all the ancient books which treated of the art of making gold and silver, that they might without distinction be consigned to the flames. This edict however necessarily presumes a certain antiquity to the pursuit; and fabulous history has recorded Solomon, Pythagoras and Hermes among its distinguished votaries. From this period the study seems to have slept, till it was revived among the Arabians after a lapse of five or six hundred years.

It is well known however how eagerly it was cultivated in various countries of the world for many centuries after it was divulged by Geber. Men of the most wonderful talents devoted their lives to the investigation; and in multiplied instances the discovery was said to have been completed.