

TWO hundred years ago, when many Bridgwater people were possessed of educational advantages which were only of the most rudimentary description, there were beliefs, ideas, and notions current amongst the inhabitants which nowadays seem to be absolutely astonishing. Many of these ideas had filtered down through many generations, and in the absence of wider knowledge they were implicitly believed. It is not the purpose to examine here what were the sources of these strange notions. They were complex, no doubt, but they were terribly real. People then were hemmed in by a dark world of mystery ; there were evil powers above and around ; nay, there were wicked influences also upon the earth, which needed, in the belief of our ancestors, all the wit and skill and knowledge of accumulated experience in order to defeat them. Some of these ideas, probably, had come down from mediaeval times, when the doctrines of Purgatory were dominating the beliefs of Englishmen. In those days the dead were not allowed to slip away from outward memory so quickly as in these. There were the obits, the trentals, the anniversaries, the recollection the loved ones who had crossed the borderland. But these things were declared to be superfluous ; they were done away with, and with no small touch of scorn.

But Purgatory, however much its tenets may have been — as they undoubtedly were — exaggerated, magnified, prostituted to ignoble and mercenary ends, and generally misconstrued, had in its essence some lodging in the beliefs of men. The mystery which hangs over death was then as real and as insoluble as it is now, and as it ever will be. Ghosts, appearances, weird sounds, and strange messages from the world beyond and from those who inhabit it, were the outcome and residuum of the purgatorial view. Evil spirits abounded, and men must be protected from them. The dead might come again, and affright the living. There might be crimes to confess, and the dead must appear to some living person in order to ease himself of his burden. The law had made it illegal to pray publicly for the souls of the departed, but the law could not do away with the host of superstitions which flooded England, and which centred mainly — as they have ever done — around the belief in the influence which the dead were supposed to exert upon the living, and the possibility of communication between the next world and this.

It is not here suggested that all people

were a prey to fears and superstitions of this nature ; it is, however, advanced that this was so with the majority. There were many people who in the latter half of the eighteenth century became utterly lax as to religious obligations, and partially as to moral ones. Strangely, however, such persons as these have frequently been found to be the most superstitious of all. If the mind cannot find some rest and comfort in the legitimate knowledge which we possess of a life hereafter, and of a Divine Providence which encompasses all things, then the mind will frequently create imaginary terrors for itself.

The most deeply-rooted beliefs were naturally connected with the dead, and with the hour of death. It was the custom to leave the room in which the head of a family had died, untenanted for a long time. If the deceased had failed to make a will, or if he was believed to hold heterodox or strange religious views, the danger of his reappearance was assumed to be considerably greater. The room in which a suicide had occurred was generally nailed up, and left unused. So also the roads and by-ways were frequently haunted by terrible spectres of people who had met their death in such places. Phantom coaches and horses scoured the carriage roads, and drove noisily up to the doors of mansions. The majority of the old manor-houses possessed their ghosts, frequently the ghosts of some wicked old people who were credited with having perpetrated all sorts of villainies during their lifetime. It was natural, perhaps, that the churchyards should be believed to be places of terror by night. The Sexton or the Parson might pass through them unharmed, as being, presumably, persons exempt by their normal occupations from molestation from those at whose funerals they had officiated. Only this year (1907) a Somerset village was terribly upset by the appearance for several nights of an old lady, a former inhabitant, who persistently — and with great lack of propriety — walked up and down one of the by-lanes. Judge Jeffrey's ghost has, it is said, been a fairly well-behaved visitor for a long time past at a house in St. Mary's Street. But he is content with knocking at the doors of rooms, and walking in the passages, and does not show himself in his habit as he lived.

No one can wonder that Sedgemoor, and its awful scenes of 1685, have peopled the neighbourhood of Bridgwater with the ghosts of dead soldiers. The poor fugitives from that field of battle fled in every

direction, some to seek safety in hiding, some to crawl away into a hedgeside to die. It was natural that these things should be fruitful in raising horrors and fears, and they assuredly were. Of the few remaining ghosts who walk the fields and lanes of the neighbourhood to-day, nearly all are '*Monmouthers*.

Witchcraft was firmly believed in for a long time, and was one of the last of superstitious notions to pass away. Bridgwater has its Witches' Walk, down in the fields below where St. Matthew's fair is held. There were three kinds of witches. Black Witches, the most diabolical of all, could do harm to people, but could never help them. White Witches were far more useful beings. They were able to cure divers diseases, and could find stolen goods which had been hidden away. But in order to gain these powers it was believed that they had sold themselves to the Devil, whose bond slaves they were. The third kind of Witch possessed both the power of helping people, and of doing them harm ; they were, consequently, to be treated with deference, and, if possible, to be won over to do kindly deeds for those who applied to them for aid. The ordinary Witch, it was presumed, was far more to be dreaded than to be cajoled. For, it was held, these beings were sometimes carried aloft through the air, on brooms or spits, so that they might attend at distant gatherings of the evil sisterhood. In order to achieve this it was necessary that they should first anoint themselves with magical ointment, supplied to them for that purpose by the Evil One himself. When the meeting had assembled it sometimes happened that the Devil would appear amongst them in human shape, that of a man or a woman, and then terrible feasting, horrible orgies, and dreadful bargains were enacted, and things were done of which it is not possible to write. There was dancing, and un-earthly music, and sometimes a fearful exhortation or sermon was delivered by Satan, exhorting his servants to commit all sorts of crimes and wickednesses. Occasionally their evil master would beat the Witches black and blue with the broomsticks, and play all kinds of spiteful tricks upon them. For having sold themselves utterly to him, they were entirely in his power, from which they were unable to escape. Yet if any one of them repeated aloud the name of God, at that instant the entire gathering was dispersed and put to rout.

If it should happen (and it was believed that this did frequently happen) that a

particular Witch desired to destroy any person to whom she bore any ill-will, or that the Devil ordered it, an image of wax was made, which, with many impious incantations, was baptized by him with the name of the individual to whom harm was intended. Thorns were pushed into the image, which was placed before a fire, and as the wax melted through heat, so the unhappy victim thus represented would begin to feel excruciating pains in his body, and would presently pine away in gradual decay, constantly experiencing severe torture, one symptom being the acute sensation of sharp thorns being thrust into his flesh. A less virulent form of resentment was exercised by the Witches in killing oxen and sheep, and by drying up milking-cows. Similarly they were able to restrain the brewing of beer, or the proper coming of butter in the churn. They could change themselves into various shapes, frequently assuming the form of a hare ; and they could, it was alleged, render themselves invisible to their victims.

In consequence of these beliefs, many means were adopted which were believed to be efficacious, or partly efficacious, against these wicked ones. Thus if a Witch were pricked, so as to draw blood, her power over her victim was annulled if the blood appeared before any actual spell had been performed. This might be done on behalf of another, as for a child by its parent, if care was taken to say aloud that the intention was to protect the child. Witches, if not known to be such, could be detected in various ways. A supposed Witch might be weighed against the Church Bible, and if she were guilty, the Bible would weigh her down. Or, she might be urged to attempt to say the Lord's Prayer, which no Witch was believed able to say correctly through, without omitting some clause. Neither could she weep more than three tears, and these only out of the left eye. Two other means were also available for her detection ; the thatch of her house might be burnt, or an animal supposed to be bewitched by her might be burnt ; either of these methods was sufficient to extort from her a confession of guilt. Yet another very cruel method might be used. It was called *Swimming the Witch*. The wretched woman was to be stripped naked ; her right thumb bound to the left toe, and her left thumb to the right toe, then she was thrown into a river or a pond. If guilty, it was held, she would be unable to sink. The cause of this was that by reason of her agreement with

Satan she was believed to have for ever renounced the benefits of the Water of Baptism. Similarly the water would now renounce her, and would refuse to receive her into its bosom. Thus, if the poor creature sank — thus proving her innocence— she might be drowned ; if she floated, she was guilty, and was deserving of death. Friday was the most favourable day for Witches to confess their guilt. And there were other means, even less creditable, for fastening the irremovable stigma of guilt upon them.

A quaint direction is given in an old eighteenth- century book as to what the behaviour of people should be when they chance to meet a Witch in their walks abroad. *On meeting a supposed Witch, it is advisable to take the wall of her in a town or street, and the right hand of her in a lane or field ; and, whilst passing her, to clench both hands, doubling the thumbs beneath the fingers ; this will prevent her having a power to injure the person so doing at the time. It is well to salute a Witch with civil words, on meeting her, before she speaks. But no presents of apples, eggs, or any other thing, should be received from her on any account.**

It may possibly be thought that such crude beliefs as these were the possession only of the vulgar and the uneducated. Yet it was not so. They permeated all classes of society. The statute which was enacted in 1603 directed that *Any one that shall use, practise, or exercise any invocation or conjuration of any evill or wicked spirit, or consult, covenant with, entertaine or employ, feede or reward, any evill or wicked spirit, to or for any intent or purpose ; or take up any dead man, woman, or child, out of his, her, or their grave, or any other place where the dead body resteth, or the skin, bone, or other part of any dead person, to be employed or used in any manner of witchcraft, sorcery, charme, or enchantment ; or shall use, practice, or exercise any witchcraft, sorcery, charme, or enchantment, whereby any person shall be killed, destroyed, wasted, consumed, pined, or lamed, in his or her body, or any part thereof, such offenders, duly and lawfully convicted and attainted, shall suffer death. If any person shall take upon him, by witchcraft, enchantment, charme, or sorcery, to tell or declare in what place any treasure of gold or silver should or might be found or had in the earth, or other secret places, or where goods or things lost or stolne should be found or become ; or to the intent to provoke any person to unlawful love ; or whereby any cattell or goods of any person shall be destroyed, wasted, or impaired ; or to destroy or hurt any person in his or her body, though the same be not effected ; a*

yeare's imprisonment and pillory, and the second conviction, death. This Statute was not repealed until King George the First's reign, and the ideas which it embodies were current, and were approved by the multitude, for many years after.

A writer of some fame in his day, Joseph Glanvill of Plymouth, an Oxford graduate, came to be somewhat of an authority on witches. He was a clergyman, and became Vicar of Frome in 1662, afterwards removing to the Rectory of Street, near Glastonbury. He held the Rectory of Bath Abbey, in the north aisle of which famous church he was buried. Glanvill was rather an erratic thinker, as may be seen by his *Philosophical Considerations touching the Being of Witches and Witchcraft*, and his posthumous work, *Sadducismus Triumphatus*. His belief in witchcraft was very strong. If the existence of Witches were disproved, he urged, all spiritual existence vanished with them. The old, old fallacy ! No process of reasoning can be more fatal than that which retains some belief or superstition because, if it be not retained, some other belief or superstition must fall with it. John Wesley, however, fell into the same logical error. He wrote: *It is true likewise that the English in general, and indeed most of the men of learning in Europe, have given up all accounts of witches and apparitions as mere old wives' fables. I am sorry for it, and I willingly take this opportunity of entering my solemn protest against this violent compliment which so many that believe the Bible pay to those who do not believe it. I owe them no such service. I take knowledge that these are at the bottom of the outcry which has been raised, and with such insolence spread through the land in direct opposition not only to the Bible, but to the suffrage of the wisest and best of men in all ages and nations. They well know (whether Christians know it or not) that the giving up witchcraft is in effect giving up the Bible.* It may be added that the men whom Wesley was attacking were not denying the truth of witchcraft and its reality in the days of the Hebrews (as the Bible relates) ; they were attacking its modern counterfeits and brutalities. Wesley several times visited Bridgwater, good and earnest man that he was. One wonders if he ever spoke on witchcraft in the old town. Probably not : he had better things to tell.

It is not necessary to allude to the terrible accusations which were set up against many innocent and blameless people, on the charge of dealing with evil spirits, and with witchcraft. Hundreds lost their lives. It was

so easy to accuse, so hard to disprove. The ruffian Matthew Hopkins, in the middle of the seventeenth century, made a tour of the Eastern Counties as *Witchfinder-General*. Hundreds of unhappy women were cruelly maltreated, and many were put to death. Hopkins was himself swum and hanged in 1647. One poor clergyman, advanced in years, was accused, and the torture was applied to him. In his agony he was made to say that he had held dealings with two Satanic imps, to sink a ship. He was executed, and was made to read the burial service for himself just before he was put to death. The last trial for witchcraft in England, it is stated, was at Hereford in 1712. The victim, Jane Wenham, was found guilty, but she was not executed. Even the able and distinguished Sir Matthew Hale believed in the power of Witches, and in 1664 tried and condemned two women for bewitching children. Professor William Forbes, a legal authority in Glasgow, defined witchcraft as *that black art whereby strange and wonderful things are wrought by a power derived from the Devil*. He wrote: *Nothing seems plainer to me than that there may be and have been Witches, and that perhaps such are now actually existing*. This was in 1730. The last execution in Scotland, it is recorded, took place at Dornoch in 1722, where a poor old woman perished for having ridden her own daughter, transformed into a pony. The pony was shod by the Devil, which made the girl lame in hands and feet ever after, as well as her son after her. It was cold weather, and the poor creature sat quietly warming herself by the fire which was to burn her, waiting for her hour to come. Not until 1736 were the statutes against witchcraft finally repealed in Scotland. Even then their abolition was strongly disapproved in many quarters. The leading seceders from the Church of Scotland, in 1743, made an enumeration of certain national and personal sins. In the list was inserted *as also the penal statutes against witches having been repealed by parliament, contrary to the express law of God ; for which a holy God may be provoked in a way of righteous judgment to leave those who are already ensnared to be hardened more and more ; and to permit Satan to tempt and seduce others to the same dangerous and wicked snare*. Few superstitions died a harder death than witchcraft. And unhappily the belief in it brought horrible cruelties upon those who were deemed to be guilty. The accusers seemed to think they were pleasing God by their inhumanities to

Witches. It was the process of the Spanish Inquisition over again. People's bodies were to be tortured so that their souls, or others' souls, might be saved. There is no cruelty like the cruelty of superstition. Two such divergent bodies of men as the Inquisitors of Spain, and the seceding members of the Scottish Kirk, joined hands over it. It was a drag upon eighteenth-century progress, and it made men hard. There was also a lighter and far more innocent side to the quaint notions of those who came before us in Somerset. Many beliefs which were tenaciously held did no one any harm, and they gave just that touch of the marvellous which served to spice the dulness of everyday careers. A few of these may be mentioned. Fairies were supposed to be a sort of intermediate race of beings between spirits and men. Their stature was extremely diminutive, and their complexions were fair. There were male and female fairies; they were usually clad in green, and were wont to haunt the south sides of hills and mountains, and to disport themselves in groves. They loved the meadows, wherein they danced in the fairy circles on the grass. Their characteristics were very human ; they would reward cleanly and comely servants by placing money in their shoes, while sluts and slovens were severely pinched. They were apt to change their elves, or children, if weak, for the stronger children of ordinary mortals, but this could only be achieved before baptism. Hence it was sometimes necessary to watch carefully by the cradles of infants until after their baptism.

Here is a story concerning the changing of children by the fairies, taken from an old book, *A pleasant Treatise on Witchcraft*.

A certain woman having put out her child to nurse in the country, found, when she came to take it home, that its form was so much altered that she scarce knew it : nevertheless, not knowing what time might do, took it home for her own. But when, after some years, it could neither speak nor go, the poor woman was fain to carry it, with much trouble, in her arms : and one day, a poor man coming to the door, "God bless you, Mistress," said he, "and your poor child; be pleased to bestow something on a poor man." "Ah, this child," replied she, "is the cause of all my sorrow," and related what had happened, adding, moreover, that she thought it changed, and none of her child. The old man, whom years had rendered more prudent in such matters, told her, that, to find out the truth, she should make a clear fire, sweep the hearth very clean, and place

the child fast in his chair, that he might not fall, before it ; then break a dozen eggs, and place the four-and-twenty half shells before it ; then go out, and listen at the door : for, if the child spoke, it was certainly a changeling: and then she should carry it out, and leave it on the dunghill to cry, and not to pity it, till she heard its voice no more. The woman, having done all things according to these words, heard the child say, "Seven years old was I before I came to the nurse, and four years have I lived since, and never saw so many milk-pans before" So the woman took it up, and left it upon the dung- hill to cry, and not to be pitied; till at last she thought the voice went up into the air : and coming, found there her own natural and well-favoured child

There were also omens, well known to the wise of those days. Thus a dog howling at night outside the house indicated a speedy death in the family, and a screech-owl flapping its wings against the windows of a sick person's chamber foretold his coming end. Three clear knocks at the bed-head or at the door of a sick chamber indicated approaching death ; so also did the gnawing of rats at the hangings of the bedroom. To break a looking-glass meant death for one in the house, presumably the master. A coal shaped like a coffin (this must surely have been an exceeding rarity), if it flew out of the fire upon the hearth, betokened death, as did also the rising up of a little heap of tallow against the wick of a candle, usually termed a winding-sheet. Special families were privileged to have special warnings of death, sometimes by the appearance of a particular bird. Others were warned by what must have been an exceedingly unpleasant visitation, that is to say, by the figure of a tall woman dressed all in white, who ran shrieking about the house. It was unlucky if a child, at Baptism, did not cry when sprinkled with the water, for it betokened his early death. Children who were prematurely wise, also, were not destined to grow up. Mr. Grose gives a quaint little note on this. *Fond parents are, however, he writes, apt to terrify themselves on this occasion without any great cause : witness the mother who gave us an instance of the uncommon sense of her boy, of only six years of age, that he having laid his dear little hand on a red-hot poker, took it away without any one soul alive bidding him.*

The number of portents indicating death were very numerous : enough, probably, have already been mentioned. Marriage also was heralded at times. An unmarried woman who fasted on Midsummer Eve, and at

midnight laid a clean cloth with bread, cheese, and ale, and sitting down as if going to eat, the street-door being left open — the man who was to be her future husband would come into the room. He would drink to her by bowing, and afterwards filling the glass, would leave it on the table, retiring with another bow. On St. Agnes night, January the 21st, maidens might know their future lot. They must take a row of pins, and pull out each one separately in turn, saying a Paternoster on sticking a pin in their sleeve. They would then dream of the man whom they would afterwards marry. The night of the first new Moon after New Year's Day was also propitious. The maiden must go out of doors in the evening, and stand over the bars of a gate. Looking steadfastly at the Moon, she must say aloud —

All hail to the Moon ! all hail to thee !
I prithee, good Moon, reveal to me
This night, who my husband must be.

Returning indoors to bed, her future husband would appear to her in a dream, clad in the uniform or garb befitting his occupation.

It was also lucky to do or to experience certain things. It was lucky to tumble upstairs, to put on a stocking the wrong side outwards, and to spit (this use obtained especially amongst pedlars) upon the first piece of money received each day for goods sold. It was lucky for the sailors to have children on board a ship, and also for a man when going on a journey, to see a sow cross the road attended by a litter of pigs. On the other hand it was unlucky to walk under a ladder; to kill a swallow, a robin, or a wren ; to lay down one's knife and fork crosswise ; to wash hands in the same bason with another person, seeing that a quarrel between the two would ensue ; to enter upon any new enterprise upon a Friday ; to scatter the salt ; or, more especially, to drown a cat at sea.

Two customs, differing widely from the above, may be noticed here. One was the use of the Passing Bell. The purpose of this was two-fold. First it was, as was most natural, to ask the prayers of good Christian folk for the departing soul. Secondly, it was to drive away the evil spirits which stood at the foot of the bed ready to seize their prey, or to molest the soul's free passage. By ringing the bell these spirits were kept away, for evil spirits were in great dread of the sound of Church Bells. If the greatest bell in the tower could be tolled, so much the better, for that

being louder, the spirits must fain flee farther away to avoid hearing it. *The evill spirytes doubt moche when they here the bells rongen : and this is the cause why the belles ben rongen whan it thondreth, & whan grete tempeste & outrages of wether happen, to the end that the feindes & wycked spirytes shold be abashed & flee, & cease of the movynge of tempeste.* The other custom is the very usual one of taking off the hat on meeting a funeral procession. This indicates nowadays, presumably, the outward indication of respect for the majesty of Death. But in the eighteenth century or earlier the custom was observed for the purpose of keeping in good humour all the evil spirits who, it was believed, attended the body of the dead.

Many of the ideas and beliefs which are here alluded to are common to other parts of England, and the number of them might be largely increased. Such notions have always lingered longest in country districts, and in places where people mostly stay at home. In Somerset they abounded, and some still survive. The clang and vigour of large modern towns are inimical to such conceptions ; the quick movement of residents, their constant change of house and home, the brisk interchange of thought between minds of varying capacity and of the most divergent mental experiences, combine to militate against beliefs which need for their perpetuation some isolation, some superstition, and some inherited prejudices. Modern life in the great centres of population has supplied all these solvents to such antiquated modes of thought ; thus many notions which our ancestors dearly cherished have passed away as a morning cloud. Some have passed away because fuller knowledge has shown the impossibility of retaining them; some have vanished without any adequate reason, save that the fashion of men's thinking changes ; some have died because they deserved to die.

As regards the relation of such beliefs to the Christian faith, it may be said that they mostly stood outside it. Thousands of devout Christians believed in these astonishing tenets, and clung to them. The beliefs themselves neither helped nor hindered any man's faith. They provided a link with the unseen and the unknown which was very real ; many sceptics shared in the superstitions of two hundred years ago. Most of all, perhaps, the growth of literature and the ample supply of books, since then, have changed men's mental outlook. *When I became*

a man, I put away childish things.



* Grose's *Glossary, and Superstitions*, published in High Holbom, 1787.

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