

# WITCHCRAFT IN CHRISTIAN COUNTRIES.

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*"Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live"* (Exodus xxii. 18). So thundered forth the Holy Scriptures, with the full force of the impugnable sanction, "And the Lord said unto Moses." When we Freethinkers, in the light and love of to-day, read this brief but terrible verse we cannot help speculating as to how much better it would have been for Humanity if Europe had never heard of this God, if Asia had never read a line of this Moses. Human nature is, in itself, rude and savage enough till, through weary ages, it gropes its way through blood and darkness up to civilisation and culture. Still, in spite of the strong using their strength to overmaster the weak, there is an inherent tendency in the human heart to sympathise with the sorrows and the sufferings of Humanity. Man is not so bad, after all, if gods would only leave him alone and priests would betake themselves to some honest secular calling. I say unhesitatingly that, down through the centuries, men never would have continued to burn and torture hundreds and thousands of frail and helpless old women but for the accursed sanction of "Thus saith the Lord." "Thus saith the Lord," and two centuries ago the valleys of this your now busy and happy Lancashire blazed and glared with the fires of death, and persons as innocent of sorcery, or of any other crime, as the purest individual in this hall shrieked in agony to God that heard not, to man that pitied not, as their flesh blackened and shrivelled, till a small heap of dust and cinders was all that was left of the thinking human brain, of the throbbing human heart. "Thus saith the Lord," and for centuries after that, otherwise every man might have been free, the sanction of the Bible was adduced to justify one man being

a master and another man a slave. The priests of the Lord, the bishops in the Upper House, were the most determined opponents of the anti-slavery agitation of Wilberforce and Clarkson; and, when the battle came to be finally fought out in America, the canting parsons of that Republic were the worst enemies of the slave, and they preached sermons and quoted no end of texts from Scripture to prove that God Almighty had declared in favour of a trade in human flesh, and that he had mercifully ordained the stripes for the back of the slave.

I am perfectly aware that both witchcraft and slavery had obtained long before Christianity had sprung from the Jewish stable; but I maintain that they both would have died out in Europe and America long before they did if it had not been for their pretended credentials from heaven. Nay, more; I venture to impeach Christianity as specially and *par excellence* the religion of witchcraft. Prosecutions for sorcery were comparatively unknown in heathen Greece, in pagan Rome, and in the provinces that owned their sway. Witchcraft is essentially one of the blessings of Christianity which, according to the utterances of the pulpit, have raised us to such an eminence among the nations of the earth. When, as devout Pilgrim Fathers, we set foot on the shores of America we began, with true Christian charity, to torture and burn each other for witchcraft, till the very Red Indians regarded with horror and bewilderment our helpless sufferers at the stake, and thanked the Great Spirit that they were not followers of the white man's terrible God. They were cruel and merciless, but not so cruel and merciless as we. They had their tomahawk, their war-paint, and their necklace of human teeth, and, with a hardihood almost superhuman and a heroism that has never been surpassed among mortals, their attack was savage and their reprisals merciless. But they were man to man, warrior to warrior. It was not they, but the cowardly and pious Christian witch-finder, that bound innumerable pins into her flesh, and beheld with holy triumph or pious stoicism the suffering of the aged and the helpless.

But now, forsooth, Christianity is ashamed of her previous belief in witchcraft. And why? Has her

unchangeable God changed his mind on the subject? Has he torn the terrible little verse in Exodus out of his infallible book? Did he who made men and women originally suppose that he had made some wizards and witches, and has he since found out his mistake? No. Surrounded by the iron ring of an infallible God and an infallible Book, the Christian cannot alter his tenets. The verse is still in the Bible, and God has given no indication that he has changed his mind and is ashamed of having written it. Then how is it that witches are not burnt to-day, with the ministers of the "blessed Gospel," as was their wont, standing round the flames to do their duty to their God by not suffering a witch to live? I will tell you why. The pulsations of the great heart of Humanity have burst asunder the accursed fetters of the supernatural creeds. Man is in the ascendant, Deity in the decline; Heaven is becoming a more and more vague phantasmagoria, and Earth a more and more glorious reality. We now think less of white wings and manna on the other side of the grave, and more of broad-cloth and roast-beef on this. We burn more coals and we burn no witches; our ships are on every sea, but we drag no wizards through the waters; our steam-engines whistle all round the globe, but we have no engines of torture; we have more schools and fewer convents; we have no racks and thumbscrews, but we have newspapers and the electric telegraph. We have no priest who can effectively gag the mouth of the heretic; and, for an enslaved and ignorant populace sitting in the old dim church with the Bible chained to the pulpit and the hearer's soul chained to the priest, we have now halls like this; and, for the priest, you have now men who have dedicated the best energies of their lives to the task of bringing down with a crash the old and tottering theologic fabric, every stone of which is reddened with the blood of persecution, or blackened with the smoke from the burning of witches and heretics. You have for the monk and the presbyter men like me, and men stronger and more eloquent than I, who, regardless of their interests and themselves, agitate with tongue and pen for political equality and mental liberty. This is why every Christian pulpit in the world is whining about the spread of "Infidelity." The newspaper is Infidelity, the steam-

engine is Infidelity, all popular forms of Government are Infidelity, and all sources of enlightenment are Infidelity. Everything that would, in the interests of the people, depose Deity, hurl the king from his throne, and break the teeth of the priest, is rank Infidelity. But slavery is Christian, witchcraft is Christian, despotism is Christian, war is Christian, ignorance is Christian, and everything that would make earth a hell for the servile many and a Paradise for the tyrannic few.

Christianity has not given up witchcraft; she has had it and slavery wrenched out of her teeth by the "Infidelity" of Public Opinion. Even in England in Puritan times, which were eminently witch-burning times, the greatest heretics then in the land—namely, the Independents—were the only sect that raised their voice against the burning of witches. So has it ever been—Orthodoxy on the side of Ignorance and Injustice, Heresy on the side of Enlightenment and Justice. Even Macaulay, who was no opponent of Christianity, in his essay on "Ranke's History of the Popes," makes a striking admission on this head. Speaking of Voltaire and his school, he observes: "On one side was a Church boasting of the purity of a doctrine derived from the Apostles, but disgraced by the massacre of St. Bartholomew, by the murder of the best of kings, by the War of Cevennes, by the destruction of Port Royal. On the other side was a sect laughing at the Scriptures, shooting out the tongue at the sacraments, but ready to encounter principalities and powers in the cause of justice, mercy, and toleration,"

This poor, emasculated eunuch, which is all that is now left of a once powerful superstition, is not Christianity at all. It has lost its slavery; it has half lost its kingcraft; it has lost its witchcraft; it has lost its dungeons, its axes, and its gibbets. It has lost nearly its every principle; but it has held tenaciously on by the cash. It has lost the Lord; but it has still the loaves and fishes. What it has lost Humanity has gained. I do not mourn over its humiliation. I laugh bitterly at its shiftiness and meanness. Its very devil has, before the Court of Arches, had his identity denied; the Broad Church party has robbed it of its roaring hell; and Colenso, Robertson Smith, and other exegetical scholars

have demonstrated the incompetency of God as a writer; but the salaries are still drawn and the sermons still droned. If you were to take a cart and proceed to demolish it by breaking the shafts, smashing the axle, knocking in the splash-board, and shattering the wheels, would you still have a cart? The wheels, the axle, and the shafts of Christianity are broken; but it has still the effrontery to call itself Christianity, and occasionally to declare that Science is its handmaid. Well, if Science be Religion's handmaid, the handmaid has broken the back of her mistress.

But Christianity never acknowledges itself wrong—oh, dear, no. It insists that the Bible has always taught what science now affirms. Of course the Bible alleges that the world was created in six days; but days are *not* days, but tremendously long periods of time. Yet days were always days till geology proved that the Bible lied. The sun used to revolve round the earth, and once stood still at the command of a Jewish cut-throat; but now it does not revolve round the earth, it only *seems* to do it; and it did not stand still, it only *seemed* to stand still. The stars and moon were originally stuck in the firmament to give light to the earth, and the firmament had originally windows, which could be opened that water might be poured out of them to drown the earth below. But the Christian priest has some way of quibbling out of all this and hundreds of other monstrous absurdities and old-world ignorances, which Science has stripped naked and whipped through the streets before the intelligence of the civilised world. The revulsion of popular feeling makes it now impossible to burn any one as a witch; and so Theology, with an effrontery which is absolutely appalling, now discovers that the Bible never taught that witches should be put to death. It is now discovered that the Hebrew word *chasaph*, like the word *veneficus*, by which it is rendered in the Latin version of the Septuagint, does not mean a witch at all. I never feel more bitter contempt for priestcraft than when it betakes itself to this miserable word-conjuring and verbal jugglery to cast the dust of its learned jargon in the eyes of the people. A word has a certain fixed and irrefragible meaning till it is inconvenient for theology that it should retain that meaning any longer, and then

the priest indulges in some philological hair-splitting, and "proves" that, after all, the word means something that really supports the faith by which he earns his bread. Men and women of England, how long will you stand this? How long will you submit to avaricious attempts to rifle your pockets, and subtle attempts to addle your brains? If from beginning to end the Bible teaches one thing clearly and without equivocation, it is that Jehovah believed in sorcery, and that sorcery should be punished by death.

Even if it were possible to cancel the terrible line in Exodus, what about Saul's weird interview with the Witch of Endor? Explain away the word witch there, and say that it does not mean witch, with the damnatory evidence before you that the Biblical hag conjured up Samuel from the grave, and that Jehovah was so wroth with Saul for thus resorting to necromancy that he gave him a suicide's grave upon the bloody hill of Gilboa. Jehovah himself, in 1 Chronicles x. 13, 14, is explicit upon this: "So Saul died for his transgressions which he had committed against the Lord, even against the word of the Lord, which he kept not, *and also for asking counsel of one that had a familiar spirit, to inquire of it*, and inquired not of the Lord; therefore he slew him, and turned the kingdom unto David, the son of Jesse."

But even if the word *chasaph* and the word *veneficus* should not mean a witch, what then? Who is responsible? The stupid God who made the stupid men who made the stupid translation. On account of this appalling mistranslation hundreds of thousands of human beings must have ended their lives at the stake. It has been calculated that in England alone some thirty thousand persons, under the charge of sorcery, suffered the penalty of death. Be it God or be it Man who is responsible for bringing witchcraft under the sanction of the Bible, he has committed a crime against the human race which the redemptive blood of a thousand Christs would not wash away, for which an eternity in the fires of perdition could not atone. Be he God or Man who is responsible for the unspeakable guilt of mistranslating the word *chasaph*, he merits the execrations of the world and curses from 100,000 blackened and

grinning jaws which were raked from among the fiery ashes of the stake to the cold earth of the grave !

Witchcraft is now frequently referred to jocularly; and few men or women whose attention has not been specially directed to the subject have any idea of its ghastliness, cruelty, and horror. If witch prosecutions had been perpetrated by only one sect or faction of the Christian Church, we should have known more about the matter, for the sect that had abstained from such prosecutions would now, ever and anon, rake it up to throw discredit upon the history of the other faction. But nothing of this kind can be done. Catholic and Protestant were alike guilty. What else could be expected of a faith the incidents of whose origin were attested by signs, prodigies, and miracles? That supernatural powers were granted to the early proselytes of the Christian Church no Christian denies. But, according to a judicious modern Christian writer, "the Fathers of the Faith are not strictly agreed at what period the miraculous power was withdrawn from the Church; but few Protestants are disposed to bring it down beneath the accession of Constantine, when the Christian religion was fully established in supremacy." The Church of Rome, however, maintains that miraculous intercourse with the supernatural world still obtains; and the belief in the recent miracles at Lourdes or Knock and the most recent spirit-rapping demonstration are not by any means outside the credence of the Church. Accordingly, in this affair of witchcraft, the Protestant saucepan has not been able, as is its wont, to cry "black" at the Catholic kettle. As early as the year 1398 the University of Paris pronounced rules for the judicial prosecution of witches, and lamented the terrible spread of sorcery among the people. With intense rigour and cruelty the judges and executioners set about extirpating the diabolical malady. But wherever the fires of death burnt hottest there did witches most increase and multiply. In the morbid state of the imagination, engendered by merciless persecution and cruelty, many were not only accused of witchcraft, but actually imagined themselves to be witches. This sort of phenomenon is observable wherever public feeling, especially among the illiterate, reaches a high state of excitement. It can readily be understood with what

a grasp wild and intense credulity would seize the minds of poor and half-crazy old women, when the wisest in the land averred that they were witches, when their own friends and neighbours appeared as witnesses against them, and when witch-fires blazed on every village green.

In the earlier period of the Romish Church we find frequent references to capital punishment for witchcraft; but it was not till the latter part of the sixteenth century, when the Papacy had attained to the very heyday of its power, that it began to hunt up witches with merciless rigour. As the Reformation dawned the charge of sorcery was discovered to be a most convenient one to bring against the Protestant heretics. It had two great advantages: it was easily made; and, once made, it could be confirmed upon the very slenderest evidence, or none at all. A person once accused of witchcraft found no refuge but the grave. It was in vain to prove an *alibi*. A dozen persons might swear that at the time you were accused of performing some diabolical act of sorcery you were fifty miles away; it was simply taken for granted that your master, the devil, had gifted you with being present at several places at the same moment of time. It is actually on record that a child saw a black cat go in at an old woman's cottage window, and averred that he believed the cat was the old woman's familiar spirit; and the aspersion of this child cost the woman her life. A rider fell from his horse; and, if an old woman happened to be in sight, she would be charged with having accomplished the rider's fall, and torture and death would follow to the accused. Somebody's cow would cease to yield her maximum supply of milk, and some unfortunate old creature would be singled out on this account to endure the most unspeakable suffering. A charge so easily made, and almost invariably fatal if once made, was a ready implement in the hand of the Church to weed out heretics who dared to breathe one disrespectful word of the Scarlet Woman.

All through Europe there came to be individuals and communities that boldly questioned the pretensions of the Church of Rome. The scholars and thinkers challenged her dogmas, and the common people doubted the sanctity of the Church when they became aware of the shameless immorality of her clergy. But by far the

most daring and dangerous of those rebels against the Papacy were the Waldenses and Albigenses, occupying the vine-clad valleys of Southern France. These heretics were denounced as sorcerers, and subjected to the most merciless visitations of sword and fire, rack and gallows. Florimond, a writer of the time, in a work on Anti-Christ, observes: "All those who have afforded us some signs of the approach of Anti-Christ agree that the increase of witchcraft and sorcery is to distinguish the melancholy period of his advent; and was ever age so afflicted with them as ours? The seats destined for criminals before our judges are blackened by persons accused of this crime. There are not judges enough to try them. Our dungeons are gorged with them. No day passes in which we do not render our tribunals bloody by the dooms which we pronounce, or in which we do not return to our homes discountenanced and terrified at the horrible contents of the confessions which it has been our duty to hear. And the devil is accounted so good a master that we cannot commit so great a number of his slaves to the flames but what there shall arise from their ashes a number sufficient to supply their place." But more terrible days still were in store, for the revolt against Rome had fairly set in, and the bull of Pope Innocent VIII. was the sanction and stimulant to a desperate attempt to exterminate heresy by fire and massacre. "Dreadful," says the author of "Demonology and Witchcraft," were "the consequences of this bull all over the continent, especially in Italy, Germany, and France. About 1485 Cumanus burnt as witches forty-one poor women in one year in the county of Burlia. In the ensuing years he continued the prosecution with such unremitting zeal that many fled from the country..... Some were accused of having dishonoured the crucifix and denied their salvation; others of having absconded to keep the Devil's Sabbath, in spite of bolts and bars; others of merely having joined in the choral dances round the witches' tree of rendezvous. Several of their husbands and relatives swore that they were in bed and asleep during these pretended excursions.....In 1488 the country four leagues round Constance was laid waste by lightning and tempest; and two women, by fair means or foul, being made to confess themselves guilty of the

cause of devastation, suffered death. About 1515 five hundred persons were executed at Geneva under the character of 'Protestant witches.'.....Forty-eight witches were burnt at Ravensburgh within four years.....In Lorraine the learned inquisitor, Remigius, boasts that he put to death nine hundred people in fifteen years. As many were banished from the country; so that whole towns were on the point of becoming desolate. In 1524 a thousand persons were put to death in one year at Como, in Italy, and about one hundred every year for several years. In the beginning of the next century the persecution of witches broke out in France with a fury which was hardly conceivable, and multitudes were burnt."

The Moors in Spain, because they were not Christian, suffered merciless persecution for witchcraft, and their school at Tobosco, devoted to the study of chemistry, medicine, mathematics, and other sciences, was banned as a seminary of magic by Christian bigotry and ignorance. The epidemic spread from the vineyards and orange groves of Spain to the wild fiords and misty mountains of Sweden. Scores of witches were burnt in the one little village of Mohra, and fifteen children were executed under the beneficent sanction of "Thus saith the Lord," and thirty-six young people were condemned to be lashed weekly at the church-doors for an entire year; for this matter of witchcraft was one in which Mother Church was learnedly and pecuniarily interested. The learned held that the executed children had been anointed by the devil with an ointment made of the scrapings of altars and the filing of church-clocks! The learned clergy also held that the witches had sons and daughters by the fiends, and that these sons and daughters incestuously produced an offspring of toads and serpents. Prayers were ordered through the churches weekly that the power of Satan might be restrained, so that thousands of old women and hundreds of young children might be exempted from perishing at the stake. It was not unusual for a child of five years to be executed because some infatuated fanatic found in his body the mark of teeth of a child of about that age; and among the Christians in America a poor dog was actually hanged for having sold himself to the devil.

But how far the prayers of the clergy were sincere we may be permitted to doubt, seeing that witchcraft, being an excellent medium through which to impress the ignorant with a vivid conception of the supernatural, was also a considerable source of priestly revenue. The manufacturing of incantations and spells was profitable, because every priest had, for a sum of money, the power of reversing them; and it was profitable for them that poisons should be distilled, because, for a sum of money, the priest could furnish an antidote to any poison which a poor old woman could concoct, more especially since, in all probability, she concocted it under his indirect instigation. So notorious did the fact of parsons making profit of witchcraft, and of setting afoot prosecutions for witchcraft that they might derive profit, become that, in 1603, it was enacted by canon that they should not for the future interfere in such matters as conjuring or expelling the devil without having, in each instance, direct permission from their bishop. The bull of Pope Innocent, which I have already referred to, was, in 1523, reinforced by Adrian VI., and boldly and straightforwardly made to include, not only *sorcerers*, but *heretics*.

But, as I have before remarked, persecutions for sorcery were not by any means confined to the Catholics. Perhaps even more cruel and fanatical witch-burners were to be found in the Calvinists and in the English Puritans.

My subject is vastly too large to be dealt with in one brief lecture. My object is to stimulate the attention of my hearers to further study of a topic the terrible significance of which is too little understood. I purpose, in hurrying to a close, to give the case of one Calvinistic wizard and one Puritan witch; one intellectual and heroic Scotchman and one simple, but splendidly heroic, English girl. The Scotchman was Dr. John Fian, schoolmaster of Salt pans, near Edinburgh. There were twenty counts against him, of which the most important was raising a storm at sea to wreck that awkward pedant, James I., when on his vogue to Denmark to visit his future queen. Fian was further accused of having rifled the graves of the dead, out of whom he cut certain parts to make hell-broth, and to be used as malevolent charms. Once he raised up two candles on

his horses' two ears, and a fifth on a staff which a man riding with him carried in his hand. These supernatural candles gave as much light as the sun at mid-day, and the man with the staff was so terrified that he fell dead on his own threshold. Also, Fian was seen to run in mad helter-skelter after a cat. When asked why he hunted the animal, he replied that Satan wanted all the cats he could lay hands on to cast into the sea for the purpose of raising storms to bring shipwreck and death.

On such monstrous charges as these, brought by the "High and Mighty Prince James," to whom the authorised version of our English Bible is still dedicated and supported by the fanatically pious Presbyterian clergy, John Fian was arraigned. Educated and self-respecting man that he was, he would confess nothing. But, under the edict of the pious Christian King, to whom the Bible is dedicated, and who, with his own royal hand, wrote a book on witchcraft, John Fian, to force him to confess, was put to the torture. First the inquisitors tied a rope slackly round his head, between which and his head they inserted a strong stick, about the length of a man's forearm, and they cruelly twisted round this stick, tightening the rope at every turn, till the skull was crushed in upon the brain. For a whole hour they persisted in this fiendish cruelty, at every turn of the stick calling upon the tortured man to confess; but, even to evade unspeakable agony, no word of confession escaped from his lips. Then they took their blood-stained rope, that had cut through the scalp to the bone, from the head of the resolute sufferer, and tried, by fair means and by wheedling and coaxing, to get him to confess himself guilty of their now inconceivably monstrous charge. Their cozening was no more successful than their twisting of the bloody rope—John Fian would not utter one word of confession. The inquisitors held a conference, and resolved to try the torture again.

Weak, pale, agonised, but still resolute and unflinching, John Fian was seated upon a bench with each leg and foot placed in a narrow and strong iron box that reached up to the knee. A huge wedge was placed loosely between each leg and the inside of each box, and a strong man, with his coat off and his sleeves to his elbows, and leaning upon a heavy hammer, stood near, and ready

to drive the wedges home. The wedge for each leg was carefully adjusted, and the strong man stood with the hammer raised over his head, ready to strike, and the pale and agonised John Fian was asked if he would even now confess. He clenched his teeth, and the perspiration moistened upon his white cheeks the dried blood from the circular wound which the torture-rope had cut to his skull ; but no word of confession escaped from his lips. Down came the hammer, and the agonised man uttered a shriek that rang through the torture-chamber ; but no man pitied ; and many pious persons mocked and laughed at the awful cry of the sufferer, whom they alleged that his master, the devil, had now deserted. Down came the hammer upon the other wedge, crushing the other leg in the most fearful fashion ; but still John Fian, who had raised the ocean waves to wreck King James, would not confess. Down came the hammer again and again upon each wedge alternately, till the skin and flesh and muscle and tendon and bone and marrow were one mass of soft and bloody jelly ; and then, by some sign which he made in the borderland between unconsciousness and excruciating agony, it was understood that he had agreed to confess. They hammered out the wedges and laid down John Fian upon his back, with his legs crushed to pulp, and with his head swollen, lacerated, and ghastly, and gathered round to hear his confession. And what kind of confession could be wrung from a human being in such a terrible plight ? He was, of course, raving mad. They left him till next day. Next day he recanted the whole of the confession which, in his delirium of suffering, they alleged they had extorted from him. They attributed this contumacy to his having been again visited and re-supported by Satan. Again they subjected him to the torture. They wrenched the nails off his fingers with a blacksmith's pincers, and stuck pins through the parts which the nails had protected. This extorted no confession. They put his thumbs into the thumbscrews, till the bones were crushed and splintered to pieces ; but this extorted no confession. His unflinching heroism was attributed to the support extended to him by the devil. Their victim was, already, more dead than alive—more delirious than sane. They

despaired of making anything further of him. The most fiendish tortures had failed, so they strangled the hapless and heroic sufferer, and burnt him at the stake on the Castle Hill of Edinburgh, on a Saturday in the end of January, 1591. This is only one specimen of Scotch Calvinism's attitude to sorcery; hundreds more could be given as inhuman and terrible.

Turning to Puritan England, I have time for only the briefest reference to a poor English girl, named Samuel, who, along with her aged father and mother, were burnt at the stake. On her way to execution some spectators, melted into compassion by her youth and beauty, and anxious to save her from the horrible doom that awaited her, suggested to her that she should allege she was pregnant—perhaps the only plea that, under the circumstances, would have respited her from the flames. That poor peasant girl's reply should be kept in everlasting remembrance to the honour of her country and of womankind. Her young life was sweet to her, and the flames to which she was being led were terrible. But she indignantly refused to put in the plea which was suggested to her. Virtually she exclaimed: "Rather than shame give me torture; rather than dishonour give me death!"

Sir Samuel Cromwell, lord of the manor at Warbois, where this heroic girl and her father and mother were burnt at the stake, having received the sum of forty pounds out of the estate of the poor persons who suffered, turned it into a rent charge of forty shillings yearly for the endowment of an annual sermon on the subject of witchcraft to be preached by a doctor or bachelor of divinity of Queen's College, Cambridge. And this sermon by a Cambridge D.D. is, for aught I know, preached annually till this day, as an insult to the memory of a humble village maiden of two hundred and odd years ago, to whom the women of England should raise a statue; and, if the metal cannot conveniently be found elsewhere, let them melt down the statues of our trumpery princes and kings, who blocked the path of progress when alive and block the way of our street traffic when dead!