Withington:
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DR. JOHN WEYER AND THE WITCH MANIA

By E. T. Withington

The value of every new truth or discovery is relative, and depends upon the state of ideas or knowledge prevalent at the time. Should it go greatly beyond this, it may lose much in practical effect, like good seed falling on unprepared soil; but the discoverer is no less worthy of praise though he be so far in advance of his fellows that they refuse to accept his teaching, and persecute instead of honouring him. Posterity, however, often ignores former conditions, especially in an era of rapid progress, for the quicker the advance the sooner will the early stages be forgotten, however important and difficult they may have been.

Among those who were so far beyond their age that the truths they proclaimed not only were rejected by the majority but brought them into danger was Dr. John Weyer, the first serious opponent of the witch mania. He stood almost alone. His attack on the witch-hunters, though it marks the turn of the tide, was followed by more than a century of cruelty, injustice, and superstition; yet our ideas on the subject are now so entirely altered that it is hard to imagine the value and danger of the service he performed, and his name was almost forgotten even by members of his own profession, when his biography was published by Dr. K. Binz in 1885.[1]

[1] *Dr. Johann Weyer, der erster Bekämpfer des Hexenwahns*, Bonn, 1885, 2nd ed., Berlin, 1896. Also J. Geffcken, 'Dr. Johann Weyer' in *Monatshefte der Comenius*

Let us try to get some idea of the nature of the witch mania, that we may better appreciate the courage and intelligence of this ancient physician.

In the second half of the fifteenth century a new age began in Western Europe. The revival of Greek, the invention of printing, and the discovery of America gave fresh ideas and new prospects to mankind. But, as the sun's rays were believed to breed serpents in fermenting matter, so amid this ferment of new life and light rose a hideous monster, more terrible than any fabled dragon of romance or superstition of the darkest ages, which for generations satiated itself on the tears and blood of the innocent and helpless. This was the witch mania. For two centuries the majority of theologians and jurists in Western Europe were convinced that vast numbers of their fellow creatures, especially women, were in league with the devil, that they had sexual intercourse with him or his imps, and that he bestowed on them in exchange for their souls the power of injuring their neighbours in person or property. They thought it their duty to search out these witches, to force from them, by the most terrible tortures they could devise, not only confessions of their own guilt, but also denunciations of their associates, and finally to put them to death, preferably by burning. In consequence, many thousands of innocent persons of all ages and ranks, but especially poor women, were judicially murdered, after being first compelled by unspeakable torments to commit moral suicide by declaring themselves guilty of unmentionable crimes, and to involve their dearest friends and relations in a similar fate. There is no sadder scene in the whole tragicomedy of human history.

There had been nothing like it in the darkest of the dark ages, there was nothing like it among the far more ignorant and superstitious adherents of the Eastern Church. The witch mania in its extreme form has been manifested only by the Catholics and Protestants of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and by some tribes of African savages.

In early Christian times, witchcraft was recognized as a relic of paganism, but it was not feared. Christ had overcome the powers of darkness, and His true followers need fear no harm from them. A canon of the Church, at least as early as the ninth

Gesellschaft 3, 1904; J. Janssen and L. Pastor, *Geschichte des deutschen Volkes*, 8 vols., Freiburg im Breisgau, 1898–1903, viii. 600 ff.

century, declared that women who thought they rode through the air with Diana or Herodias were only deluded by the devil, and that those who believed human beings could create anything, or change themselves or others into animal forms, were infidels and worse than heathens; and confessors were instructed to inquire into and inflict penance for the belief that witches could enter closed doors, make hail-storms, or kill persons without visible means.[1]

In the enlightened sixteenth century, any one who professed his disbelief that witches could ride through the air, change themselves into cats, or make caterpillars and thunder-storms, would have had an excellent chance of being burnt as a heretic or concealed sorcerer. St. Boniface (680–755) classed belief in witches and werewolves among the works of the devil, and St. Agobard of Lyons (779–840) declared the idea that witches caused hail and thunderstorms to be impious and absurd.[2] The laws of Charlemagne made it murder to put any one to death on charge of witchcraft, and in the eleventh century King Coloman of Hungary asserted briefly, 'Let no one speak of witches, seeing there are none'.[3] Few, indeed, were quite so sceptical as this; still witchcraft was in the Middle Ages looked upon by the educated in a half-contemptuous fashion, and even those who openly professed sorcery frequently escaped with no worse punishment than penance, banishment, or an ecclesiastical scourging.

This may be well illustrated by a story told in the life of the learned Dominican, St. Vincent of Beauvais. An old woman once (1190–1264) came to a priest in his church and demanded money from him, saying she had done him a great service, for that, when she and her companions, who were witches, had entered his bedroom the previous night, she had prevented them from injuring him. 'But how', asked the priest, 'could you enter my chamber, seeing that the door was locked?' 'Oh,' said the witch, 'that matters naught to us, for we go through keyholes as easily as through open doors.' 'If what you say is true,' replied the holy man, 'you shall not lack a reward, but I must first have proof of it.' With these words, he locked the church door, and began

[1] Jean Hardouin (Harduinus), *Collectio regia maxima conciliorum graecorum et latinorum*, 12 vols., Paris, 1715, i. 1506; H. C. Lea, *History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed., 3 vols., London, 1906, iii. 494; W. G. Soldan and H. Heppe, *Geschichte der Hexenprocesse*, 2 vols., Stuttgart, 1880, i. 132.

[2] Lea, loc. cit., iii. 414.

[3] Soldan and Heppe, loc. cit., i. 128, 139.

vigorously to beat the old woman with the handle of the crucifix he carried, asking her, when she complained, why she did not escape through the keyhole.[1]

The great Pope Nicholas I (died 867) strongly condemned the use of torture to induce confessions, and Gregory VII (died 1085) forbade inquisition to be made for witches and sorcerers on occasions of plague or bad weather.[2] Later, the inquisitorial process, combined with torture to enforce denunciations, became the chief agent in spreading and maintaining the witch mania.

The Eastern Church remained in this mediaeval stage, and never developed a witch mania. In the West the change seems to have been brought about mainly by two causes, the development of heresies and the increasing prominence of the devil.

There is no doubt that the Albigensian and other heresies of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries contained Manichean elements. It was taught that there were two divinities—one perfectly good, the creator of the invisible spiritual world, the other the creator of the material world, the Demiurgus, a being capable of evil passions, wrath, jealousy, &c., who was identified with the Jehovah of the Old Testament.[3] It required very little to confound this Demiurgus with Satan, the Prince of this world; after which it was easy to look upon Satan as a being not entirely evil, as Lucifer, son of the morning, the disinherited son or brother of God, a natural object of worship for the oppressed and discontented.[4]

The serfs, equally tyrannized over by bishop and noble, the relics of the persecuted sects Waldenses and Cathari,[5] sought refuge, like Saul of old, in forbidden arts, and thus sects of Luciferans, or devil-worshippers, arose (especially in Germany and France) whose numbers were exaggerated by the fear and horror of the orthodox.[6]

[1] See also Lea, loc. cit., iii. 434, on this mildness of the Church up to the fourteenth century.

[2] Soldan and Heppe, loc. cit., i. 136.

[3] Lea, loc. cit., i. 91.

[4] The Paulicians were accused of teaching that the devil created this world, but seem merely to have taken such texts as John xii. 31, xiv. 30; 2 Cor. iv. 4 'in their plain and obvious sense'. F. C. Conybeare, *Key of Truth, A Manual of the Paulician Church of Armenia*, Oxford, 1898, 46.

[5] The term 'Cathari' was said to come 'from their kissing Lucifer under the tail in the shape of a cat'. Lea, loc. cit., iii. 495.

[6] Lea, loc. cit., i. 105, ii. 334, &c. The main evidence is Conrad of Marburg's report to Pope Gregory XI, 1233: 'A tissue of inventions', but 'apparently doubted by no one'.

At the same time the devil acquired more importance in other ways. That fearful calamity, the Black Death, seemed to display his power over both the just and the unjust; while the Great Schism in which each pope excommunicated the other, handing him and his adherents over to Satan, put every one not absolutely certain of being on the right side in reasonable fear of the powers of darkness.

The belief in the great activity and power of the devil and his servants the sorcerers was further supported by the vast authority of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), whose ingenuity enabled him to explain away those ancient canons which seemed opposed to the more extreme views. Thus the synod of Bracara (A. D. 563) had declared the doctrine that the devil can produce drought or thunder-storms to be heresy; to which the Doctor Angelicus replied that though it is doubtless heresy to believe the devil can make natural thunder-storms, it is by no means contrary to the Catholic faith to hold that he may, by the permission of God, make artificial ones.[1]

For these and other reasons, the devil assumed greater prominence during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries than ever before. Men believed that he might appear to them from behind every hedge or ruin, that his action was to be seen in almost all pains and diseases, but that he was to be dreaded most of all when he entered into a league with some man or woman. Thus everything was ready for the outbreak of witch mania when, in 1484, Pope Innocent VIII by his bull *Summis desiderantes* gave the sanction of the Church to the popular beliefs concerning witches, such as sexual intercourse with devils, destruction of crops, and infliction of sterility and disease on man and beast.

The charge of sorcery had usually been employed in earlier times either to check learned men who seemed to be going too far, or tending to heresy in their researches, as in the case of the physicians Arnold of Villanova (1240–1312) and Peter of Abano (1250–1320), or to crush individuals and societies who were politically dangerous, as with Joan of Arc, the Duchess of Gloucester, and the Templars—the Church being called in to aid the civil power. Now it was the Church which called upon the civil power to assist in a crusade against witches and sorcerers as being the worst and most dangerous of heretics.

[1] Quodlibet, xi. 10; Soldan and Heppe, loc. cit., i. 143; Lea, loc. cit., iii. 415.

In the Middle Ages it was held that a man who called up the devil, knowing it to be wrong, was not a heretic but merely a sinner. But if he thought it was not wrong, or that the devil would tell him the truth, or that the devil could do anything without God's permission, he was also a heretic, since these beliefs are contrary to Church doctrine. In the fifteenth century it was taught that all sorcerers are heretics, *maleficus* being, according to the learned authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, a contraction of *male de fide sentiens* or heretic.[1]

Nor was the identification of heresy and witchcraft illogical, whatever we may think of the etymology. The Church is the kingdom of God, heretics form the kingdom of the devil, and just as the Church possesses saints who see visions, work miracles, and commune with Christ face to face, so there are specially eminent heretics, saints of the devil's church, who work miracles and have obscene intercourse with their master. All true Christians are potential saints, all heretics potential sorcerers, for all have committed treason against the divine Majesty, though only some may have entered into a definite compact with the enemy. The former, if they repent, may hope for perpetual imprisonment; the latter are to be put to death whether they repent or not.

This view was also of advantage to the Church, for it increased the horror of heresy and facilitated its suppression. The laity had never entirely reconciled themselves to the sight of their apparently harmless neighbours being tortured and burnt for differences in abstract belief, but almost every one was ready to torture and burn a sorcerer, and local outbreaks of witch-hunting were frequently started by mob violence. In 1555 it was declared by the Peace of Augsburg that no one should suffer in life and property for his religion; but to take a Lutheran, call him a sorcerer, confiscate his goods, and force him by torture to confess that he was led into his errors by the devil himself, seems to have been too great a temptation for the prince-bishops who headed the 'counter-reformation' in South Germany to resist. That this was partly the cause of the great witch-burnings in the bishoprics of Würzburg, Bamberg, Fulda, and Trèves is evidenced by the large proportion of male victims, and by the frequent and signi-

[1] H. Institoris and J. Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, editio princeps, Cologne, 1486, and frequently reprinted until the end of the seventeenth century. See especially pars 1, quaestio 2.

ficant appearance of the phrase 'is also Lutheran' in the official reports.

As soon as the Reformation was established, Protestants vied with Catholics as witch-hunters. Eager to show that they were in no way inferior to their opponents in zeal for the Lord and enmity against Satan and his servants, they had the advantage of being able to follow the scriptural injunction, 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live', without previously explaining away ancient canons and decrees of Church synods which seemed to throw doubt on the very existence of the more typical forms of witchcraft. Nor did they hesitate to attack their rivals with similar weapons. If Protestants were burnt as sorcerers at Würzburg, we find the first Danish Lutheran bishop, Peter Palladius, recommending the zealous members of his flock to seek out the so-called wise women of their neighbourhoods on pretence of having some disease. If then the latter use paternosters, holy water, or invocations of saints, they are probably not only Catholics but witches, and should be treated accordingly.[1]

Almost all the victims of the witch mania were executed on their own confession, extorted in the vast majority of instances by torture or the fear of torture. In England, where torture was theoretically illegal, confessions were comparatively rare, and nearly all died protesting their innocence. The few exceptions prove the rule; thus Elinor Shaw and Mary Philips, almost the last witches legally executed in England, 1705, confessed because they were threatened with death if they refused, and promised release if they pleaded guilty,[2] while others were induced to admit their guilt by being kept awake several nights, and forced to run up and down their cells till utterly exhausted, methods almost as effectual in producing 'a readiness to confess' as the rack or the thumbscrew.[3]

Nearly all the confessions were to a similar effect. From Lisbon to Liegnitz, from Calabria to Caithness, the central point of the story was the 'sabbat', an assembly of witches and sorcerers in some barren spot where they adored a visible devil, indulged in

[1] J. Diefenbach, *Der Hexenwahn*, Mainz, 1886, p. 299.

[2] The story of Elinor Shaw and Mary Philips, as well as many other accounts of witchcraft, may be read in two volumes entitled *Rare and Curious Tracts illustrative of the History of Northamptonshire*, Northampton, 1876 and 1881.

[3] F. Hutchinson, *Historical Essay*, London, 1718, cap. iv.

feasts, dances, and sexual orgies, reported what evil they had done and plotted more.

A few examples will therefore suffice, and they may be best taken from the *Daemonolatria* [1] of Nicholas Remy, Inquisitor of Lorraine, who burned nearly 900 witches and sorcerers in fifteen years, 1575–90.

He proves the reality of the witch dances as follows: A boy named John of Haimbach confessed that his mother took him to a sabbat to play the flute. He was told to climb up into a tree that he might be heard the better, and was so amazed by what he saw that he exclaimed: 'Good God! where did this crowd of fools and lunatics come from?' Thereupon he fell from the tree and found himself alone with a dislocated shoulder. Otillia Velvers, who was arrested soon after, confirmed the whole story, as did also Eysarty Augnel, who was burnt the following year. So too, Nicholas Langbernard, while going home in the early morning of July 21, 1590, saw in full daylight a number of men and women dancing back to back, some of them with cloven hoofs. He cried out 'Jesus' and crossed himself, upon which all vanished except a woman called Pelter, whose broomstick dropped, and who was then carried off by a whirlwind. The grass was afterwards found to be beaten down in a circle with marks of hoof-prints. Pelter and two other women were arrested and confessed they were present, as also did John Michael, who said he was playing the flute in a tree, and fell down when Nicholas crossed himself, but was carried off in a whirlwind, his broomstick not being at hand.

'What further evidence', asks the inquisitor, 'can any one require?' The only possible objection, viz. that they were phantoms or spirits of people whose bodies were asleep in their beds, is worthless, 'it being the pious and Christian belief that soul and body when once parted do not reunite till the day of judgement'.

The food at these sabbats usually included the flesh of unbaptized children, and was always abominable. A certain Morel said he was obliged to spit it out, at which the demon was much enraged. 'Dancing opens a large window to wickedness,' and is therefore specially encouraged by the devil, but the dances cause great exhaustion, just as his feasts cause loathing, and his money changes to dung or potsherds. 'Barberina Rahel, and nearly all others, declared they had to lie in bed two days after a witch dance,

[1] *Daemonolatriae libri tres*, Lyons, 1595.

but even the oldest cannot excuse themselves, and the devil beats them if they are lazy.' The music is horrible; every one sings or plays what he likes, a favourite method being to drum on horse skulls or trees. Sometimes the devil gives a concert of his own, at which all are required to applaud and show pleasure; those who do not are beaten so that they are sore for two days, as Joanna Gransandeau confessed.

All are compelled to attend and give an account of their evil deeds under heavy penalties. C. G. said 'he was beaten till he nearly died for failing to attend a sabbat, and for curing a girl whom he had been told to poison. The devil also carried him up into the air over the river Moselle, and threatened to drop him unless he swore to poison a certain person.' The witch Belhoria was attacked by dropsy because she refused to poison her husband. If they failed in their attempts on others, they were compelled to poison their own children, or destroy their own property.

Antonius Welch was asked to lend his garden for a witch dance. He refused, and found it full of snails and caterpillars. Men of little faith have objected that only God can create, for 'without Him nothing is made that was made'; but why should not demons collect vast numbers of insects in a moment? Look at the well-known rain of frogs, blood, &c. This is doubtless done by devils out of mere sport: how much more would they do for love of harm? The making of thunder-storms is harder to believe, but has been admitted by more than 200 condemned witches and sorcerers. Almost all confessed that they could creep into locked rooms and houses in the form of small animals, and resuming their natural shape commit all sorts of crimes, showing, says Remy, what a peril they are to mankind.

A worthy comrade of Remy was Peter Binsfeld, suffragan Bishop of Trèves and foremost opponent of John Weyer. He is said to have burnt no fewer than 6,500 persons and to have so desolated his diocese that in many villages round Trèves there was scarcely a woman left. His *Tractatus de confessionibus maleficorum*[1] begins with the following case, which with those mentioned above affords a complete view of the usual witch confessions. John Kuno Meisenbein, a youth about eighteen years old, was studying 'poetry and the humaner letters' at the High School in Trèves, when he confessed to the authorities that his mother,

[1] Trèves, 1595.

brother, sister, and self were all in league with the devil. He said that in his ninth year his mother had initiated him as a sorcerer, and had carried him up the chimney on a goat to a heath near Trèves, where he took part in the usual sabbat and had intercourse with a female demon named Capribarba. The mother, Anna Meisenbein, a woman of good position, had already escaped to Cologne, but a son and daughter were arrested, strangled, and burned. 'They died with much sorrow and penitence.' The eldest son, John Kuno, thereupon urged the judges to use all means to capture his mother, 'that by punishment and momentary death in this world she might escape eternal damnation'.

Moved by this most creditable and merciful petition (*honestissima et plenissima misericordiae petitione excitatus*), the prior wrote to his friends at Cologne, and the unhappy woman was arrested and taken back to Trèves. At first she protested her innocence, 'but when more severe tortures were employed' she made the usual admissions. Having lost a baby, she had, for a moment, doubted the goodness of God. Whereupon a man in black raiment appeared at the side of the bed, and promised if she would renounce God and serve him he would give her peace of mind. She did so, and he became her lover, and gave her money, which however vanished. He called himself Fedderhans, and had asses' feet. Then follows the usual story of the sabbat. 'This woman', concludes the bishop, 'was burnt alive October 20, 1590, and had a good end.' They offered to behead John Kuno as a reward for his filial piety and repentance, but he said he was unworthy of such a favour and was therefore strangled and burnt. 'He had a most edifying end,' says the bishop, who proceeds to comment upon sexual intercourse between witches, sorcerers, and demons, 'which is so certain that it is an impudence to deny it, as St. Augustine saith,[1] being supported by the confessions of learned and unlearned, and by all the doctors of the Church, though a few medical men, advocates of the devil's kingdom [an obvious reference to Weyer, whom he abuses in the preface], have dared to deny it'.[2]

It is not our purpose to try and discover what amount of truth is contained in the immense farrago of absurdities comprised in the

[1] *Civ. Dei*, xv. 23.

[2] Peter Binsfeld, *Tractatus de confessionibus maleficorum*, Trèves, 1595, pp. 37–44, 230, &c. Binsfeld often refers to this case as proving the reality of disputed forms of witchcraft and the soul-saving work of the witch-hunters.

witch confessions. Actual nocturnal meetings of peasants, either to celebrate heathen rites or to plot against their oppressors, or merely to enjoy rude dances and music, as the negro in the Southern States was supposed to play the banjo nightly after his labours on the plantation, may or may not have assisted in spreading and confirming the belief in the sabbat, but they were not necessary. The whole story of child murder, obscene worship of a demon, dances and sexual orgies, was ready to hand long before. It had been applied in classic times to the worshippers of Isis and Bacchus, by the pagans to the early Christians, by the orthodox to the first heretics, to the Jews, to the Templars, and in our own day we have seen very similar charges brought against the Freemasons. All these sets of people had known meeting-places—the witches had none; they must therefore meet on some barren moor or mountain and be carried there supernaturally. Once started, the belief spread rapidly. Indeed we know from contemporary writers that it was a common subject of village gossip, and if any wretched victim had any doubt as to what she was expected to confess, the gaoler and judges were always ready with hints or leading questions.

One learned German [1] has attributed the whole witch mania to the *Datura Stramonium*, or thorn-apple, a plant introduced into Europe about this time. Women dosed themselves with this drug, or applied it in ointments, and forthwith had hallucinations of broomstick rides and witch dances. Others look upon belladonna as the principal agent, and one ardent investigator took dangerous doses of it in the hope of experiencing the adventures of a mediaeval sorcerer, but without definite effect. A similar experiment has recently been made by Kiesewetter, the historian of 'Spiritualism'. He used the witch ointments described by Baptista Porta and others, but could produce nothing more diabolical than dreams of travelling in an express train.[2] Others, again, have supposed that the badly baked rye bread of the period must have produced an immense amount of nightmare among the poorer classes. The power of suggestion, doubtless, had a very real influence both on the victims and their judges, and with the aid of narcotics may not infrequently have produced vivid dreams of dancing and other intercourse with demons.

[1] L. Meyer, *Die Periode der Hexenprocesse*, Hannover, 1882.

[2] K. Kiesewetter, *Die Geheimwissenschaften*, Leipzig, 1895, p. 579 f.

No doubt many persons were quite ready to become witches or sorcerers, and some really believed they had acquired such powers. Cases are recorded in which formal agreements, duly signed in blood, and awaiting the devil's acceptance, were discovered, and resulted in the arrest and burning of the would-be wizard. Others took pleasure in the terror the reputed powers inspired, and may have sometimes caused or increased it by the use of actual poisons.

But these formed but a small minority of the vast army of victims; and even when some real criminal was arrested or some half-insane person voluntarily 'confessed', she was encouraged or compelled to denounce her supposed associates, and thus often involved scores of innocent acquaintances in her own awful fate.

The witch-hunters are not to be blamed for believing in witchcraft, or even for carrying out the scriptural injunction 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live'. It is the methods they employed, compared with which the procedure of a Jeffreys or a Caiaphas was just and merciful, which cannot be excused by any talk about the spirit of the age, which brought agony and death to many thousands of innocent men, women and little children, and which excited the fiery and righteous indignation of Dr. John Weyer.

According to Pascal, men never do wrong so thoroughly and so cheerfully as when they are obeying the promptings of a false principle of conscience. To which we may add that men are never more cruel and unjust than when they are in a fright. The witch-hunters, most of them at least, were pious and conscientious men. They appeal to God, the Church, and the Bible at every step. Nicholas Remy, for instance, after torturing and burning over 800 of his fellow creatures, retired from work thinking he had done God and man good service. But one thing troubled his conscience. He had spared the lives of certain young children, and merely ordered them to be scourged naked three times round the place where their parents were burning. He is convinced that this was wrong, and that they will all grow up into witches and sorcerers. Besides, if God sent two she-bears to slay the forty and two children who mocked Elisha, of how much greater punishment are those worthy who have done despite to God, His Mother, the saints, and the Catholic religion?[1] He hopes his sinful clemency will not become a precedent—a fear which was quite unnecessary, for scores

[1] Op. cit., ii. 2 (p. 200).

of children under twelve were burnt for witchcraft; and the one plea which even then respited the most atrocious murderess did not always avail a witch, since it was believed that her future child, if not the actual offspring of the devil, would infallibly belong to his kingdom.

But the witch-hunters were urged on by fear as well as by piety, for not only did they think themselves exposed to personal attacks from the devil and his allies, but they believed there was a vast and increasing society of men and women in league with the evil one, and that the fate of the world depended on its suppression.

All the machinery, therefore, which the Roman emperors had devised for their protection against treason and the Church for the suppression of heresy was brought into action against the witches, for witchcraft was the acme of treason and heresy, a *crimen laesae majestatis divinae.*[1]

For a description of the methods employed we cannot do better than go to the *Malleus Maleficarum*,[2] the guide and handbook of the witch-hunters.

All proceedings in cases of witchcraft, say the reverend authors, must be on the plan recommended by Popes Clement V and Boniface VIII, 'summarie, simpliciter, et de plano, ac sine strepitu ac figura iudicii', a harmless looking phrase which swept away at a stroke all the safeguards which the lawyers of pagan Rome and the ruder justice of ancient Gaul and Germany had placed around accused persons. There are, says the *Malleus*,[3] two forms of criminal procedure: (1) the old legal or *accusatorial* form where the prosecutor offers to prove his charge and to accept the consequences of failure, which must be carefully avoided as being dangerous and litigious; and (2) the *inquisitorial*, where a man denounces another either from zeal for the faith, or because called upon to do so, but takes no further part nor offers to prove his charge, or where a man is suspected by common report and the judge makes inquiry, and this method must always be preferred. The inquisitors, on entering a new district, should issue a proclamation calling on all persons to give information against

[1] *Malleus*, pars i, quaestio 1, p. 6, edit. 1596.

[2] By H. Institoris and J. Sprenger. Between 1486 and 1596 several editions were printed in specially small form 'that inquisitors might carry it in their pockets and read it under the table'.

[3] iii. 1 (p. 337 f.).

suspected witches on pain of excommunication and temporal penalties. Any one may be compelled, by torture if necessary, to give evidence, and if he refuses must be punished as an obstinate heretic. Other sorcerers, or the man's wife and family, are lawful witnesses against, but not for, the accused. Criminals and perjured persons, if they show zeal for the faith, may be admitted to give evidence. Priests, nobles, graduates of universities, and others legally exempt from torture are not exempt in the case of witch trials.[1]

'Delation,' the scandal of imperial Rome, was not only encouraged but enforced, and in some places, as at Milan, boxes were put in the churches, into which any one might drop an anonymous denunciation of his neighbour.

Names of informers are not to be revealed under penalty of excommunication; the advocate, if there is one, need be told the charges only. This advocate must not be chosen by the accused but by the inquisitor, and he must refuse the case if it seems to him unjust or hopeless. He must not use legal quibbles or make delays or appeals, and is to be specially warned that if he be found a protector of heretics or a hinderer of the inquisition, he will incur the usual penalties for those heinous crimes. If he reply that he defends the person, not the error, this avails not, for he must make no defence which interferes with proceeding *summarie, simpliciter, et de plano*.[2] After this it is not surprising to find that those accused of witchcraft were rarely defended by an advocate.

Faith need be kept with heretics and sorcerers 'for a time only'.[3] Therefore an inquisitor may promise not to condemn a person if he confesses, and then pass sentence after a few days, or if of very tender conscience by the mouth of another. It is also lawful to introduce persons, *etiam mulieres honestae*, to the accused who promise to find means for their escape if they will teach them some form of witchcraft. This, say the authors, is a most successful method for getting convictions.[4]

Torture, though it may not be repeated on the same charge, may be continued as long as necessary, and any fresh evidence justifies a repetition. Finally the accused may be burnt without confession if the evidence is strong enough, or he may be kept

[1] *Malleus*, iii. 4, p. 344.
[2] iii. 10.
[3] iii. 14.
[4] iii. 16.

in prison for months or years, when the *squalor carceris* may induce him to confess his crimes.[1]

Such are the proceedings recommended against persons suspected of or denounced for witchcraft, and they conclude appropriately with the hideously hypocritical formula with which they were delivered over to be burnt: 'Relinquimus te potestati curiae secularis, deprecantes tamen illam ut erga te citra sanguinis effusionem et mortis periculum suam sententiam moderetur',[2] which means, according to the *Malleus*, that sorcerers are to be burned even though they repent, while repentant heretics may be imprisoned for life.

What was meant by the *squalor carceris* may be seen from the following description by an eye-witness, Pretorius:[3]

'Some [of the dungeons] are holes like cellars or wells, fifteen to thirty fathoms (?) deep with openings above, through which they let down the prisoners with ropes and draw them up when they will. Such prisons I have seen myself. Some sit in great cold, so that their feet are frost-bitten or frozen off, and afterwards, if they escape, they are crippled for life. Some lie in continual darkness, so that they never see a ray of sunlight, and know not whether it be night or day. All of them have their limbs confined so that they can hardly move, and are in continual unrest, and lie in their own refuse, far more filthy and wretched than cattle. They are badly fed, cannot sleep in peace, have much anxiety, heavy thoughts, bad dreams. And since they cannot move hands or feet, they are plagued and bitten by lice, rats, and other vermin, besides being daily abused and threatened by gaolers and executioners. And since all this sometimes lasts months or years, such persons, though at first they be courageous, rational, strong, and patient, at length become weak, timid, hopeless, and if not quite, at least half idiotic and desperate.'

Yet all this was not considered torture, and if some poor wretch, after a year of it, went mad, or preferred a quick death to a slow one, her confession was described as being 'entirely voluntary and without torture'.

As to the torture itself, it combined all that the ferocity of savages and the ingenuity of civilized man had till then invented. Besides the ordinary rack, thumb-screws, and leg-crushers or Spanish boots, there were spiked wheels over which the victims were drawn with weights on their feet; boiling oil was poured on

[1] iii. 14. [2] iii. 29–31, repeated with slight variations.

[3] *Von Zauberei und Zauberern*, p. 211; Soldan and Heppe, i. 347.

their legs, burning sulphur dropped on their bodies, and lighted candles held beneath their armpits. At Bamberg they were fed on salt fish and allowed no water, and then bathed in scalding water and quicklime. At Lindheim they were fixed to a revolving table and whirled round till they vomited and became unconscious, and on recovery remained in so dazed a state that they were ready to confess anything.[1] At Neisse they were fastened naked in a chair 'with 150 finger-long spikes in it' and kept there for hours. And so effective were these tortures that nine out of ten innocent persons preferred to die as confessed sorcerers rather than undergo a repetition of them.

The Jesuit Father Spee, a worthy successor of John Weyer, accompanied nearly two hundred victims to the stake at Würzburg in less than two years. At the end of this time his hair had turned grey and he seemed twenty years older, and on being questioned as to the cause, declared that he was convinced that all these persons were innocent. They had, he said, at first repeated the usual confession, but on being tenderly dealt with had one and all protested their innocence, adjuring him at the same time not to reveal this, for they would much rather die than be tortured again. He added that he had received similar reports from other father confessors.[2] A few years later, 1631, he plucked up courage to publish anonymously his *Cautio Criminalis*, in which he exclaims:

'Why do we search so diligently for sorcerers? I will show you at once where they are. Take the Capuchins, the Jesuits, all the religious orders, and torture them—they will confess. If some deny, repeat it a few times—they will confess. Should a few still be obstinate, exorcise them, shave them: they use sorcery, the devil hardens them, only keep on torturing—they will give in. If you want more, take the Canons, the Doctors, the Bishops of the Church—they will confess. How should the poor delicate creatures hold out? If you want still more, I will torture you and then you me. I will confess the crimes you will have confessed, and so we shall all be sorcerers together.'[3]

[1] The Lindheim cases are recorded by G. C. Horst, afterwards pastor of the place, in his *Dämonomagie*, 2 vols., Frankfort, 1818, and *Zauberbibliothek*, 6 vols., Mainz, 1821–6. See also O. Glaubrecht, *Die Schreckensjahre von Lindheim*, 1886.

[2] *Cautio Criminalis*, Rinteln, 1631, Dubium xix (p. 128). He calls himself 'Sacerdos quidam'.

[3] Dubium xx (p. 153).

In the most notorious of judicial murders, we read that the judges had some difficulty owing to a disagreement between the witnesses. This rarely troubled the witch-hunters. At Lindheim a woman was accused of having dug up and carried off the body of an infant, which, under torture, she admitted, denouncing four others as her accomplices. But on the grave being opened, the body was found uninjured. The inquisitors at once decided that this must be a delusion of the devil, and all five women were burned. A man confessed, under torture, that he was a were-wolf, and in that form had killed a calf belonging to a neighbour; the latter, however, said he had never lost a calf, though two or three years ago two hens had disappeared, he believed through witchcraft. The accused was burnt, for what need had they of witnesses? Had they not heard his confession?[1]

It was even laid down as a principle that doubtful points must be decided 'in favour of the faith'—in other words, against the accused. 'If a sorcerer retracts his denunciations at the stake, it is not void, for he may have been corrupted by friends of the accused. Also when witnesses vary, as they often do, the positive assertion is always to be believed,' says Bishop Covarivias, a prominent member of the Council of Trent. In which he is supported by the jurist Menochius of Padua, 'ne tam horrendum crimen occultum sit'.

Anything might start a witch-hunting, and once started it increased like an avalanche. If an old woman happened to be out of doors in a thunder-storm: if the winter was prolonged; if there was a more than usual number of flies and caterpillars; if a woman had a spite against her neighbour, some one might be denounced and forced in turn to denounce others. The prolonged winter of 1586 in Savoy, for instance, resulted in the burning of 113 women and two men, who confessed, after torture, that it was due to their incantations.

It is thus not difficult to understand how, in the diocese of Como, witches were burnt for many years at an average rate of 100 per annum; how in that of Strassburg 5,000 were burnt in twenty years, 1615–35; how in the small diocese of Neisse 1,000 suffered between 1640–50, insomuch that they gave up the stake and pile as being too costly, and roasted them in a specially prepared oven; and how the Protestant jurist Benedict Carpzov could boast not

[1] Horst, *Zauberbibliothek*, ii. 374, and *Dämonomagie*, ii. 412.

only of having read the Bible through fifty-three times, but also of having passed 20,000 death sentences, chiefly on witches and sorcerers.[1]

One of Carpzov's victims is specially interesting to medical men, the Saxon physician, Dr. Veit Pratzel, who on one occasion (1660) produced twenty mice by sleight of hand in a public-house, probably for the sake of advertisement. He was denounced as a sorcerer, tortured and burnt, while his children were bled to death in a warm bath by the executioner, lest they should acquire similar diabolical powers.[2]

A like fate befell the servant of a travelling dentist at Schwersenz in Poland. The dentist, John Plan, left his assistant in the town to attract attention by conjuring tricks, while he went to sell his infallible toothache tinctures in the neighbouring villages. On his return next evening, he was horrified to see the body of the unfortunate man hanging on the town gallows, and was told on inquiry that he was an evident sorcerer who had made eggs, birds, and plants before everybody in the market-place. He had therefore been arrested, scourged, put on the rack, and otherwise tortured till he confessed he was in league with the devil. Whereupon the town council, 'out of special grace and to save expense', had, instead of burning him, mercifully condemned him to be hanged. The dentist fled in terror to Breslau.[3]

But it was by no means necessary to be so foolhardy as this to fall into the hands of the witch-hunters. A woman at Lindheim was noticed to run into her barn as the inquisitorial officials came down the street. She had never been accused or even suspected of witchcraft, but was nevertheless immediately arrested, and brought more dead than alive to the chief inquisitor, Geiss,[4] who declared her flight justified the strongest suspicion. Exposed to the most extreme torture, she confessed nothing, but at length, at the question whether she had made a compact with the devil, one of the inquisitors declared he saw her nod her head. This was enough; she was burnt; probably a happy fate under the circumstances, for she thus escaped being forced by further tortures to give details of her imaginary crime and to denounce her neighbours.

[1] Soldan and Heppe, ii. 209.
[2] Soldan and Heppe, ii. 130.
[3] J. H. Böhmer, *Ius ecclesiasticum*, 5 vols., Halle, 1738–43, v. 35.
[4] Horst, *Dämonomagie*, ii. 377.

Once in the clutches of the witch-hunters, the unfortunate victim was confronted by a series of dilemmas from which few escaped. A favourite beginning was to ask whether he believed in witchcraft. If he said 'Yes', he evidently knew more of the subject; if 'No', he was *ipso facto* a heretic and slanderer of the inquisition; if in confusion he tried to distinguish, he was *varius in confessionibus*,[1] and a fit subject for immediate torture. If he confessed under torture, the matter was, of course, settled; if he endured manfully, it was evident that the devil must be aiding him. If a mark could be found on his body which was insensible and did not bleed when pricked, it was the devil's seal and a sure sign of guilt; but if there was none, his case was no better, for it was held that the devil only marked those whose fidelity he doubted, so that a suspected person who had no such mark was in all probability a specially eminent sorcerer.[2]

Then came the water test, of which there is no better account than the report sent by W. A. Scribonius, Professor of Philosophy at Marburg, to the town council of Lemgo in 1583:

'When I came to you, most prudent and learned consules, 26th September, there were, two days later on St. Michael's eve, three witches burnt alive for divers and horrible crimes. The same day three others, denounced by those aforesaid, were arrested, and on the following day about 2 p.m. for further proving of the truth were thrown into water to see whether they would swim or not. Their clothes were removed and they were bound by the right thumb to the left big toe and vice versa, so that they could not move in the least. They were then cast three times into the water in the presence of some thousands of spectators, and floated like logs of wood, nor did one of them sink. And it is also remarkable that almost at the moment they touched the water a shower of rain then falling ceased, and the sun shone, but when they were taken out it started raining as before.'

On request of the burgomaster, he investigated 'the philosophy' of this, and, though he could find nothing definite, had no doubt of its value as a test of witchcraft. 'The physician Weyer rejects it as absurd and fallacious, but he can produce no good arguments or examples against it, and may therefore be ignored.' Perhaps witches are made lighter because possessed by demons who are 'powers of the air' and often carry them

[1] *Malleus*, iii. 14 (p. 370).

[2] Father Spee gives a long list of these dilemmas, *Cautio Criminalis*, Dubium li.

through the air. All who float have afterwards confessed, therefore though not scriptural nor of itself sufficient to convict, the swimming test is not to be despised.[1]

With regard to the number of victims, even sober historians, such as Soldan, speak of millions, but if we take three-quarters of a million for the two centuries 1500–1700, it will give a rate of ten executions daily, at least eight of which were judicial murders.

Even more pathetic than the notice of 800 condemned in one body by the senate of Savoy[2] are the long lists of yearly executions preserved in the fragmentary records of small towns and villages. Thus at Meiningen, between 1610–31 and 1656–85, 106 suffered—in 1610 three, 1611 twenty-two, 1612 four, &c. &c., the intervening records being omitted owing to war. Similar notices have survived at Waldsee, Thun in Alsace, and many other hamlets, where through a long series of years we read of one to twenty persons burnt annually, some of them being previously 'torn with red-hot pincers'.[3]

At Würzburg the Prince-bishop, Philip of Ehrenberg, is said to have burnt 900 in five years (1627–31), and we have terrible lists of twenty-nine of the burnings, almost all of which include young children. Here are two of them:

'In the thirteenth burning, four persons: the old court smith, an old woman, a little girl of nine or ten years, a younger girl her sister.'

'In the twentieth burning, six persons: Babelin Goebel, the prettiest girl in Würzburg; a student in the fifth form who knew many languages and was an excellent musician, instrumental and vocal; two boys from the new minster, twelve years old; Babel Stepper's daughter; the caretaker on the bridge.'[4]

At Bamberg the Prince-bishop, John George, 1625–30, burnt at least 600 persons, and his predecessors had been hardly less vigorous witch-hunters. He was ably seconded by his suffragan, Bishop Förner, and two doctors of law, Braun and Kötzendörffer, who besides the ordinary torture implements, salt fish and quicklime baths, found a so-called prayer stool or bench covered with

[1] *De sagarum natura et potestate, deque his recte cognoscendis et puniendis deque purgatione earum per aquam frigidam epistola*, Lemgo, 1583. Also in Sawr, *Theatrum de Veneficiis*, 1856.

[2] Lea, iii. 549.

[3] Haas, *Die Hexenprocesse*, Tübingen, 1865.

[4] Soldan and Heppe, ii. 46, and elsewhere.

spikes, on which the victim was forced to kneel, and a cage with a sharp ridged floor on which he could not stand, sit, or lie without torment, of great value in extorting confessions. The record of their deeds has been published by Dr. F. Leitschuh,[1] librarian of Bamberg, and contains, among other cases, that of the Burgomaster, John Junius, which throws more light on the nature of the witch trials than do volumes of second-hand history.[2]

John Junius, a man universally respected, had been five times Burgomaster of Bamberg, and held that office in June 1628, when he was arrested on a charge of sorcery. He protested his innocence though six witnesses declared, under torture, that they had seen him at the witch dances. On June 30 he endured the torment of the thumb-screws and leg-crushers (Spanish boots) without confession. Then they stuck pins in him and found a 'devil's mark', and finally drew him up with his arms twisted backwards, but he would admit nothing. Next day, however, when threatened with a repetition of the torture, he broke down, made the usual confession (including intercourse with a female demon who turned into a he-goat), and denounced twenty-seven persons whose names and addresses are given.[3] He was condemned to be beheaded and burnt, but before his death wrote the following letter to his daughter:

'Many hundred thousand good-nights, my dearest daughter Veronica! Guiltless was I taken to prison, guiltless have I been tortured, guiltless I must die. For whoever comes here must either be a sorcerer, or is tortured until (God pity him) he makes up a confession of sorcery out of his head. I'll tell you how I fared. When I was questioned the first time, there were present Dr. Braun, Dr. Kötzendörffer, and two strangers. Dr. Braun asked me, "Friend, how came you hither?" I answered, "Through lies and misfortune." "Hear you," said he, "you're a sorcerer. Confess it willingly or we'll bring witnesses and the executioner to you." I said, "I am no sorcerer. I have a clear conscience on this matter, and care not for a thousand witnesses, but am ready to hear them." Then the chancellor's son, Dr. Haan, was brought out. I asked, "Herr Doctor, what do you know of me? I never had anything to do with you, good or bad." He answered, "Sir, it is a judgement matter, excuse me for witnessing against you. I saw you at the dances." "Yes, but how?" He did not know. Then I asked the commissioners to put him on oath, and examine him properly.

[1] *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Hexenwesens in Franken*, Bamberg, 1883.
[2] 48 ff. [3] Official report, given by Leitschuh in appendix.

"The thing is not to be arranged as you want it," said Dr. Braun; "it is enough that he saw you." I said, "What sort of witness is that? If things are so managed, you are as little safe as I or any other honourable person." Next came the chancellor and said the same as his son. He had seen me, but had not looked carefully to see who I was. Then Elsa Hopffen. She had seen me dancing on Haupt's moor. Then came the executioner and put on the thumb-screws, my hands being tied together, so that the blood spurted from under the nails, and I cannot use my hands these four weeks, as you may see by this writing. Then they tied my hands behind and drew me up. I thought heaven and earth were disappearing. Eight times they drew me up and let me fall so that I suffered horrible agony. All which time I was stark naked, for they had me stripped.

'But our Lord God helped me, and I said to them, "God forgive you for treating an innocent man like this; you want not only to destroy body and soul, but also to get the goods and chattels." [At Bamberg, two-thirds of the property of convicted sorcerers went to the bishop, and the rest to the inquisitors.] "You're a rascal," said Dr. Braun. I replied, "I am no rascal, but as respectable as any of you; but if things go on like this, no respectable man in Bamberg will be safe, you as little as I or another." The doctor said he had no dealings with the devil. I said, "Nor have I. Your false witnesses are the devils, your horrible tortures. You let no one go, even though he has endured all your torments."

'It was Friday, 30th June, that, with God's help, I endured these tortures. I have ever since been unable to put my clothes on or use my hands, besides the other pains I had to suffer innocently.

'When the executioner took me back to prison, he said to me, "Sir, for God's sake confess something, whether true or not. Think a little. You can't stand the tortures they'll inflict on you, and even if you could you wouldn't escape, though you were a count, but they'll go through them again and again and never leave you till you say you are a sorcerer, as may be seen by all their judgements, for all end alike." Another came and said the bishop had determined to make an example of me which would astonish people, and begged me for God's sake to make up something, for I should not escape even though I were innocent, and so said Neudecker and others.

'Then I asked to see a priest, but could not get one. . . . And then this is my confession as follows, but all of it lies.

'Here follows, dearest child, what I confessed that I might escape the great torments and agonies, for I could not have endured them any longer. This is my confession, nothing but lies, that I had to make on threat of still greater tortures, and for which I must die.

"'I went into my field, and sat down there in great melancholy, when a peasant girl came to me and said, 'Sir, what is the matter? Why are you so sorrowful?' I said I did not know, and then she sat down close to me, and suddenly changed into a he-goat and said, 'Now you know with whom you have to do.' He took me by the throat and said, 'You must be mine, or I'll kill you.' Then I said, 'God forbid.' Then he vanished and came back with two women and three men; bade me deny God, and I did so, denied God and the heavenly host. Then he baptized me and the two women were sponsors; gave me a ducat, which turned into a potsherd."

'Now I thought I had got it over, but they brought in the executioner, and asked where I went to the witch dances. I did not know what to say, but remembered that the chancellor and his son and Elsa Hopffen had mentioned Haupt's moor and other places, so I said the same. Then I was asked whom I had seen there. Replied I did not recognize any. "You old rascal, I must get the executioner to you. Was the chancellor there?" Said "Yes." "Who else?" "I recognized none." Then he said, "Take street by street, beginning from the market." Then I had to name some persons. Then Long Street. I knew nobody; had to name eight persons. . . . Did I know any one in the castle? I must speak out boldly whoever it was. So they took me through all the streets till I could and would say no more. Then they gave me to the executioner to strip, shave off my hair, and torture me again. "The rascal knows a man in the market-place, goes about with him daily, and won't name him." They meant Dietmeyer, so I had to name him.

'Next they asked what evil I had done. I replied, "None." The devil bade me to, and beat me when I refused. "Put the rascal on the rack." So I said I was told to murder my children but killed a horse instead. That wasn't enough for them. I had also taken a sacramental wafer and buried it. When I said this they left me in peace.

'There, dearest child, you have all my confession, for which I must die, and it is nothing but lies and made-up things, so God help me. For I had to say all this for fear of the tortures threatened me, besides all those I had gone through. For they go on torturing till one confesses something; be he as pious as he will, he must be a sorcerer. No one escapes, though he were a count. And if God does not interfere, all our friends and relations will be burnt, for each has to confess as I had.

'Dearest child, I know you are pious as I, but you have already had some trouble, and if I may advise, you had better take what money there is and go on a pilgrimage for six months, or somewhere where you can stay for a time outside the diocese till one sees what

will happen. Many honourable men and women in Bamberg go to church and about their business, do no evil, and have clear consciences as I hitherto, as you know, yet they come to the witch prison, and if they have a tongue to confess, confess they must, true or not.

'Neudecker, the chancellor, his son, Candelgiesser, Hofmeister's daughter, and Elsa Hopffen all denounced me at once. I had no chance. Many are in the same case, and many more will be, unless God intervenes.

'Dear child, keep this letter secret so that nobody sees it, or I shall be horribly tortured and the gaoler will lose his head, so strict is the rule against it. You may let Cousin Stamer read it quickly in private. He will keep it secret. Dear child, give this man a thaler.

'I have taken some days to write this. Both my hands are lamed. I am in a sad state altogether. I entreat you by the last judgement, keep this letter secret, and pray for me after my death as for your martyred father . . . but take care no one hears of this letter. Tell Anna Maria to pray for me too. You may take oath for me that I am no sorcerer, but a martyr.

'Good-night, for your father, John Junius, will see you never more.

24th July, 1628.'

On the margin is written:

'Dear child, six denounced me: the chancellor, his son, Neudecker, Zaner, Ursula Hoffmaister, and Elsa Hopffen, all falsely and on compulsion as they all confessed. They begged my pardon for God's sake before they were executed. They said they knew nothing of me but what was good and loving. They were obliged to name me, as I should find out myself. I cannot have a priest, so take heed of what I have written, and keep this letter secret.'

The letter is still preserved, with its crippled handwriting, in the library at Bamberg. This case is beyond comment. It is like the trial of Faithful at Vanity Fair, but with rack and thumb-screw in place of a jury. Yet it is but a moderate sample of those outrages on justice and humanity called witch trials. Men rarely held out long, but, did space permit, we might tell stories of many heroic women who endured ten, twenty, even fifty repetitions of torture, till they died on the rack or in the dungeon rather than falsely accuse themselves or their neighbours.[1]

[1] Maria Hollin at Nördlingen (1593) withstood fifty-six repetitions of torture, and was finally 'dismissed' on the terms mentioned (Janssen, op. cit., viii. 719).

For when once arrested, the victim had small hope of acquittal, and in the most favourable cases, when there was no external evidence, and no amount of torture could induce a 'confession', the accused was sent back friendless and crippled to her home, which she was forbidden to leave, having first sworn to have no more dealings with the devil, and to take no proceedings against her accusers. To acquit her would imply that an innocent person had been tortured, a thing naturally repugnant to the tender consciences of the inquisitors.

Nor was the mania confined to any special class. Protestants vied with Catholics, and town councils with bishops in cruelty and injustice. At Nördlingen they had a special set of torture instruments which the Protestant town council lent to neighbouring district authorities, with the pious observation that 'by these means, and more especially by the thumb-screw, God has often been graciously pleased to reveal the truth, if not at first, at any rate at the last'.[1]

It is obvious from the above cases that the main cause of the continuance of the witch-burnings, and of the number of the victims, was the use of torture to obtain denunciations. The instances in which insane persons accused themselves or others seem to have been fewer than we might have expected.

Then, as now, there were melancholics who thought they had committed the unpardonable sin, and in those days the unpardonable sin might be represented by an imaginary compact with the devil. Then, as now, the 'mania of persecution' was a prominent symptom in some forms of insanity, and the idea of being bewitched by some old woman corresponded to the modern dread of detectives, electric batteries, or telephones.

Some of the supposed signs of witchcraft resemble those of mania and melancholia. Thus maniacs sometimes collect dirt for money, and witches often confessed that the devil's money changed to dirt. Melancholics mutter to themselves, look on the ground, and avoid society, all of which were considered signs of witchcraft. But then red hair and left-handedness were no less infallible indications.

Insanity and crime were indeed present at the witch trials, but they were at least as obvious in the accusers and judges as in the

[1] The Nördlingen authorities acquired an evil eminence in this frightfulness, which they termed 'eine heilsame Tortur' (Soldan, ii. 470).

victims, and the first man who was bold enough to say so was Dr. John Weyer. Though a few feeble protests may have been made by others, it was from the medical profession that the first determined opposition came. Mystics like Paracelsus and Cardan might encourage the superstition; pious and able members of the profession like Ambroise Paré and Sir Thomas Brown might give it their sanction, but it was the physician Cornelius Agrippa who first successfully defended a witch at the risk of his own life,[1] and it was his pupil John Weyer who first declared open war against the witch-hunters and invoked the vengeance of heaven upon their atrocities.

'The feareful abounding at this time in this countrie of those detestable slaves of the divell, the witches or enchanters hath moved me (beloved reader) to dispatch in post the following treatise of mine, not in any wise (as I protest) to serve for a shewe of my learning and ingine, but only (moved of conscience to preasse thereby) so far as I can, to resolve the doubting hearts of manie both that such assaults of Satan are most certainly practised, and that the instruments thereof merit most severely to be punished, against the damnable opinions of two principally in our age, whereof the one called Scot, an Englishman, is not ashamed in public print to denie that there can be such a thing as witchcraft and so maintains the old error of the Sadduces in denying of spirits, the other called Wierus, a German physition sets out a publike apologie for all these crafts-folks, whereby procuring for their impunity, he plainly bewrayes himself to have been of that profession.'

Thus did our 'British Solomon', James I, commence his *Daemonologia* (1598), a work directed against the two men who alone up to that time had made a bold and open protest against the witch mania and its abominations. Reginald Scot in his *Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584) took the view of a modern common-sense Englishman, that the whole thing is absurd, a mixture of roguery and false accusations. Weyer, on the other hand, his predecessor by twenty years, is a firm believer in the activity of the devil, whose object, however, is not to get possession of the souls of crazy old women, but by deluding them, to convert pious and learned lawyers and theologians into torturers and murderers.

Born about 1516 at Grave in Brabant, the son of a dealer in hops and faggots, Weyer was acquainted with the supernatural

[1] Lea, iii. 545, and references there given.

from his earliest years, for they had a domestic 'house cobold' or *Poltergeist*, who was heard tumbling the hop-sacks about whenever a customer was expected. At seventeen years of age the boy was sent to study medicine as apprentice to Cornelius Agrippa, an extraordinary man, long held to be a sorcerer, who had recently incurred yet stronger suspicion by his heroic and successful defence of a woman accused of witchcraft at Metz, and by his fondness for a black dog called 'Monsieur' which scarcely ever left him. The young Weyer used to take this animal out on a string, and soon became convinced, to use his own words, that it was 'a perfectly natural male dog'.[1] He next went to Paris and thence to Orleans, a university then famous for its medical school, where he took the degree of M.D. in 1537. He commenced practice in Brabant, became public medical officer at Arnheim in 1545, and in 1550 physician to Duke William of Cleves. In 1563 he published his great work *De praestigiis daemonum et incantationibus ac veneficiis*,[2] the object of which is to show that so-called witchcraft is usually due to delusions of demons, who take advantage of the weaknesses and diseases of women to bring about impious and absurd superstitions, hatreds, cruelties, and a vast outpouring of innocent blood, things in which they naturally delight.

He proposes to treat the subject under four heads corresponding to the four faculties, theology, philosophy, medicine, and law. In the first section he attempts to show that the Hebrew word *Kasaph* does not mean 'witch' but 'poisoner', or at any rate that Greek, Latin, and Rabbinical interpreters so vary, that no reliance can be placed upon them. Moreover the law of Moses was given to the Jews 'for the hardness of their hearts', and is by no means always to be used by Christians.[3] Magicians and sorcerers do indeed still exist, as in ancient Egypt, but these are always men, and usually rogues and swindlers, such as was Faust, of whom Weyer gives us one of the earliest and most authentic notices. Faust, he says, was once arrested by Baron Hermann of Batoburg, and given in charge of his chaplain, J. Dursten, who hoping to see some sign or wonder, treated him with much kindness, giving him the best of wine. But all he got out of him was a magic ointment to enable him to shave without a razor, containing arsenic, and so strong that it brought

[1] *De praestigiis, &c.*, ii. 5.

[2] The privilege for publication is dated November 4, 1562; three editions appeared before the end of 1564, and a sixth in 1583.

[3] Op. cit., ii. 1.

not only the hair but the skin from the reverend gentleman's cheeks. 'The which he has told me more than once with much indignation.' [1]

Weyer, however, firmly believes that the devil may assist sorcerers, such as Faust, in some of their feats, though he does this chiefly by deluding the eyes of the spectators. He may also delude women into the belief that they have been at witch dances and caused thunder-storms, &c., but his greatest deception is to make men believe in the reality of witchcraft and so torture and murder the innocent.[2] Women are more liable to his deceptions owing to their greater instability both of mind and body, and the delusion may be favoured by the use of drugs and ointments, especially those containing belladonna, lolium, henbane, opium, and even more by herbs recently introduced from east and west, such as Indian hemp, datura, 'and the plant called by the Indians "tabacco", by the Portuguese "peto", and by the French "nicotiana"'.[3]

As for the supposed compact with the devil, it is an absurdity only surpassed by the belief in sexual intercourse with demons. This delusion, Weyer points out, may be explained medically by the phenomena of nightmare and the effects of certain drugs, and is not sanctioned by Scripture. For, though holy men such as Lactantius, Justin Martyr, and Tertullian have maintained that the 'sons of God' mentioned in Genesis vi. 2 were spirits, this interpretation is opposed by still more eminent theologians, such as Saints Jerome, Gregory Nazianzen, and Chrysostom, though he is obliged to admit that St. Augustine believed in *incubi* and *succubae*,[4] and that distinguished living theologians hold that Luther's father was literally the devil. This, however, says Weyer, is an unfair and prejudiced way of attacking the Lutheran heresy.[5]

People who fancy themselves bewitched are really possessed or assaulted by the devil, as were Job and the demoniacs of the New Testament. If these demoniacs had lived in our days, he remarks, they would probably have each cost the lives of numerous old women.[6] The strange objects vomited by such persons are either deceptions or put into the person's mouth by the devil, as is shown by there being no admixture of food, and the absence of pain or injury in spite of the size of the objects.[7]

[1] Op. cit., ii. 4. [2] iii. 6. [3] iii. 18. [4] iii. 21.
[5] iii. 23. [6] iv. 1. [7] iv. 2.

A girl near Cleves fell into convulsions with clenched hands and teeth which, according to her father, could only be opened by making the sign of the cross. She also complained of pains for which it was necessary to buy a bottle of holy water from a priest at Amersfort, on drinking which she proceeded to vomit pins, needles, scraps of iron, and pieces of cloth. She spoke in an altered boyish voice, intended for that of a demon, and declared the whole was caused by an 'in my opinion honest matron', who was imprisoned with her mother and two other women.

Weyer undertook the case, 'whereupon she said in her boy's voice she would have nothing to do with me, and that I was a cunning fellow. "Look what sharp eyes he has."' Weyer opened her hands and mouth, without making the sign of the cross, 'not that I would in any way speak irreverently thereof'. He also showed that the objects produced, even soon after eating, were free from admixture of food, and had therefore never been farther than the mouth; and he thus obtained the release of the four women after a month's imprisonment.[1]

As for the stories of men changed into animals, they are partly poetic and moral allegories, as the sailors of Ulysses, and partly a form of insanity long recognized by physicians, and termed lycanthropy.[2]

Many think they are possessed when they are only melancholic, and others pretend to be so to excite interest and obtain money. Those who fancy themselves attacked by devils should, instead of accusing their neighbours, take to themselves the armour of God as described by St. Paul. Unfortunately, spiritual pastors, in their ignorance and greed, teach that not only diabolical possession, but even ordinary diseases are to be cured by charms, incantations, palm branches, consecrated candles, and an execrable abuse of scriptural words. Cures are, indeed, sometimes so produced, but are really due to the imagination.

Persons supposed to be possessed should first be taken to an intelligent physician, who should investigate and treat any bodily disorder. Should spiritual disorders be also present he may then send the patient to a pious minister of the Church, but this will often be unnecessary. The devil is especially fond of attacking nuns, who should be separated from the rest, and, if possible, sent home to their relations.[3]

[1] iv. 3. [2] iv. 23. [3] iv. 10.

Here Weyer inserts several instances in his own experience.

Philip Wesselich, a monk of Knechtenstein near Cologne, an honest, simple-minded man, was miserably afflicted by a spirit about the year 1550. Sometimes he was carried up to the roof, at others thrust in among the beams of the belfry, often carried unexpectedly through the wall (*plerumque per murum transferebatur inopinato*) and knocked about generally. At length the spirit declared he was Matthew Duren, a former abbot, condemned to penance for having paid an artist insufficiently for a painting of the Blessed Virgin, so that the poor man went bankrupt and committed suicide, 'which was true'. He could only be released if the monk went to Trèves and Aix and recited three masses in the respective cathedrals. The theological faculty of Cologne advised that he should do so, but the abbot Gerard, a man of firmness and intelligence, told the possessed man that he was a victim of diabolical deceptions, and that unless he put his trust in God, and pulled himself together, he should be publicly whipped. Whereupon the monk did so, and the devil left him and went elsewhere.[1]

A similar case was that of a young woman known to Weyer, who had convulsions in church whenever the 'Gloria in excelsis' was sung in German, and said she was possessed. It was observed, however, that she looked about for a soft place to fall on. She was therefore sent for by Weyer's friend the Countess Anna of Virmont, who said she was about to sing the chant, and that if the demon attacked her she would soon drive him out. The young woman fell in the usual fit, on which the countess, *prudens et cordata matrona*, with the aid of her daughter pulled up her dress and gave her a good whipping. 'She confessed to me afterwards that it completely cured her.' Extreme diseases, adds Weyer, require, according to Hippocrates, extreme remedies, but care should be taken to distinguish suitable cases.[2]

The last and most important section of the book treats of the punishment of witches, who are to be carefully distinguished from poisoners and magicians, such as Faust, who are often wealthy men and spend much money in travel, books, &c., to learn diabolic arts; or deceivers, such as the mason who buried wolves' dung in a cattle stall, and when the animals showed great excitement, said they were bewitched, and offered to cure them for a consideration. Such men, when proved to have done serious harm, are to be severely

[1] Op. cit., v. 34. [2] v. 35.

punished. The less guilty should be admonished, and among them are those who spread superstitious practices and persuade sick people that they are bewitched by some old woman.

This is all that the laws of Church or State require, and is a very different thing from seizing poor women possessed by diabolic delusions, or on the malicious accusations or foolish suspicions of the ignorant vulgar, and casting them into horrible dungeons, whence they are dragged to be torn and crushed by every imaginable instrument of torture, till, however guiltless they are, they confess to sorcery, since it is better to give their souls to God in innocence, even through flame, than longer endure the hideous torments of bloodthirsty tyrants. And should they die under torture or in prison, the accusers and judges cry out triumphantly that they have committed suicide, or that the devil has broken their necks.

Here follows a burst of indignant eloquence which would have cost Weyer dear had he fallen into the clutches of the witch-hunters, and which may be given in the terse vigour of the original:

'Sed ubi tandem is apparuerit quem nihil latet, Scrutator cordium et renum, ipsius abstrusissimae etiam veritatis Cognitor et Iudex, vestri actus palam fient, O vos praefracti tyranni, O iudices sanguinarii, hominem exuti et caecitate ab omni misericordia procul remoti. Ad ipsius extremi iudicii tribunal iustissimum vos provoco, qui inter vos et me decernet ubi sepulta et culcata Veritas resurget vobisque in faciem resistet latrociniorum ultionem exactura.'[1]

Their credulity almost equals their cruelty, as shown by the belief that a certain old woman caused the excessive cold of the preceding winter, and by the absurd swimming test. What effect can denial of faith, evil intentions, or a corrupt fantasy have upon a person's specific gravity, on which floating depends? Moreover, women usually float, since their specific gravity is less than that of men, as Hippocrates pointed out.[2] But nothing is too absurd for a witch inquisitor. Some fishermen at Rotterdam drew up their nets full of stones but fishless. This was clearly witchcraft, so they seized an unfortunate woman who confessed in her terror that she had flown out of the window through a hole the size of a finger-end, dived under the sea in a mussel-shell,[3] and there terrified the fishes

[1] vi. 4. [2] vi. 9.

[3] 'Mossel-scolp nostratibus dicitur.'

and put stones in the nets. The woman, says Weyer, was evidently mad or deluded by the devil, but they burnt her all the same. Treachery and cruelty go together. A priest, having failed to make a witch confess, promised that if she would admit some small act of sorcery, he would see that she was released after some slight penance. Thereupon she confessed and was burnt alive.[1]

In contrast to this, Weyer describes the method of dealing with witchcraft in the duchy of Cleves. In 1563 a farmer, finding his cows gave less milk than usual, consulted a witch-finder, who told him that one of his own daughters had bewitched them. The girl, deluded by the devil, admitted this and accused sixteen other women of being her accomplices. The magistrate wrote to the duke proposing to imprison them all, but the latter, probably at Weyer's instigation, replied that the witch-finder was to be imprisoned, the girl to be instructed by a priest and warned against the delusions of demons, and the sixteen women in no way to be molested.[2]

An old woman of eighty was arrested at Mons on charge of witchcraft, the chief evidence being that her mother had long ago been tortured to death on a similar charge. To make her confess they poured boiling oil over her legs, which produced blisters and ulcers, and her son hearing of it sent her a roll of lint to put round them. This was supposed to make magic bandages by the aid of which the woman might escape, and the son was promptly arrested. The mother was to be burnt in a few days, and her son would probably have followed, when Weyer, by permission of the Duke of Cleves, visited Count William of Mons and explained his views on witchcraft. He also examined the old woman, who was so broken down that she fainted several times, and finally obtained the release of both.[3]

Theologians (says Weyer in conclusion) may object that he is only a physician and bid him keep to his last. He can only reply that St. Luke was a physician, and that he is one of those who hope by the mercy of God and grace of Christ to attain that royal priesthood of which St. Paul and St. John speak. Finally he is ready to submit all he has said to the judgement of the Church, and to recant any errors of which he may be convicted.

The Church answered by putting his name on the *Index* as an *auctor primae classis*, that is, one whose opinions are so

[1] Op. cit., vi. 15. [2] vi. 16. [3] vi. 16.

dangerous that none of his works may be read by the faithful without special permission, while his book was solemnly burnt by the Protestant University of Marburg.[1] The Duke of Alva, then engaged in his notorious work in the Netherlands, used his influence to get Weyer removed from his position at the court of Cleves. In this he was aided by the duke's increasing melancholia and ill health, which were considered by many a judgement upon him for his protection of Weyer and neglect of witch-burning. In 1578 Weyer resigned his post to his son Galen, and in 1581 witch-hunting commenced in the duchy of Cleves. Weyer, however, as befitted the chivalrous defender of outraged womanhood, enjoyed the friendship and protection of Countess Anna of Techlenburg, at whose residence he died, 1588, aged seventy-two.

The work on *The Deceptions of Demons* has been aptly compared to a torch thrown out into the darkness, which for a moment brightly illumes a small space and then disappears. It made a temporary sensation, and was welcomed by a few of the more enlightened spirits of the time; it saved the lives of some unfortunate women (being successfully quoted the very year after publication in defence of a young woman at Frankfort, who confessed she had flown through the air and had intercourse with the devil), and it marks the beginning of an open and persistent opposition to the witch mania. Spee also has a curious story showing the influence of Weyer's book:

'A great prince invited two priests to his table, both men of learning and piety. He asked one of them whether he thought it right to arrest and torture persons on the evidence of 10 or 12 witches. Might not the devil have deceived them in order to make rulers shed innocent blood, as certain learned men had lately argued, "thereby causing us pangs of conscience"? The priest stoutly maintained that these pangs were needless, for God would never allow the devil to bring innocent men to a shameful and horrible death in this way; and so he (the prince) might continue the witch trials as usual. He persisted in this, till the prince said, "I am sorry, my father, you have condemned yourself and cannot complain were I to order your immediate arrest, for no less than 15 persons have sworn you were with them at the witch dances", and he produced the records of their trials in proof. Then the good man stood like butter in the sun in the dog-days, and had nothing more to say for himself.'[2]

[1] Diefenbach, p. 241.

[2] *Cautio Criminalis*, Dubium xlviii.

But it had little effect on the superstition itself, which reached its height during the following half-century; and the author is compelled by his religious beliefs to admit so much that his position is hardly tenable. Indeed, his premisses had already been granted by the witch-hunters themselves. The jurist Molitor, for instance, admits that much witchcraft is imaginary and due to the deceptions of demons, but while the physician argues that these deceptions are rendered possible by disease, and are themselves largely of the nature of disease, so that the victims deserve pity and medical treatment rather than burning, the lawyer asserts that a person can only be so deceived by his free will, and therefore a woman who believes she has made a compact or had intercourse with the devil is as deserving of punishment as if she had actually done so.[1]

Just over a century after the appearance of Weyer's book (1664)

'Sir Thomas Brown of Norwich, the famous physician of his time, was desired by my Lord Chief Baron [Hale] to give his judgement [in a case of witchcraft]. And he declared that he was clearly of opinion That the Fits were natural, but heightened by the devil co-operating with the malice of the witches at whose instance he did the villanies. And he added, That in Denmark there had been lately a great Discovery of Witches, who used the very same way of afflicting persons by conveying pins into them.'

The jury 'having Sir Thomas Brown's Declaration about Denmark for their encouragement, in half an hour brought them in guilty. . . . They were hanged maintaining their innocence.'[2]

Had Brown been better acquainted with *The Deceptions of Demons* he might have hesitated to make that 'Declaration about Denmark', but Weyer's early opponent, Bishop Binsfeld, has no difficulties. Quoting Origen (in Matt. xvii. 15) he exclaims, 'Physicians may say what they like, we who believe the Gospel hold that devils cause lunacy' and many other diseases.[3] But for a demon to cause disease or do other harm, two things are requisite, the permission of God and the free will of some malicious person, witch, or sorcerer. The physician, Weyer, has denied the possibility of a compact with the devil, but is easily refuted by

[1] U. Molitor, *Tractatus de lamiis*, 1561, p. 27.

[2] Hutchinson, *Historical Essay concerning Witchcraft*, London, 1718, pp. 40, 118, 120.

[3] Op. cit., Preludium, i.

Scripture and Church authority. Did not the devil try to make a compact with Christ Himself ?[1] Similarly he has no difficulty in showing that the Hebrew word for witch means much more than 'poisoner', and, given the almost universal beliefs of the age, it must be admitted that Brown and the bishop have the best of the argument.

In the opening chapter of his well-known work on rationalism, Lecky says that the decline of the belief in witchcraft 'presents a spectacle not of argument and conflict, but of silent evanescence and decay'; it was 'unargumentative and insensible'. Scot's work 'exercised no appreciable influence', and, so far as the result was concerned, he, Weyer, and their like might as well have kept quiet and waited for the change to be effected by 'what is called the spirit of the age', that is, 'a gradual insensible yet profound modification of the habits of thought' due to 'the progress of civilization'. This theory has been ably criticized elsewhere.[2] The truth it contains seems to be that argument would not have sufficed to change public opinion about witchcraft, without the aid of changes in other matters, and especially the development and success of scientific investigation. Such discoveries as the motion of the earth and circulation of the blood, when generally accepted (which was not till late in the seventeenth century), showed that the learned as well as the vulgar might be utterly mistaken in important beliefs supported by apparently good evidence, and that scientific methods of attaining truth differed widely from those of the witch-hunters.

The progress of civilization by practically abolishing the use of torture would alone have immensely diminished the number of victims, and of those 'confessions' on which the belief was fed. To use military language, the witch mania was an ugly and formidable redoubt connected with other forts and entrenchments. It suffered somewhat from the bombardment by Weyer and Scot, but could only be finally demolished by a general advance of the forces of science and civilization. But if every one had trusted to 'the spirit of the age' rather than disturb his neighbours' beliefs, we might still be burning our grandmothers.

Though born in what is now Holland and educated in France, German writers claim Weyer as their countryman and compare

[1] Preludium, vi.

[2] J. M. Robertson, *Letters on Reasoning*, London, 1905, cap. vi.

him with Martin Luther. The monk of Wittenberg is indeed a fine figure with his 'Here stand I; I cannot otherwise, God help me!' But he had half Germany behind him; both princes and populace were ready to protect him. Weyer stood practically alone, and if he escaped being burnt by jurists and theologians, had a fair chance of being lynched by an enraged mob as a sorcerer and protector of witches. There was little to save him from torture and death but the strength of mind of Duke William of Cleves, who came of an insane family and already showed signs of melancholia.

Weyer was happily spared such a trial of his fortitude, but none the less does he deserve our admiration as the chivalrous champion of womanhood, who first, with vizor up and lance in rest, greeted, alas! not, like the knights of legend, by prayers and blessings but by threats and imprecations, went forth to do open battle with the hideous monster which had so long tortured and slain the innocent and helpless.