

August, 1940.

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The Abinger Chronicle

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THE EDITOR

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NOTE :

All previous numbers, except a few copies of No. 8, are sold out. In order to increase the size of the Chronicle a few more subscribers are needed. If readers will tell their friends how to obtain it, this will be achieved. The Chronicle is self-supporting at present. If a profit should occur, it will be used to enlarge the paper, which exists for the delight of those who write in it and of those who read it. Contributors need not be, and often have not been, of the locality, but Abinger is represented in every number.

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THE SURREY PRACTITIONER.

It must often have been regretted that a once famous craft, well suited to the tastes of a large and increasing portion of the population, should have fallen into disfavour. Elderly, lonely women, too infirm for active labours, too retiring to take pleasure in sewing circles or whist drives, were able, in happier days, to engage themselves in home-work that was as adventurous as it was secret. The hand that had ceased to rock the cradle could still stir the cauldron, eyes that had lost their brightness could exert a sinister fascination, and no leg, however rheumatic, but would instantly regain its elasticity when thrown across a broomstick. As a career for women the popularity of witchcraft must surely have been unrivalled. The culture of simples, the capture and cookery of select reptilian specimens, the modelling of wax figures meticulously studded with pins, are arts that appeal irresistibly to feminine taste; while for a feeble and sedentary constitution what exercise could be more salutary than the nocturnal gambols of cat or of hare?

It is reassuring to learn from a lady who has been familiar with this region for more than half a century that Surrey is still a stronghold of sorcery. Disciples of the Black Arts, though denied publicity, are able, even now, to maintain a modest but regular practice. That their number can never actually diminish is shown by a conversation held, some forty years ago, by Miss M. at Dunsfold with her parlourmaid, who was a niece to a famous witch. When Miss M. suggested that with the spread of education and the urbanisation of the countryside the craft might be

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in some danger of extinction, 'No, miss,' she was answered, 'you see a witch can't die, not without she's passed on her secrets to someone else.' How the parlourmaid's aunt—one of those apple-cheeked, well-spoken, model parishioners—held the village in thrall was shown by the ease with which she always got everything she wanted. 'Well, dearie, your mother's got some lovely plums just ripe, I see,' she would observe slyly; and a basket would promptly be left on her doorstep. Or, 'That's a fine little sucking pig you'm got in your last litter'—and next day little Benjamin would be sizzling in her oven. Although reticent about her aunt's activities, the maid occasionally revealed a sidelight. 'I often wonder,' she observed one morning when dusting the dining-room china, 'however they manage to do it.' 'Do what, Louisa?' 'Why, miss, to change themselves into animals.' All Dunsfold knew that Louisa's aunt nightly coursed the fields in the guise of an extremely large hare. The damage caused to the crops was great, but no matter how often they tried, no farmer was able to shoot her. 'Don't 'e know the reason,' at last suggested the oldest inhabitant, 'Why she can't be shot not without it's with a silver bullet.' So a florin was melted down and the best shot hid behind a hedge one moonlit Saturday night. Into the middle of the turnip field bounded the hare. Bang!—and away she limped, her hind leg broken. Next day the Vicar was distressed to note that his favourite Parishioner was not in her usual pew. Still more distressed was he to learn that she was confined to her room with a bad leg. When, some years later, she expired in his arms, his obituary notice extolling her virtues was the most eloquent ever printed in the Parish Magazine. As he was often heard to remark at tea tables, both the piety and the absence of superstition in his Parish was to him a source of boundless gratification.

The Dunsfold witch had a confederate near Ewhurst—a good-natured old body who would often help at the farm. 'That's a queer character you've got up at the farm just now,' remarked a neighbour. 'Who d'you mean?' 'Why that old body who comes with the milk,' 'Oh she be a

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good old soul.' 'No, she bain't, she be a proper witch and I'll tell 'e how to prove it. You get a broomstick and put the handle under the step where she can't see it and she won't be able to pass over. She'll limp and she'll hobble till she comes to the wood, then she'll fly over it like a bird till she comes to her cottage.' The farmer did as directed and hid behind a door. And sure enough the old woman stuck fast at the steps; then she limped and she hobbled till she got to the wood, and flew over it like a bird till she got to her cottage.

Between Bramley and Guildford is still an old cottage whose owner, in Miss M.'s day, used to cause much inconvenience to farmers by glueing their teams to the ground. 'Yes, she's given us a lot of trouble,' said the oldest farmer, 'but you know what to do. When the horses stop dead just you put a piece of iron under the wheel, then take up your whip and give a loud crack. The old woman standing at the gate 'll vanish, but you'll see a black dog run as fast as it can up the road. Then the horses 'll start moving.'

Miss M. had been told of the strange state of things that went on at Suchbrook Manor towards the end of the last century. The cattle pined, the children could not sleep, the servants were nervous and ailing. At last a famous white wizard, Mr. Puttick, was called in to lay the spell. By his orders a great fire was lit in the kitchen and every soul on the estate called in. Then Mr. Puttick took an ox's heart into which he had stuck all manner of pins, and uttering some strange words he threw the heart into the fire. Instantly a great blaze flared up, the room shook, the china on the dresser rattled, every face was lit with terror. But that night the children slept sweetly, the cattle grazed quietly in the meadows, and Suchbrook Manor was at peace again.

It may be objected that Miss M.'s recollectoins relate to the past and that these superstitions have gone with the bonnet and the barouche. But wait!—

In a pretty thatched cottage not far from our village lives that decent old body, Mrs. Widdershins. Her grand-

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son worked for Mr. Potten, a bullet-headed, broken-nosed irascible farmer. Old Potten so bullied the lad that one hot morning he flung down his hoe and ran away to sea. Mrs. Widdershins was heartbroken. And from that day things began to take a very queer turn on Potten's farm. His eldest son George fell off a ladder when picking green-gages and broke his leg. His daughter Mabel lost her place at the Rectory and some time afterwards spent three weeks in Hospital. An unsatisfactory nephew, believed to have emigrated, died in Hoxton, leaving his orphan twins in his uncle's charge. Young Johnny Potten, aged three, picked up a box of his mother's Bile Beans and swallowed the lot. Nor was misfortune confined to the family. The cows ran dry, the hens became Roupy, the pigs got the Gargol, the geese the Gargil, the crops were attacked by Scab, Rust, Black Blight, Hessian Fly and Colorado Beetle. Seventeen young turkeys were taken by the fox, and into the trap which Potten set fell—not the fox, but the favourite Spaniel of the Squire's daughter. Finally when exchanging words with the officer from the R.S.P.C.A. old Potten had a stroke and fell down dead.

Shortly before this event I was having a heart to heart about Bi-ennials with Mrs. Widdershins when the shadow of old Potten fell across her door. Instantly the expression on her smiling face changed to one of such hideous hatred that my remarks about Mekanopsis froze on my lips. It is true that no wreath was larger or more luxuriant than that placed by Mrs. Widdersins on old Potten's coffin. It is true that she devotedly nursed the entire Potten family when they went down with Influenza last winter. It is true, also, that little Johnny Potten is as tenderly petted by Mrs. Widdershins as her smallest and most frolicsome black kitten. . . . Yet who can doubt that somewhere hidden between piles of clean linen in the neat chest of drawers of a whitewashed room in the pretty thatched cottage is a wax figure of a bullet-headed, broken-nosed man, stuck all over with pins?

OLIVE HESELTINE.

TO A SKYLARK OVER AN AERODROME.

Are you not frightened, skylark? Is there fear
 In your courageous heart, though you still sing
 Above the aerodrome? This time last year
 These fields were yours alone, and you could fling
 Your bright song from the skies, and never hear
 The whirring of machines, the scream of wings.
 The sky belonged to you, who were not near
 The genius of man, the power that brings
 The miracle of flight to human minds.
 You who were born to air, who know the key
 Of currents and of clouds, of secret winds,
 Forgive us that we took the mystery
 To pieces, and forgetting that song's breath
 Is far more wonderful than rushing wings,
 Have mingled all your loveliness with death
 And smeared your element with mortal things.

DOUGLAS GIBSON.

DEATH.

Death is a maiden, come to me
 That I may feel her passionate kiss
 And quench my burning cheek between her breasts.

Death is the final ecstasy
 In which my being flees from this
 Dark lighted hall of weariness, and rests
 Alone.

Death is the final gentleness of Life—
 The end which I have sought, the end of strife,
 The harmony, the softness which has been
 Always beside my bed and now is seen,
 Is felt, is come
 Into my arms.

R. D. BOSANQUET.

These, Polly, are some of my childhood memories which I have strung together for you:

5. VISITORS.

The letter which Aunt Ann had carried home in her pocket brought the exciting news that two nieces from London proposed to pay them a visit. The Aunts were in a flutter; I jumped for joy. How I loved the bustle of preparation on the day of their expected arrival. You may see me in the kitchen (my chair well drawn up to the table so that I should miss nothing of what went on) in my favourite attitude—elbows on table, hands cupping my face; the Aunts were too busy to-day to correct this fault, as they usually did by setting a plate under each elbow. I watch Aunt Betsy rolling out the flead cakes for tea to an even more knife-like thinness than usual, and then watching them in the oven until they had attained the right pale golden shade. Meantime Aunt Ann would go to the old oak livery press which stood in the kitchen, sadly degraded now to housing their kitchen utensils, and fetch out the best china and silver to be in readiness for Bell and Fanny's arrival.

Now the Aunts would see the latest London fashion in sleeves: their best silk dresses would need to be turned in a year or so's time, and the new sleeve could be introduced. Are those semi-crinolines still worn? (these were a kind of cage-like structure worn over the petticoat at the back to set out the full skirt and, alas, sometimes, unless very carefully adjusted, working a bit to one side in times of stress); or perhaps these were reduced still more to a bustle! (this was a pad also worn at the back and liable to the same deviation). All these things could be talked over and the latest things in bonnets and caps discussed.

Towards tea-time Bell and Fanny arrived; and, when rested, they were eager to give the Aunts all the information they wanted on the latest mode. They even demonstrated what they called "the Grecian Bend" for us to practise. This pose, they said, was all the rage in London; as far as

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I can remember, it consisted in slightly throwing out the right hip in walking, the left appearing in consequence slightly depressed.

The Aunts and I admired, but decided to continue to walk the way we were made.

My cousins, much older than myself, were merry lively creatures. They must be entertained while they are with us; perhaps this would mean, thought I, that the long-talked-of drive in the waggonette to Scarletts would at last come off. Aunt Ann, who was the adventurous one of the sisters, had considered the project from all points of view for some time, and Aunt Betsy had been nearly won over. The visit of their nieces brought the matter to a head; the waggonette was bespoken; the day arrived, as also the proud moment when we clambered up and settled ourselves in it and were really off.

Scarletts in Cowden was the home of the Aunts' cousins, the Holmdens. While the older members of the party were talking over the relatives they had in common we younger ones were put into the charge of the miller to show us over the mill. When I read Hardy's "Trumpet Major" I am reminded of this old man. You remember that whenever he went into the sitting-room of the house adjoining the mill he always left behind him a fine powdery dust over everything. This man must have done the same wherever he went, for he was white with flour from head to foot: eyebrows, eyelashes, hair and clothes were all covered with it.

We were shown over the different floors of the mill; duly cautioned on the first not to get our frocks caught in the machinery; and so on to the top floor where the golden grain was waiting to be resolved into first, seconds and middlings. Up here were some rat-holes, which needed more warnings, for the visitors were darting about everywhere, and no doubt the miller was heartily glad to get rid of us and his responsibility when we had seen all.

The day did not end without adventure. As we neared the village in the dusk of evening we saw that something unusual had occurred; the villagers were standing about in

compact groups talking excitedly and looking nervously over their shoulders. We very soon heard the news that there was a murderer at large in the neighbourhood. *He could not be found.* What a narrow escape we had had! As we drove along those lonely lanes on our way home he may have been actually peering at us from his hiding-place only waiting his opportunity to pounce upon us and murder us all.

We hurried home, and the Aunts tremblingly searched every nook and corner which might conceivably afford cover to the criminal. Bell and Fanny and I clung together, rather pleasantly frightened, while the search went on. At last, feeling persuaded that he could not be there, the Aunts barred and bolted the doors, and we all dared to go to bed.

I had my own idea of what a murderer was like—a fearsome creature—as frightening to look at as my pictures of Satan, but perhaps without horns or tail. So that when, from the parlour window, I saw the man brought through the town a few days later, handcuffed between two policemen and followed by a crowd, I was rather disappointed to see, instead of my imaginations, a dejected starving wretch who had been found hiding in a haystack—betrayed by a sneeze. I found myself, surprisedly, very sorry for him, and wished with all my heart he had got away.

I missed my cousins very much at the end of their visit. I was thrown once more on my own resources.

There were no bought toys, at any rate for me, in those days; there *was* a doll that had belonged to Aunt Betsy in her childhood (she was now about sixty), and the doll had been probably handed down to her from a previous generation. This, I was occasionally allowed to look at *but not handle*. It was a ghastly object, a dead doll, it seemed to me, with its corpse-like wax face, and its gown faded to a dull pea green. I was glad when it was again wrapped in its shroud, and I could return to my *real* doll made of dusters or any old thing, tied round near the top for the head, and in the middle for the waist. She was at least “cuddable.” Aunt Betsy’s doll remains in the family—as dead as ever.

SARAH SHOREY GILL.

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