

OF WITCHES

By James Branch Cabell

WITCHCRAFT, if it were not indeed the first manifestation of "feminism," was practised almost exclusively by women. There has been a feebly paradoxical attempt to contend that the Devil was the original witch, when he played the impostor with our primal parents, and that the serpent whose form he assumed was his imp, or familiar spirit; but the theory lacks any corroboration, if only because the Prince of Darkness is, on venerable authority, a gentleman; and if, but in his capacity, would be the first to quote that axiomatic *Place aux dames* which cynics assert to be his workaday rule.

At all events, sorcery was imputed to both the wives of Adam. Thus the Talmudists tell us how Lilith, his first helpmate—for the then comparatively novel offense of refusing to obey her husband—was cast out of Paradise, to be succeeded by Eve; and how since this eviction Lilith, in firm alliance with the powers of evil, has passed her existence "in the upper regions of the air," whence she occasionally speeds earthward to seek amusement in the molestation of infants. She it is who cunningly tortures the descendants of her unforgiven husband with croup and pangs of teething. Sheer pedantry tempts one to point out here that it was on this account the Hebrew mothers were accustomed, when putting their children to sleep, to sing "Lullaby!" which is when Englished "Lilith, avaunt!" so that all our cradle songs are the results of a childish marriage.

Equally in Jewish legend has Lilith's successor, our joint grandmother Eve, been accredited with being a trifle prone to sorcerous practises. I regret that the details as thus rumored are not very nicely quotable; but they seem quite as well authenticated as any other gossip of the period; so that witchcraft may fairly be declared the first invention of the first woman. Eve had dealings with the Devil some while before the birth of Cain, even before the incident of the fig leaves. She was a magician before she was a mother, and conjuring with her took precedence with costume. And while the fact that forever after there were twenty women given to witchcraft as against one man, may seem a little strange, King James the First of England, in his "Demonology," explains it, speciously enough, by yet another reference to the most ancient of all scandals. "The reason is easy, for as that sex is frailer than man is, so it is easier to be entrapped by the gross snares of the Devil, as was over well proved by the serpent's beguiling deceit of Eve at the beginning, which makes him the homelier with that sex." In other words, King James is bold enough to voice it as a truism that women go to the Devil in search of congeniality.

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MEN have always inclined instead to sorcery. A witch, it may be premised, derived her power from a contract with the especial devil to whom she became in some sort a servant; whereas a sorcerer commanded divers spirits in bale by means of his skill at magic, and in this ticklish traffic was less the servant than the master. And the foremost of all sorcerers was probably Johan Faustus of Württemberg. He certainly stays the best known, now that Goethe and Gounod and Berlioz and so many others have had their fling at him, as an alluring peg whereon to hang librettos and allegories. But it is Christopher Marlowe's version of the legend which today would seem almost to justify any conceivable practice, however diabolical, without which we had lacked this masterpiece of loveliness. Presently I must speak of this drama at greater length, and of Marlowe too, as one of those neglected geniuses with which the British branch of American literature has been so undeservedly favored.

Momentarily waiving art's debt to conjurers, and returning to their sister practitioners, the typical witch woman was distinguishable—according to Gaule, in his "Select Cases of Conscience Touching Witches and Witchcraft"—by "a wrinkled face, a furred brow, a hairy lip, a gobber tooth, a squint eye, a squeaking voice, and a scolding tongue." These were the outward marks of a sinister genus, which was divided into three species. Thus antiquity distinguished thereamong "white witches," who could help, but not hurt; "black witches," who could hurt, but not help; and "gray witches," who could do either at will. All were persecuted with severity, which seems natural enough in harrying clack or even gray witches, but rather unaccountable when exercised toward the beneficent white witch. It appears, however, that the last were set without their human frailties: Dryden at least refers to some one as being as little honest as he could manage, and "like white witches, mischievously good." Then, too, a Jacobean publicist has left it on record that "it were a thousand times better for the land if all witches, but especially the blessing witch, might suffer death. For men do commonly hate and spit at the damnifying sorceress as unworthy to live among them; whereas they flee unto the other in necessity, they depend upon her as their god, and by this means thousands are carried away to their final

confusion. Death, therefore, is the just and deserved portion of the good witch." Such logic smacks of sophistry, but remoter times found it acceptable. . . .

It was long an unquestioned belief that certain persons were peculiarly endowed with the faculty of distinguishing witches from the rest of humanity. Of these "witch finders" the most celebrated was that Matthew Hopkins who, during the seventeenth century, was officially employed for this purpose by the English government. Hopkins was in his time a personage, and an unexcelled detector of the "special marks" which are the sure signs of a witch. But his customary test was to "swim" the accused. By this really infallible method of furnishing public recreation he averaged sixty murders to the year; and was thriving in his unique profession when it somehow occurred to some one to put Hopkins himself to Hopkins' test. The sequel is cheerful; for he imprudently remained above water, and being thus by his own methods proven a witch, was buried alive. . . .

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IT seems a great while ago that such things were possible. We have relinquished nowadays our belief in witchcraft, along with our faith in many other Biblical matters. The faith of every century is, however, the natural laughing stock of its immediate successors. So it is now very generally conceded that witches are obsolete, and that the cause of evil is today furthered by more competent factors, such as denying the ballot to women, or not restricting alcohol as a poison to the communion table, or whatever other prevalent arrangement especially evokes the speaker's natural talents for being irrational.

Yet consideration suggests that many witches have a more plausible title to existence than falls to most of their deriders. Were it but for the noble aid which certain sorceresses have rendered to romance, it must be that somewhere, or east of the sun or west of the moon, there is a paradise of witches, wherein all these abide eternally. There stands the house of Pamphile, whom Lucius saw transformed into an owl, and by whose pilfered unguents he himself was disastrously converted into an ass. In the moonlit courtyard glitters an ever moving wheel, barley and laurel burn together there, and Simaetha calls to the bright and terrible lady of heaven for pity and help and vengeance.

Nearby a nameless red haired witch waits at the vine hung opening of a cave; in her hand is a spray of blossoming hemlock; and she cries, "What d'ye lack? It has a price." By the roadside, on the marge of a clear pool, a woman smiles to think of that which she alone foresees, with bright wild eyes that are as changeless as the eyes of a serpent; for this is Lamia; and Lycius has already left Corinth. On the adjoining heath the three Weird Sisters stir their cauldron: they are observed, from a respectful distance, by that Madge Gray who once rifled the rectory larder at Tappington, and by that wee Nannie, "Cutty-Sark," who in the dance at Kirk-Alloway extorted injudicious applause from Tam O'Shanter. Off shore Parthenope and Ligela and Leucosia, the dreaded sirens, chant their endless song; fathoms beneath them that other sea witch, with whom the little mermaid trafficked, lurks in a horrible forest of polypl, and carresses meditatively a fat, drab colored water snake.

Through yonder glen whirls the blasphemous carnival of Walspurgis, no more sedate tonight than when Faustus spied upon it very anciently. Beyond those dense thickets one may yet come to the many columned palace, builded of polished stones, wherein Circe waits the coming of unwary mariners—Circe, the fair haired and delicate voiced witch, who is a bane to men, and yet sometimes takes mortal lovers. . . .

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BUT here we enter dreamland. Thus far a little pedantic levity has seemed permissible enough, in treating of man's dealings with the witch woman as his conscience prompted, since here as elsewhere a high moral motive has been the banner flown by such enormities as grow unbearable when regarded seriously. But the dreams of man arise from deeper requirements than prompt his deeds. In dreams man has shown no aversion to the witch woman, whom in his dreams he has never really confounded with those broomstick riding, squint eyed and gobber toothed wives of the goat that he conscientiously hunted down and murdered; but, to the contrary, man has always clung, with curious tenacity, to the notion of some day attaining the good graces of that fair haired and delicate voiced witch who is the bane to men, and yet sometime takes mortal lovers. The aspiration was familiar even in Plutarch's far off heyday; and you will find that he, precise fellow, though speaking guardedly enough of "those very ancient fables which the Phrygians have received and still recount of Attis, the Bithynians of Herodotus, and the Arcadians of Endymion," yet ventures into diffident and delicate dissent from certain tenets of the "wise Egyptians." . . .