EPISTULAE DAEMONICAE

SOURCEBOOK

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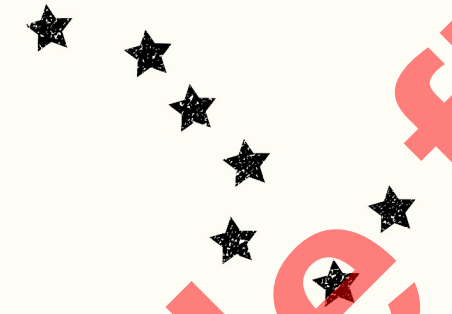
A LIGHTSPRESS BOOK



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INTRODUCTIO

Introduction

Epistulae Daemonicae takes Sir Walter Scott's *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* and transforms them into a sourcebook for fantasy and modern roleplaying that's as haunting as it is inspired. Whether you're crafting tales of dark fantasy, unraveling historical mysteries, or exploring the supernatural in a grounded modern setting, this book delivers the tools to tell character-driven, story-focused tales where every decision matters. Forget cookie-cutter plots, this is where imagination, collaboration, and player agency shape the narrative.

Drawing on Scott's chilling accounts of demons, witches, and the occult, this sourcebook grounds fantastical elements in historical roots, lending authenticity to the strange and terrifying. You'll find inspiration for everything from ancient grimoires and cursed artifacts to the societal consequences of witch hunts and the secret machinations of infernal cults. Whether you're working with a historical setting or giving modern-day characters a taste of arcane danger, the content fits seamlessly into your sessions.

What makes this book more than just a list of spooky lore is its focus on weaving these elements into character and story. Instead of merely tossing in demons as cannon fodder or witches as plot device, it pushes you to explore the personal stakes. What happens to someone accused of witchcraft in an oppressive community? How does a pact with a demon reshape a character's motivations, relationships, and moral compass? These aren't just monsters and spells, they're the threads of a larger narrative tableau, driving conflict, growth, and, let's face it, a good dose of drama.

This isn't a one-size-fits-all sourcebook. Whether you prefer gritty historical intrigue, cinematic dark fantasy, or modern occult conspiracies, there's something here to adapt to your preferred flavor of roleplaying. The tools inside balance historical context with creative freedom, giving gamemasters the resources to anchor their stories in believable details while still leaving plenty of room for the bizarre and otherworldly.

For players who love to immerse themselves in character and story, **Epistulae Daemonicae** offers hooks that go beyond surface-level engagement. Imagine a priest struggling to reconcile their faith with evidence of demonic forces, or a scholar obsessed with uncovering a witch's secret at the cost of their sanity. This is a book that thrives on morally complex decisions and messy, human stakes. Sure, you can throw fireballs, but wouldn't you rather wrestle with questions that stick with you long after the session ends?

And let's not ignore the collaborative possibilities. This sourcebook isn't just for the gamemaster, it's a treasure chest for players who want to flesh out

backstories, motivations, and arcs tied to the occult. Whether you're running the show or sitting at the table, **Epistulae Daemonicae** ensures everyone has something to contribute to the story's richness.

Perfect for fans of history, the occult, and roleplaying, this book feels fresh yet familiar, blending inspiration from Sir Walter Scott with modern design sensibilities. If you're tired of shallow plots and disposable scares, this is your invitation to build something unforgettable. Dive into the supernatural, bring characters to life, and let the narrative take you somewhere dark, compelling, and genuinely engaging.

Verbum Pro Infirmis Cordibus

Roleplaying won't summon demons. It won't lure children into cults. That hasn't stopped the usual suspects from screeching about it for forty years. You know the ones. Big smiles, small souls. The kind of people who think empathy is a threat and imagination is a sin.

They're louder now. Meaner, too. They want a world where everyone worships like them, lives like them, dies like them. And if you don't? They'll try to silence you. Ban your books. Burn your stories. Pretend it's for the sake of the children.

This book contains no sex, no gore, no violence. Just ideas. Fiction. Tools for telling tales. That's it. If that's enough to make someone spiral into a frothing panic, the problem isn't the book.

And if the things in these pages upset the people who want to kill art and call it holiness, good. Let it unsettle them. Let it haunt them.

We'll be here. Speaking our intentions into the dark, and laughing while they choke on their own fear.

Monitum de Argumento

This book engages with historical material that includes explicit examples of colonialism, racism, misogyny, and religious bigotry. These elements are inherent to the time period and source texts and are presented here for critical reflection and roleplaying inspiration. Readers should approach this content with care and awareness, especially when adapting it for collaborative storytelling.

Navigating This Book

Here's a breakdown of what you'll find in these pages:

The Letters: Each of Scott's letters is summarized in straightforward, easy-to-digest English. Instead of slogging through dense text, you'll get clear, concise versions of his ideas without losing any of the eerie charm or historical intrigue that make them worth exploring. Every letter is broken down to capture the

essence of Scott's observations, making them accessible to readers who might not want to wrestle with the original 19th-century language.

Analysis of the Letters: This section goes deeper, examining the meaning and significance behind each letter. It explores the historical context, the circumstances surrounding Scott's writing, and the broader points he was making. Whether he was critiquing the superstition of his time or investigating cultural attitudes toward witchcraft and demonology, it's all unpacked here. This isn't just a history lesson; it's a way to understand how these ideas can resonate with modern storytelling and character design.

Roleplaying the Letters: The practical heart of the book, this section focuses on how to turn Scott's observations into a wealth of narrative inspiration. You'll learn how to use the letters to create vibrant worlds, flesh out detailed character backgrounds, and brainstorm fresh adventure ideas. From cursed relics to morally ambiguous witch hunts, this section provides the building blocks to craft memorable stories steeped in supernatural intrigue. Whether you want a dark fantasy tone or a more grounded historical approach, there's something here to suit your style.

Reference: This is where the nuts and bolts of the book come together. You'll find ready-to-use stock characters, creatures, and equipment, all tailored to fit into the settings you're creating. The glossary helps clarify key terms, the bibliography points you toward additional resources, and there are detailed notes on converting this material into any system you prefer, or folding your system's rules into the ideas presented here. It's all about making sure you can use this sourcebook as seamlessly as possible in your sessions.

SUMMARIUM

Overview

Sir Walter Scott's *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* is a fascinating, if occasionally meandering, work that stands as reflection of its author's intellect and the cultural concerns of his time. Published in 1830, this book isn't some throwaway attempt to cash in on supernatural trends. Instead, it's a careful exploration of the history, folklore, and cultural underpinnings of witchcraft, demons, and belief in the supernatural. Written toward the end of Scott's life, the book blends his knack for storytelling with a historian's curiosity, resulting in a nuanced examination of human credulity, social dynamics, and the roots of superstition.

What Is This Book?

At its core, *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* is a collection of ten "letters" written as though they're part of an extended correspondence. Each letter tackles a specific element of supernatural belief, witchcraft trials, ghost stories, and the theological underpinnings of demonology, among others. While it sounds like Scott might have been aiming to shock or scare his readers, that wasn't his goal at all. This isn't a sensational exposé of the paranormal; it's more like a deep dive into the cultural and historical reasons why people believed in witches and demons. Scott takes a skeptical, almost clinical approach to the material, trying to explain why people were so drawn to the supernatural and how those beliefs shaped their societies.

The letters are written in an approachable, conversational tone that feels more like Scott is telling you a long, winding story over a cup of tea. He doesn't just recount folklore and history, he dissects them, asking questions about the psychological and social forces that perpetuated these beliefs. At times, the book veers into tangential anecdotes or detailed retellings of ghost stories, which can feel a little unfocused. But that's part of its charm: Scott's enthusiasm for the subject is evident, even when his narrative gets a bit unwieldy.

Who was Sir Walter Scott?

Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) was a Scottish novelist, poet, and historian whose works helped define historical fiction as genre. Best known for *Ivanhoe*, *Rob Roy*, and *The Lady of the Lake*, he drew heavily on folklore, history, and his deep love of Scotland's cultural heritage. His writing balanced meticulous research with compelling storytelling, creating tales that captivated readers of his time and influenced countless writers after him. Beyond fiction, Scott's fascination with the supernatural and the occult found its way into his

nonfiction, like his *Letters*. Equal parts scholar and storyteller, he left a lasting mark on literature and the way we tell stories about the past.

Why Did Scott Write It?

Understanding why Scott wrote *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* requires looking at the broader context of his life and career. In 1830, Scott was a literary giant, best known for his *Waverley Novels*. But he wasn't just a novelist, he was also a historian, folklorist, and passionate chronicler of Scottish culture. His fiction drew heavily from Scottish folklore, so writing a nonfiction book that explored the roots of those stories made perfect sense.

Scott wrote this book specifically for the *Family Library*, a series of books designed to educate the general public on a wide range of topics. Think of it as the 19th-century equivalent of a popular science series, informative but accessible, and aimed at readers who weren't professional scholars. Scott was commissioned to contribute a volume, and given his interests in history, folklore, and the supernatural, *Letters* was a natural fit.

There's also a personal angle to consider. In the late 1820s, Scott's health was in decline, and his financial situation was dire. The collapse of his publisher, Archibald Constable, had left him with enormous debts. Scott, ever the workhorse, took it upon himself to write his way out of bankruptcy. While *Letters* wasn't a massive moneymaker, it was part of the larger body of work that helped him chip away at his debts. It's easy to imagine Scott pouring his energy into this book not just out of financial necessity but also as way to explore a subject he genuinely cared about.

The Content of the Book

Scott structures the book as series of letters addressed to a fictional correspondent. This epistolary format, a popular style in the 19th century, allows him to present his ideas in a conversational, accessible way. Each letter tackles a different topic, ranging from historical witch trials to theological debates about demons. While the structure feels loose, there's a clear progression as Scott moves from general observations about superstition to more specific discussions of cultural and historical phenomena.

Superstition & Human Nature

Scott begins by discussing the universal nature of belief in the supernatural. Every culture, he argues, has its ghosts, demons, and witches. He attributes this to human psychology, the tendency to see patterns and assign agency to natural phenomena. For Scott, these beliefs aren't evidence of actual supernatural forces but of humanity's fear of the unknown and its need to explain the inexplicable.

Witchcraft & Witch Trials

One of the most compelling sections of the book focuses on witchcraft and the witch trials that swept through Europe, particularly in the 16th and 17th centuries. Scott examines how social, religious, and legal factors combined to create a perfect storm of hysteria. He's critical of the way communities scapegoated vulnerable individuals, usually women, and used accusations of witchcraft to justify horrific punishments. Scott also examines the legal mechanisms that enabled these persecutions, painting a grim picture of how fear and ignorance can warp justice.

Demonology & Theology

In discussing demonology, Scott connects beliefs about demons and the devil to broader religious conflicts and power dynamics. He critiques how church authorities used fear of demonic forces to consolidate their control over the populace. At the same time, he acknowledges the deep cultural and theological roots of these beliefs, showing how they were shaped by centuries of religious doctrine and superstition. Scott's tone here is cautious; while he's skeptical of demonology, he doesn't dismiss the cultural significance of these beliefs.

Ghosts & Apparitions

Another major section of the book focuses on ghost stories and tales of apparitions. Scott recounts several famous anecdotes, analyzing their psychological and cultural significance. He treats ghost stories less as evidence of supernatural forces and more as reflections of societal anxieties. For example, tales of haunted houses or spectral visions reveal underlying tensions about property, inheritance, or social status.

The Enlightenment & Modernity

Scott concludes the book by reflecting on the decline of superstition in the face of scientific progress and Enlightenment thinking. While he's optimistic about humanity's ability to overcome fear and ignorance, he also acknowledges that superstition hasn't entirely disappeared. Even in his own time, he notes, people are still prone to irrational beliefs and moral panics.

Significance of the Book

Letters occupies an interesting place in literary and cultural history. On one hand, it's a product of the Romantic era, with its fascination for folklore, Medievalism, and the supernatural. On the other, it's deeply influenced by the Enlightenment, with Scott using reason and historical analysis to demystify the subject.

The book is significant for several reasons. First, it provides a historical perspective on witchcraft and demonology, offering insights into how these

beliefs were shaped by social, religious, and political forces. Second, it reflects the cultural concerns of the early 19th century, particularly the tension between Romanticism and Enlightenment thinking. Finally, it serves as reminder of how deeply ingrained superstition is in human culture, and how easily it can be exploited.

For modern readers, *Letters* is both fascinating and frustrating. Scott's historical insights are compelling, but his 19th-century worldview can feel dated. His skepticism is refreshing, but his occasional romanticization of the past can be grating. Still, the book's exploration of how fear and ignorance fuel superstition feels strikingly relevant today.

Why It Still Matters

The book's enduring appeal lies in its exploration of the intersection between folklore, history, and human psychology. It's not just a history of witchcraft and demonology, it's a study of why people believe in the supernatural and how those beliefs shape their societies. Scott's observations about the social and psychological roots of superstition remain relevant in an era still plagued by conspiracy theories and moral panics.

In many ways, *Letters* is a cautionary tale. It reminds us that fear and ignorance can lead to persecution and injustice, whether in the form of witch trials or modern scapegoating. It also underscores the importance of critical thinking and historical awareness in challenging irrational beliefs.

Why It's Perfect for Roleplaying

Scott's Letters is packed with everything you need to build compelling roleplaying stories. It's a goldmine of history, folklore, and supernatural elements that can anchor any setting, from dark fantasy to modern occult. The letters don't just skim the surface of these topics, they dig deep into the fears and beliefs that shaped cultures, providing fertile ground for creative storytelling.

The work stands out because it blends historical authenticity with a sense of the eerie and the strange. Scott's detailed accounts of witch trials, demon pacts, and hauntings offer a perfect foundation for roleplaying. These aren't just isolated anecdotes, they're windows into how people thought, feared, and rationalized the unknown. Whether you want to explore the societal consequences of a witch hunt or the ramifications of a demon's curse, this material adds weight and depth to your stories.

The letters are ideal for crafting morally complex scenarios. A town on the brink of hysteria over suspected witchcraft isn't just an event to witness, it's an opportunity for characters to make hard choices. Do they expose the innocent to protect themselves? Or risk everything to stand against a mob? Similarly,

demonology isn't just about conjuring monsters; it's about the desperate decisions that lead someone to make a pact, and the aftermath of those choices. These themes resonate across settings, offering endless opportunities for character-driven stories.

Scott also gives you a variety of tones and topics to work with. Some of his letters explore terrifying accounts of the supernatural, while others focus on the skepticism and rationality of his era. This duality allows for flexibility in storytelling. Do you want an atmosphere dripping with dread, or a more grounded mystery that teeters on the edge of belief? Either way, you can draw directly from Scott's work to suit your needs.

The episodic structure of the letters makes them easy to adapt. Each account is like a fully-formed story seed, ready to be reimagined into an adventure. A haunted castle could become a battleground for resolving old grudges. A cursed relic might be the centerpiece of a heist. A secret society dabbling in forbidden magic could spark an entire campaign. Whether you're running one-shots or long-form narratives, this material has you covered.

What makes Scott's work even more valuable is the way it roots the supernatural in real-world history and culture. This isn't just about jump scares or flashy magic, it's about grounding your world in something that feels authentic. The details he provides give weight to your storytelling, making the fantastical elements more believable and immersive.

For players, the letters offer inspiration for backstories, character motivations, and personal arcs. A scholar obsessed with the occult, a healer falsely accused of witchcraft, or someone wrestling with the consequences of a demon's bargain, these are just a few ideas sparked by Scott's work. The richness of the material ensures that every character can find a place in the world you're creating.

In every sense, *Letters* is a perfect resource for roleplaying. It's full of inspiration for creating worlds, driving narratives, and immersing players in stories that are as haunting as they are meaningful.

Genre Adaptation

While the information in this book can be adapted for any genre or setting, some lend themselves particularly well to the themes and material covered here. These genres highlight how the occult and its cultural contexts can shape stories and characters, offering flexibility in tone and narrative style.

Grounded Historical

This approach strips away the supernatural, focusing on the political, cultural, and superstitious elements of history. It examines how people's fears, beliefs, and ambitions shaped events, creating tension through the power

struggles and societal shifts of the time. The intrigue lies in the very human motivations and conflicts behind witch trials, alchemy, and secret societies.

Historical Fantasy

In this version of history, the supernatural is real. Witches, demons, and curses aren't just fears but tangible threats. The focus remains on the context of the period, blending historical accuracy with fantastical elements to explore the consequences of magic and the unseen on society, politics, and personal struggles.

Grounded Modern

This genre stays rooted in realism, exploring how historical ideas of the occult have lingered into modern times. From conspiracy theories to enduring superstitions, the narrative focuses on the real-world implications of the occult's legacy. The works of Scott and similar influences serve as touchstones for exploring how these themes remain relevant.

Modern Horror

Here, the supernatural returns with a vengeance. Witches and demons aren't just echoes of historical fears but terrifying realities in the modern world. This genre thrives on blending present-day settings with ancient horrors, forcing characters to confront not only supernatural threats but the echoes of past beliefs and atrocities.

Modern Magical Realism

In this style, the line between the mundane and the magical blurs. Witches are real, and their presence is woven seamlessly into the everyday. The focus remains grounded in the context of modern life, but with an added layer of wonder and mysticism that turns the ordinary into something extraordinary. The supernatural enhances rather than overshadows the human drama and cultural exploration.

I: NATIVITAS SUPERSTITIONIS

Letter I: The Birth of Superstition

You have asked of me, my dear friend, that I should assist the "Family Library" with the history of a dark chapter in human nature, which the increasing civilization of all well-instructed countries has now almost blotted out, though the subject attracted no ordinary degree of consideration in the older times of their history.

Among much reading of my earlier days, it is no doubt true that I travelled a good deal in the twilight regions of superstitious disquisitions. Many hours have I lost; "I would their debt were less!"; in examining old as well as more recent narratives of this character, and even in looking into some of the criminal trials so frequent in early days, upon a subject which our fathers considered as a matter of the last importance. And, of late years, the very curious extracts published by Mr. Pitcairn, from the Criminal Records of Scotland, are, besides their historical value, of a nature so much calculated to illustrate the credulity of our ancestors on such subjects, that, by perusing them, I have been induced more recently to recall what I had read and thought upon the subject at a former period.

As, however, my information is only miscellaneous, and I make no pretensions, either to combat the systems of those by whom I am anticipated in consideration of the subject, or to erect any new one of my own, my purpose is, after a general account of Demonology and Witchcraft, to confine myself to narratives of remarkable cases, and to the observations which naturally and easily arise out of them; in the confidence that such a plan is, at the present time of day, more likely to suit the pages of a popular miscellany, than an attempt to reduce the contents of many hundred tomes, from the largest to the smallest size, into an abridgment, which, however compressed, must remain greatly too large for the reader's powers of patience.

A few general remarks on the nature of Demonology, and the original cause of the almost universal belief in communication betwixt mortals and beings of a power superior to themselves, and of a nature not to be comprehended by human organs, are a necessary introduction to the subject.

The general, or, it may be termed, the universal belief of the inhabitants of the earth, in the existence of spirits separated from the encumbrance and incapacities of the body, is grounded on the consciousness of the divinity that speaks in our bosoms, and demonstrates to all men, except the few who are hardened to the celestial voice, that there is within us a portion of the divine substance, which is not subject to the law of death and dissolution, but which, when the body is no longer fit for its abode, shall seek its own place, as a

sentinel dismissed from his post. Unaided by revelation, it cannot be hoped that mere earthly reason should be able to form any rational or precise conjecture concerning the destination of the soul when parted from the body; but the conviction that such an indestructible essence exists, the belief expressed by the poet in a different sense, *Non omnis moriar* must infer the existence of many millions of spirits who have not been annihilated, though they have become invisible to mortals who still see, hear, and perceive, only by means of the imperfect organs of humanity. Probability may lead some of the most reflecting to anticipate a state of future rewards and punishments; as those experienced in the education of the deaf and dumb find that their pupils, even while cut off from all instruction by ordinary means, have been able to form, out of their own unassisted conjectures, some ideas of the existence of a Deity, and of the distinction between the soul and body; a circumstance which proves how naturally these truths arise in the human mind. The principle that they do so arise, being taught or communicated, leads to further conclusions.

These spirits, in a state of separate existence, being admitted to exist, are not, it may be supposed, indifferent to the affairs of mortality, perhaps not incapable of influencing them. It is true that, in a more advanced state of society, the philosopher may challenge the possibility of a separate appearance of a disembodied spirit, unless in the case of a direct miracle, to which, being a suspension of the laws of nature, directly wrought by the Maker of these laws, for some express purpose, no bound or restraint can possibly be assigned. But under this necessary limitation and exception, philosophers might plausibly argue that, when the soul is divorced from the body, it loses all those qualities which made it, when clothed with a mortal shape, obvious to the organs of its fellow-men. The abstract idea of a spirit certainly implies that it has neither substance, form, shape, voice, or anything which can render its presence visible or sensible to human faculties.

But these sceptic doubts of philosophers on the possibility of the appearance of such separated spirits, do not arise till a certain degree of information has dawned upon a country, and even then only reach a very small proportion of reflecting and better-informed members of society. To the multitude, the indubitable fact, that so many millions of spirits exist around and even amongst us, seems sufficient to support the belief that they are, in certain instances at least, by some means or other, able to communicate with the world of humanity. The more numerous part of mankind cannot form in their mind the idea of the spirit of the deceased existing, without possessing or having the power to assume the appearance which their acquaintance bore during his life, and do not push their researches beyond this point.

Enthusiastic feelings of an impressive and solemn nature occur both in private and public life, which seem to add ocular testimony to an intercourse

betwixt earth and the world beyond it. For example, the son who has been lately deprived of his father feels a sudden crisis approach, in which he is anxious to have recourse to his sagacious advice; or a bereaved husband earnestly desires again to behold the form of which the grave has deprived him for ever; or, to use a darker yet very common instance, the wretched man who has dipped his hand in his fellow-creature's blood, is haunted by the apprehension that the phantom of the slain stands by the bedside of his murderer. In all or any of these cases, who shall doubt that imagination, favoured by circumstances, has power to summon up to the organ of sight, spectres which only exist in the mind of those by whom their apparition seems to be witnessed?

If we add, that such a vision may take place in the course of one of those lively dreams in which the patient, except in respect to the single subject of one strong impression, is, or seems, sensible of the real particulars of the scene around him, a state of slumber which often occurs; if he is so far conscious, for example, as to know that he is lying on his own bed, and surrounded by his own familiar furniture at the time when the supposed apparition is manifested, it becomes almost in vain to argue with the visionary against the reality of his dream, since the spectre, though itself purely fanciful, is inserted amidst so many circumstances which he feels must be true beyond the reach of doubt or question. That which is undeniably certain becomes, in a manner, a warrant for the reality of the appearance to which doubt would have been otherwise attached. And if any event, such as the death of the person dreamt of, chances to take place, so as to correspond with the nature and the time of the apparition, the coincidence, though one which must be frequent, since our dreams usually refer to the accomplishment of that which haunts our minds when awake, and often presage the most probable events, seems perfect, and the chain of circumstances touching the evidence may not unreasonably be considered as complete. Such a concatenation, we repeat, must frequently take place, when it is considered of what stuff dreams are made; how naturally they turn upon those who occupy our mind while awake, and, when a soldier is exposed to death in battle, when a sailor is incurring the dangers of the sea, when a beloved wife or relative is attacked by disease, how readily our sleeping imagination rushes to the very point of alarm, which when waking it had shuddered to anticipate. The number of instances in which such lively dreams have been quoted, and both asserted and received as spiritual communications, is very great at all periods; in ignorant times, where the natural cause of dreaming is misapprehended and confused with an idea of mysticism, it is much greater. Yet, perhaps, considering the many thousands of dreams which must, night after night, pass through the imagination of individuals, the number of coincidences between the vision and real event are fewer and less remarkable than a fair calculation of chances would warrant us to expect. But in countries where such presaging dreams are subjects of attention, the number of those

which seemed to be coupled with the corresponding issue, is large enough to spread a very general belief of a positive communication betwixt the living and the dead.

Somnambulism and other nocturnal deceptions frequently lend their aid to the formation of such *phantasmata* as are formed in this middle state, betwixt sleeping and waking. A most respectable person, whose active life had been spent as master and part owner of a large merchant vessel in the Lisbon trade, gave the writer an account of such an instance which came under his observation. He was lying in the Tagus, when he was put to great anxiety and alarm by the following incident and its consequences. One of his crew was murdered by a Portuguese assassin, and a report arose that the ghost of the slain man haunted the vessel. Sailors are generally superstitious, and those of my friend's vessel became unwilling to remain on board the ship; and it was probable they might desert rather then return to England with the ghost for a passenger. To prevent so great a calamity, the captain determined to examine the story to the bottom. He soon found that, though all pretended to have seen lights and heard noises, and so forth, the weight of the evidence lay upon the statement of one of his own mates, an Irishman and a Catholic, which might increase his tendency to superstition, but in other respects a veracious, honest, and sensible person, whom Captain ; ; had no reason to suspect would wilfully deceive him. He affirmed to Captain S; ; with the deepest obtestations, that the spectre of the murdered man appeared to him almost nightly, took him from his place in the vessel, and, according to his own expression, worried his life out. He made these communications with a degree of horror which intimated the reality of his distress and apprehensions.

The captain, without any argument at the time, privately resolved to watch the motions of the ghost-seer in the night; whether alone, or with a witness, I have forgotten. As the ship bell struck twelve, the sleeper started up, with a ghastly and disturbed countenance, and lighting a candle, proceeded to the galley or cook-room of the vessel. He sate down with his eyes open, staring before him as on some terrible object which he beheld with horror, yet from which he could not withhold his eyes. After a short space he arose, took up a tin can or decanter, filled it with water, muttering to himself all the while; mixed salt in the water, and sprinkled it about the galley. Finally, he sighed deeply, like one relieved from a heavy burden, and, returning to his hammock, slept soundly. In the next morning the haunted man told the usual precise story of his apparition, with the additional circumstances, that the ghost had led him to the galley, but that he had fortunately, he knew not how, obtained possession of some holy water, and succeeded in getting rid of his unwelcome visitor. The visionary was then informed of the real transactions of the night, with so many particulars as to satisfy him he had been the dupe of his imagination; he acquiesced in his commander's reasoning, and the dream, as often happens in

these cases, returned no more after its imposture had been detected. In this case, we find the excited imagination acting upon the half-waking senses, which were intelligent enough for the purpose of making him sensible where he was, but not sufficiently so to judge truly of the objects before him.

But it is not only private life alone, or that tenor of thought which has been depressed into melancholy by gloomy anticipations respecting the future, which disposes the mind to mid-day fantasies, or to nightly apparitions; a state of eager anxiety, or excited exertion, is equally favourable to the indulgence of such supernatural communications. The anticipation of a dubious battle, with all the doubt and uncertainty of its event, and the conviction that it must involve his own fate and that of his country, was powerful enough to conjure up to the anxious eye of Brutus the spectre of his murdered friend Cæsar, respecting whose death he perhaps thought himself less justified than at the Ides of March, since, instead of having achieved the freedom of Rome, the event had only been the renewal of civil wars, and the issue might appear most likely to conclude in the total subjection of liberty. It is not miraculous that the masculine spirit of Marcus Brutus, surrounded by darkness and solitude, distracted probably by recollection of the kindness and favour of the great individual whom he had put to death to avenge the wrongs of his country, though by the slaughter of his own friend, should at length place before his eyes in person the appearance which termed itself his evil genius, and promised again to meet him at Philippi. Brutus' own intentions, and his knowledge of the military art, had probably long since assured him that the decision of the civil war must take place at or near that place; and, allowing that his own imagination supplied that part of his dialogue with the spectre, there is nothing else which might not be fashioned in a vivid dream or a waking reverie, approaching, in absorbing and engrossing character, the usual matter of which dreams consist. That Brutus, well acquainted with the opinions of the Platonists, should be disposed to receive without doubt the idea that he had seen a real apparition, and was not likely to scrutinize very minutely the supposed vision, may be naturally conceived; and it is also natural to think, that although no one saw the figure but himself, his contemporaries were little disposed to examine the testimony of a man so eminent, by the strict rules of cross-examination and conflicting evidence, which they might have thought applicable to another person, and a less dignified occasion.

Even in the field of death, and amid the mortal tug of combat itself, strong belief has wrought the same wonder, which we have hitherto mentioned as occurring in solitude and amid darkness; and those who were themselves on the verge of the world of spirits, or employed in dispatching others to these gloomy regions, conceived they beheld the apparitions of those beings whom their national mythology associated with such scenes. In such moments of undecided battle, amid the violence, hurry, and confusion of ideas incident to the situation,

the ancients supposed that they saw their deities, Castor and Pollux, fighting in the van for their encouragement; the heathen Scandinavian beheld the Choosers of the slain; and the Catholics were no less easily led to recognize the warlike Saint George or Saint James in the very front of the strife, showing them the way to conquest. Such apparitions being generally visible to a multitude, have in all times been supported by the greatest strength of testimony. When the common feeling of danger, and the animating burst of enthusiasm, act on the feelings of many men at once, their minds hold a natural correspondence with each other, as it is said is the case with stringed instruments tuned to the same pitch, of which, when one is played, the chords of the others are supposed to vibrate in unison with the tones produced. If an artful or enthusiastic individual exclaims, in the heat of action, that he perceives an apparition of the romantic kind which has been intimated, his companions catch at the idea with emulation, and most are willing to sacrifice the conviction of their own senses, rather than allow that they did not witness the same favourable emblem, from which all draw confidence and hope. One warrior catches the idea from another; all are alike eager to acknowledge the present miracle, and the battle is won before the mistake is discovered. In such cases, the number of persons present, which would otherwise lead to detection of the fallacy, becomes the means of strengthening it.

Of this disposition, to see as much of the supernatural as is seen by others around, or, in other words, to trust to the eyes of others rather than to our own, we may take the liberty to quote two remarkable instances.

The first is from the "Historia Verdadera" of Don Bernal Dias del Castillo, one of the companions of the celebrated Cortez in his Mexican conquest. After having given an account of a great victory over extreme odds, he mentions the report inserted in the contemporary Chronicle of Gomara, that Saint Iago had appeared on a white horse in van of the combat, and led on his beloved Spaniards to victory. It is very curious to observe the Castilian cavalier's internal conviction that the rumour arose out of a mistake, the cause of which he explains from his own observation; whilst, at the same time, he does not venture to disown the miracle. The honest Conquestador owns that he himself did not see this animating vision; nay, that he beheld an individual cavalier, named Francisco de Morla, mounted on a chestnut horse, and fighting strenuously in the very place where Saint James is said to have appeared. But instead of proceeding to draw the necessary inference, the devout Conquestador exclaims; "Sinner that I am, what am I that I should have beheld the blessed apostle!"

The other instance of the infectious character of superstition occurs in a Scottish book, and there can be little doubt that it refers, in its first origin, to some uncommon appearance of the aurora borealis, or the northern lights, which do not appear to have been seen in Scotland so frequently as to be

accounted a common and familiar atmospherical phenomenon, until the beginning of the eighteenth century. The passage is striking and curious, for the narrator, Peter Walker, though an enthusiast, was a man of credit, and does not even affect to have seen the wonders, the reality of which he unscrupulously adopts on the testimony of others, to whose eyes he trusted rather than to his own. The conversion of the sceptical gentleman of whom he speaks is highly illustrative of popular credulity carried away into enthusiasm, or into imposture, by the evidence of those around, and at once shows the imperfection of such a general testimony, and the ease with which it is procured, since the general excitement of the moment impels even the more cold-blooded and judicious persons present to catch up the ideas and echo the exclamations of the majority, who, from the first, had considered the heavenly phenomenon as a supernatural weapon-schaw, held for the purpose of a sign and warning of civil wars to come.

"In the year 1686, in the months of June and July," says the honest chronicler, "many yet alive can witness that about the Crossford Boat, two miles beneath Lanark, especially at the Mains, on the water of Clyde, many people gathered together for several afternoons, where there were showers of bonnets, hats, guns, and swords, which covered the trees and the ground; companies of men in arms marching in order upon the waterside; companies meeting companies, going all through other, and then all falling to the ground and disappearing; other companies immediately appeared, marching the same way. I went there three afternoons together, and, as I observed, there were two-thirds of the people that were together saw, and a third that saw not; and, *though I could see nothing*, there was such a fright and trembling on those that did see, that was discernible to all from those that saw not. There was a gentleman standing next to me who spoke as too many gentlemen and others speak, who said, 'A pack of damned witches and warlocks that have the second sight! the devil ha't do I see;' and immediately there was a discernible change in his countenance. With as much fear and trembling as any woman I saw there, he called out, 'All you that do not see, say nothing; for I persuade you it is matter of fact, and discernible to all that is not stone-blind.' And those who did see told what works (i.e., locks) the guns had, and their length and wideness, and what handles the swords had, whether small or three-barr'd, or Highland guards, and the closing knots of the bonnets, black or blue; and those who did see them there, whenever they went abroad, saw a bonnet and a sword drop in the way."[1]

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1 Walker's "Lives," Edinburgh, 1827, vol. i. p. xxxvi. It is evident that honest Peter believed in the apparition of this martial gear on the principle of Partridge's terror for the ghost of Hamlet; not that he was afraid himself, but because Garrick showed such evident marks of terror.

This singular phenomenon, in which a multitude believed, although only two-thirds of them saw what must, if real, have been equally obvious to all, may be compared with the exploit of the humourist, who planted himself in an attitude of astonishment, with his eyes riveted on the well-known bronze lion that graces the front of Northumberland House in the Strand, and having attracted the attention of those who looked at him by muttering, "By heaven it wags! it wags again!" contrived in a few minutes to blockade the whole street with an immense crowd, some conceiving that they had absolutely seen the lion of Percy wag his tail, others expecting' to witness the same phenomenon.

On such occasions as we have hitherto mentioned, we have supposed that the ghost-seer has been in full possession of his ordinary powers of perception, unless in the case of dreamers, in whom they may have been obscured by temporary slumber, and the possibility of correcting vagaries of the imagination rendered more difficult by want of the ordinary appeal to the evidence of the bodily senses. In other respects their blood beat temperately, they possessed the ordinary capacity of ascertaining the truth or discerning the falsehood of external appearances by an appeal to the organ of sight. Unfortunately, however, as is now universally known and admitted, there certainly exists more than one disorder known to professional men of which one important symptom is a disposition to see apparitions.

This frightful disorder is not properly insanity, although it is somewhat allied to that most horrible of maladies, and may, in many constitutions, be the means of bringing it on, and although such hallucinations are proper to both. The difference I conceive to be that, in cases of insanity, the mind of the patient is principally affected, while the senses, or organic system, offer in vain to the lunatic their decided testimony against the fantasy of a deranged imagination. Perhaps the nature of this collision; between a disturbed imagination and organs of sense possessed of their usual accuracy; cannot be better described than in the embarrassment expressed by an insane patient confined in the Infirmary of Edinburgh. The poor man's malady had taken a gay turn. The house, in his idea, was his own, and he contrived to account for all that seemed inconsistent with his imaginary right of property; there were many patients in it, but that was owing to the benevolence of his nature, which made him love to see the relief of distress. He went little, or rather never abroad; but then his habits were of a domestic and rather sedentary character. He did not see much company; but he daily received visits from the first characters in the renowned medical school of this city, and he could not therefore be much in want of society. With so many supposed comforts around him; with so many visions of wealth and splendour; one thing alone disturbed the peace of the poor optimist, and would indeed have confounded most *bons vivants*. "He was curious," he said, "in his table, choice in his selection of cooks, had every day a dinner of three regular courses and a dessert; and yet, somehow or other, everything he

eat *tasted of porridge*." This dilemma could be no great wonder to the friend to whom the poor patient communicated it, who knew the lunatic eat nothing but this simple aliment at any of his meals. The case was obvious. The disease lay in the extreme vivacity of the patient's imagination, deluded in other instances, yet not absolutely powerful enough to contend with the honest evidence of his stomach and palate, which, like Lord Peter's brethren in "The Tale of a Tub," were indignant at the attempt to impose boiled oatmeal upon them, instead of such a banquet as Ude would have displayed when peers were to partake of it. Here, therefore, is one instance of actual insanity, in which the sense of taste controlled and attempted to restrain the ideal hypothesis adopted by a deranged imagination. But the disorder to which I previously alluded is entirely of a bodily character, and consists principally in a disease of the visual organs, which present to the patient a set of spectres or appearances which have no actual existence. It is a disease of the same nature which renders many men incapable of distinguishing colours; only the patients go a step further, and pervert the external form of objects. In their case, therefore, contrary to that of the maniac, it is not the mind, or rather the imagination, which imposes upon and overpowers the evidence of the senses, but the sense of seeing (or hearing) which betrays its duty and conveys false ideas to a sane intellect.

More than one learned physician, who have given their attestations to the existence of this most distressing complaint, have agreed that it actually occurs, and is occasioned by different causes. The most frequent source of the malady is in the dissipated and intemperate habits of those who, by a continued series of intoxication, become subject to what is popularly called the Blue Devils, instances of which mental disorder may be known to most who have lived for any period of their lives in society where hard drinking was a common vice. The joyous visions suggested by intoxication when the habit is first acquired, in time disappear, and are supplied by frightful impressions and scenes, which destroy the tranquillity of the unhappy debauchee. Apparitions of the most unpleasant appearance are his companions in solitude, and intrude even upon his hours of society: and when by an alteration of habits, the mind is cleared of these frightful ideas, it requires but the slightest renewal of the association to bring back the full tide of misery upon the repentant libertine.

Of this the following instance was told to the author by a gentleman connected with the sufferer. A young man of fortune, who had led what is called so gay a life as considerably to injure both his health and fortune, was at length obliged to consult the physician upon the means of restoring, at least, the former. One of his principal complaints was the frequent presence of a set of apparitions, resembling a band of figures dressed in green, who performed in his drawing-room a singular dance, to which he was compelled to bear witness, though he knew, to his great annoyance, that the whole *corps de ballet* existed only in his own imagination. His physician immediately informed him that he

had lived upon town too long and too fast not to require an exchange to a more healthy and natural course of life. He therefore prescribed a gentle course of medicine, but earnestly recommended to his patient to retire to his own house in the country, observe a temperate diet and early hours, practising regular exercise, on the same principle avoiding fatigue, and assured him that by doing so he might bid adieu to black spirits and white, blue, green, and grey, with all their trumpery. The patient observed the advice, and prospered. His physician, after the interval of a month, received a grateful letter from him, acknowledging the success of his regimen. The greens goblins had disappeared, and with them the unpleasant train of emotions to which their visits had given rise, and the patient had ordered his town-house to be disfurnished and sold, while the furniture was to be sent down to his residence in the country, where he was determined in future to spend his life, without exposing himself to the temptations of town. One would have supposed this a well-devised scheme for health. But, alas! no sooner had the furniture of the London drawing-room been placed in order in the gallery of the old manor-house, than the former delusion returned in full force: the green *figurantés*, whom the patient's depraved imagination had so long associated with these moveables, came capering and frisking to accompany them, exclaiming with great glee, as if the sufferer should have been rejoiced to see them, "Here we all are; here we all are!" The visionary, if I recollect right, was so much shocked at their appearance, that he retired abroad, in despair that any part of Britain could shelter him from the daily persecution of this domestic ballet.

There is reason to believe that such cases are numerous, and that they may perhaps arise not only from the debility of stomach brought on by excess in wine or spirits, which derangement often sensibly affects the eyes and sense of sight, but also because the mind becomes habitually predominated over by a train of fantastic visions, the consequence of frequent intoxication; and is thus, like a dislocated joint, apt again to go wrong, even when a different cause occasions the derangement.

It is easy to be supposed that habitual excitement by means of any other intoxicating drug, as opium, or its various substitutes, must expose those who practise the dangerous custom to the same inconvenience. Very frequent use of the nitrous oxide which affects the senses so strongly, and produces a short but singular state of ecstasy, would probably be found to occasion this species of disorder. But there are many other causes which medical men find attended with the same symptom, of embodying before the eyes of a patient imaginary illusions which are visible to no one else. This persecution of spectral deceptions is also found to exist when no excesses of the patient can be alleged as the cause, owing, doubtless, to a deranged state of the blood or nervous system.

The learned and acute Dr. Ferriar of Manchester was the first who brought before the English public the leading case, as it may be called, in this department, namely, that of Mons. Nicolai, the celebrated bookseller of Berlin. This gentleman was not a man merely of books, but of letters, and had the moral courage to lay before the Philosophical Society of Berlin an account of his own sufferings, from having been, bydisease, subjected to a series of spectral illusions. The leading circumstances of this case may be stated very shortly, as it has been repeatedly before the public, and is insisted on by Dr. Ferriar, Dr. Hibbert, and others who have assumed Demonology as a subject. Nicolai traces his illness remotely to a series of disagreeable incidents which had happened to him in the beginning of the year 1791. The depression of spirits which was occasioned by these unpleasant occurrences, was aided by the consequences of neglecting a course of periodical bleeding which he had been accustomed to observe. This state of health brought on the disposition to see *phantasmata*, who visited, or it may be more properly said frequented, the apartments of the learned bookseller, presenting crowds of persons who moved and acted before him, nay, even spoke to and addressed him. These phantoms afforded nothing unpleasant to the imagination of the visionary either in sight or expression, and the patient was possessed of too much firmness to be otherwise affected by their presence than with a species of curiosity, as he remained convinced from the beginning to the end of the disorder, that these singular effects were merely symptoms of the state of his health, and did not in any other respect regard them as a subject of apprehension. After a certain time, and some use of medicine, the phantoms became less distinct in their outline, less vivid in their colouring, faded, as it were, on the eye of the patient, and at length totally disappeared.

The case of Nicolai has unquestionably been that of many whose love of science has not been able to overcome their natural reluctance to communicate to the public the particulars attending the visitation of a disease so peculiar. That such illnesses have been experienced, and have ended fatally, there can be no doubt; though it is by no means to be inferred, that the symptom of importance to our present discussion has, on all occasions, been produced from the same identical cause.

Dr. Hibbert, who has most ingeniously, as well as philosophically, handled this subject, has treated it also in a medical point of view, with science to which we make no pretence, and a precision of detail to which our superficial investigation affords us no room for extending ourselves.

The visitation of spectral phenomena is described by this learned gentleman as incidental to sundry complaints; and he mentions, in particular, that the symptom occurs not only in plethora, as in the case of the learned Prussian we have just mentioned, but is a frequent hectic symptom; often an

associate of febrile and inflammatory disorders; frequently accompanying inflammation of the brain; a concomitant also of highly excited nervous irritability; equally connected with hypochondria; and finally united in some cases with gout, and in others with the effects of excitation produced by several gases. In all these cases there seems to be a morbid degree of sensibility, with which this symptom is ready to ally itself, and which, though inaccurate as a medical definition, may be held sufficiently descriptive of one character of the various kinds of disorder with which this painful symptom may be found allied.

A very singular and interesting illustration of such combinations as Dr. Hibbert has recorded of the spectral illusion with an actual disorder, and that of a dangerous kind, was frequently related in society by the late learned and accomplished Dr. Gregory of Edinburgh, and sometimes, I believe, quoted by him in his lectures. The narrative, to the author's best recollection, was as follows: A patient of Dr. Gregory, a person, it is understood, of some rank, having requested the doctor's advice, made the following extraordinary statement of his complaint. "I am in the habit," he said, "of dining at five, and exactly as the hour of six arrives I am subjected to the following painful visitation. The door of the room, even when I have been weak enough to bolt it, which I have sometimes done, flies wide open; an old hag, like one of those who haunted the heath of Forres, enters with a frowning and incensed countenance, comes straight up to me with every demonstration of spite and indignation which could characterize her who haunted the merchant Abudah in the Oriental tale; she rushes upon me, says something, but so hastily that I cannot discover the purport, and then strikes me a severe blow with her staff. I fall from my chair in a swoon, which is of longer or shorter endurance. To the recurrence of this apparition I am daily subjected. And such is my new and singular complaint." The doctor immediately asked whether his patient had invited any one to sit with him when he expected such a visitation. He was answered in the negative. The nature of the complaint, he said, was so singular, it was so likely to be imputed to fancy, or even to mental derangement, that he had shrunk from communicating the circumstance to any one. "Then," said the doctor, "with your permission, I will dine with you to-day, téte-à-téte, and we will see if your malignant old woman will venture to join our company." The patient accepted the proposal with hope and gratitude, for he had expected ridicule rather than sympathy. They met at dinner, and Dr. Gregory, who suspected some nervous disorder, exerted his powers of conversation, well known to be of the most varied and brilliant character, to keep the attention of his host engaged, and prevent him from thinking on the approach of the fated hour, to which he was accustomed to look forward with so much terror. He succeeded in his purpose better than he had hoped. The hour of six came almost unnoticed, and it was hoped might pass away without any evil consequence; but it was scarce a moment struck when the owner of the house exclaimed, in an alarmed

voice, "The hag comes again!" and dropped back in his chair in a swoon, in the way he had himself described. The physician caused him to be let blood, and satisfied himself that the periodical shocks of which his patient complained arose from a tendency to apoplexy.

The phantom with the crutch was only a species of machinery, such as that with which fancy is found to supply the disorder called Ephialtes, or nightmare, or indeed any other external impression upon our organs in sleep, which the patient's morbid imagination may introduce into the dream preceding the swoon. In the nightmare an oppression and suffocation is felt, and our fancy instantly conjures up a spectre to lie on our bosom. In like manner it may be remarked, that any sudden noise which the slumberer hears, without being actually awakened by it; any casual touch of his person occurring in the same manner; becomes instantly adopted in his dream, and accommodated to the tenor of the current train of thought, whatever that may happen to be; and nothing is more remarkable than the rapidity with which imagination supplies a complete explanation of the interruption, according to the previous train of ideas expressed in the dream, even when scarce a moment of time is allowed for that purpose. In dreaming, for example, of a duel, the external sound becomes, in the twinkling of an eye, the discharge of the combatants' pistols; is an orator haranguing in his sleep, the sound becomes the applause of his supposed audience; is the dreamer wandering among supposed ruins, the noise is that of the fall of some part of the mass. In short, an explanatory system is adopted during sleep with such extreme rapidity, that supposing the intruding alarm to have been the first call of some person to awaken the slumberer, the explanation, though requiring some process of argument or deduction, is usually formed and perfect before the second effort of the speaker has restored the dreamer to the waking world and its realities. So rapid and intuitive is the succession of ideas in sleep, as to remind us of the vision of the prophet Mahommed, in which he saw the whole wonders of heaven and hell, though the jar of water which fell when his ecstasy commenced, had not spilled its contents when he returned to ordinary existence.

A second, and equally remarkable instance, was communicated to the author by the medical man under whose observation it fell, but who was, of course, desirous to keep private the name of the hero of so singular a history. Of the friend by whom the facts were attested I can only say, that if I found myself at liberty to name him, the rank which he holds in his profession, as well as his attainments in science and philosophy, form an undisputed claim to the most implicit credit.

It was the fortune of this gentleman to be called in to attend the illness of a person now long deceased, who in his lifetime stood, as I understand, high in a particular department of the law, which often placed the property of others at

his discretion and control, and whose conduct, therefore, being open to public observation, he had for many years borne the character of a man of unusual steadiness, good sense, and integrity. He was, at the time of my friend's visits, confined principally to his sick-room, sometimes to bed, yet occasionally attending to business, and exerting his mind, apparently with all its usual strength and energy, to the conduct of important affairs intrusted to him; nor did there, to a superficial observer, appear anything in his conduct, while so engaged, that could argue vacillation of intellect, or depression of mind. His outward symptoms of malady argued no acute or alarming disease. But slowness of pulse, absence of appetite, difficulty of digestion, and constant depression of spirits, seemed to draw their origin from some hidden cause, which the patient was determined to conceal. The deep gloom of the unfortunate gentleman; the embarrassment, which he could not conceal from his friendly physician; the briefness and obvious constraint with which he answered the interrogations of his medical adviser, induced my friend to take other methods for prosecuting his inquiries. He applied to the sufferer's family, to learn, if possible, the source of that secret grief which was gnawing the heart and sucking the life-blood of his unfortunate patient. The persons applied to, after conversing together previously, denied all knowledge of any cause for the burden which obviously affected their relative. So far as they knew; and they thought they could hardly be deceived; his worldly affairs were prosperous; no family loss had occurred which could be followed with such persevering distress; no entanglements of affection could be supposed to apply to his age, and no sensation of severe remorse could be consistent with his character. The medical gentleman had finally recourse to serious argument with the invalid himself, and urged to him the folly of devoting himself to a lingering and melancholy death, rather than tell the subject of affliction which was thus wasting him. He specially pressed upon him the injury which he was doing to his own character, by suffering it to be inferred that the secret cause of his dejection and its consequences was something too scandalous or flagitious to be made known, bequeathing in this manner to his family a suspected and dishonoured name, and leaving a memory with which might be associated the idea of guilt, which the criminal had died without confessing. The patient, more moved by this species of appeal than by any which had yet been urged, expressed his desire to speak out frankly to Dr.; ; . Every one else was removed, and the door of the sick-room made secure, when he began his confession in the following manner:

"You cannot, my dear friend, be more conscious than I, that I am in the course of dying under the oppression of the fatal disease which consumes my vital powers; but neither can you understand the nature of my complaint, and manner in which it acts upon me, nor, if you did, I fear, could your zeal and skill avail to rid me of it."; "It is possible," said the physician, "that my skill may not

equal my wish of serving you; yet medical science has many resources, of which those unacquainted with its powers never can form an estimate. But until you plainly tell me your symptoms of complaint, it is impossible for either of us to say what may or may not be in my power, or within that of medicine."; "I may answer you," replied the patient, "that my case is not a singular one, since we read of it in the famous novel of Le Sage. You remember, doubtless, the disease of which the Duke d'Olivarez is there stated to have died?"; "Of the idea," answered the medical gentleman, "that he was haunted by an apparition, to the actual existence of which he gave no credit, but died, nevertheless, because he was overcome and heart-broken by its imaginary presence."; "I, my dearest doctor," said the sick man, "am in that very case; and so painful and abhorrent is the presence of the persecuting vision, that my reason is totally inadequate to combat the effects of my morbid imagination, and I am sensible I am dying, a wasted victim to an imaginary disease." The medical gentleman listened with anxiety to his patient's statement, and for the present judiciously avoiding any contradiction of the sick man's preconceived fancy, contented himself with more minute inquiry into the nature of the apparition with which he conceived himself haunted, and into the history of the mode by which so singular a disease had made itself master of his imagination, secured, as it seemed, by strong powers of the understanding, against an attack so irregular. The sick person replied by stating that its advances were gradual, and at first not of a terrible or even disagreeable character. To illustrate this, he gave the following account of the progress of his disease:

"My visions," he said, "commenced two or three years since, when I found myself from time to time embarrassed by the presence of a large cat, which came and disappeared I could not exactly tell how, till the truth was finally forced upon me, and I was compelled to regard it as no domestic household cat, but as a bubble of the elements, which had no existence save in my deranged visual organs or depraved imagination. Still I had not that positive objection to the animal entertained by a late gallant Highland chieftain, who has been seen to change to all the colours of his own plaid if a cat by accident happened to be in the room with him, even though he did not see it. On the contrary, I am rather a friend to cats, and endured with so much equanimity the presence of my imaginary attendant, that it had become almost indifferent to me; when, within the course of a few months, it gave place to, or was succeeded by, a spectre of a more important sort, or which at least had a more imposing appearance. This was no other than the apparition of a gentleman-usher, dressed as if to wait upon a Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, a Lord High Commissioner of the Kirk, or any other who bears on his brow the rank and stamp of delegated sovereignty.

"This personage, arrayed in a court dress, with bag and sword, tamboured waistcoat, and chapeau-bras, glided beside me like the ghost of Beau Nash; and,

whether in my own house or in another, ascended the stairs before me, as if to announce me in the drawing-room, and at sometimes appeared to mingle with the company, though it was sufficiently evident that they were not aware of his presence, and that I alone was sensible of the visionary honours which this imaginary being seemed desirous to render me. This freak of the fancy did not produce much impression on me, though it led me to entertain doubts on the nature of my disorder and alarm for the effect it might produce on my intellects. But that modification of my disease also had its appointed duration. After a few months the phantom of the gentleman-usher was seen no more, but was succeeded by one horrible to the sight and distressing to the imagination, being no other than the image of death itself; the apparition of a skeleton. Alone or in company," said the unfortunate invalid, "the presence of this last phantom never quits me. I in vain tell myself a hundred times over that it is no reality, but merely an image summoned up by the morbid acuteness of my own excited imagination and deranged organs of sight. But what avail such reflections, while the emblem at once and presage of mortality is before my eyes, and while I feel myself, though in fancy only, the companion of a phantom representing a ghastly inhabitant of the grave, even while I yet breathe on the earth? Science, philosophy, even religion, has no cure for such a disorder; and I feel too surely that I shall die the victim to so melancholy a disease, although I have no belief whatever in the reality of the phantom which it places before me."

The physician was distressed to perceive, from these details, how strongly this visionary apparition was fixed in the imagination of his patient. He ingeniously urged the sick man, who was then in bed, with questions concerning the circumstances of the phantom's appearance, trusting he might lead him, as a sensible man, into such contradictions and inconsistencies as might bring his common-sense, which seemed to be unimpaired, so strongly into the field as might combat successfully the fantastic disorder which produced such fatal effects. "This skeleton, then," said the doctor, "seems to you to be always present to your eyes?" "It is my fate, unhappily," answered the invalid, "always to see it." "Then I understand," continued the physician, "it is now present to your imagination?" "To my imagination it certainly is so," replied the sick man. "And in what part of the chamber do you now conceive the apparition to appear?" the physician inquired. "Immediately at the foot of my bed. When the curtains are left a little open," answered the invalid, "the skeleton, to my thinking, is placed between them, and fills the vacant space." "You say you are sensible of the delusion," said his friend; "have you firmness to convince yourself of the truth of this? Can you take courage enough to rise and place yourself in the spot so seeming to be occupied, and convince yourself of the illusion?" The poor man sighed, and shook his head negatively. "Well," said the doctor, "we will try the experiment otherwise." Accordingly, he rose from his chair by the bedside, and placing himself between the two half-drawn curtains at the foot of the bed,

indicated as the place occupied by the apparition, asked if the spectre was still visible? "Not entirely so," replied the patient, "because your person is betwixt him and me; but I observe his skull peering above your shoulder."

It is alleged the man of science started on the instant, despite philosophy, on receiving an answer ascertaining, with such minuteness, that the ideal spectre was close to his own person. He resorted to other means of investigation and cure, but with equally indifferent success. The patient sunk into deeper and deeper dejection, and died in the same distress of mind in which he had spent the latter months of his life; and his case remains a melancholy instance of the power of imagination to kill the body, even when its fantastic terrors cannot overcome the intellect, of the unfortunate persons who suffer under them. The patient, in the present case, sunk under his malady; and the circumstances of his singular disorder remaining concealed, he did not, by his death and last illness, lose any of his well-merited reputation for prudence and sagacity which had attended him during the whole course of his life.

Having added these two remarkable instances to the general train of similar facts quoted by Ferriar, Hibbert, and other writers who have more recently considered the subject, there can, we think, be little doubt of the proposition, that the external organs may, from various causes, become so much deranged as to make false representations to the mind; and that, in such cases, men, in the literal sense, really see the empty and false forms and hear the ideal sounds which, in a more primitive state of society, are naturally enough referred to the action of demons or disembodied spirits. In such unhappy cases the patient is intellectually in the condition of a general whose spies have been bribed by the enemy, and who must engage himself in the difficult and delicate task of examining and correcting, by his own powers of argument, the probability of the reports which are too inconsistent to be trusted to.

But there is a corollary to this proposition, which is worthy of notice. The same species of organic derangement which, as a continued habit of his deranged vision, presented the subject of our last tale with the successive apparitions of his cat, his gentleman-usher, and the fatal skeleton, may occupy, for a brief or almost momentary space, the vision of men who are otherwise perfectly clear-sighted. Transitory deceptions are thus presented to the organs which, when they occur to men of strength of mind and of education, give way to scrutiny, and their character being once investigated, the true takes the place of the unreal representation. But in ignorant times those instances in which any object is misrepresented, whether through the action of the senses, or of the imagination, or the combined influence of both, for however short a space of time, may be admitted as direct evidence of a supernatural apparition; a proof the more difficult to be disputed if the phantom has been personally witnessed by a man of sense and estimation, who, perhaps satisfied in the general as to the

actual existence of apparitions, has not taken time or trouble to correct his first impressions. This species of deception is so frequent that one of the greatest poets of the present time answered a lady who asked him if he believed in ghosts: "No, madam; I have seen too many myself." I may mention one or two instances of the kind, to which no doubt can be attached.

The first shall be the apparition of Maupertuis to a brother professor in the Royal Society of Berlin. This extraordinary circumstance appeared in the Transactions of the Society, but is thus stated by M. Thiebault in his "Recollections of Frederick the Great and the Court of Berlin." It is necessary to premise that M. Gleditsch, to whom the circumstance happened, was a botanist of eminence, holding the professorship of natural philosophy at Berlin, and respected as a man of an habitually serious, simple, and tranquil character.

A short time after the death of Maupertuis,[2] M. Gleditsch being obliged to traverse the hall in which the Academy held its sittings, having some arrangements to make in the cabinet of natural history, which was under his charge, and being willing to complete them on the Thursday before the meeting, he perceived, on entering the hall, the apparition of M. de Maupertuis, upright and stationary, in the first angle on his left hand, having his eyes fixed on him. This was about three o'clock, afternoon. The professor of natural philosophy was too well acquainted with physical science to suppose that his late president, who had died at Bâle, in the family of Messrs. Bernoullie, could have found his way back to Berlin in person. He regarded the apparition in no other light than as a phantom produced by some derangement of his own proper organs. M. Gleditsch went to his own business, without stopping longer than to ascertain exactly the appearance of that object. But he related the vision to his brethren, and assured them that it was as defined and perfect as the actual person of Maupertuis could have presented. When it is recollected that Maupertuis died at a distance from Berlin, once the scene of his triumphs; overwhelmed by the petulant ridicule of Voltaire, and out of favour with Frederick, with whom to be ridiculous was to be worthless; we can hardly wonder at the imagination even of a man of physical science calling up his Eidolon in the hall of his former greatness.

The sober-minded professor did not, however, push his investigation to the point to which it was carried by a gallant soldier, from whose mouth a particular friend of the author received the following circumstances of a similar story. Captain C; ; was a native of Britain, but bred in the Irish Brigade. He was a man of the most dauntless courage, which he displayed in some uncommonly

2 Long the president of the Berlin Academy, and much favoured by Frederick II., till he was overwhelmed by the ridicule of Voltaire. He retired, in a species of disgrace, to his native country of Switzerland, and died there shortly afterwards.

desperate adventures during the first years of the French Revolution, being repeatedly employed by the royal family in very dangerous commissions. After the King's death he came over to England, and it was then the following circumstance took place. Captain C; ; was a Catholic, and, in his hour of adversity at least, sincerely attached to the duties of his religion. His confessor was a clergyman who was residing as chaplain to a man of rank in the west of England, about four miles from the place where Captain C; ; lived. On riding over one morning to see this gentleman, his penitent had the misfortune to find him very ill from a dangerous complaint. He retired in great distress and apprehension of his friend's life, and the feeling brought back upon him many other painful and disagreeable recollections. These occupied him till the hour of retiring to bed, when, to his great astonishment, he saw in the room the figure of the absent confessor. He addressed it, but received no answer; the eyes alone were impressed by the appearance. Determined to push the matter to the end,

Captain C; ; advanced on the phantom, which appeared to retreat gradually before him. In this manner he followed it round the bed, when it seemed to sink down on an elbow-chair, and remain there in a sitting posture. To ascertain positively the nature of the apparition, the soldier himself sate down on the same chair, ascertaining thus, beyond question, that the whole was illusion; yet he owned that, had his friend died about the same time, he would not well have known what name to give to his vision. But as the confessor recovered, and, in Dr. Johnson's phrase, "nothing came of it," the incident was only remarkable as showing that men of the strongest nerves are not exempted from such delusions.

Another illusion of the same nature we have the best reason for vouching as a fact, though, for certain reasons, we do not give the names of the parties. Not long after the death of a late illustrious poet, who had filled, while living, a great station in the eye of the public, a literary friend, to whom the deceased had been well known, was engaged, during the darkening twilight of an autumn evening, in perusing one of the publications which professed to detail the habits and opinions of the distinguished individual who was now no more. As the reader had enjoyed the intimacy of the deceased to a considerable degree, he was deeply interested in the publication, which contained some particulars relating to himself and other friends. A visitor was sitting in the apartment, who was also engaged in reading. Their sitting-room opened into an entrance-hall, rather fantastically fitted up with articles of armour, skins of wild animals, and the like. It was when laying down his book, and passing into this hall, through which the moon was beginning to shine, that the individual of whom I speak saw, right before him, and in a standing posture, the exact representation of his departed friend, whose recollection had been so strongly brought to his imagination. He stopped for a single moment, so as to notice the wonderful accuracy with which fancy had impressed upon the bodily eye the peculiarities

of dress and posture of the illustrious poet. Sensible, however, of the delusion, he felt no sentiment save that of wonder at the extraordinary accuracy of the resemblance, and stepped onwards towards the figure, which resolved itself, as he approached, into the various materials of which it was composed. These were merely a screen, occupied by great-coats, shawls, plaids, and such other articles as usually are found in a country entrance-hall. The spectator returned to the spot from which he had seen the illusion, and endeavoured, with all his power, to recall the image which had been so singularly vivid. But this was beyond his capacity; and the person who had witnessed the apparition, or, more properly, whose excited state had been the means of raising it, had only to return into the apartment, and tell his young friend under what a striking hallucination he had for a moment laboured.

There is every reason to believe that instances of this kind are frequent among persons of a certain temperament, and when such occur in an early period of society, they are almost certain to be considered as real supernatural appearances. They differ from those of Nicolai, and others formerly noticed, as being of short duration, and constituting no habitual or constitutional derangement of the system. The apparition of Maupertuis to Monsieur Gleditsch, that of the Catholic clergyman to Captain C; ; , that of a late poet to his friend, are of the latter character. They bear to the former the analogy, as we may say, which a sudden and temporary fever-fit has to a serious feverish illness. But, even for this very reason, it is more difficult to bring such momentary impressions back to their real sphere of optical illusions, since they accord much better with our idea of glimpses of the future world than those in which the vision is continued or repeated for hours, days, and months, affording opportunities of discovering, from other circumstances, that the symptom originates in deranged health.

Before concluding these observations upon the deceptions of the senses, we must remark that the eye is the organ most essential to the purpose of realizing to our mind the appearance of external objects, and that when the visual organ becomes depraved for a greater or less time, and to a farther or more limited extent, its misrepresentation of the objects of sight is peculiarly apt to terminate in such hallucinations as those we have been detailing. Yet the other senses or organs, in their turn, and to the extent of their power, are as ready, in their various departments, as the sight itself, to retain false or doubtful impressions, which mislead, instead of informing, the party to whom they are addressed.

Thus, in regard to the ear, the next organ in importance to the eye, we are repeatedly deceived by such sounds as are imperfectly gathered up and erroneously apprehended. From the false impressions received from this organ also arise consequences similar to those derived from erroneous reports made by the organs of sight. A whole class of superstitious observances arise, and are

grounded upon inaccurate and imperfect hearing. To the excited and imperfect state of the ear we owe the existence of what Milton sublimely calls;

The airy tongues that syllable men's names,
On shores, in desert sands, and wildernesses.

These also appear such natural causes of alarm, that we do not sympathize more readily with Robinson Crusoe's apprehensions when he witnesses the print of the savage's foot in the sand, than in those which arise from his being waked from sleep by some one calling his name in the solitary island, where there existed no man but the shipwrecked mariner himself. Amidst the train of superstitions deduced from the imperfections of the ear, we may quote that visionary summons which the natives of the Hebrides acknowledged as one sure sign of approaching fate. The voice of some absent, or probably some deceased, relative was, in such cases, heard as repeating the party's name. Sometimes the aerial summoner intimated his own death, and at others it was no uncommon circumstance that the person who fancied himself so called, died in consequence; for the same reason that the negro pines to death who is laid under the ban of an Obi woman, or the Cambro-Briton, whose name is put into the famous cursing well, with the usual ceremonies, devoting him to the infernal gods, wastes away and dies, as one doomed to do so. It may be remarked also, that Dr. Johnson retained a deep impression that, while he was opening the door of his college chambers, he heard the voice of his mother, then at many miles' distance, call him by his name; and it appears he was rather disappointed that no event of consequence followed a summons sounding so decidedly supernatural. It is unnecessary to dwell on this sort of auricular deception, of which most men's recollection will supply instances. The following may he stated as one serving to show by what slender accidents the human ear may be imposed upon. The author was walking, about two years since, in a wild and solitary scene with a young friend, who laboured under the infirmity of a severe deafness, when he heard what he conceived to be the cry of a distant pack of hounds, sounding intermittedly. As the season was summer, this, on a moment's reflection, satisfied the hearer that it could not be the clamour of an actual chase, and yet his ears repeatedly brought back the supposed cry. He called upon his own dogs, of which two or three were with the walking party. They came in quietly, and obviously had no accession to the sounds which had caught the author's attention, so that he could not help saying to his companion, "I am doubly sorry for your infirmity at this moment, for I could otherwise have let you hear the cry of the Wild Huntsman." As the young gentleman used a hearing tube, he turned when spoken to, and, in doing so, the cause of the phenomenon became apparent. The supposed distant sound

was in fact a nigh one, being the singing of the wind in the instrument which the young gentleman was obliged to use, but which, from various circumstances, had never occurred to his elder friend as likely to produce the sounds he had heard.

It is scarce necessary to add, that the highly imaginative superstition of the Wild Huntsman in Germany seems to have had its origin in strong fancy, operating upon the auricular deceptions, respecting the numerous sounds likely to occur in the dark recesses of pathless forests. The same clew may be found to the kindred Scottish belief, so finely embodied by the nameless author of "Albania:";

"There, since of old the haughty Thanes of Ross
Were wont, with clans and ready vassals thronged,
To wake the bounding stag, or guilty wolf;
There oft is heard at midnight or at noon,
Beginning faint, but rising still more loud,
And louder, voice of hunters, and of hounds,
And horns hoarse-winded, blowing far and keen.
Forthwith the hubbub multiplies, the air
Labours with louder shouts and rifer din
Of close pursuit, the broken cry of deer
Mangled by throttling dogs, the shouts of men,
And hoofs, thick-beating on the hollow hill:
Sudden the grazing heifer in the vale
Starts at the tumult, and the herdsman's ears
Tingle with inward dread. Aghast he eyes
The upland ridge, and every mountain round,
But not one trace of living wight discerns,
Nor knows, o'erawed and trembling as he stands,
To what or whom he owes his idle fear;
To ghost, to witch, to fairy, or to fiend,
But wonders, and no end of wondering finds."[3]

3 The poem of "Albania" is, in its original folio edition, so extremely scarce that I have only seen a copy belonging to the amiable and ingenious Dr. Beattie, besides the one which I myself possess, printed in the earlier part of last century. It was reprinted by my late friend Dr. Leyden in a small volume entitled

It must also be remembered, that to the auricular deceptions practised by the means of ventriloquism or otherwise, may be traced many of the most successful impostures which credulity has received as supernatural communications.

The sense of touch seems less liable to perversion than either that of sight or smell, nor are there many cases in which it can become accessary to such false intelligence as the eye and ear, collecting their objects from a greater distance and by less accurate enquiry, are but too ready to convey. Yet there is one circumstance in which the sense of touch as well as others is very apt to betray its possessor into inaccuracy, in respect to the circumstances which it impresses on its owner. The case occurs during sleep, when the dreamer touches with his hand some other part of his own person. He is clearly, in this case, both the actor and patient, both the proprietor of the member touching, and of that which is touched; while, to increase the complication, the hand is both toucher of the limb on which it rests, and receives an impression of touch from it; and the same is the case with the limb, which at one and the same time receives an impression from the hand, and conveys to the mind a report respecting the size, substance, and the like, of the member touching. Now, as during sleep the patient is unconscious that both limbs are his own identical property, his mind is apt to be much disturbed by the complication of sensations arising from two parts of his person being at once acted upon, and from their reciprocal action; and false impressions are thus received, which, accurately enquired into, would afford a clew to many puzzling phenomena in the theory of dreams. This peculiarity of the organ of touch, as also that it is confined to no particular organ, but is diffused over the whole person of the man, is noticed by Lucretius:

"Ut si forte manu, quam vis jam corporis, ipse
Tute tibi partem ferias, reque experiare."

A remarkable instance of such an illusion was told me by a late nobleman. He had fallen asleep, with some uneasy feelings arising from indigestion. They operated in their usual course of visionary terrors. At length they were all summed up in the apprehension that the phantom of a dead man held the sleeper by the wrist, and endeavoured to drag him out of bed. He awaked in horror, and still felt the cold dead grasp of a corpse's hand on his right wrist. It was a minute before he discovered that his own left hand was in a state of numbness, and with it he had accidentally encircled his right arm.

"Scottish Descriptive Poems." "Albania" contains the above, and many other poetical passages of the highest merit.

The taste and the smell, like the touch, convey more direct intelligence than the eye and the ear, and are less likely than those senses to aid in misleading the imagination. We have seen the palate, in the case of the porridge-fed lunatic, enter its protest against the acquiescence of eyes, ears, and touch, in the gay visions which gilded the patient's confinement. The palate, however, is subject to imposition as well as the other senses. The best and most acute bon vivant loses his power of discriminating betwixt different kinds of wine, if he is prevented from assisting his palate by the aid of his eyes,; that is, if the glasses of each are administered indiscriminately while he is blindfolded. Nay, we are authorized to believe that individuals have died in consequence of having supposed themselves to have taken poison, when, in reality, the draught they had swallowed as such was of an innoxious or restorative quality. The delusions of the stomach can seldom bear upon our present subject, and are not otherwise connected with supernatural appearances, than as a good dinner and its accompaniments are essential in fitting out a daring Tam of Shanter, who is fittest to encounter them when the poet's observation is not unlikely to apply;

"Inspiring bauld John Barleycorn,
What dangers thou canst make us scorn!
Wi' tippenny we fear nae evil,
Wi' usquebae we'll face the devil.
The swats sae ream'd in Tammie's noddle,
Fair play, he caredna deils a bodle!"

Neither has the sense of smell, in its ordinary state, much connexion with our present subject. Mr. Aubrey tells us, indeed, of an apparition which disappeared with a curious perfume as well as a most melodious twang; and popular belief ascribes to the presence of infernal spirits a strong relish of the sulphureous element of which they are inhabitants. Such accompaniments, therefore, are usually united with other materials for imposture. If, as a general opinion assures us, which is not positively discountenanced by Dr. Hibbert, by the inhalation of certain gases or poisonous herbs, necromancers can dispose a person to believe he sees phantoms, it is likely that the nostrils are made to inhale such suffumigation as well as the mouth.[4]

4 Most ancient authors, who pretend to treat of the wonders of natural magic, give receipts for calling up phantoms. The lighting lamps fed by peculiar kinds of medicated oil, and the use of suffumigations of strong and deleterious herbs, are the means recommended. From these authorities, perhaps, a professor of legerdemain assured Dr. Alderson of Hull, that he could compose a preparation of antimony, sulphur, and other drugs, which, when burnt in a

I have now arrived, by a devious path, at the conclusion of this letter, the object of which is to show from what attributes of our nature, whether mental or corporeal, arises that predisposition to believe in supernatural occurrences. It is, I think, conclusive that mankind, from a very early period, have their minds prepared for such events by the consciousness of the existence of a spiritual world, inferring in the general proposition the undeniable truth that each man, from the monarch to the beggar, who has once acted his part on the stage, continues to exist, and may again, even in a disembodied state, if such is the pleasure of Heaven, for aught that we know to the contrary, be permitted or ordained to mingle amongst those who yet remain in the body. The abstract possibility of apparitions must be admitted by every one who believes in a Deity, and His superintending omnipotence. But imagination is apt to intrude its explanations and inferences founded on inadequate evidence. Sometimes our violent and inordinate passions, originating in sorrow for our friends, remorse for our crimes, our eagerness of patriotism, or our deep sense of devotion; these or other violent excitements of a moral character, in the visions of night, or the rapt ecstasy of the day, persuade us that we witness, with our eyes and ears, an actual instance of that supernatural communication, the possibility of which cannot be denied. At other times the corporeal organs impose upon the mind, while the eye and the ear, diseased, deranged, or misled, convey false impressions to the patient. Very often both the mental delusion and the physical deception exist at the same time, and men's belief of the phenomena presented to them, however erroneously, by the senses, is the firmer and more readily granted, that the physical impression corresponded with the mental excitement.

So many causes acting thus upon each other in various degrees, or sometimes separately, it must happen early in the infancy of every society that there should occur many apparently well-authenticated instances of supernatural intercourse, satisfactory enough to authenticate peculiar examples of the general proposition which is impressed upon us by belief of the immortality of the soul. These examples of undeniable apparitions (for they are apprehended to be incontrovertible), fall like the seed of the husbandman into fertile and prepared soil, and are usually followed by a plentiful crop of superstitious figments, which derive their sources from circumstances and enactments in sacred and profane history, hastily adopted, and perverted from their genuine reading. This shall be the subject of my next letter.

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confined room, would have the effect of causing the patient to suppose he saw phantoms.; See "Hibbert on Apparitions".

Compendium

In Letter I, Sir Walter Scott sets the stage by exploring the origins of superstition and how it has influenced human behavior across history. He begins by discussing how early societies, faced with an overwhelming and hostile natural world, attributed inexplicable events to supernatural forces. This laid the groundwork for myths, legends, and religious practices that sought to explain phenomena beyond their understanding.

Scott examines how fear plays a central role in the human psyche. People, he notes, are quick to assign supernatural causes to anything that provokes terror or awe. Natural disasters, illnesses, or unexplainable occurrences became linked to divine wrath, malevolent spirits, or magical interference. These fears, left unchecked, gave rise to deeply ingrained superstitions, which were passed down through generations and became cultural norms.

He touches on the ways early religious systems shaped these beliefs, reinforcing the connection between the natural and the supernatural. Priests and shamans, acting as intermediaries between humans and the gods, became figures of authority. Their ability to control rituals or interpret divine will further solidified the power of superstition in ancient societies. These religious practices evolved into systems that blended reverence for natural forces with fear of divine punishment, creating a framework where supernatural explanations became part of daily life.

Scott also highlights how these early superstitions were far from harmless. They led to social practices that reinforced fear and division. The belief in witchcraft, for example, created scapegoats during times of crisis. Those who were different or misunderstood, whether due to age, appearance, or behavior, became easy targets for accusations. Superstition, he argues, didn't just explain the unknown; it became a tool of oppression and control.

Moving forward in time, Scott touches on the transition from pagan beliefs to organized religion, particularly Christianity. He notes how early Christians sought to distinguish their faith from older, polytheistic systems by denouncing pagan practices as demonic. The emphasis on a singular, omnipotent God brought a shift in how the supernatural was perceived. What was once the domain of many gods, spirits, and natural forces became simplified into a dichotomy of good and evil, aligned with God and the Devil. This shift added a moral dimension to supernatural beliefs, deepening the fear and stigma surrounding practices deemed unholy or heretical.

Finally, Scott reflects on the persistence of superstition in even the most rational societies. Education and science have chipped away at these fears, but traces of them linger in modern cultures. He points to the enduring fascination

with ghost stories, witchcraft, and the occult as proof that the human need for wonder and mystery never truly fades.

Letter I serves as foundation for the letters that follow, establishing the historical and psychological roots of superstition while showing how deeply intertwined it is with culture, religion, and fear. It's a sweeping overview that ties together ancient practices and modern curiosities, setting up the detailed accounts and examples in the rest of the book.

Analysis

Letter I of Scott's Letters lays a foundation for understanding humanity's long-standing fascination with the supernatural. Scott begins by tracing the roots of superstition to early societies, where people relied on supernatural explanations to make sense of a mysterious and hostile world. These beliefs, born of necessity and fear, became deeply embedded in culture, religion, and human behavior, influencing how societies approached the unknown.

The Rise of Reason

Scott wrote *Letters* in 1830, a period when reason and science were on the rise, but folklore and the supernatural still captured the public's imagination. The Enlightenment had brought significant changes to how people understood the natural world, yet ghost stories, occult practices, and ancient fears remained popular. Scott's work reflects this tension, examining superstition with a blend of historical analysis and storytelling that made his observations engaging and accessible.

At the heart of Letter I is Scott's acknowledgment of humanity's need to explain what cannot be understood. In the absence of scientific knowledge, early societies attributed natural events, storms, diseases, earthquakes, and more, to divine or supernatural forces. This need for answers was universal, stemming from both fear and the desire to impose order on chaos.

Scott frames his work as letters to his nephew, a choice that lends a conversational tone while maintaining depth. The format allows him to explore complex ideas without being overly formal, making his commentary feel personal and engaging.

Superstition & Fear

In Letter I, Scott emphasizes that superstition is rooted in fear. Confronted with the unknown, people instinctively sought explanations, attributing mysterious events to spirits, curses, or divine wrath. This reaction, Scott argues, is a natural part of the human psyche, transcending time and culture.

Fear, Scott suggests, was both a survival tool and a cultural force. In a dangerous and unpredictable world, superstition offered a sense of control, even if it was based on imagined forces. Over time, these beliefs evolved into

structured practices, reinforcing community bonds and providing a framework for understanding the unpredictable. Scott uses historical examples to illustrate how these patterns emerged, showing how fear and creativity shaped human behavior.

Religion plays a central role in Scott's discussion. Early priests and shamans acted as intermediaries between humanity and the supernatural, interpreting natural events and establishing rituals to appease unseen forces. Their authority reinforced these beliefs, embedding them into cultural norms and practices. This relationship between religion and superstition laid the groundwork for phenomena like witch hunts and exorcisms, which Scott explores in later letters.

Scott also examines how the rise of monotheistic religions redefined supernatural beliefs. With the dominance of Christianity, pagan gods and spirits were reframed as evil, aligning them with the Devil. This moral duality heightened the fear associated with witchcraft, heresy, and other practices deemed unholy, adding a new layer of complexity to supernatural beliefs. Scott observes how this shift from neutral forces to moral judgment reshaped cultural attitudes toward the unknown.

Despite advancements in science and education, Scott notes that superstition remains deeply ingrained in human nature. He points to the continued popularity of ghost stories and occult practices as evidence that the need for wonder and mystery persists. These beliefs, he suggests, are not relics of the past but enduring elements of the human experience.

A Framework for Understanding

Letter I is significant for several reasons. It establishes a framework for understanding how superstition has evolved, offering insight into its origins and persistence. Scott's observations highlight how these beliefs have shaped and been shaped by culture, religion, and human psychology.

The letter also examines how superstition intersects with power and authority. Through interpreting and controlling supernatural beliefs, religious leaders and shamans wielded influence that shaped societal norms. Scott illustrates how fear of the unknown was used to enforce social structures and maintain control.

Scott's focus on fear as driving force behind superstition is particularly striking. His analysis connects historical events like witch hunts to broader patterns of human behavior, showing how fear and imagination create narratives that persist across generations. This perspective provides a lens for examining not only past events but also contemporary phenomena rooted in the same impulses.

Religion's role in shaping superstition adds another layer of significance. Scott's discussion of early practices and their transformation under Christianity offers insight into the complex relationship between belief, morality, and cultural development. His commentary on how theological shifts influenced supernatural beliefs reveals the depth and complexity of these cultural transformations.

Finally, Scott's reflections on the enduring appeal of the supernatural add relevance to his analysis. Despite progress in science and reason, people remain captivated by the mysterious and unexplained. This fascination, Scott argues, is a fundamental part of human nature, not easily dismissed or eradicated.

Characters

The history of superstition is not told in abstractions, but in roles. From classical diviners to Enlightenment skeptics, the people who navigated belief shaped how it survived, evolved, or was weaponized. These characters reflect the specific cultural, theological, and legal conditions described in Scott's account. They are not mystical figures, but social participants in systems where the unseen world was never far from the visible one.

The Civic Augur

In a Roman forum, he watches the flight of birds and reads the entrails of beasts, not out of faith, but because it is his office. His pronouncements shape legal outcomes, military campaigns, and public sentiment. He believes in order, not omens, but he understands that one requires the appearance of the other.

The augur belonged to the *collegium augurum*, one of the sacred colleges of Republican and Imperial Rome tasked with maintaining divine favor through ritual observation. Augury was not mystical inspiration but a regulated form of divination, embedded in law and procedure. By observing signs in the natural world, avian flight paths, thunder patterns, or the behavior of sacred chickens, augurs determined whether proposed actions conformed to divine will. Their authority did not rest on personal belief, but on their sanctioned role as interpreters of ritual, and their decisions could delay or nullify public business, including elections and military campaigns. The act of consulting the augurs was itself a performance of legitimacy, often used to frame political power as obedience to the sacred order.

Disrupting Plans Through Ritual: A character in this role can shape the direction of events by determining when action may or may not proceed. By withholding favorable omens or citing ambiguous signs, the augur delays legal decisions, blocks military advances, or interrupts political gatherings. Their influence comes not from physical power, but from the authority granted by tradition and public expectation. In roleplaying, this provides opportunities to

exert control through passive resistance, spiritual technicality, or cultural inertia.

Manipulating Perception Through Authority: Whether the augur believes in the gods or not, their rulings are received as fact. They may quietly coordinate with political figures behind the scenes, arranging for favorable signs to align with strategic interests. This manipulation must remain concealed, not to protect the divine, but to preserve public trust in the system. Players can explore how power is shaped by narrative more than truth, and how belief can be engineered without deception.

Maintaining Order Through Ceremony: The augur may feel the weight of their role more than its privilege. They see how quickly panic spreads when ritual is neglected, and how conflict escalates when old forms are abandoned. Even skeptics among the augurs may uphold the rites to avoid unrest. This creates space for characters caught between personal conviction and civic duty, performing rituals they no longer trust to preserve the illusion of harmony.

Facing Resistance From Rationalists and Reformers: As philosophies change, the augur becomes a figure of contested relevance. New political movements may reject augury as outdated, corrupt, or superstitious. The character must defend their role not on spiritual grounds, but as a stabilizing element within a fragile social order. This opens avenues for ideological conflict, courtroom defense, or private doubt rendered public.

The civic augur is not a mystic or a fraud. He is a statesman of ritual, a servant of form, and a master of ambiguity. In any historical or speculative setting where belief intersects with governance, his presence raises questions about legitimacy, tradition, and the uneasy alliance between the sacred and the state.

The Desert Anchorite

He fled the city to escape temptation, but found the wilderness full of voices. His visions come with scripture, but the symbols are older. Others seek his wisdom, not knowing whether he speaks with angels or fights devils alone.

The anchorite emerges in late antiquity as part of the Christian ascetic tradition, withdrawing from society to pursue spiritual purity through solitude, fasting, and prayer. In the deserts of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine, these figures lived in isolation, often in caves or huts, rejecting worldly comfort in favor of continual spiritual struggle. Influenced by both Christian theology and older Gnostic and hermetic beliefs, their inner lives were often filled with visions, temptations, and symbolic dreams. The boundary between divine revelation and diabolical assault was never clear. The anchorite's sanctity was measured not by peace, but by the intensity of their suffering, and stories about them quickly spread as both inspiration and warning.

Struggling With Inner Temptation: A character in this role does not find clarity in solitude, but conflict. Removed from human distractions, the anchorite confronts spiritual forces in raw, personal form, visions, dreams, and intrusive thoughts that may be divine in origin or masks for something darker. In roleplaying, this allows players to explore mystical uncertainty, where the line between revelation and madness is never fully resolved. The character's solitude becomes a battlefield, and every moment of peace feels earned.

Becoming a Symbol Against One's Will: Despite seeking isolation, the anchorite attracts attention. Pilgrims come with questions, clerics come with suspicion, and rulers come seeking legitimacy through his endorsement. The character becomes a site of meaning for others, treated as a prophet, heretic, or saint depending on the needs of those who arrive. Players can use this to explore how a private life becomes public myth, and how resisting or accepting that role shapes the character's identity.

Interpreting Ancient Signs Through New Doctrine: The anchorite's visions often speak in language older than scripture, desert spirits, burning wheels, falling stars, animals that speak. Trained in Christian theology but surrounded by older symbols, the character becomes a living tension between orthodoxy and mystery. This is ideal for campaigns exploring religious change, doctrinal conflict, or syncretic belief systems. The character may offer insight that others reject as dangerous, or remain silent while others twist their words.

Facing Isolation Without Abandonment: While they live apart, the anchorite is never free from the world. Distant orders may monitor them. Political factions may try to use them. Those in power may fear the influence of someone who answers only to the divine. This creates space for conflict that reaches the anchorite even in isolation, visits from emissaries, threats disguised as gifts, or the haunting realization that escape was never complete.

The desert anchorite is not a recluse in peace, but a figure at war with what cannot be named. He carries faith like a wound, endures praise like a curse, and teaches others not because he wants to, but because they will not leave him alone. He is not a leader. He is what remains when the world becomes too loud to bear.

The Scholastic Commentator

She walks the halls of a monastic school with parchment under one arm and salt in her pocket. Her work is theological, parsing demons from angels in dense Latin clauses. She knows how fine the line is between heresy and insight, and how often both are punished the same.

The scholastic tradition of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries sought to reconcile Christian doctrine with classical philosophy, particularly the newly recovered works of Aristotle. Within cathedral schools and emerging

universities, thinkers like Thomas Aquinas, Peter Lombard, and Albertus Magnus built vast commentaries that examined the invisible world with legalistic precision. Angels, demons, miracles, temptation, and possession were not mystical abstractions but structured categories, often debated with the rigor of legal theory. While men held official teaching roles, many women in monastic communities also engaged with these texts, writing devotional commentaries, translating Latin treatises, or guiding novices through spiritual formation. Whether cloistered in scriptoria or walking cloister gardens, these women lived at the edge of orthodoxy, where spiritual insight and doctrinal error were separated by phrasing alone.

Questioning With Caution and Conviction: A character in this role studies the mechanics of belief while navigating the dangers of interpretation. She asks what separates divine influence from illusion, and how one can recognize evil masquerading as light. In roleplaying, this creates a space for philosophical depth and narrative tension. The character seeks knowledge, but knows that too much precision can be seen as pride, and too much doubt as blasphemy.

Balancing Spiritual Insight With Social Constraint: She is learned, but she is not free. Her commentary may be circulated only under another's name. Her insights may be praised in private but dismissed in synod. This tension between intellectual clarity and institutional containment is ideal for players who enjoy navigating systems of power through subtlety, tradition, and coded speech. The character may teach others while hiding her own questions, or guide reform quietly from within.

Interpreting the Invisible With Technical Authority: The character does not cast spells or perform rituals, but she knows which rites are sanctioned and which border on superstition. She can explain the difference between demonic obsession and spiritual ecstasy, or why certain charms are tolerated and others condemned. In worlds where the supernatural is real, her knowledge becomes both shield and weapon, proof against accusation, or grounds for it. She can identify what others misname, and speak truths that no one wants said aloud.

Enduring the Judgment of the Faithful: No scholar is safe from scrutiny. The line between heresy and innovation shifts with political wind and ecclesiastical pressure. She may be summoned to justify her work before a suspicious superior, or see her texts quietly removed from circulation. In roleplaying, this creates constant narrative pressure, who is watching, who is waiting, and whether truth is worth the cost of clarity.

The scholastic commentator is not a theologian of comfort. She is precise, patient, and dangerous in ways even she does not always understand. Her thoughts are sharp enough to draw blood, and her silence is never empty. She lives where doctrine breathes and trembles.

The Parish Widow

She lights candles at the wrong saints' shrines, murmurs prayers half-remembered from her grandmother, and never steps on a grave. The priest scolds her gently, but the villagers come to her when a child falls ill or a dog howls at night. She is not wise, only persistent, and that persistence is mistaken for knowledge.

The late medieval and early modern village was shaped as much by informal belief as by official doctrine. While the Church prescribed saints' days, rites, and penance, rural communities held tightly to customs passed down orally and modified over time. Widows often became custodians of this inherited knowledge. With husbands gone and children grown, they occupied a liminal role in the social fabric, respected, feared, consulted, and sometimes resented. They remembered old blessings whispered before childbirth, charms placed beneath doorposts, and the names of saints who had quietly fallen out of favor. Though not clergy, they acted as intermediaries between the anxious and the sacred, preserving forms of faith that were personal, local, and unofficial.

Preserving Memory Without Understanding: A character in this role does not claim power or insight. She follows the forms she was taught, even when she no longer recalls their meaning. Her rituals may contradict Church teaching or include remnants of pre-Christian practice, but they continue because they have not failed. In roleplaying, this allows for a deeply human character, one who acts from habit, hope, or fear rather than certainty. Her effectiveness may lie more in her presence than in her practice.

Serving as a Reluctant Advisor: People seek her out not because they trust her doctrine, but because they trust her experience. She has seen births, deaths, accidents, and unexplained sickness. Her advice is full of hedges, warnings, and sayings, but her confidence reassures. In stories, she provides a way for superstition to enter the scene without theatricality. She is not a witch, a healer, or a fraud. She is someone who listens and remembers.

Navigating Tension With Religious Authority: The parish priest may view her with wary tolerance. Her practices are irregular, her theology confused, her presence a reminder that faith cannot be fully contained by catechism. Sometimes she is asked to stop. Sometimes she is quietly thanked. In play, this dynamic can shape scenes of quiet conflict, uncertain allegiance, or generational misunderstanding. She may be protected by community goodwill or targeted as a scapegoat when fear takes hold.

Living Between Custom and Suspicion: Her rituals may pass for harmless tradition until something goes wrong. If a crop fails or a child dies, whispers may turn against her. Her presence in a story can foreshadow unrest, reflect the persistence of older beliefs, or reveal how community memory outlasts doctrine.

She lives in the space between sacred and familiar, where meaning is carried in gesture, not doctrine.

The parish widow is not a figure of power, but of accumulation. She knows what to say when others fall silent, and how to act when no one else remembers what their grandmother taught them. She is not a threat. She is what people turn to before they let themselves be afraid.

The Episcopal Judge

He holds in one hand the canon law and in the other the whispered confessions of accused witches. He does not believe in flying through chimneys, but he believes in order, in penance, and in the weight of fear. His rulings are merciful compared to others, but mercy in this court is still a verdict.

In the medieval and early modern Church, bishops and their appointed officials presided over ecclesiastical courts responsible for regulating morality, enforcing doctrine, and investigating spiritual offenses. These courts dealt not only with heresy and sacrilege, but with accusations of witchcraft, sorcery, and consorting with devils. Unlike secular courts, which increasingly pursued witchcraft as a civil crime punishable by death, episcopal judges often approached such cases with theological scrutiny. They examined intent, confession, and signs of contrition, sometimes favoring penance or imprisonment over execution. Still, their decisions were shaped by fear, politics, and the growing pressure to root out impurity. Judges had to weigh individual guilt against communal unrest, and their mercy was often misunderstood as lenience or complicity.

Rendering Judgment Within Fragile Legitimacy: A character in this role must decide what the law requires, what the people demand, and what his conscience can bear. He understands that belief in witches is real because fear is real, and that dismissing a case too quickly could provoke panic. In roleplaying, this character creates moral and procedural tension. He is not a villain, but his verdicts may still destroy lives. His power is in his discretion, and that power is never without consequence.

Struggling With the Burden of Proof: Unlike inquisitors who seek certainty through torture, the episcopal judge is trained in canon law and theological logic. He looks for confession, consistency, and spiritual signs. He may doubt the truth of an accusation, but feel bound to act if the danger to order outweighs the flaws in evidence. This creates narrative space for legal ambiguity, personal doubt, and internal conflict. The character may rule against his own judgment to prevent greater harm, or defy expectation and risk collapse.

Balancing Public Expectation and Private Doubt: The bishop may demand action. The townspeople may call for fire. The judge stands between them, interpreting doctrine while watching fear take shape. He becomes a figure both

of authority and suspicion. In roleplaying, this allows the character to shift between roles: ally to reason, servant of the Church, or scapegoat when things go wrong. His every decision ripples outward, reshaping how others understand justice, power, and belief.

Acting As a Mirror of Doctrine: He knows the texts. He has memorized the appropriate prayers and read the treatises that define the devil's works. But he also knows that theology is a structure built on fear and hope, and that both can be used to justify cruelty. His rulings reflect the Church's stance in its time, measured, complex, and increasingly defensive. Players can use this character to explore the evolving relationship between religious institutions and popular belief, where the courtroom becomes a theater for sacred authority.

The episcopal judge is not merciless, but neither is he free. He serves law shaped by fear, mercy shaped by doctrine, and truth shaped by silence. His work is clean, his robes orderly, and his nights sleepless.

The Enlightenment Collector

He gathers charms, folk prayers, and accounts of spectral visitations, placing them beside ancient coins and natural oddities. He does not believe in their power, only in their relevance. But when the house is silent, he sometimes rereads a particular tale more slowly than the others.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as Enlightenment ideals spread through Europe, belief in the supernatural began to shift from sacred truth to cultural curiosity. Philosophers, antiquarians, and natural historians cataloged what previous generations had feared. Old ghost stories, protective charms, and trial transcripts became objects of study rather than prosecution. The collector emerged as a transitional figure, half skeptic, half romantic, interested in the survival of irrational belief as a social phenomenon. Some were driven by ethnographic interest, preserving folk customs before they vanished under rational reform. Others simply could not look away from the edges of reason, where the line between knowledge and mystery remained blurred.

Documenting Belief Without Endorsing It: A character in this role keeps careful records, not to preserve magic but to understand what it meant. He does not test spells or call spirits. He takes notes, compares versions, and assembles patterns. In play, this character provides access to lost lore without embracing it. He becomes a source of recovered knowledge, cultural memory, or inconvenient truth. His collection may include the key to solving a mystery, or the cause of one.

Preserving What the World Is Trying to Forget: He walks through villages with a notebook and quiet questions. The old midwife tells him of curses; the farmer shows him a burial charm. These remnants are being erased by progress, mocked by clergy, and ignored by aristocrats. The collector knows they matter,