

THE WITCHES' PHARMACOPOEIA

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ROBERT FLETCHER

**THE WITCHES'
PHARMACOPOEIA**

THE WITCHES' PHARMACOPŒIA.

READ BEFORE THE
HISTORICAL CLUB OF THE JOHNS HOPKINS HOSPITAL,
APRIL 13, 1896.

BY

ROBERT FLETCHER, M. D.

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THE WITCHES' PHARMACOPŒIA.*

BY ROBERT FLETCHER, M. D.

The subject of this evening's paper is extraordinarily copious, and long-descended in its history. A belief in witchcraft characterized the earliest periods of which we have any record; it prevails among all savages or semi-civilized peoples at the present time, and is by no means extinct in otherwise intelligent communities. The cowardly fear and the resulting cruelties which have sprung from this strange superstition are too well known to need comment. In Merry England and in religious New England, men and women, old and young, the ministers of the Gospel, the clown and the philosopher, have perished at the stake or on the gallows, victims to this hideous delusion. A striking feature in the history of witchcraft is the fact that by far the greater number of its votaries were women, mostly old women. It is hard to find any explanation of this condition. King James I., in his *Demonologia*, ungallantly accounts for it by saying: "For as that sex is frailer than man is, so is it easier to be entrapped in these grosse snares of the Divell, as was over well proved to be true by the serpent's deceiving Eve in the beginning, which makes him the homlier with that sexe sensine."

The personal appearance of the typical witch was not attractive. Harsnet, in a work published in 1603, says a witch is "an old weather-beaten crone, having her chin and knees

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meeting for age, walking like a bow, leaning on a staff, hollow-eyed, untoothed, furrowed, having her limbs trembling with palsy, going mumbling in the streets; one that hath forgotten her paternoster, yet hath a shrewd tongue to call a drab a drab." (Declaration of Popish Imposture, 136.)

If she ventured out in the daylight she was pursued with obloquy. In Gay's fable of *The Old Woman and her Cats*, the poor creature exclaims:

Crowds of boys
Worry me with eternal noise;
Straws laid across my path retard;
The horse-shoe's nailed (the threshold's guard),
The stunted broom the wenches hide,
For fear that I should up and ride.
They stick with pins my bleeding seat,
And bid me show my secret teat.

Your genuine witch was believed to be incapable of shedding tears, and if through torture she could be made to weep, her power had departed and she became a helpless victim to justice. King James says: "They cannot even shed tears, though women in general are like the crocodile, ready to weep upon every light occasion."

Old age was not always a necessary adjunct to witchcraft. Some of the famous witches of classical times, such as Canidia, Erichthoë, and Circe, were beautiful women. The first was a famous hetaira and was once the mistress of Horace.

Accounts are given in history and legend of wizards who practised their diabolical art, but they seem to have labored for more important purposes than their female rivals. In old chronicles, in popular story, and above all in the drama, it is the witch who figures as the minister of evil, and it is with her and her marvelous storehouse of materials we have to do to-night.

It is a mistake to suppose that these materials consisted only of offensive or grotesque substances—of "eye of newt and toe of frog." If the time permitted it would not be difficult to show that certain legendary qualities attached to them have come down from classic and pre-classic days. This will to some extent appear as we progress in the enquiry, for the literature of witch-

craft is very ancient, and it will be found that the same ingredients have been made use of through many ages to produce the like results. Astrology lent its aid, and plants which were under certain planetary influence, especially those belonging to the moon, acquired more potency in consequence. Old Culpepper, in his British Herbal, gives a list of over 500 plants with the planets which govern them. The doctrine of signatures too had its influence in the selection of ingredients for malevolent as well as for healing purposes, and if liver-wort or eye-bright were powerful for good, the lurid flowers and leaves of aconite, hemlock, henbane, and belladonna were manifestly suited for diabolic charms.

The term pharmacopœia made use of in the title of this paper, must be understood in its most comprehensive sense. It comprises substances from the vegetable and animal kingdoms, and the products of the atmosphere must be included.

In addition to its materia medica, witchcraft has its especial pharmacology. Not only must the materials be procured with certain magical forms and precautions, many of which are of Druidical origin, but the commixture must be made under spell and incantation. There are two divisions of the pharmacopœia of witches, of distinctly opposite qualities—one, and the most numerous, comprising noxious ingredients, and the other consisting of the ordinary healing remedies of popular medicine. The woman who made use of the latter was known as a "white witch." She removed warts, cured fits, counteracted the spells laid upon cattle, and was looked upon as a generally beneficent sort of neighbor. The grey witch was one who, as occasion required, practised either the kindly or the malevolent arts, and the black witch was one who dealt in the latter exclusively. A mere list of the materials employed by the malevolent witch would be wearisome, and it will be more interesting and convenient to select from the rich stores of the drama and of poetry some passages which refer to witches and their baleful arts. Some comments elucidatory of the qualities and the folklore history of the ingredients employed, will, I trust, be not uninteresting.

The play most familiar to us all in which witches play a tragic part is, of course, Macbeth. Thomas Middleton, a con-

temporary of Shakespeare, was the author of a drama called *The Witch* which is wonderfully rich in this particular lore. A comedy by Thomas Heywood, entitled *The Late Lancashire Witches*, was published in 1634. Another comedy entitled *The Lancashire Witches, and Teague O'Divelly the Irish Priest*, written by Thomas Shadwell, was first performed at the Duke's Theatre in 1682. The two latter plays were reprinted in 1853 by Mr. James Orchard-Halliwel, the celebrated Shakespearean scholar, only 80 copies being printed. This work is now extremely scarce. From these plays and from collateral writings my illustrations will be drawn.

It is proper to say that in neither of these dramas has the author devised the proceedings he describes from his own imagination, so far as the materials and methods employed are concerned. These have been borrowed largely, and in some instances literally, from Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, published in 1584. He, in his turn, had delved with wonderful diligence in fields of all kinds from classic days to his own, and this confirms what I have already stated as to the great antiquity of the folklore of witchcraft.

The famous incantation scene when the witches are expecting the approach of *Macbeth*, and have filled their cauldron with the most powerful ingredients of their art, is curious as exhibiting almost exclusively substances of animal origin. The only exceptions are "root of hemlock digg'd i' the dark," and "slips of yew silver'd in the moon's eclipse." Familiar as it is, it must be repeated in full for the sake of some comments upon the composition of the "hell-broth."

- First Witch.* Round about the caldron go ;
 In the poison'd entrails throw,—
 Toad, that under the cold stone
 Days and nights hast thirty-one
 Swelter'd venom sleeping got,
 Boil thou first i' the charmed pot.
- All.* Double, double toil and trouble ;
 Fire burn, and, caldron, bubble.
- Second Witch.* Fillet of a fenny snake,
 In the caldron boil and bake ;
 Eye of newt, and toe of frog,
 Wool of bat, and tongue of dog,

Adder's fork, and blind-worm's sting,
Lizard's leg, and howlet's wing,—
For a charm of powerful trouble,
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.

All. Double, double toil and trouble;
Fire burn, and, caldron, bubble.

Third Witch. Scale of dragon; tooth of wolf;
Witches' mummy; maw and gulf
Of the ravin'd salt-sea shark;
Root of hemlock digg'd i' the dark;
Liver of blaspheming Jew;
Gall of goat; and slips of yew
Silver'd in the moon's eclipse;
Nose of Turk, and Tartar's lips;
Finger of birth-strangled babe
Ditch-deliver'd by a drab—
Make the gruel thick and slab;
Add thereto a tiger's chaudron,
For the ingredients of our caldron.

All. Double, double toil and trouble;
Fire burn, and, caldron, bubble.

Sec. Witch. Cool it with a baboon's blood,
Then the charm is firm and good.

The commentators have expressed some conjectures as to what the "poisoned entrails" were, but there is, I think, no doubt that the term applied to the entire ingredients of the caldron. The toad figures constantly in necromantic charms, and its venom, if it have any, is supposed to reside in the glands of the skin. The blind-worm is the slow-worm, which is spoken of in *Timon* as the "eyeless venom'd worm." As a matter of fact it is a harmless reptile. Mummy was formerly one of the articles of the pharmacopœias, and its virtue was doubtless due to the aromatics with which it was endued. Sir Thomas Browne, in his *Urn-burial*, says of it: "The Egyptian mummies which Cambyses or time hath spared, avarice now consumeth. Mummie is become merchandise. Mizraim cures wounds, and Pharaoh is sold for balsams." The "gulf of the ravin'd salt-sea shark" is the stomach of that voracious fish. "Nose of Turk and Tartar's lips" seem to have no obvious qualifications, but it would be hard to find two lines of as concentrated expression as those which follow—

Finger of birth-strangled babe
Ditch-delivered by a drab.

The "tiger's chaudron" means the entrails of the animal. The tiger is of great importance in Chinese medicine; for an attack of hydrophobia the skull, teeth and toes of the animal are ground up and given in wine.

This wonderful collection of "poisoned entrails" was to be cooled with a baboon's blood. The baboon, or *babian* of the Dutch, was a large and dangerous ape, described by travelers of those times as found in great flocks near the Cape of Good Hope. Monstrous stories were told of it by contemporary writers.

When in reply to Macbeth's demand for further prognostications of his fate, more charms became needful, the first witch says:

Pour in sow's blood, that hath eaten
Her nine farrow; grease that's sweaten
From the murderer's gibbet throw
Into the flame.

In illustration of the first of these ingredients, Stevens quotes from Holinshed's History of Scotland, 1577, a law of Kenneth II. which provided that, "if a sowe eate her pigges let her be stoned to death and buried."

The fat or grease that drops from the body of the murderer hung in chains was one of the ingredients in the preparation of the "hand of glory," and it was also believed that where it fell the baleful mandrake sprang. Human fat was long believed to be a remedy for rheumatism and sprains. A German druggist once told me that it is still asked for, but that harmless goose-grease stiffened with spermaceti is the succedaneum, and when served from an antique jar with a mysterious inscription upon it, it gives great satisfaction.

Another and very important use of human fat was to anoint the body of a witch and thus enable her to soar through the air. This will be spoken of in more detail further on. In Middleton's play of *The Witch*, Hecate says to one of her followers:

There, take this unbaptised brat;
Giving the dead body of a child.
Boil it well; preserve the fat;
You know 'tis precious to transfer
Our 'nointed flesh into the air,
In moonlight nights.