

## Literature, &amp;c.

## British Magazines for October.

From Blackwood's Magazine.

## THE WITCHFINDER.

At the upper end of the large Gothic room, forming the interior of the town hall of Hammalburg, which was formally prepared as a court of trial, sat upon a raised part of the flooring, in his chair of state, the Ober-Amtmann; before him were placed, at a velvet behung table, his *schreibers* or secretaries; beside him sat, upon a low cushioned stool, his daughter the fair Fraulein Bertha, surrounded by her firewomen, who remained standing behind her.

The presence of the young Fraulein was of rare occurrence upon occasions of judicial ceremony in the old town hall. But a solemn appeal to her testimony had been made by the witchfinder; and her father, whose sense of justice considered that a matter of accusation of so heavy and serious a nature as that of witchcraft, should be investigated in all its bearings, had commanded her presence. Her heart, full of the purest milk of human kindness, revolted, however, from witnessing the progress of such terrible proceedings—the justice of which her simple mind, tutored according to the dark prejudices of the age, never once doubted, but which curdled her blood with horror. And she sat pale and sad, with downcast eyes, scarcely daring to raise them upon the crowd that filled the hall, much less upon the most conspicuous object in the scene before her—the unhappy being against whom all curses, all evil feeling, all insane desires of blood and death, were then directed. Perhaps there was another reason also, which, almost unconsciously, caused her to keep her eyes fixed upon the earth; perhaps she feared that they might meet two other mild blue eyes, the expression of which was that of a deep—far too deep—an interest; for it caused her heart to beat, and her spirit to be troubled; and her bosom to heave a sigh, she knew not wherefore; unless, indeed, she were in truth, bewitched.

In the centre of the hall was placed the accused woman. She was seated upon a rude three-legged stool, which was firmly fixed upon a raised flooring, elevated about three feet from the ground—her face turned towards her judge. A slight chain passed round the middle of her body, and fastened her down to her seat. She was still attired in the dark hood and cloak which had been her customary dress, and sat, with head bent downwards, and her hands clasped languidly upon her knees, as if resigned, in the bitterness of her despair, to meet the cruel fate that awaited her.

Below was a compact and turbulent crowd of the lower orders of the town, which was with difficulty kept, by the pikemen, within the limits assigned to it; and which, from time to time, let forth low howls against the supposed sorceress, that increased, like the *crescendo* of distant thunder, and then died away again.

On either side, towards the upper end, were ranged upon benches some of the more reputable *bourgeois* and their spouses, all decked out in their finest braveries, as if they were present at a theatrical show, or a church mystery: and in truth, the representation about to be given, was but little more in their own eyes, than a sort of show got up for their especial gratification. Guarded by two pikemen, stood the cripple—his teeth set firmly, although his lips quivered with excitement—his light eyes glaring fiercely around with an air of savage exaltation, and gleaming as it were, with a pale phosphoric fire, from out of the dark ground of his swarthy face and lank black hair. He moved restlessly and uneasily upon his withered limbs, cleaving by fits and starts his rosary from his bosom, and murmuring a hasty, and—to judge by the wildness of his eyes, that showed how his mind was fixed upon far other thoughts—a vain prayer. He rolled also his head and the upper part of his body continually backwards and forwards, like a wild beast fretting in his cage.

Among the more prominent of the crowd, whom the favour of the guards had allowed to push beyond the assigned limits, or whom reasons, connected with the trial, required to come forwards, stood "Gentle Gottlob." His brow was overclouded with sadness, for he felt in how fearful a pass this horrible denunciation had placed the woman whom he had so long regarded with attachment. His mild blue eyes were once more melancholy than of wont; and yet, in spite of the trouble of his mind, he was unable to withdraw his looks from that bright loadstone of his affections, whose sadness seemed to sympathise with his own. At least his heart would fain persuade him that there was a mysterious sympathy in their mutual dejection.

The principal personages concerned in the awful question at issue, occupied, thus, their respective positions in the old town hall; when after a long and troubled pause, during which silence was with difficulty obtained among the more tumultuous portion of the crowd at the lower end of the hall, one of the *schreibers* rose and read, from an interminable strip of parchment which he held in his hand, the act of accusation against the female known under the popular designation of "Mother Magdalena," as attainted of the foul crime of witchcraft, of the casting of spells and malefices to the annoyance and destruction of her fellow creatures, of consorting with spirits of darkness, and of lascivious intercourse with the arch fiend himself. For so ran, at that time, the tenor of the accusation directed against the unhappy woman suspected of this imaginary crime.

The act of accusation was long, and richly interlarded with all those interminable complications of legal phraseology, which seem ever, at all times, and in all nations, to have been the necessary concomitants of all legal proceedings. The reading of the act, however, being at last terminated, the town beggar, commonly known by the familiar name of Black Claus the witchfinder, Schwartzer-Claus, or Claus Schwartz, as he was usually designated among the people, was summoned to stand forward as the denouncer of the aforesaid Magdalena, and to substantiate his charge.

Thus called upon, the cripple gave a start forward, like a lion let loose upon the gladiator's arena, through the barred gates of which he has already sniffed the odour of blood; and then raising one of his long arms towards the stool of penitence, on which the criminal had been placed, he again repeated, with an eagerness amounting to frenzy his accusation against her.

As the witchfinder's hoarse voice was heard a visible shudder passed through Magdalena's frame; but she raised not her head, moved not a limb, spoke not; and it was only when upon by the chief *schreiber* to declare what she had to say against the accusation, that she slowly murmured—"God's will be done!" but still with bowed head and downcast eyes.

In support of his denunciation, the cripple proceeded to state how he had watched the mysterious female called "Mother Magdalena," and had observed that she never would enter any consecrated building; how she would daily advance up the steps of the church, and then pause before the threshold, as if she feared to pass it, and then threw herself down upon the stones before the gate, where she would lie in strange convulsions, and at last return without having penetrated into the building—an evident proof that the devil she served had forbidden her to put her foot into any sacred dwelling, but had taught her, nevertheless, to approach near enough to treat the awful mysteries of the Christian religion, performed within, with mockery and contempt. To this accusation, which was confirmed by the acclamation of several persons present in the court Magdalena, when called upon to speak, proffered no denial; she contended herself with the meek reply, that God alone knew the motives of the heart—that it was for Him alone to judge. The words were still uttered in a low despairing tone, and without the slightest movement of her head from its sunken posture.

The partially monastic dress which was her habitual attire, was next brought forward against her as a proof of her desire to treat with contempt the dress of the religious orders; and to this absurd accusation, when asked why she had adopted a costume resembling that of the holy sisterhood of penitents, the old woman still refused any reply.

The events of the previous afternoon, when she had been openly seen to throw her staff at the Amtmann's unoffending daughter, and wound her on the neck, and then break into pieces the image of the Holy Cross, were then recapitulated, as facts known upon the positive evidence of a hundred witnesses.

These matters disposed of, the cripple proceeded to detail his own peculiar grievances, and attributed, as he had done in the cases of the seven unhappy women who had already fallen victims of his frantic delusion, the severe pain that had racked his poor, distorted limbs to the malefic charms of the sorceress. He related how, on the last night on which he had met Mother Magdalena, he had found her sitting by the well in the market place, casting a spell upon the spring, and turning the waters to poison and blood—as a proof of which he swore to have himself tasted in the water of the bucket, the taste of blood; how, in revenge for his warning to her to desist from her foul practices, she had pointed up her finger to the sky, and immediately brought down upon his head, all the combined waters of heaven; how she had vanished from his sight in this storm, he knew not how; and how immediately intense pains began to torture his joints, until he became half frantic with agony, and had been compelled, by hideous visions, to quit the shelter he had sought, in order to be exposed to all the peltings of the storm. He had since suffered, he declared, the tortures of the damned in all his limbs, with occasional fits of shuddering, sometimes of hot fever, sometimes of the most freezing cold, which were evidently torments worked upon him by the powers of darkness. And, as he spoke, the unhappy wretch was again seized by one of his fearful fits of ague, during the convulsions of which the clamours of the crowd grew terrible against the sorceress.

"What sayest thou to this accusation, woman?" said the chief *schreiber*. "Thou seest now even now he suffers!"

"I have never willed any evil to any man—not even to him," was Magdalena's only reply.

When recovered from his fit, the cripple again raised his head—it was to cast a glance at the object of his denunciation, in which hatred and triumph were blended together, in one of those occasional flashes of wildness which showed that there was a vein of insanity running through all the frenzied zeal of the witchfinder. He had now arrived at a period of his narration, when the most damning proof of all was to overwhelm the accused woman.

It was not without an unaffected expression of horror, that he went on to relate how he had wandered around the building by the Water-gate, in a lower cell which he had discovered that she dwelt, seeking in vain to find an entrance or a peep hole, that might enable him to penetrate into the interior; at last he dragged his crippled limbs up into a tree on the river's bank, overlooking an upper chamber of the building; how he had, at first seen Mother Magdalena in conversation with the young il-

luminator; how, upon his departure, she had flung herself down upon her knees, and after spitting upon one of the books of holy writ upon the table, had made wild gestures of conjuration, upon which the demon himself, attired in a dark robe, had suddenly appeared by supernatural means, for he had not entered by the door; how the foul hag had fallen down and worshipped the arch fiend; and how, after a conference of short duration, during which the women at his feet appeared to supplicate with earnestness, probably a prolongation of her wretched term of power to work ill, and afterwards kissed his hand in token of adoration and submission, the demon had vanished as suddenly as he had appeared.

A low murmur of horror ran through the assembly, as Black Claus related this fearful story. All hands were turned upon the handmaiden of Satan. For a moment she had raised her head, horror struck at this interpretation of the interview she had in Gottlob's chamber with the stranger—for a moment she seemed to have a desire to speak. But then, clasping her hands before her face, she murmured—"Oh God! it cannot be! But this is terrible!"

Gottlob, who, during the whole accusation, had listened with much impatience, could now no longer restrain his generous feelings. He started forward with the words—"No, no, it is impossible! Speak Magdalena—say how false is this man's tale!"

"God knows that it is false!" said Magdalena.

"I knew it could not. There could be no one with thee in my chamber, and he lies."

"No," replied Magdalena sadly, "thus far is true. There was a stranger by me in your chamber."

"But who then?—speak, Magdalena," urged Gottlob. "Clear yourself of the foul stigma of his tale!"

"I may not say!" replied the unhappy woman. "But God will prove my innocence in His own right time."

"Why hesitate," again cried the eager young man, "when with a word you could disprove him?"

"I have already said it cannot be," said the accused woman, sinking her head upon her breast.

Gottlob himself drew back with a shudder; for a moment he knew not what to think; the strange answers of Magdalena perplexed and troubled him. He began himself to doubt of the woman; who, in return for his benevolence had showed him the attachment of a mother. He pulled his cloak over his face with both his hands, and stood for a time overwhelmed.

"It needs no further questions upon this point, I presume," said the chief *schreiber*, turning to the Ober-Amtmann. "The wretched woman has already admitted a part of the truth; and, with a sign to the denouncer, he bade him proceed."

The witchfinder paused for a moment, and gave one long look of tenderness and pity—as far, indeed, as his harsh, rudely-cramped features could express such feelings—at the pale face of Bertha. Then, fixing his eye keenly upon the Ober-Amtmann, as if to fascinate his attention, he burst into a fresh accusation against the sorceress, as having in the first place cast her spells upon the noble Fraulein Bertha, for the purpose of sowing the seeds of death within her frame; and as having, in the second place, employed the young man called "Gentle Gottlob," to be an involuntary agent of her work of ill.

Upon hearing the first part of this charge, Magdalena had raised her head to give, unconsciously as it were, a deprecating look at the fair girl—as if to assure her, with that one long consecrated look of deep feeling, that, far from desiring her evil, she contended only with the overpourings of kindness and love for her; and then, as though she had already expressed more than her conscience could approve, she bowed again her head, murmuring only—"O God! support me. Thou knowest how false is the raving of that wretched man."

The second part of the charge excited other and very varied feelings among those present. Magdalena again started, but with evident surprise, and made a hasty gesture of denial. Gottlob, sprang forward, horrified at being thus involved, even as an involuntary agent, in the hideous denunciation, and indignant at the supposition that he could work ill to the Amtmann's lovely daughter; and he protested, with all the vehemence which gentle natures, when roused into excitement, will display, against so unfounded and calumnious an accusation; whilst Bertha, joining together her small hands, as if in supplication, turned her face, with anxious expression, to her father, crying—"No, no—it cannot be!"

Astonished at so unexpected a revelation, the Ober Amtmann seemed at first not to know what to think. He gazed alternately upon Gottlob and Bertha, as if to read upon their faces the secret of a connexion between them; and then, satisfied of the impossibility that the noble Ober Amtmann's daughter could have the slightest affinity with the unknown youth before him, he drew a long breath, and passed his hand over his brow, as if to drive away ideas so absurd.

"Peace, youth—peace!" he cried to Gottlob; "we will hear the anon. It is not thou who art accused. And thou, my child—be calm. Cripple! what mean thy words? What proof bringest thou of their truth?"

"Ask of the suffering angel by thy side, my noble lord," replied the cripple, with emotion. "Let her tell how, of late, her cheek has grown pale, her limbs have become weary, her life's blood languid and oppressed. I have watched her day by day, and I have seen these changes. I have watched her with a careful and a cunning eye; and I have felt—there, in my heart—that the spell was upon her; and

his it was that urged me to denounce wretched hag!"

"Speak my child," said the Ober Amtmann, in trouble and anxiety. "What thou says is it true? Hast thou suffered ill? Indeed, I do remember that thy cheek has paler than of wont—thy appetite has left thee—thou hast been no longer cheerful or active as of old. Speak, my child—hast thou really suffered?"

"Oh, no! my father, I have not suffered," replied the agitated girl in much confusion. "and yet I have not been as formerly. I have been sad I know not why, and the silence of my chamber without ceasing, and I have found no pleasure in my embroidery, nor in my flowers, nor in my falcons. I have found my foot fall weary. I have sought to rest, and yet, when reposing, I have been unable to remain in quiet, and I have laboured for exercise abroad. But yet I have not suffered; and sometimes I have even hugged with pleasure the trouble of my mind and body."

"These seem indeed, the symptoms of a deadly spell upon thee, my poor child," claimed the father. "Such, they say, are the first evidences of the working of those spells that witches breathe over their victims."

"And let the Fraulein Bertha tell," cried the witchfinder, "how it has been yonder?" who has seemed to exercise this influence ill upon her."

Again Gottlob sought to spring forward to speak; but a sign from the Ober-Amtmann the guards, caused them to place their hands before him, and arrests him in his impulse.

"How, and what is this, my child?" cried the Ober Amtmann. "Knowest thou youth? and in what has he, consciously or unconsciously, done thee ill?"

"He has done me no ill," replied the young girl in still greater confusion, as her countenance heaved, and the blood suffused her cheeks. "I am sure he would not do me ill for his treasures of the world!"

"Thou knowest him then?" said her father somewhat more sternly.

"No, I know him not," replied Bertha; "but I have met him sometimes in the park, and I have seen him"—she hesitated a moment, and then added, with downcast eyes, "at his window, which overlooks the garden."

"Why then this trouble, Bertha?" cried the Ober Amtmann, in a tone that rendered their conversation inaudible beyond their immediate circle.

"I cannot tell myself, my father," replied the girl, troubled and sad, it is true; and yet I know not why I have no cause."

"And when thou hast met yonder youth thou sayest, hast thou felt this trouble?"

"Alas! yes, my father. I remember that at his aspect my heart would beat, my head grow giddy, and my ears would ring, and then a faintness would come over me, though it were a pain I felt, and yet it was pleasant pain. There was nothing in this could cause me ill; was there, father?"

The Ober-Amtmann's brow grew dark. Bertha proceeded; but, after a moment's reflection, he murmured to himself—"Love no! It is impossible! She and he! The noble's daughter and the low-born youth! It could not be! There is no doubt! Witchcraft has been at work! How long has it thus with thee, my child?" he added with a frown.

"I cannot tell, my father. Some five or six months past it came upon me. I know not when or how!"

"Bears he no charm upon him?" exclaimed the Ober Amtmann aloud.

"He bears a charm upon him!" cried the witchfinder in triumph. "And ask who it round his neck?"

"It is false! I bear no charm!" cried the girl, eagerly. "She herself denied that such."

"Of what does he speak?" cried the Amtmann.

"It was but a gift of affection, and no more. She gave me this ring," said Gottlob, holding up the ring hung by a small ribbon round his neck; "and I have worn it, as she intended, in remembrance of some unworthy person I had shown her."

"And how long since was it," enquired the Ober Amtmann, "that she bestowed the posed gift upon you?"

"Some five or six months past," was the girl's un lucky answer; "not long after she brought her to reside with me in my dwelling."

During this examination the agitated Magdalena had become extreme; and upon the Ober Amtmann's command the ring should be handed up to him, Gottlob moved it from his neck, and gave it into the hands of one of the guards, she cried, in excitement, "No, no; give it not, Gottlob!"

The ring, however, was passed on to the Ober Amtmann; and Magdalena, covering her face with her hands, fell back with a groan, into her former crouching position.

The sight of the ring seemed indeed to be the power of a necromancer's charm upon the Ober Amtmann. No sooner had his eyes fallen upon it, than his cheek grew pale, and his eyes were fixed upon the ring with an ally severe and stern gaze was convulsed agitation—and he sank back in his chair with the low cry—"That ring! O God! how many years of dearly sought oblivion!"

At the sight of the Ober Amtmann's motion and apparent swoon, a howl of excitement burst from the crowd below, mingled with the cries of "Tear the wretch in pieces! he has poisoned him—tear her in pieces!" A stertorous prevailed through the whole assembly. Bertha sprang to her father's side, and the Ober Amtmann quickly rallied. He turned his daughter back with the remark—