

Literature, &c.

British Magazines for October.

From Blackwood's Magazine.

THE WITCHFINDER.

[Concluded.]

The day was come. The first faint doubtful streaks of early dawn had gradually spread, in a cold heavy grey light, over the sky. By degrees the darkness had fled, and the market place, and the surrounding gables of the houses, the black pile in the midst, had become clearer and clearer in harsh distinctness. The day was come! Already a few narrow casements had been pushed back in their sliding grooves, and strange faces, with sleepy eyes, had peeped out, in night attire, to forestal impatient curiosity. Already indistinct noises, a vague rumbling, an uncertain sound from here or there had broken up the utter silence of the night, and told that the drowsy town was waking from its sleep, and stirring with a faint movement of new life. The day was come! The sentinels paced up and down more quickly, to dissipate that feeling of shivering cold which runs through the night watching during the first hour of the morn. During the colloquy between the cripple and the prisoner, they had been more than once disturbed by the loud tones of passionate exclamation that had burst from the former; but Hans had contrived to dispel his comrade's scruples as to what was going forward at the prison door, by making light of the matter.

"Let them alone. They are only having a tussle together—the witchfinder and the witch! And if the man, as the weaker vessel in matters of witchcraft, do come off minus a nose or so, it will never spoil Black Claus's beauty, that's certain. Hark! hark! they are at it again! To it, devil! To it, devil! Let them fight it out between them, man. Let them fight it out. It's fine sport, and it will never spoil the show," and Hans stamped with his feet, and hooted at a distance, and hissed between his teeth, with all the zest of a modern cockfighter in the sport, rather to the scandal and shame of his more cautious and scrupulous companion. But when the cripple, in his despair, shook, in his nervous grasp, the bars of the grating in the door, as if he would wrench it from its staples, and flung himself in desperation against the strongly ironed wooden mass, with a violence that threatened, in spite of its great strength, to burst it open, the matter seemed to become more serious in their eyes.

"Hallo, man! witchfinder! Black Claus! What art thou doing?" cried the sentinels, hurrying to the spot. "Does the devil possess thee? Art thou bewitched? Wait! wait! they'll let her out quick enough to make her mount the pile. Have patience, man!"

"She is innocent!" cried the cripple, still grappling with the bars in his despair. "She is innocent! Let her go free!"

"He is bewitched," said the soldier. "See what comes of letting them be together." "He has had the worst of it, sure enough," said Hans.

"I am not bewitched, fools!" cried the frantic man. "There's no witchcraft here! She is innocent, I tell ye! O God! these bells! they announce their coming! Bid them cease! bid them cease! they drive me mad!"

At that moment a merry chime from the church bells burst out joyously upon the morning air, to announce that a fete was about to take place in the town; for such a gratifying show as the burning of a witch, was a fete for the inhabitants of Hamelburg.

"These bells! these bells!" again cried Claus in agony, as their merry chime in gusts along the rising wind, as if to mock his misery and despair. "How often, during this long night, I have longed to hear their joyous sound; and now they ring in my ears like the howling of fiends! But she shall not die! I will yet save her," continued the distracted man; and he again shook the prison door with a force which his crippled limbs could scarcely have been supposed to possess.

With difficulty could the now alarmed sentinels, who shouted for help, cause the cripple to release his hold. Fresh guards rushed to the spot, and assisted to seize the desperate man. But in vain he protested the innocence of the supposed sorceress—in vain he cried to them to release her. He was treated as bewitched; and it was only when at last, overcome by the violence of his struggles he ceased to resist with so much, that they allowed him to remain unbound, and let fall the cords with which they had already commenced to tie his arms.

"The Ober-Amtmann will come," he said at last, with a sort of sullen resignation. "He must—he shall hear me. He shall know all—he will believe her innocent."

In the meanwhile, the market-place had already begun to fill with an anxious crowd. In a short time, the press of spectators come to witness the bloody spectacle, began to be great. The throng flowed on through street and lane. There were persons of all ages, all ranks, of both sexes—all hurrying, crowding, squeezing to the fete of horror and death. Manifold and various were the hundreds of faces congregated in a dense mass, as near as the guards would admit them, round the pile—all moved by one feeling of hideous curiosity. Little by little all the windows of the surrounding houses were jammed with faces—each window a strange picture in its quaintly carved wooden frame. The crowd was there—the living crowd eager for death—palpitating with excitement—each heartbeating with one pitiless feeling of greedy cruelty. And the bells still

rang ceaselessly their merry, joyous, fete-like peal.

And now with difficulty the soldiers forced a way through the throng for the approaching officer of justice; the great officiating dignitary of the town, who was to preside over the ceremony. He neared the town hall, to order the unlocking of the prison door, when the wretched witchfinder again sprang forward crying, "Mercy! mercy! she is innocent! Hear me, noble Ober Amtmann!" But he again started back with a cry of despair—it was not the Ober Amtmann. He had been obliged, by indisposition, to give up the office of superintending the execution, and the chief schreiber had been deputed to take his place.

"Where is the Ober Amtmann?" cried Claus in agony. "I must see him—I must speak with him! She is innocent—I swear she is! He will save her villain as he has been, when he hears all!"

The general cry that Black Claus had been bewitched by the sorceress, was a sufficient explanation to the chief schreiber of his seemingly frantic words.

"Poor man," was his only reply. "She has worked her last spell upon him. Her death alone can save his reason."

In spite of the struggles and cries of the infuriated cripple, the door was opened, and the unhappy Magdalena was forced to come forward by the guards. She looked wretchedly haggard and careworn in her sackcloth robe, with her short-cut grey hairs left bare. A chain was already bound round her waist, and clanked as she advanced. As her eyes fell upon her miserable son she gave one convulsive shudder of despair; and then, clasping her hands towards with a look of pity and forgiveness, she murmured with a look of resignation—"It is too late. Farewell! farewell! until we meet again, where there shall be no sorrow, no care, no pain—only mercy and forgiveness."

"No, no—thou shalt not die!" screamed the cripple, whom several bystanders, as well as guards, now held back with force, in awe as well as pity at his distracted state—"Thou shalt not die! she is my mother!" he cried like a maniac to the crowd around. "My mother—do ye hear? She is innocent. What I said yesterday was false—utterly false—a damning lie! She is not guilty—you would murder her! Fools, wretches, assassins. You believed me when I warned against her; why will ye not believe me now? She is innocent, I tell you. You shall not kill her!"

"He is bewitched, he is bewitched. To the stake with the sorceress—to the stake!" was the only reply returned to his cries by the crowd.

In truth the miserable man bore all the outward signs of a person who, in those days, might be supposed to be smitten by the spells of witchcraft. His eyes rolled in his head. His every feature was distorted in the agony of his passion. His mouth foamed like that of a mad dog. His struggles became desperate convulsions.

But he struggled in vain. The procession advanced towards the stake. Between two bodies of guards, the condemned woman dragged her suffering bare feet over the rough stones of the market place. On one side of her walked the executioner of the town; on the other, his assistant, with a lighted torch of tow, besmeared with resin and pitch, shedding around, in a small cloud, the lurid smoke that was soon about to rise in a heavy volume from the pile. The chief schreiber had mounted, with his adjuncts, the terrace before the door of the town hall, whence it was customary for the chief to superintend such executions. The bells rang on their merry peal.

And now the unhappy woman was forced on to the pile. The executioner followed. He bound her resistless to the stake, and then himself descended. At each of the four corners of the pile, a guard on horseback kept off the crowd. There was a pause. Then appeared, at one end of the mass of wood and faggots, a slight curling smoke, a faint light. The executioner had applied the torch. A few seconds, and a bright glaring flame licked upwards with a forked tongue, and a heavier gush of smoke burst upwards in the air. The miserable woman crossed her hands over her breast—raised her eyes for a moment to heaven, and then, closing them upon the scene around her, moved her lips in prayer—in the last prayer of her soul's agony. The crowd, which, during the time when the procession had advanced the pile, had howled with its usual pitiless howl, was now silent, motionless, breathless, in the extreme tension of its excitement. But still the merry peal of bells rang on.

The smoke grew thicker and thicker. The flame already darted forward, as if to snatch at the miserable garment of its victim, and claim her as its own, when there was heard a struggle—a cry—a shout of frantic despair. The cripple, in that moment when all were occupied with the fearful sight, had broken from those who held him, and before another could seize him, had staggered through the crowd, and now swung himself with force upon the pile. A cry of horror burst from the mass of spectators. They thought him utterly deprived of reason, and determined, in his madness, to die with the sorceress. But in a moment his bony hand had torn the link that bound the chain—had unwound the chain itself—had snatched the woman from the stake. Before, in the surprise of the moment, a single person had stirred, his arm seized, with firm and heavy gripe, the collar of the nearest horseman, who found himself in his seat on horseback upon a level with the elevation of the pile. He knocked him with violence from the saddle. The guard reeled and fell; and in the next instant Claus had flung himself on to the horse, and in his arms he bore the form of the half-fainting Magdalena.

With a cry—a yell—a wild scream—he

shouted "to the sanctuary, to the sanctuary, she shall not die—room, room." Trampling right and left to the earth the dense crowd, who fled from his passage as from an infuriated tiger in its spring, he dashed upon the animal over the market place, and darted in full gallop down the street leading to the Bridgegate of the town.

"After him," cried a thousand voices. The three other horsemen had already sprung after the fugitive. The guards hastened in the same direction. Several of the crowd rushed down the narrow street. All was confusion. Part of those who passed on impeded the others. Groans arose from those who had been thrown down by the frantic passage of Claus, and who, lying on the stones, prevented the pushing forwards of the others.

"Follow after him to the sanctuary," still cried a thousand voices of the crowd.

At the same moment a noise of horsemen was heard coming from the entrance of the town in the opposite direction to that leading to the bridge. Those who stood nearest turned their heads eagerly that way. The first person who issued from the street, at full gallop, was Gottlob, without a covering to his head—his fair hair streaming to the wind—his handsome face pale with fatigue and excitement.

"Stop, stop," he shouted as he advanced, and his eye fell upon the burning pile. "I bring the prince's pardon! Save her!"

In a few moments, followed by a scanty train of attendants, appeared the Prince Bishop of Fulda himself, in the dress—half religious—half secular—that he wore in travelling. His mild, benevolent face looked haggard and anxious, and he was also very pale; for he had evidently ridden hard through a part of the night; and the exertion was too much for his years and habits. As he pushed through, the crowd drew back with respect from the passage of their sovereign, he eagerly demanded if the execution had taken place. The general rumour told him confusedly the tale of the events that had just occurred. Gottlob was soon again by his side, and related to him all that had occurred.

"Where is my brother?" cried the bishop. "Is he not here?"

A few words told him that he had not appeared on this occasion.

"I will to the palace, then," he continued. "And the poor wretched woman, which way has that maniac conveyed her?"

"To the sanctuary upon the mountain side, in the path leading to your highness's castle of Saaleck, as he was heard to cry," was the answer.

"But the torrents have come down from the hills," exclaimed others; "and the inundations sweep so heavily upon the bridge, that it is impossible to pass it without the utmost danger."

"Save that unhappy woman," exclaimed the bishop in agitation. "A reward for him who saves her," and, followed by his attendants, he took the direction of the street leading to the palace.

It was true. The torrents had come down from the hills during the night, and the waters swept over the bridge with fury. The planked flooring of the bridge, raised in ordinary circumstances some feet above the stream, was covered by the raging floods; and the side parapets, which consisted partly of solid enclosure, partly of railing, tottered, quivered, and bent beneath the rushing mass of dark, dun coloured, whirling waters. The river itself, swelled far beyond the usual extent of the customary inundations, for the passage of which the extreme length of the bridge had been provided, hurried in wild eddies round the walls of the town, like an invading army seeking to tear them down. But the frantic Claus heeded not the violence of the waters, and dashed through the town-gate towards the bridge with desperation. The frightened horse shied at the foaming stream, struggled, snorted; but the cripple seemed to possess resistless power of a demon—a power which gave him sway over the brute creation. He urged the unwilling animal, with almost superhuman force, on to the tottering bridge.

The guards who had galloped after him, stopped suddenly as they saw the roaring torrent. None dared advance, none dared pursue. Others, on foot, clogged the gateway, and stood appalled at the sight of the rushing flood. The more eager of the crowd soon mounted on to those parts of the torn walls that flanked the gate, and watched, with excited gesture, and shouts of wonder or terror, the desperate course of the cripple.

Pressing his mother in his arms, with his body stretched forward in wild impatience upon the struggling horse, Black Claus had urged his way into the middle of the stream. The bridge shook fearfully beneath the burden; he heeded it not. It crack-d and groaned still louder than the roaring of the stream; he heard it not. He strove to dash on against the almost resistless force of the sweeping current. His eye was strained upon the first point of the dry path on the highway beyond. Before him lay, at a short distance, the road towards the castle of Saaleck, up the mountainside. Half-way up the height stood, embowered in trees, the chapel he sought to reach—the sanctuary of refuge for the condemned. That was his haven—there his wretched mother would be in safety. He pressed her more tightly to his breast, and shouted wildly. His shout was followed by a loud tearful crash, a roaring of waters, and a straining of breaking timbers. In another instant, the centre of the bridge was fiercely borne away by the torrent, and all was wild confusion around him.

A general cry of horror burst from the crowd at the gate and on the walls. All was for a moment lost to sight in the whirl of waters. Then was first seen the snorting head of the poor horse rising from the stream. The sui-

mal was struggling in desperation to reach land. Again were whirled upwards the arms of the cripple and the female, still tightly sed within his arms; and then a rush of more powerful than the son's frantic tore them assunder. Nothing now was but a floating body, which again disappeared in the eddying flood; and now again the of the witchfinder rose above the mass of ters. His long arms were tossed aloft; hisperate cries were heard above the roaring the torrent.

"Mercy! mercy!" he screamed. "Save me from those flames! this stifling smoke, burn, I burn!"

As he shouted these last words of wild pair, the icy cold waters swept over him ever.

All had disappeared. Upon the boiling face of the hurrying flood was now seen ing more than spars and fragments of the remnants of the bridge, whirled up and here and there, and dashed along the stream.

Among the foremost of the crowd, who pressed down the narrow lane leading to water's edge, between the premises of the medicine monastery, and the palace eager to gain an unoccupied point where they might watch the cripple's flight, "Gentle Gottlob."

From under the small water-gate, the passage of which was partially flooded by unusually rising waters, he had seen the ful catastrophe which had accompanied sweeping away of the bridge. He stood here and there, and dashed along the stream man, whom he had uselessly striven to his eye fixed upon the roaring waters, seeing distinctly any thing but a sort of turmoil, which accorded well with his troubled reflections; when a cry from crowd, which still lingered on the spot, led him to himself.

"Look, look!" cried several voices. "It is again! It is a body!"

On the dark surface of the waters, Gott saw a form whirled by the force of the rent towards the water-gate.

"It is the witch! it is the witch!" cried the crowd, as the sackcloth garment of unhappy Magdalena showed itself above stream.

In another moment Gottlob had rushed the water, to seize the body as it was ed past the water gate, and was almost against the stone piles.

"Touch her not!" again screamed the standers. "It is the witch! it is the witch!"

But Gottlob heeded not the shouts of crowd. Holding by one hand on the trunk a tree overhanging the water, in order to up against the violence of the stream, grasped with the other hand the dress of floating female before it again sank beneath the whirling eddy. He pulled it towards with force; and, after with difficulty struggling against the force of the current, at length succeeded in bearing the lifeless form of Magdalena under the gateway.

Streaming himself with water, he laid cold and wet body down upon the stones, bent over it, to see whether life had fled it for ever. The crowd drew back with horror, uttering cries of vain expostulation.

"Thank Heaven, she still lives," said Gottlob at last, as, after some moments, a convulsive movement passed over the form of the poor woman. "Aid me, my friends, still lives. Help me to transport her to house." But the crowd drew back with horror. "I will convey her to my own chamber close by. She still lives: Are ye without be continued, as, instead of assisting him, crowd held back, and answered his entreaty only with exclamations of disgust and "Are ye Christian men, that ye would see poor woman die before your eyes for want aid? She is no witch. Good God! will one show a heart of bare humanity?" The crowd still held back, and if they did not at him, were silent.

The kind youth, finding all hope of assistance vain, from the miserable prejudices of the ple, had at last contrived to raise the senseless Magdalena in his arms, with intention of conveying her into his own dwelling, and already murmurs began to rise among crowd, as if they intended to oppose his pose; when a door, communicating from palace gardens with the narrow lane, opened, and the stately form of an aged man, of volent aspect, stood between Gottlob, who remained alone under the water gate with lifeless form of Magdalena on his arm, and murmuring crowd which had drawn back lane. He stood like a guardian angel before the fair youth and the senseless mass of men. All snatched off their furred hats bowed their bodies with respect. It was sovereign the Prince Bishop of Fulda. attendants followed him to the threshold of garden gate.

"Thank God!" was his first simple exclamation at the sight of Magdalena in Gottlob's arms. "You have contrived to save her, you? I was myself hurrying hither to what could be done. Does she still live?" Upon an affirmative exclamation from Gottlob, he raised his eyes to heaven with a thanksgiving; and then, turning to the youth with a stern air, he asked—

"What were these cries and murmurs I heard? Why were those threatening I saw? Would ye oppose a Christian charity due to that unhappy woman, even she the miserable criminal she is not? ye yet to be taught your Christian duties and land? God forgive me; for then I have to answer for!"

After this meek self rebuke, he again seriously upon the bystanders, and waved hand to disperse the crowd, who slunk before him; then hastily giving orders