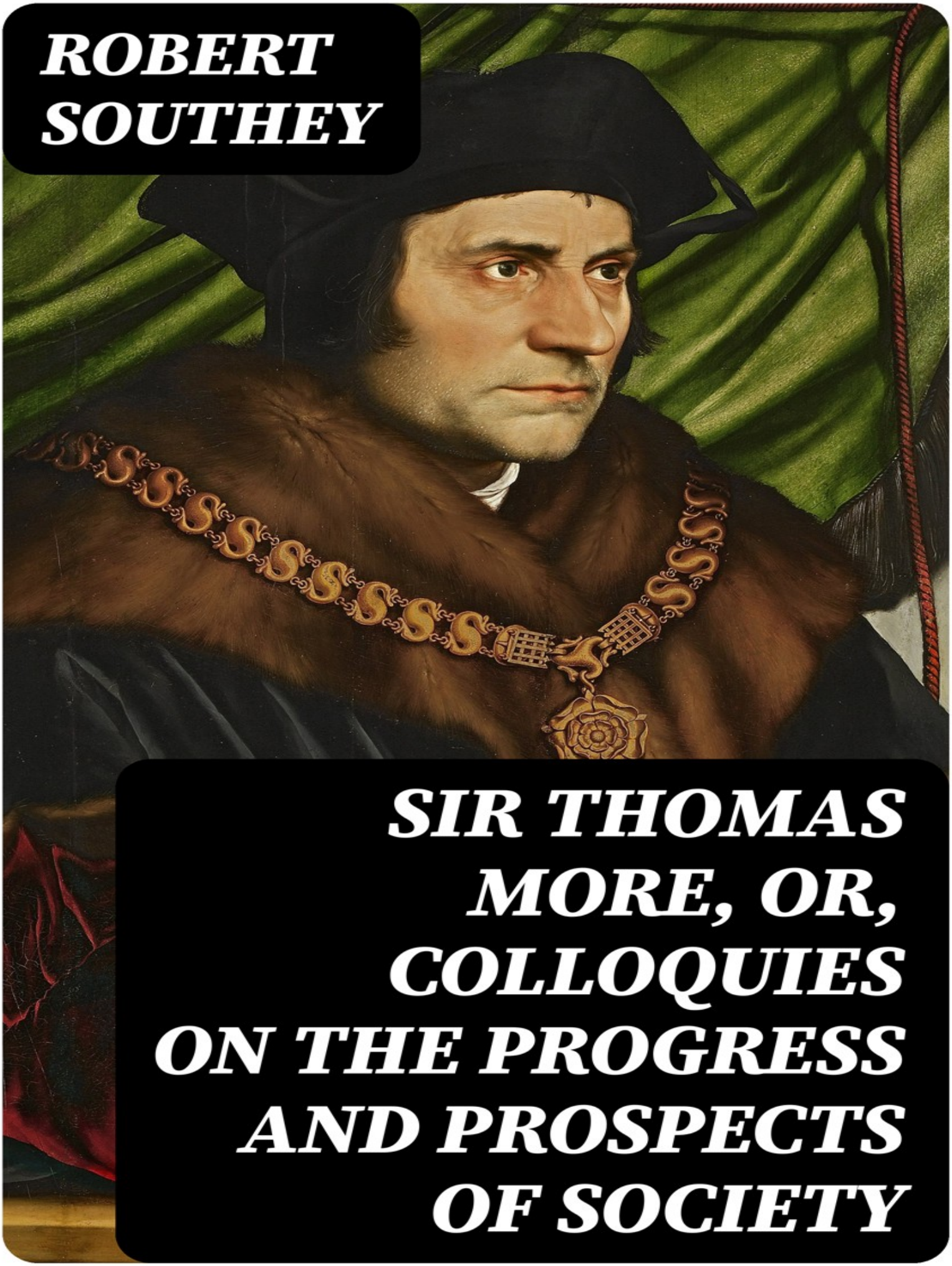
ROBERT SOUTHEY



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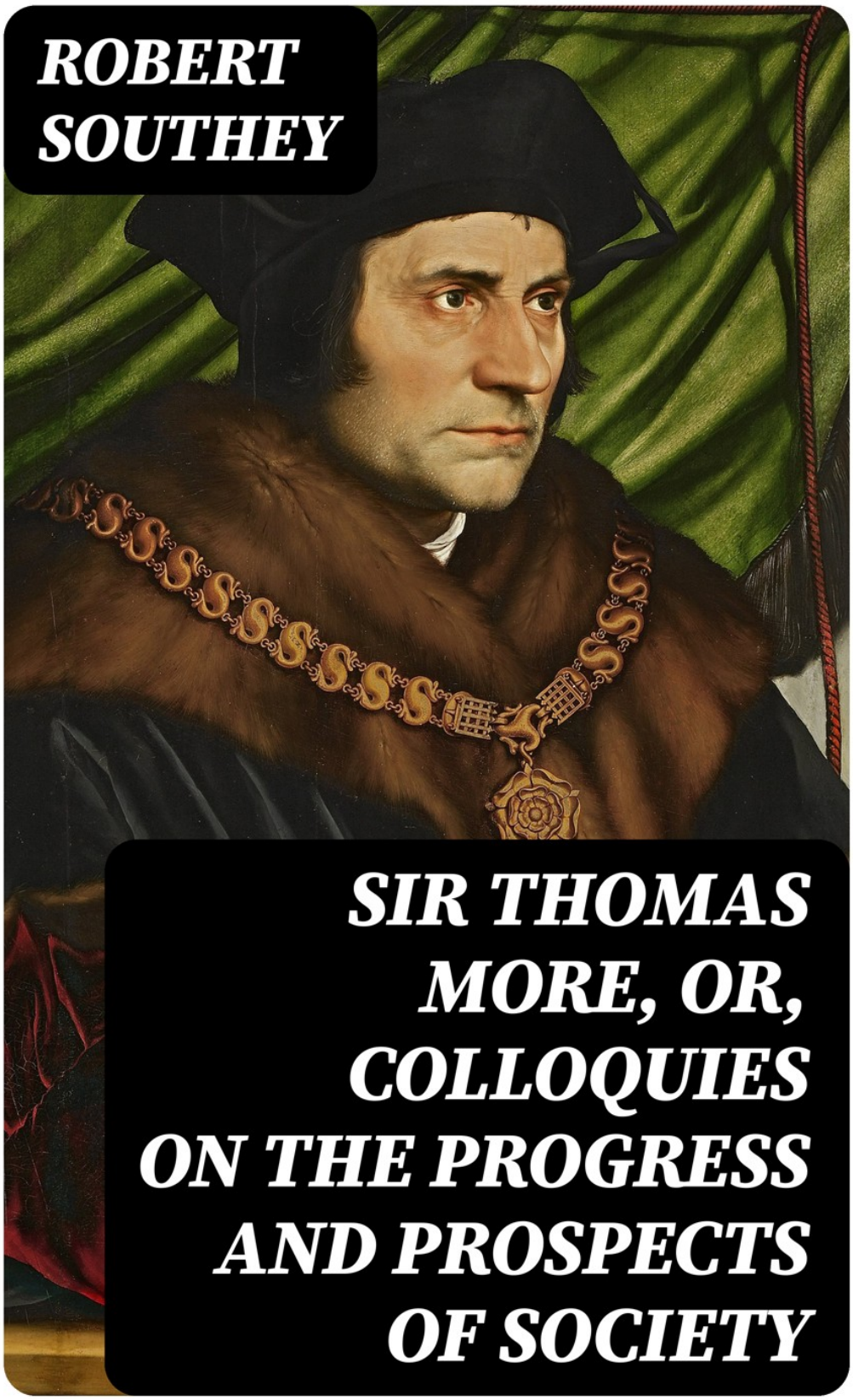

SIR THOMAS MORE, OR, COLLOQUIES ON THE PROGRESS AND PROSPECTS OF SOCIETY

Robert Southey

Sir Thomas More, or, Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society

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INTRODUCTION.

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It was in 1824 that Robert Southey, then fifty years old, published “Sir Thomas More, or Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society,” a book in two octavo volumes with plates illustrating lake scenery. There were later editions of the book in 1829, and in 1831, and there was an edition in one volume in 1837, at the beginning of the reign of Queen Victoria.

These dialogues with a meditative and patriotic ghost form separate dissertations upon various questions that concern the progress of society. Omitting a few dissertations that have lost the interest they had when the subjects they discussed were burning questions of the time, this volume retains the whole machinery of Southey’s book. It gives unabridged the Colloquies that deal with the main principles of social life as Southey saw them in his latter days; and it includes, of course, the pleasant Colloquy that presents to us Southey himself, happy in his library, descanting on the course of time as illustrated by the bodies and the souls of books. As this volume does not reproduce all the Colloquies arranged by Southey under the main title of “Sir Thomas More,” it avoids use of the main title, and ventures only to describe itself as “Colloquies on Society, by Robert Southey.”

They are of great interest, for they present to us the form and character of the conservative reaction in a mind that was in youth impatient for reform. In Southey, as in Wordsworth, the reaction followed on experience of failure

in the way taken by the revolutionists of France, with whose aims for the regeneration of Europe they had been in warmest accord. Neither Wordsworth nor Southey ever lowered the ideal of a higher life for man on earth. Southey retains it in these Colloquies, although he balances his own hope with the questionings of the ghost, and if he does look for a crowning race, regards it, with Tennyson, as a

> "*far off* divine event
> To which the whole Creation moves."

The conviction brought to men like Wordsworth and Southey by the failure of the French Revolution to attain its aim in the sudden elevation of society was not of vanity in the aim, but of vanity in any hope of its immediate attainment by main force. Southey makes More say to himself upon this question (page 37), "I admit that such an improved condition of society as you contemplate is possible, and that it ought always to be kept in view; but the error of supposing it too near, of fancying that there is a short road to it, is, of all the errors of these times, the most pernicious, because it seduces the young and generous, and betrays them imperceptibly into an alliance with whatever is flagitious and detestable." All strong reaction of mind tends towards excess in the opposite direction. Southey's detestation of the excesses of vile men that brought shame upon a revolutionary movement to which some of the purest hopes of earnest youth had given impulse, drove him, as it drove Wordsworth, into dread of everything that sought with passionate energy immediate change of evil into good. But in his own way no man ever strove more patiently than

Southey to make evil good; and in his own home and his own life he gave good reason to one to whom he was as a father, and who knew his daily thoughts and deeds, to speak of him as “upon the whole the best man I have ever known.”

In the days when this book was written, Southey lived at Greta Hall, by Keswick, and had gathered a large library about him. He was Poet Laureate. He had a pension from the Civil List, worth less than £200 a year, and he was living at peace upon a little income enlarged by his yearly earnings as a writer. In 1818 his whole private fortune was £400 in consols. In 1821 he had added to that some savings, and gave all to a ruined friend who had been good to him in former years. Yet in those days he refused an offer of £2,000 a year to come to London and write for the *Times*. He was happiest in his home by Skiddaw, with his books about him and his wife about him.

Ten years after the publishing of these Colloquies, Southey’s wife, who had been, as Southey said, “for forty years the life of his life,” had to be placed in a lunatic asylum. She returned to him to die, and then his gentleness became still gentler as his own mind failed. He died in 1843. Three years before his death his friend Wordsworth visited him at Keswick, and was not recognised. But when Southey was told who it was, “then,” Wordsworth wrote, “his eyes flashed for a moment with their former brightness, but he sank into the state in which I had found him, patting with both his hands his books affectionately, like a child.”

Sir Thomas More, whose ghost communicates with Robert Southey, was born in 1478, and at the age of fifty-

seven was beheaded for fidelity to conscience, on the 6th of July, 1535. He was, like Southey, a man of purest character, and in 1516, when his age was thirty-eight, there was published at Louvain his “Utopia,” which sketched wittily an ideal commonwealth that was based on practical and earnest thought upon what constitutes a state, and in what direction to look for amendment of ills. More also withdrew from his most advanced post of opinion. When he wrote “Utopia” he advocated absolute freedom of opinion in matters of religion; in after years he believed it necessary to enforce conformity. King Henry VIII., stiff in his own opinions, had always believed that; and because More would not say that he was of one mind with him in the matter of the divorce of Katherine he sent him to the scaffold.

H. M.

COLLOQUY I.—THE INTRODUCTION.

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“*Posso aver certezza*, *e non paura*,
Che raccontando quel che m’ è accaduto,
Il ver dirò, *nè mi sarà creduto*.”

“Orlando Innamorato,” c. 5. st. 53.

It was during that melancholy November when the death of the Princess Charlotte had diffused throughout Great Britain a more general sorrow than had ever before been known in these kingdoms; I was sitting alone at evening in my library, and my thoughts had wandered from the book before me to the circumstances which made this national calamity be felt almost like a private affliction. While I was

thus musing the post-woman arrived. My letters told me there was nothing exaggerated in the public accounts of the impression which this sudden loss had produced; that wherever you went you found the women of the family weeping, and that men could scarcely speak of the event without tears; that in all the better parts of the metropolis there was a sort of palsied feeling which seemed to affect the whole current of active life; and that for several days there prevailed in the streets a stillness like that of the Sabbath, but without its repose. I opened the newspaper; it was still bordered with broad mourning lines, and was filled with details concerning the deceased Princess. Her coffin and the ceremonies at her funeral were described as minutely as the order of her nuptials and her bridal dress had been, in the same journal, scarce eighteen months before. “Man,” says Sir Thomas Brown, “is a noble animal, splendid in ashes, and pompous in the grave; solemnising nativities and deaths with equal lustre, nor omitting ceremonies of bravery in the infamy of his nature.” These things led me in spirit to the vault, and I thought of the memorable dead among whom her mortal remains were now deposited. Possessed with such imaginations I leaned back upon the sofa and closed my eyes.

Ere long I was awakened from that conscious state of slumber in which the stream of fancy floweth as it listeth by the entrance of an elderly personage of grave and dignified appearance. His countenance and manner were remarkably benign, and announced a high degree of intellectual rank, and he accosted me in a voice of uncommon sweetness, saying, “Montesinos, a stranger from a distant country may

intrude upon you without those credentials which in other cases you have a right to require." "From America!" I replied, rising to salute him. Some of the most gratifying visits which I have ever received have been from that part of the world. It gives me indeed more pleasure than I can express to welcome such travellers as have sometimes found their way from New England to those lakes and mountains; men who have not forgotten what they owe to their ancient mother; whose principles, and talents, and attainments would render them an ornament to any country, and might almost lead me to hope that their republican constitution may be more permanent than all other considerations would induce me either to suppose or wish.

"You judge of me," he made answer, "by my speech. I am, however, English by birth, and come now from a more distant country than America, wherein I have long been naturalised." Without explaining himself further, or allowing me time to make the inquiry which would naturally have followed, he asked me if I were not thinking of the Princess Charlotte when he disturbed me. "That," said I, "may easily be divined. All persons whose hearts are not filled with their own grief are thinking of her at this time. It had just occurred to me that on two former occasions when the heir apparent of England was cut off in the prime of life the nation was on the eve of a religious revolution in the first instance, and of a political one in the second."

"Prince Arthur and Prince Henry," he replied. "Do you notice this as ominous, or merely as remarkable?"

“Merely as remarkable,” was my answer. “Yet there are certain moods of mind in which we can scarcely help ascribing an ominous importance to any remarkable coincidence wherein things of moment are concerned.”

“Are you superstitious?” said he. “Understand me as using the word for want of a more appropriate one—not in its ordinary and contemptuous acceptation.”

I smiled at the question, and replied, “Many persons would apply the epithet to me without qualifying it. This, you know, is the age of reason, and during the last hundred and fifty years men have been reasoning themselves out of everything that they ought to believe and feel. Among a certain miserable class, who are more numerous than is commonly supposed, he who believes in a First Cause and a future state is regarded with contempt as a superstitionist. The religious naturalist in his turn despises the feebler mind of the Socinian; and the Socinian looks with astonishment or pity at the weakness of those who, having by conscientious inquiry satisfied themselves of the authenticity of the Scriptures, are contented to believe what is written, and acknowledge humility to be the foundation of wisdom as well as of virtue. But for myself, many, if not most of those even who agree with me in all essential points, would be inclined to think me superstitious, because I am not ashamed to avow my persuasion that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in their philosophy.”

“You believe, then, in apparitions,” said my visitor.

Montesinos.—Even so, sir. That such things should be is probable *à priori*; and I cannot refuse assent to the strong evidence that such things are, nor to the common consent

which has prevailed among all people, everywhere, in all ages a belief indeed which is truly catholic, in the widest acceptation of the word. I am, by inquiry and conviction, as well as by inclination and feeling, a Christian; life would be intolerable to me if I were not so. “But,” says Saint Evremont, “the most devout cannot always command their belief, nor the most impious their incredulity.” I acknowledge with Sir Thomas Brown that, “as in philosophy, so in divinity, there are sturdy doubts and boisterous objections, wherewith the unhappiness of our knowledge too nearly acquainteth us;” and I confess with him that these are to be conquered, “not in a martial posture, but on our knees.” If then there are moments wherein I, who have satisfied my reason, and possess a firm and assured faith, feel that I have in this opinion a strong hold, I cannot but perceive that they who have endeavoured to dispossess the people of their old instinctive belief in such things have done little service to individuals and much injury to the community.

Stranger.—Do you extend this to a belief in witchcraft?

Montesinos.—The common stories of witchcraft confute themselves, as may be seen in all the trials for that offence. Upon this subject I would say with my old friend Charles Lamb—

> “I do not love to credit tales of magic!
> Heaven’s music, which is order, seems unstrung.
> And this brave world
> (The mystery of God) unbeautified,
> Disordered, marred, where such strange things are acted.”

The only inference which can be drawn from the confession of some of the poor wretches who have suffered upon such charges is, that they had attempted to commit the crime, and thereby incurred the guilt and deserved the punishment. Of this indeed there have been recent instances; and in one atrocious case the criminal escaped because the statute against the imaginary offence is obsolete, and there exists no law which could reach the real one.

Stranger.—He who may wish to show with what absurd perversion the forms and technicalities of law are applied to obstruct the purposes of justice, which they were designed to further, may find excellent examples in England. But leaving this allow me to ask whether you think all the stories which are related of an intercourse between men and beings of a superior order, good or evil, are to be disbelieved like the vulgar tales of witchcraft?

Montesinos.—If you happen, sir, to have read some of those ballads which I threw off in the high spirits of youth you may judge what my opinion then was of the grotesque demonology of the monks and middle ages by the use there made of it. But in the scale of existences there may be as many orders above us as below. We know there are creatures so minute that without the aid of our glasses they could never have been discovered; and this fact, if it were not notorious as well as certain, would appear not less incredible to sceptical minds than that there should be beings which are invisible to us because of their subtlety. That there are such I am as little able to doubt as I am to affirm anything concerning them; but if there are such, why

not evil spirits, as well as wicked men? Many travellers who have been conversant with savages have been fully persuaded that their jugglers actually possessed some means of communication with the invisible world, and exercised a supernatural power which they derived from it. And not missionaries only have believed this, and old travellers who lived in ages of credulity, but more recent observers, such as Carver and Bruce, whose testimony is of great weight, and who were neither ignorant, nor weak, nor credulous men. What I have read concerning ordeals also staggers me; and I am sometimes inclined to think it more possible that when there has been full faith on all sides these appeals to divine justice may have been answered by Him who sees the secrets of all hearts than that modes of trial should have prevailed so long and so generally, from some of which no person could ever have escaped without an interposition of Providence. Thus it has appeared to me in my calm and unbiassed judgment. Yet I confess I should want faith to make the trial. May it not be, that by such means in dark ages, and among blind nations, the purpose is effected of preserving conscience and the belief of our immortality, without which the life of our life would be extinct? And with regard to the conjurers of the African and American savages, would it be unreasonable to suppose that, as the most elevated devotion brings us into fellowship with the Holy Spirit, a correspondent degree of wickedness may effect a communion with evil intelligences? These are mere speculations which I advance for as little as they are worth. My serious belief amounts to this, that preternatural impressions are sometimes communicated to us for wise