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JAMES THACHER



ALSO, AN ACCOUNT
OF THE WITCHCRAFT DELUSION
AT SALEM, IN 1692

AN ESSAY ON DEMONOLOGY, GHOSTS AND
APPARITIONS, AND POPULAR
SUPERSTITIONS

James Thacher

An Essay on Demonology, Ghosts and Apparitions, and Popular Superstitions

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[GHOSTS AND APPARITIONS.](#)

[POWER OF IMAGINATION.](#)

[ILLUSIONS.](#)

[IMAGINATION AND FEAR.](#)

[SUPERSTITION.](#)

[WITCHCRAFT AND SORCERY.](#)

[SALEM WITCHCRAFT.](#)

[TRIAL OF SUSANNA MARTIN, JUNE 29, 1692.](#)

[TRIAL OF ELIZABETH HOW, JUNE 30, 1692.](#)

[TRIAL OF MARTHA CARRYER, AUGUST 2, 1692.](#)

[OMENS AND AUGURIES.](#)

[MEDICAL QUACKERY.](#)

ESSAY.

GHOSTS AND APPARITIONS.

[Table of Contents](#)

SUCH is the constitution of the human mind, that it never attains to perfection; it is constantly susceptible of erroneous impressions and perverse propensities. The faculties of the soul are bound in thralldom by superstition, and the intellect, under its influence, is scarcely capable of reflecting on its divine origin, its nobleness and dignity. The mind that is imbued with a superstitious temperament, is liable to incessant torment, and is prepared to inflict the most atrocious evils on mankind; even murder, suicide, and merciless persecution, have proceeded from, and been sanctioned by a superstitious spirit. It is this, in its most appalling aspect, which impels the heathen to a life of mutilation and perpetual pain and torment of body, which degrades the understanding below that of a brute. The superstitions practised by the devotees to the Roman Catholic Church, if less horrible, are equally preposterous and pernicious. The popular belief in supernatural visitations in the form of apparitions and spectres, is fostered and encouraged by the baneful influence of superstition and prejudice. So universal has been the prevalence of the belief that those conversant with history can resort to the era when every village had its ghost or witch, as, in more ancient times, every family had its household gods. Superstition, is a word of very extensive signification, but for the purpose of this work, the word applies to those who believe in witchcraft, magic, and apparitions, or that the

divine will is decided by omens or auguries; that the fortune of individuals can be affected by things indifferent, by things deemed lucky or unlucky, or that disease can be cured by words, charms, and incantations. It means, in short, the belief of what is false and contrary to reason. Superstition arises from, and is sustained by ignorance and credulity in the understanding. The subject of supernatural agency and the reality of witchcraft, has been the occasion of unbounded speculation, and of much philosophical disquisition, in almost all nations and ages. While some of the wisest of men have assented to their actual existence and visible appearance, others equally eminent have maintained the opinion that the supposed apparitions are to be accounted for on the principle of feverish dreams and disturbed imaginations. That our Creator has power to employ celestial spirits as instruments and messengers, and to create supernatural visions on the human mind, it would be impious to deny. But we can conceive of no necessity, at the present day, for the employment of disembodied spirits in our world; we can hold no intercourse with them, nor realize the slightest advantage by their agency. To believe in apparitions is to believe that God suspends the law of nature for the most trivial purposes, and that he would communicate the power of doing mischief, and of controlling his laws to beings, merely to gratify their own passions, which is inconsistent with the goodness of God. We are sufficiently aware that the sacred spirits of our fathers have ascended to regions prepared for their reception, and there may they remain undisturbed till the mighty secrets now concealed shall be revealed for our good. The soul or spirit

of man is immaterial, of course intangible and invisible. If it is not recognisable by our senses, how can the dead appear to the living? That disembodied spirits should communicate with surviving objects on earth, that the ghosts of the murdered should appear to disclose the murderer, or that the spirit of the wise and good should return to proffer instructions to the vile and ignorant, must be deemed unphilosophical.

It will now be attempted to demonstrate, that the generality of the supposed apparitions, in modern times, will admit of explanation from causes purely natural. For this purpose, it will be requisite first, to describe the system of nerves, and their functions, which constitute a part of our complicated frames. Nerves are to be considered as a tissue of strings or cords, which have their origin in the brain and spinal marrow, and are distributed in branches to all parts of the body. They are the immediate organs of sensation and of muscular action. Upon the integrity of the nerves, all the senses, both external and internal, entirely depend. The nerves are the medium of illusions; their influence pervades the whole body, and their various impressions are transmitted to the brain. When the entire brain is affected, delirium is the consequence; if the optic nerve only, visions disturb the imagination; if the acoustic nerves receive the impression, unreal sounds or voices are heard. If the optic nerves are cut or rendered paralytic, the sense of vision is irrecoverably destroyed. The nervous system is liable to be diseased and deranged from various causes, from which, it is obvious, derangement of both body and mind must ensue. The following is extracted from a lecture on Moral

Philosophy, by the learned and Reverend Samuel Stanhope Smith, D.D., late President of the College of New Jersey.

‘The nerves are easily excited into movement by an infinite variety of external impulses, or internal agitations. By whatever impulse any motion, vibration, or affection, in the nervous system is produced, a correspondent sensation, or train of sensations, or ideas in the mind, will naturally follow. When the body is in regular health, and the operations of the mind are in a natural and healthful train, the action of the nervous system, being affected only by the regular and successive impressions made upon it by the objects of nature, as they successively occur, will present to the mind just and true images of the scenes that surround it. But by various species of infirmity and disorder in the body, the nerves, sometimes in their entire system, and sometimes only in those divisions of them which are attached to particular organs of sense, may be subjected to very irregular motions or vibrations. Hence unreal images may be raised in the mind. The state of the nervous affections may be vitiated by intemperate indulgence, or by infirmity resulting from sedentary and melancholy habits. Superstitions, fancies, or enthusiastic emotions, do often greatly disturb the regular action of the nervous system. Such elastic and vibratory strings may be subject to an infinite variety of irregular movements, sometimes in consequence of a disordered state of health, and sometimes arising from peculiarity of constitutional structure, which may present false and often fantastic images to the mind. No cause, perhaps, produces a more anomalous oscillancy, or vibration of the nervous system, or of some particular

portions of it, than habits of intemperate indulgence. And I have not unfrequently become acquainted with men who had been addicted to such excesses, who were troubled with apprehensions of supernatural apparitions. A peculiar imbecility of constitution, however, created by study, retirement, or other causes, may be productive of similar effects, and sometimes these nervous anomalies are formed in men who are otherwise of active and athletic constitutions. But where they possess enlightened minds and vigorous understandings, such visionary tendencies may be counteracted by their intellectual energies. Yet have we sometimes known the strongest understandings overcome by the vivacity of nervous impression, which frequently is scarcely inferior to the most lively ideas of sense. This may, especially, be the case in two opposite conditions; either when the body has fallen into a gloomy temperament, and the mind is weakened by fears, in which case it is oppressed by distressing apprehensions; or, on the other hand, when the nerves, the primary organs, of sensation, are strained into an unnatural tension, and the whole system is exalted by an enthusiastic fervor to the pitch of delirious intoxication. When a man is exalted to such a degree of nervous excitement and mental feeling, his visions are commonly pleasing, often rapturous, and sometimes fantastic; but generally rise above the control or correction of the judgment. Lord Lyttleton, in the vision which he believed he saw of his deceased mother's form, shortly before his own death, may be an example of the former; and the Baron Von Swedenborg, in his supposed visions, sometimes of angels and sometimes of reptiles,

may be an instance of the latter. Persons, whose fancies have been much disturbed in early life, by the tales of nurses, and other follies of an injudicious education, creating a timid and superstitious mind, are more especially liable to have their fears alarmed and their imagination excited by every object in the dark. Whence sounds will be augmented to the ear, and images rendered more glaring to the eyes.'

In a note, the learned author presents the following examples, tending to illustrate the principles just advanced.

'I knew, some years ago, a worthy lady who, anxiously watching by the cradle of a sick infant, and momentarily expecting its death, felt, as she believed, just before it expired, a violent stroke across the back of both her arms. From a tincture of superstitious apprehension infused in her early education, and unacquainted with any natural cause of such a phenomenon, she construed it into a preternatural signal of the death of her child. It was, probably, a sudden and convulsive contraction of the muscles in that part of the system, occasioned by the solicitude of her mind and the fatigue of watching, which, aided by imagination in a very interesting moment, produced a shock that had to her the feeling of a severe concussion. That a convulsive contraction should take place in those particular muscles need not appear strange to those who know how irregular and uncertain is the whole train of nervous action, especially under the operation of some disorders of the body; and frequently, under the influence of strong affections and emotions of the mind.' 'A young lady, who was peculiarly susceptible of the impressions of fear in the

dark, or at the sight of any of the accompaniments of death, attended the funeral of one of her intimate companions, who had died of the small pox. On the following night she lodged in company with a female friend of great firmness of mind. Waking in the night, some time after the moon had risen, and faintly enlightened her chamber, the first object that struck her view was a white robe hanging on the tall back of a chair, and a cap placed on the top. Her disturbed imagination instantly took the alarm, and in her agitation and terror rousing her companion, she exclaimed violently that her deceased friend was standing before her. The lady, with great presence of mind, brought the articles of clothing which had caused the alarm, and thus composed her fears. After she had become tranquil and was able distinctly to recall her sensations, she declared that the perfect image of the deceased, just as she was dressed for her coffin seemed to be before her sight. She contemplated it as long as her fears would permit her, before she exclaimed. She was sure that she recognised every feature of her friend, and even the pits of the small pox, of which she died, in her face. And she affirmed that before any tribunal she would have been willing to make oath to this fact.' 'I have introduced this anecdote,' says Dr Smith, 'merely to illustrate the power of the imagination by its reaction on the nervous system, to complete the pictures that any sudden impulses of the senses, occasioned by surprise or by superstitious or enthusiastic feeling, have begun to form. It is not a solitary anecdote of the kind. But I have selected it, because I am more perfectly possessed of the circumstances, than of many others that are circulated through certain classes of

society. Nor are these classes always to be found among the most ignorant and credulous.' Lord Lyttleton was a man of splendid abilities, but degraded himself by a continued course of profligacy and the basest dissipation. He was arrested in his career by a sudden and remarkable death, at the age of thirtyfive in the year 1779. The various narrations that have been published relative to this singular event concur in most of the following particulars. Three days previous to his death, being in perfect health, he was warned in a dream or vision of the event, which, accordingly, took place without any previous illness. According to his own account, he awoke from sleep, and saw the image of his deceased mother, who opened the curtains of his bed and denounced to him, that in three days he should die. On the sentence being denounced, he started up in great terror, incoherently saying, 'what! shall I not live three days?' The reply was, no, you will not live more than three days, and the apparition instantly vanished. This alarming vision his lordship related, at breakfast the next morning, to several women who were his companions. They fell a crying; but he, although secretly agitated, pretended to disregard the affair, laughed at their credulous folly, and professed to have no sort of belief, or apprehension about it. On the third day of the prediction, he invited Admiral Woolsey and another friend to dine with him, at his country seat. At dinner, his lordship, appeared more than usually loquacious and desultory in his conversation, reciting the probable remarks that would of course be made whenever the news of his death should be announced. In the evening, perceiving his female companions in a gloomy mood, he

took one of them and danced a minuet with her, then taking out his watch, said, 'Look you here, it is now nine o'clock, according to the vision I have but three hours to live, but don't you mind this, madam; never fear, we'll jockey the ghost, I warrant you.' At eleven o'clock he retired to bed earlier than usual with him, but his pretence was, that he had planned for the party to breakfast early, and spend the day in riding into the country. Admiral Woolsey and his friend resolved to sit in the parlor till the predicted hour was past, and the clock was privately put a little forward, and as soon as it struck twelve, his lordship said, 'you see I have cheated the ghost;' but soon after a voice was heard from the staircase, uttering these words. 'He's dead? Oh, my lord is dead!' Instantly running up stairs, they found him in bed, fallen back, and struggling. Admiral Woolsey took his hand, which was grasped with such violence that it was painful to endure, but he spake no more. His eyes were turned up and fixed. They opened the jugular vein, but no blood issued, and he was entirely dead at midnight of the third day. Admiral Woolsey gives the following remarkable particulars in addition. At the distance of thirty miles from the place where this melancholy scene happened there lived a gentlemen, one of the intimate companions of Lord Lyttleton, M.P. Andrews, Esq.; and they had agreed that whichever of them should die first, the survivor should receive one thousand pounds from the estate of the deceased. On this very night he awoke about one o'clock and rung his bell with great violence. His servant ran to him with all speed, and inquired, 'what is the matter?' The gentleman sitting up in bed, with a countenance full of

horror, cried out, 'Oh John! Lord Lyttleton is dead!' 'How can that be?' he replied, 'we have heard nothing, but that he is alive and well.' The master exclaimed with the greatest perturbation, 'no, no, I awoke just now on hearing the curtains undrawn, and at the foot of the bed stood Lord Lyttleton, as plain as ever I saw him in my life. He looked ghastly, and said, "all is over with me, Andrews. You have won the thousand pounds," and vanished.' After attending to the particulars above detailed, it would seem to require a philosophical firmness to resist the impression in favor of supernatural visitations; but this latter instance will, I believe, bear a different explanation. The gentleman was apprised of Lyttleton's vision and predicted death, which, with the thousand pounds depending, must have excited in his mind an exquisite degree of anxiety, and roused a guilty conscience. He doubtless counted every hour, and although he fell asleep, could not be calm, and probably had a disturbed dream. Awaking suddenly, it is quite natural that he should have the impression, that the prediction was fulfilled. Dr Smith, who is quoted above, comments as follows on the death of Lord Lyttleton. His lordship was a man who had worn down to a very feeble state, a lively and elastic constitution, and impaired a brilliant wit, by voluptuous, and intemperate excesses. A few days before his death, he imagined that he saw before him the perfect resemblance of his deceased mother, who denounced to him that on such a day, and at a prescribed hour, he should die. Under a constrained vivacity, his mind, during the interval, was evidently much agitated. And on the predicted day, and at the prescribed time, he actually expired.

This fact has been regarded by many persons, and those by no means of inferior understandings, as a decisive proof of the reality of apparitions from the spiritual world; and by others has been attempted to be resolved on a variety of different grounds. The principles already suggested, may, perhaps, serve to explain it in conformity with the known laws of human nature, if the theory of nervous vibration be admitted to be true, without resorting to the solution of supernatural agents. The irregular and convulsive motions in the nervous system which frequently arise from long continued habits of intemperate indulgence, might be especially expected in a constitution so irritable and debilitated, as that of Lord Lyttleton. If, either sleeping or waking, or, in that indefinite interval between sleeping and waking, their disordered movements could present to the fancy or excite in the visual nerves, the distinct image of a living person apparently resuscitated from the dead, which has been shown to be a possible case, the debilitated frame of his lordship, agitated as it must have often been, by the conscious apprehension of his approaching end, may naturally be supposed to have predisposed them to such a vision. Conscience, notwithstanding his assumed gayety, somewhat perturbed by the fears of death, and with a recollection of a pious mother, whose anxious admonitions had often endeavored in vain to recall him from his vices, and to fix his thoughts on his future existence, might naturally retrace her features in this formidable vision. It is not improbable, that the whole scene may have been a kind of waking dream, or if it was wholly transacted in sleep, it might have been with such a forcible and vivid vibration, or

impulse of the nerves concerned in the formation of such an image, as would give it the distinctness and vivacity of waking sensation. In the tumult of his spirits, and the fear-excited vibrations of his whole system, it is not strange, that the image of that disappointed and reproaching parent should be presented to him, with a solemn and foreboding aspect. And it would be adding only one trait of terror to the scene, already so well prepared to admit it, and one that is perfectly conformable to our experience of the desultory images of dreaming, as well as what we have learned of similar visionary impressions—that a particular period should be denounced to him for his death, the symptoms and presages of which, in all probability, he frequently felt in the tremors and palpitation of a breaking constitution. The principal difficulty in the minds of those who have only carelessly attended to this history, is to account for the exact correspondence of the event of his death to the time fixed by the prediction, if it had no other foundation than nervous impression. The imagined prediction itself was sufficient, in a debilitated and exhausted constitution, like that of Lord Lyttleton, to produce its own accomplishment. Seizing upon his fears, in spite of his reason and philosophy, for a life of dissipation and sensual excess generally very much weakens the powers both of the mind and of the body, it would naturally throw his whole system into great commotion. These perturbed and tumultuous agitations would increase as the destined moment approached, till the strength of nature failing, may well be supposed to break at the point of extreme convulsion; that is, at the expected moment of death.