

# White Witches

By E. Lynn Linton

Thus an November the 12th, 1597, Janet Stewart in the Canongate, Christian Levingstone in Leith, Bessie Aiken, also of Leith, and Christian Sadler of Blackhouse, were brought to trial for no worse crimes than healing and helping sundry of their neighbours. Christian Levingstone was “fyhit and convict” for abusing (deceiving) Thomas Gothray, who went to her complaining that his gear went from him, and that he was bewitched; which she said was true; promising to help him, and “let him see where the witchcraft was laid.” So she took hmt down his own stair, and dug a hole with her knife, and took out a little bag of black plaid, wherein were some grains of wheat, worsted threads of many colours, some hair, and nails of men’s fingers, affirming that he was bewitched by these means, and bidding his wife catch them in her apron. If this bag had not been found, said Christian, he would have been wrackit both in mind and body; which was a clear case of “abusing,” if you will. This “scho deponit in presens of my Lard Justice vpoun the tent day of Julij last past to be of veritie.” She also said that her daughter had been taken away by fairy folk, and that she had learnt all her wise-wife knowledge from her, and as a proof of this knowledge, she prophesied that Gothray’s wife, then “being with barne,” should bear a man child; which proved to be true, to the sad strengthening of the accusations against her. Another time she and Christian Sadler were prayed by Robert Bailie, mason in Haddington, to go and cure his wife. Christian Sadler recommended her to take three pints of sweet wort, and boil it with a quantity of fresh butter; which she did, and drank it too, but with no good effects of healing, as we may suppose. Again, shortly before her accusation, she was sent for by Christian Sadler, on some other devil’s deed; and together they made Andrew Pennycuik a cake baked with the blood of a red cock; but he could not eat it. Then they took his shirt and dipped it in the well at the back of his house, and brought it to him and put it on him, dripping as it was, “quhairthrow he maist baif sownit amang their hands,” giving him to understand that now he would be mended, “albeit that it was onlie plane abusione, as the event declarit.” Not finding the cake of red cock’s blood or the dripping shirt of great efficacy, Andrew went then to Janet Stewart, craving his health at her hands “for God’s sake;” but we are not told the result.

Janet Stewart was fylit for going to Bessie Inglis in the Kowgate, Bessie being deidlie sick; when Janet took off her “mutche and sark” (cap and shift), washed them in south-running water, and put them on her again at midnight, wet as they were, saying three times, “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.” She also “fyrit,” or put a hot iron into water, and burnt straw at the four corners of the bed, as Michael Clarke, smith, had learnt her; and she healed women of the mysterious child-bed disorder called wedonymph, by taking a garland of woodbine and putting them through it, afterwards cutting it into nine pieces, which she threw into the fire. This charm she said she had learnt from Mr. John Damiet, an Italian, and a notorious enchanter. And she cured sundry persons of the falling-evil by hanging a stone about their necks for five nights, which stone she said she got from Lady Crawford.

Christian Sadler was “fylit and convict” for taking in hand to heal the young Laird of Bargany, with a salve made of quicksilver, which she rubbed into the patient, alleging

that she learnt it of her father; but she did the same by “unlessum” (unwholesome) means, said the dittay, she having no such knowledge as would enable her to cure leprosy, which the most expert men in medicine are not able to do. Robert Hunter, too, since deceased, having a flaw in his face, she undertook to cure with a mixture of quicksilver in a drink. She said the flaw was leprosy, but it was nothing of the kind; and “God knows how the drink was composed,” but the gentleman died twelve hours after, “as was notourlie confessit of himself, and can nocht be denyit, quhairby scho was gilty of his death be hir craft; ministering to him vnlessnm things, quhair of he deit suddenlie.” So the four women were convicted and condemned, sentenced to be strangled at a stake, then burnt, and all their goods forfeit to the crown. Only Bessie Aiken got off by reason of her pregnancy; and after having suffered “lang puneischment be famine and imprisonment,” was finally banished the kingdom for life.

In July, 1602, James Reid suffered for the same kind of offences—taking three pennies and a piece of “creisch”(grease) from the bag of his master the devill, whom he met an Bynnie-crag, and learning from him the art of healing by means of silk laces, south-running waters, charms, incantations, amid other “unlessum” means. He cured Sarah Borthwick by his sorcery and devilry, bringing her south-running water from the “Schriff-breyis-wehh,” and casting a certain quantity of salt and wheat about her bed: and he consulted with certain for the destruction of David Libbertonne, baxter and burges of Edinburgh, his spouse, their corn, and goods, by taking a piece of raw flesh, and making nine nicks in it, then putting part under the mill door and part under the stable door; while, to ruin the land, he enchanted stones and cast them an the fields. He cured John Crystie of a swelling, by putting three silk laces round his leg for ten weeks; and his deeds becoming notorious and his character lost, he was adjudged worthy of death, and judicially murdered accordingly.

Who was safe, if a half-fed scrofulous woman had fancies and the megrims? The first person on whom her wild imagination chose to cast the grim shadow of witchcraft was surely doomed, however slight the evidence, or whatever the manifest quality of the disease. There was poor Patrick Lowrie, fylit July 23, 1605—what had he done? Why, he and Janet Hunter, “ane notorious wich,” bewitched Bessie Saweris’ (Sawyer’s) her corn, and took all her fisnowne (fushion, foison, pith, strength, flavour) from her; and then he fell foul of certain “ky,” so that they gave no milk; and he had cured the horse of Margaret Guffok, the witch of Barnewell, twenty years ago; and struck Janet Lowrie blind; and, as a climax, uncannily helped Elizabeth Crawford’s bairn in Glasgow, which had been strangely sick for the last eight or nine years. And the way in which he helped her was thus. He took a cloth off the said bairn’s face, “saining” it, and crossing the face with his hand; he kept the cloth for eight days, then came back and covered her face again with it; whereupon the child slept without moving for two days, and at the end of that time Patrick Lowrie wakened her, and her eye, which “had been tynt throw disease, was restored to her, and in five days she was cured and mended.” He was also fylit of having met the devil on the common waste at Sandhills, in Kyle, when a number of men and women were there; and for having entertained him under the form of a woman, one Helen M’Brune (this was a succubus); also of having received from him a hair belt, at one end of which was the similitude of “four fingeris and ane thumbe, nocht far different from the clawis of the devill;” which belt Janet Hunter had, and it was burnt at her trial; also of having dug up dead bodies, to dismember them for his deadly charms; and also for being

“ane cowmone and notorious sorcerer, warlok, and abuser of the peopill, be all vnlawfull charms and devillische incantationes, vset be him this xxiiij yeir begane.” To which terrific array was added the testimony of Mr. David Mill, who said how, in his own place, he was “brutit and commonlie called Pait ye Witch, and that he gat his father’s malison,” and had been spoken of as sure to make an ill end. So he did, poor fellow; for the Lard Advocate threatened to prosecute the assize if they acquitted him, which insured his effectual condemnation, and Pate the Witch was burnt with his fellows.