

# The Lunatic and His Turkey

*A Tale of Witchcraft*

By Anonymous

The singular superstition still exists, in some parts of the country, of ascribing those terrible affections of the mind which we see in all the forms of insanity, to the agency of witchcraft. More than one instance has come to the knowledge of the writer, where the inmates of the family afflicted appeared most devoutly to believe that their sick friend was actually bewitched by some foul and malignant demon of the air. Experiments have been tried to detect the malicious hag who haunted the bedside of the suffering patient. Sentries have been set over his chamber, and silent watches kept in 'the witching hour of night', in the hope of intercepting the stealthy visits of the witch—

Who chooseth solitarie to abide  
Far from all neighbours, that her devilish deedes,  
And hellish arts from people she might hide,  
And hurt far off, unknowne, whomever she envyde.

When these experiments failed, and we have yet to hear of the first that has been successful, others equally profound and philosophical have been resorted to. The blood taken from the arm of the patient by his physician has been covertly placed in some secret closet upon the topmost shelf, to dry away, under the belief that the health of the old witch would from that hour begin to fail, and that she would infallibly die, the moment the process of evaporation ceased. Another mode of operation has been to open the ashes upon the old-fashioned hearth, and pour in the sick man's blood, some expert dame standing ready, with heated shovel, to stir up the embers, under the belief that the witch, whoever or whatever she might be, would get a terrible scorching by the operation.

A singular instance of this species of credulity occurred a few years since in the town of D—. A labouring man, the father of a family in humble circumstances, was attacked with a slight disease, which, after several weeks of illness, terminated in a fixed insanity. The patient was quite harmless and inoffensive, but singular in all his proceedings, and generally wild and incoherent in his conversation. The family, one after another, from certain strange noises they had observed, and the mysterious conversations which they imagined the lunatic to hold with some invisible being, came to the conclusion that he was actually bewitched. All the minor remedies for witchcraft were speedily resorted to. Horseshoes were nailed over every door in the house, and nails, in the form of the cross, driven into the thresholds. Pins were plentifully stuck into the crevices of the windows, and the shovel and tongs carefully placed crosswise upon the hearthstone at the raking up of the fire. But all to no purpose. The sick man was still a lunatic, and no clue could be obtained to his supposed tormentors.

Affairs remained in this situation for several weeks; one friend and another friend advising to this experiment and to that, as their imagination prompted; when a consultation of certain wise old ladies of the neighbourhood was held, and, after due deliberation, a bold step was decided upon against the enemy. On a Sabbath, after the conclusion of the afternoon service, some fifteen or twenty ladies, of the most knowing class, proceeded direct from the church to the house of the

lunatic, and the good deacon of the parish also made it in his way to be present. What sort of amulet or charm each buxom dame wore about her person, does not appear; but the deacon took special care to be duly fortified against the wiles of the adversary, by a miniature copy of the Bible snugly stowed away in one pocket, and a book of psalms in the other. On assembling together at the house, a long and interesting conversation ensued on the subject of witchcraft and evil spirits in general, each one present having some striking illustration to offer in support of the common opinion. The deacon was especially eloquent in denouncing the wickedness of all such as sold themselves to the evil one, for the purpose of tormenting their fellow creatures, and brought up as many instances of their ultimate detection and miserable end as served to heighten the faith of all present in the success of their immediate undertaking.

The form and particulars of the whole ceremony having been settled, operations were now commenced. A huge blazing fire was kindled in the fireplace, which, by the way, was one of those old-fashioned, wide, and capacious fireplaces which would take in, at a single mouthful, the whole of a New York 'load' of wood; after which, the most ominous silence was preserved by all present, who were waiting until the last rays of the setting sun had been lost among the shadows of evening. At the proper time, on a concerted signal, the carcass of a lamb, which had just been slain, and its heart and entrails laid open, was brought into the room; the heart of which was immediately stuck full of pins, and the body then placed upon the fire, where it was consumed. The sick man, during all this process, was locked in a distant room, and one or more of the party set to watch his emotions through the keyhole of the door, during the time occupied in the sacrifice. This ceremony and sacrifice, however, proved utterly fruitless. There was no change for the better in the condition of the lunatic.

A few days after this, he commenced employing himself in walking back and forth constantly across the dooryard in front of his house. This practice he continued for weeks, following it all the day, and only prevented during the night by the interference of the family, who literally forced him into the house, until he had worn his path as smooth and uniform as the pavement. It so happened that, among the fowls of the barnyard, was a veteran old bruiser, who, from his many battles and bloody encounters, his perpetual strut and gabble, had become the acknowledged leader of his flock. No one was even bold enough to 'follow in his footsteps'. This old turkey-cock, observing the daily walk of his master, took it into his sapient head to follow his example; and it is a fact, that for days and weeks the old turkey-cock continued to walk by the side of the lunatic, facing about whenever he did, and imitating, as far as possible, his steps. The family drove him away repeatedly, though against the entreaties of the lunatic, and once shut him up for a whole week, with the design to break off the singular connection, but all to no purpose. The moment the turkey was let loose, he again entered the course with his master, and walked as long as he did.

Here was food for the lovers of the marvellous. Men, women, and children came from a great distance, to see the lunatic and his turkey. Frequent councils were held on the subject; and it was at length solemnly decided that the turkey should suffer death. He was accordingly soon afterwards beheaded, and his body submitted to the flames. Still the poor lunatic grew no better; on the contrary, he had formed a sort of attachment for the companion of his walks, and bitterly lamented his loss.

The experiments of good dames of the neighbourhood, however, did not stop here. They resolved on one more trial to exorcise the fiend. They accordingly again assembled at the house of the lunatic, with the deacon at their head. The physician was sent for, and on his arrival, he observed that an unusual number of persons were assembled. He noticed also that a brisk fire

was blazing in the oven, and that the most reserved manner was adopted by all the circle around. Passing into the sick man's room, and examining his situation, he determined on bleeding him, after having been urgently pressed to do so by several of the family. After attending to this operation, he handed over the vessel containing the blood to one of the company. The physician concluded to watch by the bedside of his patient during the night. In the course of two or three hours after the bleeding, he was roused from a doze into which he had fallen, by a loud report, as of a loaded musket, in the adjoining room; and, on going out, discovered a thick smoke issuing from the mouth of the oven, and extending itself in black wreaths upward, and along the ceiling. There sat the good deacon, with Bible open upon his knees; and some half-score of old ladies were seated in grim silence around the room. On inquiring the cause of this singular scene, the doctor ascertained that the blood of the lunatic, which a few hours before he had taken from his arm, had been poured into an earthen jar, which was then hermetically sealed, and covered with small pieces of silver; and after which it was placed in the oven. As soon as the contents of the jar became sufficiently rarified, it exploded, with the effects above stated.

For a long while after this, the old ladies who officiated on this singular occasion used to tell of the strange noises they heard overhead on that night; and some of them actually believed they had got the better of the adversary, especially as it soon became noised abroad, that an old woman living in an adjoining town, and long suspected of witchcraft, actually died on that eventful night. The poor lunatic, however, was never the better for these kind but mistaken efforts on his behalf, and in a few months he died.