

A Noted Case of Witchcraft at North Moreton, Berks, in the early 17th Century.

By C. L'ESTRANGE EWEN.

Of the reign of James I, "the royal demonologist," a case of witchcraft, which with its sequel stirred Berkshire and Oxfordshire, has just come to light from the records of the Star Chamber.¹ Throughout the summer of 1604, Brian Gunter, a gentleman of North Moreton, lay dangerously ill at Exeter College, Oxford, and during his absence from home, Anne, his daughter, aged about fourteen, fell into strange fits. Mistress Gunter consulted one Master Cleyny of Wallingford, who diagnosed a natural indisposition, but it did not yield to treatment and the girl continued to suffer with little respite. The malady was recognised by some as the "falling sickness" (i.e. epilepsy), by others as "suffocation of the mother" (i.e. hysteria), in those days very common among young girls; but the more far-seeing suspected a supernatural disorder, an opinion confirmed when the afflicted child in her torment railed against certain women by name, Elizabeth Gregory, Mary and Agnes Pepwell.

Such accusations were frequent in the early seventeenth century, but this particular case has a special interest from the number of prominent persons and distinguished medical men who took part in the controversy. On the 30th October Master Gunter arrived home, and set about energetically to cope with the mysterious trouble. The most eminent physicians in Oxford as well as lesser known quack-salvers were consulted. Dr. Bartholomew Warner and Mr. Roger Bracegirdle could find no normal disease. Dr. Henry Bust, Dr. John Chennell and Mr. William Barker expressed the opinion that the infirmities were not natural. On 6th November John Wendore of Newbury, specialist in diseases due to sorcery, from an examination of the

¹ St. Ch. 8, 4/10.

patient's water, diagnosed a supernormal disorder. One Black-wall, coming to a similar conclusion, advised drawing blood of the suspected women, whilst Dr. Williams thought removing Mistress Anne forty miles from the place where she was bewitched would be followed by recovery. In the face of this solid professional opinion Master Gunter cannot be blamed for his belief in witchcraft ; moreover, suffering with sudden pain in his shoulder, he had himself scratched Elizabeth Gregory on the crown, and immediately became well, a certain proof of the inimical influence at work ; and this " he did affirm to the King's most excellent Majesty, and also to the Justices of Assize on Monday 19th Nov. 1604." The sick chamber became thronged with sympathisers, and sight-seers from far and wide. Would-be-helpful friends brought as gifts various books, one of the exorcist John Darrell being amongst them, but *The Witches of Warboys*, 1593, being the account of the epidemic in the Throckmorton family, seems to have been absorbed by Anne as well as her father.

The young girl suffered from doubling and swelling of the body, lameness, goggling of the eyes, foaming at the mouth, blindness, deafness, and change of weight and height with variations of strength. She sneezed pins in an extraordinary manner, sometimes several hundred times in rapid succession, she voided and vomited pins, and even more pins exuded from her breasts and fingers. Sometimes she abstained from taking food for ten or twelve days together, and occasionally her pulse ceased to beat. She could tell what money people had in their purses, and describe actions performed in other rooms. Regarding the witches, she said that Agnes Pepwell's bunne or spirit was a whitish mouse with a man's face called Sweat ; Elizabeth Gregory had a black rat with a swine's face and boar's tusk named Catche (significantly the same as one of the Throckmorton's) ; and Mary Pepwell had assistance from a whitish toad called Vizitt. In her fits she saw the spirits in other shapes, as bull, bear and black swan.

Various established remedies were tried. Thatch from the houses of the suspected women being burned in an adjoining

chamber Anne immediately had relief, and so also on two occasions when hair from Goodwife Gregory's head was burned. A periapt in the shape of a bag seemed inefficacious. Mary Pepwell being brought to the bedside and made to utter this charm: "In the name of the Son and Holy Ghost, so be it, Amen. I, Mary Pepwell, charge thee, White Toade, to come out of thee, Anne Gunter," immediately Anne threw off her fit, but when the First Person in the Trinity was mentioned she received no ease. Diverse scholars and ministers having met in the sick chamber to pray, and Anne being in a trance, she unexpectedly lifted a leg and kicked the lighted candle into the face of the young man reading, who was "faine presentlie to deliver his prayer to a graver scholar." But Anne Gunter put her head under the bed clothes, as some observers suspected, to have a quiet laugh! The young lady railed much at the godly ministers, in particular at one Burd (from Brightwell), crying out: "That Godwiffe Gregory hadd tolde her, that shee sholde not be out of that fiitt in ffoer and ffortie howers, vnlesse that fflowle Burd went out of the chamber." The reverend gentleman obstinately remaining, Mistress Anne came to her senses in about an hour and a half.

Various tests were applied to ascertain if the symptoms were counterfeits. The patient staying in the house of Dr. Holland, the rector of Exeter College, Dr. Harding observed that in her fits she became blind yet could write what purported to be confessions of the witches, but upon the light being extinguished she could not continue. She managed to read writing contained in folded papers, but the more doubtful observers thought she inspected it surreptitiously. It being believed that bewitched persons had no feeling and would not bleed, her fingers were wrung, hair pulled, and pins thrust into her body, but the watchers did not agree upon the result. The fits becoming worse when strangers came to the door, Mr. Helme of Exeter College, Oxford, a gentleman well known to Mistress Anne, found that speaking in a disguised voice outside the chamber as though two strangers were conversing, she immediately "grew to be exceeding unruly." It followed that Mistress Anne became seriously suspected of

simulation, but her father thought otherwise, and putting his view before the justices, and the three suspected women for long having had a doubtful reputation, warrants were issued for their apprehension, and Master Gunter was bound to prosecute. Mary Pepwell fled, but the others were taken. One John Leaver, who was at the apprehension of Elizabeth Gregory on a Friday, for weeks afterwards on every Friday suffered with fits. The two women were indicted for witchcraft and arraigned before Mr. Justice Williams at the Lent Assizes held at Abingdon on 1st March 1605. The accused were more fortunate than many in their position and were not without practical sympathisers. Master Alexander Jermayne of Exeter College, having carried out some of the tests, "resolved to spend his pore endeavor to kepe them (Gunters) from the guilt of innocent bloud." He found a compassionate ear in Sir Francis Knowles, who in turn spoke to one Alexander Chokke of Abingdon, a justice of the peace. Master Thomas Hinton of Chilton Park, a cousin of Mr. Justice Williams, also testified for the defence.

Anne Gunter, brought from her lodging at the King's Head, Abingdon, exhibited "strange fits or trances" and Master Gunter desired the spell to be read, but that being ruled inadmissible, he complained that his daughter would not have the justice administered in the Throckmorton case. A jury of quality and sufficiency, including three gentlemen from the Bench, being impanelled, the case lasted until after ten at night when the verdict returned was "not guilty." This decision by no means terminated the matter. Rumours of ancient enmity, already bruited, became more insistent, and reports spread that Gunter first fell out with the Gregorys over a "mache or play at footeball," that soon afterwards the two Gregorys (brothers-in-law of Elizabeth) died at the hand of Gunter, and that he had forced his daughter to counterfeit, and so on. In Whitsun week after the trial Anne entered into the care of the Bishop of Salisbury, who, causing pins to be secretly marked, found that these were afterwards "vomited" by Anne. Pressed to confess her duplicity she refused on the ground that if she did so her father would lose all his lands.

At this time King James took a great interest in cases of supposed witchcraft and demoniacal possession, and Brian Gunter "made means to bring Anne to his Majesty to the end his Highness might see in what state she was." Accordingly he carried her to Oxford and found lodging in the house of Thomas White, an apothecary, where she received a large number of visitors. There is reason to believe that the King, who came to Oxford on 27th August 1605, examined her. The Court next moved to Windsor (31st Aug. 1605) where Elizabeth Gregory and both Pepwells were in custody, although six months had elapsed since the acquittal. Anne Gunter there stayed in the house of one Harris, and again visited His Majesty. A third visit to the King at Whitehall led to Richard Bancroft, Archbishop of Canterbury taking up the matter, and by Michaelmas the young lady had been committed to the care of his chaplain, Samuel Harsnett (afterwards Archbishop of York), who some years previously had exposed the practices of John Darrell, the exorcist, and also the Denham miracle-mongers, and had great success in obtaining "confessions" from supposed demoniacs. Agnes Pepwell, if not the others, was brought to London about Christmas, 1605.

During Mistress Anne's stay with Harsnett she received medical attention from Edward Jorden, an advanced physician and expert in hysterical diseases, who found the cause to be natural. While he observed that she voided pins and glass, he concluded that she swallowed them in her fits, and soon after coming to his house ceased to be so troubled. Harsnett scored another success, as we learn from the deposition of Mistress Anne (24th Feb. 1605-6). She admitted that she suffered from a natural distemper, and that her father (and Nicholas Kyrfoote and his wife) persuaded her to counterfeit, and to lay the witchcraft on Elizabeth Gregory and the others. Further he made her take an oath of secrecy and when she refused to be fitted, beat her, and he provided drinks "which worked great distemper and obstupation to her senses." She swallowed the pins to destroy herself. A maidservant deposed to hearing Anne say: "Indeed,

father, afor I will lyve such a lyef with you I will take a halter and hang myself." By the end of the year the matter had come to the cognizance of Sir Edward Coke, the attorney-general, who filed an information in the Star Chamber (20th Jan. 1605-6) against Brian Gunter and Anne Gunter, alleging conspiracy. Master Gunter, by this time "imprisoned at Lambeth," denied the allegations (30th Jan. 1605-6) and made every effort to prove witchcraft, and so refute the damning evidence of his daughter. On Defendant's behalf, Gilbert Bradshawe, the vicar of North Moreton, and a number of other unimpeachable witnesses, declared that as Anne lay upon her bed they saw her petticoat and diverse other garments loosen themselves without human aid, and her shoes, stockings and garters, come from under her clothes, and creep along the ground like worms, then returning to her legs again become tied and fastened again in very admirable manner. Thomas Bird, the minister from Brightwell, so disliked by Anne, corroborated, and spoke to her pulling out of his beard thirty hairs which vanished, taken, as she said, to put upon "the chinne of her bunne." To strengthen the view of witchcraft several persons who had conversed freely with the women at Windsor and London deposed: Agnes Pepwell confessed that she had been a witch fourteen years, and had a spirit in the shape of a black cat bequeathed to her by Goodwife Bishop deceased. Before the devil would help her she had to give him a live thing or a drop of her blood which he sucked from her back. He had a young rat for his labour in bewitching Anne Gunter. He appeared in the shape of a ragged colt, cat or dog, and when he vanished he spoke big like a man. The witches did at diverse times meet at the Fower Ashes when their spirits danced together. She expressed sorrow for bewitching Anne, but could not undo the witchcraft. Her mother-in-law Old Katherine Gregory was a witch and possessed spirits.

No decrees are extant and the judgment delivered by the lords is unknown. To the twentieth-century enquirer it appears that Anne Gunter suffered from a form of hysteria, so often accompanied by lying, deceit and simulation. The divines, as

in other similar cases, were unjust in harrassing the unfortunate girl into a semi-bogus confession. It is highly improbable that her father ever deliberately conspired to destroy Elizabeth Gregory and the others, but it is conceivable that he seized the opportunity arising from his daughter's illness and the professional diagnosis of witchcraft. To the reader must be left discovery of the cause of the mysterious movements of clothing, and the garters "tying themselves in knots like chitterlings."