

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen  
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo  
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm  
Garnett Engels Byron Schiller  
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka  
Cotton Dostoyevsky Hall  
Baum Henry Kipling Doyle Willis  
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac  
Stockton Vatsyayana Crane  
Burroughs Verne  
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch  
Homer Tolstoy Whittman  
Darwin Thoreau Twain  
Potter Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato Scott  
Kant Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen Burton Harte  
London Descartes Cervantes Wells Hesse  
Poe Aristotle James Hastings Voltaire Cooke  
Hale Shakespeare Bunner Chambers Irving  
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# **Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft**

Walter, Sir Scott

# Imprint

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## INTRODUCTION.

Sir Walter Scott's "Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft" were his contribution to a series of books, published by John Murray, which appeared between the years 1829 and 1847, and formed a collection of eighty volumes known as "Murray's Family Library." The series was planned to secure a wide diffusion of good literature in cheap five-shilling volumes, and Scott's "Letters," written and published in 1830, formed one of the earlier books in the collection.

The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge had been founded in the autumn of 1826, and Charles Knight, who had then conceived a plan of a National Library, was entrusted, in July, 1827, with the superintendence of its publications. Its first treatises appeared in sixpenny numbers, once a fortnight. Its "British Almanac" and "Companion to the Almanac" first appeared at the beginning of 1829. Charles Knight started also in that year his own "Library of Entertaining Knowledge." John Murray's "Family Library" was then begun, and in the spring of 1832—the year of the Reform Bill—the advance of civilization by the diffusion of good literature, through cheap journals as well as cheap books, was sought by the establishment of "Chambers's Edinburgh Journal" in the North, and in London of "The Penny Magazine."

In the autumn of that year, 1832, on the 21st of September, Sir Walter Scott died. The first warning of death had come to him in February, 1830, with a stroke of apoplexy. He had been visited by an old friend who brought him memoirs of her father, which he had promised to revise for the press. He seemed for half an hour to be bending over the papers at his desk, and reading them; then he rose, staggered into the drawing-room, and fell, remaining speechless until he had been bled. Dieted for weeks on pulse and water, he so far recovered that to friends outside his family but little change in him was visible. In that condition, in the month after his seizure, he was writing these Letters, and also a fourth series of the "Tales of a Grandfather." The slight softening of the brain found after death had then begun. But the old delight in anecdote and skill in story-

telling that, at the beginning of his career, had caused a critic of his "Border Minstrelsy" to say that it contained the germs of a hundred romances, yet survived. It gave to Scott's "Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft" what is for us now a pathetic charm. Here and there some slight confusion of thought or style represents the flickering of a light that flashes yet with its old brilliancy. There is not yet the manifest suggestion of the loss of power that we find presently afterwards in "Count Robert of Paris" and "Castle Dangerous," published in 1831 as the Fourth Series of "Tales of My Landlord," with which he closed his life's work at the age of sixty.

Milton has said that he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem. Scott's life was a true poem, of which the music entered into all he wrote. If in his earlier days the consciousness of an unlimited productive power tempted him to make haste to be rich, that he might work out, as founder of a family, an ideal of life touched by his own genius of romance, there was not in his desire for gain one touch of sordid greed, and his ideal of life only brought him closer home to all its duties. Sir Walter Scott's good sense, as Lord Cockburn said, was a more wonderful gift than his genius. When the mistake of a trade connection with James Ballantyne brought ruin to him in 1826, he repudiated bankruptcy, took on himself the burden of a debt of £130,000, and sacrificed his life to the successful endeavour to pay off all. What was left unpaid at his death was cleared afterwards by the success of his annotated edition of his novels. No tale of physical strife in the battlefield could be as heroic as the story of the close of Scott's life, with five years of a death-struggle against adversity, animated by the truest sense of honour. When the ruin was impending he wrote in his diary, "If things go badly in London, the magic wand of the Unknown will be shivered in his grasp. The feast of fancy will be over with the feeling of independence. He shall no longer have the delight of waking in the morning with bright ideas in his mind, hasten to commit them to paper, and count them monthly, as the means of planting such scaurs and purchasing such wastes; replacing dreams of fiction by other prospective visions of walks by

'Fountain-heads, and pathless groves;  
Places which pale passion loves.'

This cannot be; but I may work substantial husbandry—*i.e.* write history, and such concerns." It was under pressure of calamity like this that Sir Walter Scott was compelled to make himself known as the author of "Waverley." Closely upon this followed the death of his wife, his thirty years' companion. "I have been to her room," he wrote in May, 1826; "there was no voice in it—no stirring; the pressure of the coffin was visible on the bed, but it had been removed elsewhere; all was neat as she loved it, but all was calm—calm as death. I remembered the last sight of her: she raised herself in bed, and tried to turn her eyes after me, and said with a sort of smile, 'You have all such melancholy faces.' These were the last words I ever heard her utter, and I hurried away, for she did not seem quite conscious of what she said; when I returned, immediately departing, she was in a deep sleep. It is deeper now. This was but seven days since. They are arranging the chamber of death—that which was long the apartment of connubial happiness, and of whose arrangement (better than in richer houses) she was so proud. They are treading fast and thick. For weeks you could have heard a footfall. Oh, my God!"

A few years yet of his own battle, while the shadows of night and death were gathering about him, and they were re-united. In these "Letters upon Demonology and Witchcraft," addressed to his son-in-law, written under the first grasp of death, the old kindness and good sense, joined to the old charm in story-telling, stand firm yet against every assault; and even in the decay that followed, when the powers were broken of the mind that had breathed, and is still breathing, its own health into the minds of tens of thousands of his countrymen, nothing could break the fine spirit of love and honour that was in him. When the end was very near, and the son-in-law to whom these Letters were addressed found him one morning entirely himself, though in the last extreme of feebleness: his eye was clear and calm—every trace of the wild fire of delirium was extinguished: "Lockhart," he said, "I may have but a minute to speak to you. My dear, be a good man—be virtuous, be religious—be a good

man. Nothing else will give you any comfort when you come to lie here."

Another volume of this Library may give occasion to recall Scott in the noontide of his strength, companion of

"The blameless Muse who trains her sons  
For hope and calm enjoyment."

Here we remember only how from among dark clouds the last light of his genius shone on the path of those who were endeavouring to make the daily bread of intellectual life—good books—common to all.

**LETTERS**  
**ON**  
**DEMONOLOGY AND WITCHCRAFT**  
To J.G. LOCKHART, ESQ.



## LETTER I.

Origin of the general Opinions respecting Demonology among Mankind—The Belief in the Immortality of the Soul is the main inducement to credit its occasional re-appearance—The Philosophical Objections to the Apparition of an Abstract Spirit little understood by the Vulgar and Ignorant—The situations of excited Passion incident to Humanity, which teach Men to wish or apprehend Supernatural Apparitions—They are often presented by the Sleeping Sense—Story of Somnambulism—The Influence of Credulity contagious, so that Individuals will trust the Evidence of others in despite of their own Senses—Examples from the "Historia Verdadera" of Bernal Dias del Castillo, and from the Works of Patrick Walker—The apparent Evidence of Intercourse with the Supernatural World is sometimes owing to a depraved State of the bodily Organs—Difference between this Disorder and Insanity, in which the Organs retain their tone, though that of the Mind is lost—Rebellion of the Senses of a Lunatic against the current of his Reveries—Narratives of a contrary Nature, in which the Evidence of the Eyes overbore the Conviction of the Understanding—Example of a London Man of Pleasure—Of Nicolai, the German Bookseller and Philosopher—Of a Patient of Dr. Gregory—Of an Eminent Scottish Lawyer, deceased—Of this same fallacious Disorder are other instances, which have but sudden and momentary endurance—Apparition of Maupertuis—Of a late illustrious modern Poet—The Cases quoted chiefly relating to false Impressions on the Visual Nerve, those upon the Ear next considered—Delusions of the

Touch chiefly experienced in Sleep—Delusions of the  
Taste—And of the Smelling—Sum of the Argument.

You have asked of me, my dear friend, that I should assist the "Family Library" with the history of a dark chapter in human nature, which the increasing civilization of all well-instructed countries has now almost blotted out, though the subject attracted no ordinary degree of consideration in the older times of their history.

Among much reading of my earlier days, it is no doubt true that I travelled a good deal in the twilight regions of superstitious disquisitions. Many hours have I lost—"I would their debt were less!"—in examining old as well as more recent narratives of this character, and even in looking into some of the criminal trials so frequent in early days, upon a subject which our fathers considered as a matter of the last importance. And, of late years, the very curious extracts published by Mr. Pitcairn, from the Criminal Records of Scotland, are, besides their historical value, of a nature so much calculated to illustrate the credulity of our ancestors on such subjects, that, by perusing them, I have been induced more recently to recall what I had read and thought upon the subject at a former period.

As, however, my information is only miscellaneous, and I make no pretensions, either to combat the systems of those by whom I am anticipated in consideration of the subject, or to erect any new one of my own, my purpose is, after a general account of Demonology and Witchcraft, to confine myself to narratives of remarkable cases, and to the observations which naturally and easily arise out of them;—in the confidence that such a plan is, at the present time of day, more likely to suit the pages of a popular miscellany, than an attempt to reduce the contents of many hundred tomes, from the largest to the smallest size, into an abridgement, which, however compressed, must remain greatly too large for the reader's powers of patience.

A few general remarks on the nature of Demonology, and the original cause of the almost universal belief in communication betwixt mortals and beings of a power superior to themselves, and of

a nature not to be comprehended by human organs, are a necessary introduction to the subject.

The general, or, it may be termed, the universal belief of the inhabitants of the earth, in the existence of spirits separated from the encumbrance and incapacities of the body, is grounded on the consciousness of the divinity that speaks in our bosoms, and demonstrates to all men, except the few who are hardened to the celestial voice, that there is within us a portion of the divine substance, which is not subject to the law of death and dissolution, but which, when the body is no longer fit for its abode, shall seek its own place, as a sentinel dismissed from his post. Unaided by revelation, it cannot be hoped that mere earthly reason should be able to form any rational or precise conjecture concerning the destination of the soul when parted from the body; but the conviction that such an indestructible essence exists, the belief expressed by the poet in a different sense, *Non omnis moriar* must infer the existence of many millions of spirits who have not been annihilated, though they have become invisible to mortals who still see, hear, and perceive, only by means of the imperfect organs of humanity. Probability may lead some of the most reflecting to anticipate a state of future rewards and punishments; as those experienced in the education of the deaf and dumb find that their pupils, even while cut off from all instruction by ordinary means, have been able to form, out of their own unassisted conjectures, some ideas of the existence of a Deity, and of the distinction between the soul and body—a circumstance which proves how naturally these truths arise in the human mind. The principle that they do so arise, being taught or communicated, leads to further conclusions.

These spirits, in a state of separate existence, being admitted to exist, are not, it may be supposed, indifferent to the affairs of mortality, perhaps not incapable of influencing them. It is true that, in a more advanced state of society, the philosopher may challenge the possibility of a separate appearance of a disembodied spirit, unless in the case of a direct miracle, to which, being a suspension of the laws of nature, directly wrought by the Maker of these laws, for some express purpose, no bound or restraint can possibly be assigned. But under this necessary limitation and exception, philosophers might plausibly argue that, when the soul is divorced from

the body, it loses all those qualities which made it, when clothed with a mortal shape, obvious to the organs of its fellow-men. The abstract idea of a spirit certainly implies that it has neither substance, form, shape, voice, or anything which can render its presence visible or sensible to human faculties. But these sceptic doubts of philosophers on the possibility of the appearance of such separated spirits, do not arise till a certain degree of information has dawned upon a country, and even then only reach a very small proportion of reflecting and better-informed members of society. To the multitude, the indubitable fact, that so many millions of spirits exist around and even amongst us, seems sufficient to support the belief that they are, in certain instances at least, by some means or other, able to communicate with the world of humanity. The more numerous part of mankind cannot form in their mind the idea of the spirit of the deceased existing, without possessing or having the power to assume the appearance which their acquaintance bore during his life, and do not push their researches beyond this point.

Enthusiastic feelings of an impressive and solemn nature occur both in private and public life, which seem to add ocular testimony to an intercourse betwixt earth and the world beyond it. For example, the son who has been lately deprived of his father feels a sudden crisis approach, in which he is anxious to have recourse to his sagacious advice—or a bereaved husband earnestly desires again to behold the form of which the grave has deprived him for ever—or, to use a darker yet very common instance, the wretched man who has dipped his hand in his fellow-creature's blood, is haunted by the apprehension that the phantom of the slain stands by the bedside of his murderer. In all or any of these cases, who shall doubt that imagination, favoured by circumstances, has power to summon up to the organ of sight, spectres which only exist in the mind of those by whom their apparition seems to be witnessed?

If we add, that such a vision may take place in the course of one of those lively dreams in which the patient, except in respect to the single subject of one strong impression, is, or seems, sensible of the real particulars of the scene around him, a state of slumber which often occurs; if he is so far conscious, for example, as to know that he is lying on his own bed, and surrounded by his own familiar furniture at the time when the supposed apparition is manifested, it

becomes almost in vain to argue with the visionary against the reality of his dream, since the spectre, though itself purely fanciful, is inserted amidst so many circumstances which he feels must be true beyond the reach of doubt or question. That which is undeniably certain becomes, in a manner, a warrant for the reality of the appearance to which doubt would have been otherwise attached. And if any event, such as the death of the person dreamt of, chances to take place, so as to correspond with the nature and the time of the apparition, the coincidence, though one which must be frequent, since our dreams usually refer to the accomplishment of that which haunts our minds when awake, and often presage the most probable events, seems perfect, and the chain of circumstances touching the evidence may not unreasonably be considered as complete. Such a concatenation, we repeat, must frequently take place, when it is considered of what stuff dreams are made—how naturally they turn upon those who occupy our mind while awake, and, when a soldier is exposed to death in battle, when a sailor is incurring the dangers of the sea, when a beloved wife or relative is attacked by disease, how readily our sleeping imagination rushes to the very point of alarm, which when waking it had shuddered to anticipate. The number of instances in which such lively dreams have been quoted, and both asserted and received as spiritual communications, is very great at all periods; in ignorant times, where the natural cause of dreaming is misapprehended and confused with an idea of mysticism, it is much greater. Yet, perhaps, considering the many thousands of dreams which must, night after night, pass through the imagination of individuals, the number of coincidences between the vision and real event are fewer and less remarkable than a fair calculation of chances would warrant us to expect. But in countries where such presaging dreams are subjects of attention, the number of those which seemed to be coupled with the corresponding issue, is large enough to spread a very general belief of a positive communication betwixt the living and the dead.

Somnambulism and other nocturnal deceptions frequently lend their aid to the formation of such *phantasmata* as are formed in this middle state, betwixt sleeping and waking. A most respectable person, whose active life had been spent as master and part owner of a large merchant vessel in the Lisbon trade, gave the writer an ac-

count of such an instance which came under his observation. He was lying in the Tagus, when he was put to great anxiety and alarm by the following incident and its consequences. One of his crew was murdered by a Portuguese assassin, and a report arose that the ghost of the slain man haunted the vessel. Sailors are generally superstitious, and those of my friend's vessel became unwilling to remain on board the ship; and it was probable they might desert rather than return to England with the ghost for a passenger. To prevent so great a calamity, the captain determined to examine the story to the bottom. He soon found that, though all pretended to have seen lights and heard noises, and so forth, the weight of the evidence lay upon the statement of one of his own mates, an Irishman and a Catholic, which might increase his tendency to superstition, but in other respects a veracious, honest, and sensible person, whom Captain — — had no reason to suspect would wilfully deceive him. He affirmed to Captain S— — with the deepest obtestations, that the spectre of the murdered man appeared to him almost nightly, took him from his place in the vessel, and, according to his own expression, worried his life out. He made these communications with a degree of horror which intimated the reality of his distress and apprehensions. The captain, without any argument at the time, privately resolved to watch the motions of the ghost-seer in the night; whether alone, or with a witness, I have forgotten. As the ship bell struck twelve, the sleeper started up, with a ghastly and disturbed countenance, and lighting a candle, proceeded to the galley or cook-room of the vessel. He sate down with his eyes open, staring before him as on some terrible object which he beheld with horror, yet from which he could not withhold his eyes. After a short space he arose, took up a tin can or decanter, filled it with water, muttering to himself all the while—mixed salt in the water, and sprinkled it about the galley. Finally, he sighed deeply, like one relieved from a heavy burden, and, returning to his hammock, slept soundly. In the next morning the haunted man told the usual precise story of his apparition, with the additional circumstances, that the ghost had led him to the galley, but that he had fortunately, he knew not how, obtained possession of some holy water, and succeeded in getting rid of his unwelcome visitor. The visionary was then informed of the real transactions of the night, with so many particulars as to satisfy him he had been the dupe of his imagina-

tion; he acquiesced in his commander's reasoning, and the dream, as often happens in these cases, returned no more after its imposture had been detected. In this case, we find the excited imagination acting upon the half-waking senses, which were intelligent enough for the purpose of making him sensible where he was, but not sufficiently so to judge truly of the objects before him.

But it is not only private life alone, or that tenor of thought which has been depressed into melancholy by gloomy anticipations respecting the future, which disposes the mind to mid-day fantasies, or to nightly apparitions—a state of eager anxiety, or excited exertion, is equally favourable to the indulgence of such supernatural communications. The anticipation of a dubious battle, with all the doubt and uncertainty of its event, and the conviction that it must involve his own fate and that of his country, was powerful enough to conjure up to the anxious eye of Brutus the spectre of his murdered friend Cæsar, respecting whose death he perhaps thought himself less justified than at the Ides of March, since, instead of having achieved the freedom of Rome, the event had only been the renewal of civil wars, and the issue might appear most likely to conclude in the total subjection of liberty. It is not miraculous that the masculine spirit of Marcus Brutus, surrounded by darkness and solitude, distracted probably by recollection of the kindness and favour of the great individual whom he had put to death to avenge the wrongs of his country, though by the slaughter of his own friend, should at length place before his eyes in person the appearance which termed itself his evil genius, and promised again to meet him at Philippi. Brutus' own intentions, and his knowledge of the military art, had probably long since assured him that the decision of the civil war must take place at or near that place; and, allowing that his own imagination supplied that part of his dialogue with the spectre, there is nothing else which might not be fashioned in a vivid dream or a waking reverie, approaching, in absorbing and engrossing character, the usual matter of which dreams consist. That Brutus, well acquainted with the opinions of the Platonists, should be disposed to receive without doubt the idea that he had seen a real apparition, and was not likely to scrutinize very minutely the supposed vision, may be naturally conceived; and it is also natural to think, that although no one saw the figure but himself, his

contemporaries were little disposed to examine the testimony of a man so eminent, by the strict rules of cross-examination and conflicting evidence, which they might have thought applicable to another person, and a less dignified occasion.

Even in the field of death, and amid the mortal tug of combat itself, strong belief has wrought the same wonder, which we have hitherto mentioned as occurring in solitude and amid darkness; and those who were themselves on the verge of the world of spirits, or employed in dispatching others to these gloomy regions, conceived they beheld the apparitions of those beings whom their national mythology associated with such scenes. In such moments of undecided battle, amid the violence, hurry, and confusion of ideas incident to the situation, the ancients supposed that they saw their deities, Castor and Pollux, fighting in the van for their encouragement; the heathen Scandinavian beheld the Choosers of the slain; and the Catholics were no less easily led to recognize the warlike Saint George or Saint James in the very front of the strife, showing them the way to conquest. Such apparitions being generally visible to a multitude, have in all times been supported by the greatest strength of testimony. When the common feeling of danger, and the animating burst of enthusiasm, act on the feelings of many men at once, their minds hold a natural correspondence with each other, as it is said is the case with stringed instruments tuned to the same pitch, of which, when one is played, the chords of the others are supposed to vibrate in unison with the tones produced. If an artful or enthusiastic individual exclaims, in the heat of action, that he perceives an apparition of the romantic kind which has been intimated, his companions catch at the idea with emulation, and most are willing to sacrifice the conviction of their own senses, rather than allow that they did not witness the same favourable emblem, from which all draw confidence and hope. One warrior catches the idea from another; all are alike eager to acknowledge the present miracle, and the battle is won before the mistake is discovered. In such cases, the number of persons present, which would otherwise lead to detection of the fallacy, becomes the means of strengthening it.

Of this disposition, to see as much of the supernatural as is seen by others around, or, in other words, to trust to the eyes of others

rather than to our own, we may take the liberty to quote two remarkable instances.

The first is from the "Historia Verdadera" of Don Bernal Dias del Castillo, one of the companions of the celebrated Cortez in his Mexican conquest. After having given an account of a great victory over extreme odds, he mentions the report inserted in the contemporary Chronicle of Gomara, that Saint Iago had appeared on a white horse in van of the combat, and led on his beloved Spaniards to victory. It is very curious to observe the Castilian cavalier's internal conviction that the rumour arose out of a mistake, the cause of which he explains from his own observation; whilst, at the same time, he does not venture to disown the miracle. The honest Conquistador owns that he himself did not see this animating vision; nay, that he beheld an individual cavalier, named Francisco de Morla, mounted on a chestnut horse, and fighting strenuously in the very place where Saint James is said to have appeared. But instead of proceeding to draw the necessary inference, the devout Conquistador exclaims—"Sinner that I am, what am I that I should have beheld the blessed apostle!"

The other instance of the infectious character of superstition occurs in a Scottish book, and there can be little doubt that it refers, in its first origin, to some uncommon appearance of the aurora borealis, or the northern lights, which do not appear to have been seen in Scotland so frequently as to be accounted a common and familiar atmospherical phenomenon, until the beginning of the eighteenth century. The passage is striking and curious, for the narrator, Peter Walker, though an enthusiast, was a man of credit, and does not even affect to have seen the wonders, the reality of which he unscrupulously adopts on the testimony of others, to whose eyes he trusted rather than to his own. The conversion of the sceptical gentleman of whom he speaks is highly illustrative of popular credulity carried away into enthusiasm, or into imposture, by the evidence of those around, and at once shows the imperfection of such a general testimony, and the ease with which it is procured, since the general excitement of the moment impels even the more cold-blooded and judicious persons present to catch up the ideas and echo the exclamations of the majority, who, from the first, had considered the

heavenly phenomenon as a supernatural weapon-schaw, held for the purpose of a sign and warning of civil wars to come.

"In the year 1686, in the months of June and July," says the honest chronicler, "many yet alive can witness that about the Crossford Boat, two miles beneath Lanark, especially at the Mains, on the water of Clyde, many people gathered together for several afternoons, where there were showers of bonnets, hats, guns, and swords, which covered the trees and the ground; companies of men in arms marching in order upon the waterside; companies meeting companies, going all through other, and then all falling to the ground and disappearing; other companies immediately appeared, marching the same way. I went there three afternoons together, and, as I observed, there were two-thirds of the people that were together saw, and a third that saw not; and, *though I could see nothing*, there was such a fright and trembling on those that did see, that was discernible to all from those that saw not. There was a gentleman standing next to me who spoke as too many gentlemen and others speak, who said, 'A pack of damned witches and warlocks that have the second sight! the devil ha't do I see;' and immediately there was a discernible change in his countenance. With as much fear and trembling as any woman I saw there, he called out, 'All you that do not see, say nothing; for I persuade you it is matter of fact, and discernible to all that is not stone-blind.' And those who did see told what works (*i.e.*, locks) the guns had, and their length and wideness, and what handles the swords had, whether small or three-barr'd, or Highland guards, and the closing knots of the bonnets, black or blue; and those who did see them there, whenever they went abroad, saw a bonnet and a sword drop in the way." [1]

[Footnote 1: Walker's "Lives," Edinburgh, 1827, vol. i. p. xxxvi. It is evident that honest Peter believed in the apparition of this martial gear on the principle of Partridge's terror for the ghost of Hamlet—not that he was afraid himself, but because Garrick showed such evident marks of terror.]

This singular phenomenon, in which a multitude believed, although only two-thirds of them saw what must, if real, have been equally obvious to all, may be compared with the exploit of the humourist, who planted himself in an attitude of astonishment,