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**The Works Of The Right Honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.**

In Four Volumes

**Addison, Joseph**

**London, 1721**

N° 117. Saturday, July 14.

[urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-53621](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-53621)

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N<sup>o</sup> 117. Saturday, July 14.

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----- *Ipsi sibi somnia fingunt.*

Virg.

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**T**HERE are some opinions in which a man should stand neuter, without engaging his assent to one side or the other. Such a hovering faith as this, which refuses to settle upon any determination, is absolutely necessary in a mind that is careful to avoid errors and prepossessions. When the arguments press equally on both sides in matters that are indifferent to us, the safest method is to give up our selves to neither.

It is with this temper of mind that I consider the subject of Witchcraft. When I hear the relations that are made from all parts of the world, not only from *Norway* and *Lapland*, from the *East* and *West-Indies*, but from every particular nation in *Europe*, I cannot forbear thinking that there is such an intercourse and commerce with evil Spirits, as that which we express by the name of Witchcraft. But when I consider that the ignorant and credulous parts of the world abound most in these relations, and that the persons among us who are supposed to engage in such an infernal commerce, are people of a weak understanding and crazed imagination, and at the same time reflect upon the many impostures and delusions of this nature that have been detected in all ages, I endeavour to suspend my belief till I hear more certain accounts than any which have yet come to my knowledge. In short, when I consider the question, Whether there are such persons in the world as those we call Witches? my mind is divided between two opposite opinions; or rather (to speak my thoughts freely) I believe in general that there is, and has been, such a thing as Witchcraft; but at the same time can give no credit to any particular instance of it.

I am engaged in this Speculation, by some occurrences that I met with yesterday, which I shall give my Reader an account of at large. As I was walking with my friend Sir ROGER by the side of one of his woods,

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an old woman applied her self to me for my charity. Her dress and figure put me in mind of the following description in *Otway*.

*In a close lane as I pursu'd my journey,  
I spy'd a wrinkled Hag, with age grown double,  
Picking dry sticks, and mumbling to her self.  
Her eyes with scalding rheum were gall'd and red;  
Cold palsy shook her head; her hands seem'd wither'd;  
And on her crooked shoulders had she wrapp'd  
The tatter'd remnants of an old striped hanging,  
Which serv'd to keep her carcass from the cold.  
So there was nothing of a piece about her.  
Her lower weeds were all o'er coarsly patch'd  
With diff'rent colour'd rags, black, red, white, yellow,  
And seem'd to speak variety of wretchedness.*

As I was musing on this description, and comparing it with the object before me, the Knight told me, that this very old woman had the reputation of a Witch all over the country, that her lips were observed to be always in motion, and that there was not a switch about her house which her neighbours did not believe had carried her several hundreds of miles. If she chanced to stumble, they always found sticks or straws that lay in the figure of a Cross before her. If she made any mistake at church, and cryed *Amen* in a wrong place, they never failed to conclude that she was saying her prayers backwards. There was not a Maid in the parish that would take a pin of her, though she should offer a bag of money with it. She goes by the name of *Moll White*, and has made the country ring with several imaginary exploits which are palmed upon her. If the dairy-maid does not make her butter to come so soon as she would have it, *Moll White* is at the bottom of the churn. If a horse sweats in the stable, *Moll White* has been upon his back. If a hare makes an unexpected escape from the hounds, the Hunt-man curses *Moll White*. Nay, (says Sir ROGER) I have known the Master of the pack, upon such an occasion, send one of his servants to see if *Moll White* had been out that morning.

This account raised my curiosity so far, that I begged my friend Sir ROGER to go with me into her hovel, which stood in a solitary corner under the side of the wood. Upon our first entering Sir ROGER winked to me, and pointed at something that stood behind the door, which upon looking that way I found to be an old broomstaff. At the same



time he whispered me in the ear to take notice of a Tabby cat that sat in the chimney-corner, which, as the Knight told me, lay under as bad a report as *Moll White* her self; for besides that *Moll* is said often to accompany her in the same shape, the Cat is reported to have spoken twice or thrice in her life, and to have played several pranks above the capacity of an ordinary Cat.

I was secretly concerned to see humane nature in so much wretchedness and disgrace, but at the same time could not forbear smiling to hear Sir ROGER, who is a little puzzled about the old woman, advising her as a Justice of Peace to avoid all communication with the Devil, and never to hurt any of her neighbours cattle. We concluded our visit with a bounty, which was very acceptable.

In our return home Sir ROGER told me that old *Moll* had been often brought before him for making children spit pins, and giving maids the night-mare; and that the country people would be tossing her into a pond and trying experiments with her every day, if it was not for him and his Chaplain.

I have since found, upon enquiry, that Sir ROGER was several times staggered with the reports that had been brought him concerning this old woman, and would frequently have bound her over to the County Sessions, had not his Chaplain with much ado persuaded him to the contrary.

I have been the more particular in this account, because I hear there is scarce a village in *England* that has not a *Moll White* in it. When an old woman begins to doat, and grow chargeable to a parish, she is generally turned into a Witch, and fills the whole country with extravagant fancies, imaginary distempers, and terrifying dreams. In the mean time the poor wretch that is the innocent occasion of so many evils, begins to be frighted at her self, and sometimes confesses secret commerces and familiarities that her imagination forms in a delirious old age. This frequently cuts off Charity from the greatest objects of compassion, and inspires people with a malevolence towards those poor decrepid parts of our species, in whom human nature is defaced by infirmity and dotage.

Tuesday,