

## A Wizard of Yesterday.

By ARTHUR MORRISON.

Author of "Cunning Murrell," "Tales of Mean Streets," etc., etc.



WHEN first I came upon the records and remembrances of Cunning Murrell, the Essex wizard who died forty years back, and when first I resolved to write a story about him, it seemed to me that some might find it hard to believe that such a man, practising such arts and wielding such influence, could have lived so recently within so short a distance of London. For I came upon those records at a time when we were all very much enlightened and very loftily scornful of all superstitions, as well as of our benighted fathers who believed in witches and the like. But that was ten years ago, or more, and now I see half-a-dozen business-like advertisements of astrologers and divers seers of other sorts on the front page of my morning paper, all through the London season. And I read in a law-case report that a lady can make an income of four figures in Bond Street by seizing her customers by the wrist, staring earnestly over their heads, and prophesying. So that perhaps my necromancer will not be voted an impossible monster, after all.

Cunning Murrell lived at Hadleigh, then, and indeed till nine or ten years ago, a very different place from what the Salvation Army colony and rows of horrible yellow brick shops have since made it. I have made many holidays in remote parts of Essex, where, ten years ago, places and people were still in the eighteenth century as regards

aspect, costume, habits, and modes of thought. One of these places was Hadleigh, where, making a sketching excursion with my friend, Mr. J. L. Wimbush, the painter, who illustrates this article, we came on the tales and relics of the wizard.

Witches, an old lady told us, were to exist in Leigh for a hundred years, but in Hadleigh there were to be three for ever, and in Canewdon as many as nine; and this was the prophecy of Cunning Murrell.

James Murrell died at Hadleigh in 1860. At different times he had followed the more common trades of shoemaker, surveyor, and chemist's stillman; but the most of his life was given to astrology, quack doctoring, exorcism, veterinary surgery, and the casting out of devils. He was the seventh son of a seventh son, he cured with charms, he divined the lurking places of lost property, he laid spells upon thieves until they restored their plunder. By the tales we heard there never was such a mighty magician

before, out of the Arabian Nights Entertainments. He was miraculously transported from place to place in the night. He made a wonderful glass wherewith a man might see through a brick wall; he could do anything, cure anything, and know anything, past, present, or future, and it was his daily boast that he was the devil's master. In short, he was a white man-witch, and his powers many living men and women still testified to through all Essex.



From a] CUNNING MURRELL'S COTTAGE. [Photograph.





STEPHEN CHOPPEN, WHO FORGED THE WITCH-BOTTLES.

The Castle Inn was at that time kept by a Mr. Cracknell, a very intelligent and obliging landlord, who I am sorry to say has now been dead some years, like too many more of my old Essex friends. He remembered Murrell well when he — Cracknell — was a boy, and he pointed out to us, among other things, the cottage which the cunning man had occupied. It was an ordinary, clap-boarded, two-floored little cottage, one of a row of half-a-dozen or so, and it was in the little room into which the

front door opened, now bright and clean and comfortable, that the wizard had received his clients and pursued his works, amid walls hung about thick with the herbs that he was always gathering. The tenants, charming old people near the nineties, knew and believed in the wizard wholly. They told us of his marvellous cures, his amazing recoveries of linen stolen from hedges, his surprising prophecies by aid of the stars, and his triumphant overthrow of the wicked designs of witches. For Cunning Murrell, they would have us know, was a white and lawful wizard, who warred against the powers of darkness with all his might, and it was no sin to employ the arts of a man like him. They told us, moreover, of the famous case of Sarah Mott, a young woman so devil-possessed and afflicted by witchcraft that she ran round tables without being able to stop, and walked about on the ceiling head downwards, like a bluebottle, till Cunning Murrell destroyed the witch's power over her and drove out the demon that possessed her. And, again, they told us of the iron witch-bottles made for Murrell by Choppen the smith, in which were placed blood, water, finger-nails, hair, and pins; which bottles, when screwed up airtight, were set on the fire by way of process against witches, and frequently burst with great success and devastation, thus signaling the destruction of the diabolical influence. How he prophesied that a descendant should arise endowed with his own mystic powers,



FORGING THE FIRST WITCH-BOTTLES.



and how his son still lived and worked on a farm at Thundersley, a peaceful and ignorant labourer, though he still owned many of his father's books and instruments.

It seemed that an interesting find might be before us in the way of books and records. The story of Murrell did not surprise me, for did I not know well that a woman was swum for a witch in Essex as late as 1876? There may, indeed, have been later cases. There is one case, however, only a dozen years earlier, which anybody can verify for himself, because there was a coroner's inquest on the victim, and a trial, reported in the newspapers. It was in 1864 that an old man suspected of witchcraft was swum at Castle Hedingham, and died from the violence.

On our way to discover the wizard's son we called on Mr. Stephen Choppen, the smith who had made the witch-bottles. He

the bottles is gone and one of the terrible new shops stands on the site. Steve Choppen had no witch-bottle to show us, for the last had been exploded long ago, but he had the cunning man's spectacles—a quaint and clumsy instrument, with circular glasses and ponderously thick iron rims. The narrowness of the space between the sides showed the wizard's head to have been a small one, and, indeed, he was an extremely small man in every way, by the descriptions of a dozen people.

Steve Choppen had his anecdotes, also, told with a terse humour of his own. He was not a superstitious man, but he admitted that the first of the witch-bottles gave him trouble in the forging, for which he could not account. The iron wholly refused to be welded—till Cunning Murrell arrived and blew the fire, when all went well. I have made use of this incident in my recently-



"BANG! GOES THE BOTTLE."

was long retired from the smithy, and was living in his own little house on the village outskirts. He is alive and well, I hope, still—I saw him so but a month or two back—but now he has left his pretty little house because his wife died and left him lonely. And the smithy wherein he made

published story, together with others with which I became acquainted at various times. So much for the first of the bottles. The last vanished in a way that Steve Choppen described somewhat thus:—

"Old Buck Murrell—that's the son you're going to see; his name's Edward, but every-



one calls him Buck—old Buck Murrell, though he can't as much as read, after his father died he got an idea to do a bit o' hocus-pocus on his own account, just to keep up the family reputation. So he finds a chap as suspects a witch, an' he gets the last o' the bottles the old man had left, an' he makes it ready and fills it up just as his father used to do. 'You musn't speak a word,' says he to the chap, 'else you'll spoil the charm,' an' with that he shoves the bottle on the fire. Now this bottle must ha' been one o' my best, an' it holds the bilin' stuff an' steam in for a long time, they

Jim," they said; "a-helpin' to make the thing first, an' now a-drinking bewitched beer out of it." It was an empty enough piece of chaff, lightly enough said, but it is a fact that it terrified the wretched boy, who went home, sickened, and never came to the smithy again; for in a little while he died.

In Mr. Cracknell's trap we drove to Thundersley to find Buck Murrell, and there, after something of a hunt, we sighted him at last, working in a field. He was a short, sturdy old fellow, with a shock head of loose, white hair, and nothing about him to betoken so near relationship to the for-



"BUCK MURRELL WAS FOUND WORKING IN A FIELD."

two a-sittin' either side the grate a-waitin'. Presently the other chap gets impatient, and says he, 'I don't believe this here bottle's a good 'un.' 'Danged!' shouts Buck, 'you've spiled the charm!' An' at that 'BANG!' goes the bottle, an' bundles the pair on 'em over neck an' crop on the floor, down comes all the pots an' kettles with a run, an' when they gets enough sense in 'em to look round they finds the whole chimney-breast blowed up, mantelpiece, grate an' all, an' pretty nigh one side o' the house fetched out. That was the end o' the last bottle, an' old Buck Murrell, he aren't been in the witchcraft line since."

The bottle that ended in this ignominious devastation nevertheless had provided, soon after its making, a striking example of the overpowering influence of superstitious fear. Soon after it had cooled Steve Choppen and some of his friends disrespectfully christened it in beer. One after another took a pull from it, till it came to the turn of the bellows-boy. When he had drunk, some wag began solemnly to "chaff" the lad, and others took it up. "Nobody wouldn't give much for *your* chance o' bein' an old man,

midable mystic who had held a county in awe for a long lifetime.

He was not a bit haughty, moreover; on the contrary, a hint of a pint of "mild" brought him away from his work with great alacrity, and soon Buck Murrell was the most important person in Thundersley, surrounded by admiring friends, and waxing eloquent on the exploits of his father. He defied us, or anybody else, to name anything that his father couldn't do—anything in the whole universe.

"My father, genelmen, knowed more'n any o' the doctors an' parsons in England. There warn't a witch as could stand him, where-ever he went. Books, sir—why, bless you, I've got books as nobody couldn't read—nobody but my father. Often they've tried—doctors an' genelmen as claims to read anythin'—but no. Herbs, sir? aye, my father knowed every herb as growed. Herbs? ah, that he did."

"He cured 'em, Buck, den't he?" observed an admirer. "Ague and rheumatiz an' such, down in t' marshes, eh?"

"Cured 'em? Ay, there warn't nothin' as my father couldn't cure—just as you might be



a-sittin' there, sir. There was a Mr. Bird—he come to my father paralyzed an' eat up wi' scurvy. My father he says summat or does summat, an' Mr. Bird he stands up as healthy as me, an' gets a-hossback to ride home. Mr. Bird, sir, he puts down ten pound on the table—ten gold suvens on the spot, genelmen. So says my father, 'No,' says he, 'it aren't cost me nothin', sir, an' it sha'n't cost you!' But says Mr. Bird, 'Take it, Mr. Murr'll,' says he—the gentry folk always respected my father—'Take it, Mr. Murr'll, I sha'n't touch it agen,' says he, 'an' if you don't take it it'll be lost'—an' out he goes." And Buck Murrell applied himself again to his mug.

Many queer reminiscences were pumped out of the depth of the old man's memory by the united force of the assembled company—strangely mingled anecdotes of the cunning man; totally impossible myths being mingled with narratives of the simplest and most natural performances—all seeming equally wonderful in the eyes of the simple rustics. How, in a case pronounced incurable, he effected a cure by a charm which took seven years in operation, the operator never seeing the patient, nor, indeed, knowing where he might be, in the meantime; and how he had astounded the village constable (who had received a tremendous "turn" on suddenly coming upon the wise man standing ghost-like in a field studying the heavens) by naming a star and pointing it out, catalogued in a book. All about the wonderful glass with which one could see through a brick wall, which glass his father had enjoined Buck to keep, but to obtain which some gentleman curiously inclined had basely tempted him with half a sovereign—successfully; and how this same gentleman afterwards met poetic justice by swallowing

another half-sovereign, which killed him. This glass, by the way, had once been the subject of a private examination and taking apart at the hands of Steve Choppen, who informed me that it was nothing but a clumsily home-made arrangement of bits of looking-glass, such as might once have been bought at a toy-shop.

We brought the talk round to the matter of the present whereabouts of the books and papers, and it turned out, at last, that they were all in a chest, which chest was in a former lodging of Buck Murrell's at Hadleigh. And so we all went back to Mr. Cracknell's trap, to redeem the chest by payment of the debt that kept it from its owner. And on the way Buck Murrell undertook, by vague and complicated argument, to prove the existence of witchcraft now and for all time. The evil angels, said Buck, in effect, were cast out of Heaven, as we have it on indisputable authority. There is no record of their ever being received back again; consequently they must be somewhere—and there you are.

When at last the old wooden chest stood in the parlour of the Castle Inn, Buck Murrell unlocked it with a hushed and awful respect. All that was in this chest and other things as well had been circumspectly buried in the back garden of the cottage, after the cunning man's death, by his landlord. After this complete interment, the landlord, confident of having done a public service in putting out of the way for ever all the devilish and mischievous machinery of the departed wizard, went home, and Buck Murrell dug everything up again, and here most of it was.

The lid was lifted and set back. Within was the most confused jumble of dusty, heaped-up books and papers that mind's eye can picture; a jumble that the old man



"STUDYING THE HEAVENS."



regarded with as much awe as pride. Even as I afterwards found that many of the villagers regarded simple old Buck Murrell himself, whom they were ever careful to avoid displeasing.

Then came our plunge into that dusty old box, and our inspection of the heaps of

ments as to quantity and preparation corrected, in the wizard's small and crabbed handwriting. Particular care had been taken in all these books to indicate exactly at what hour and on what day various herbs were to be gathered and at what time prepared. The old gentleman also evidently

had the courage of his opinions in matters of astrology, for numerous copies of Raphael's almanac, dated between 1806 and 1850, were scrawled over and corrected in matters of prediction. If I spoke of one of these almanacs Buck Murrell would release his pipe from his mouth and say, "Almanacs, sir? Ah, my father could *make* almanacs, he could. He den't care for nobody, did my father; he was the devil's master, genelman!"

But the main interest of the whole collection lay in the manuscripts. Of these the first and chief were certain unbound homemade books, dealing with conjurations, astrology, and geomancy. The largest of these was a good-sized quarto of about fifty pages, with the title, "The book of Magic and Conjurations." The book set out with a particularization of the various angels of the planets and their functions on different days. Then many pages were devoted to a setting forth in straggling diagram of the sigils, spirits, intelligences, seals, and characters of the planets, with sacred pentacles and other cabalistic signs. Accompanying these were notes directing how the figures should be employed as talismans and amulets, and upon what metals they must be engraved. Two of these pages are here reproduced in facsimile. The rest of the book was a recital of the conjurations to be used in different circumstances and on different days—the terms of which tended to confirm Buck



"THEN CAME OUR PLUNGE INTO THAT DUSTY OLD BOX."

letters and papers—all the sorrow and sickness and bedevilment of Essex any time from ninety to forty years ago. Not to mention much of that of Kent, and even some in London.

There were many books of astrology, astronomy, and tables of ascensions; many old medical books and botanical and anatomical plates. A Bible and a Prayer-book, "New Tables of the Motions of the Planets, 1728"; many more such books, all adorned with numerous manuscript notes; and on the fly-leaves of "Hackett's Astronomy" Cunning Murrell had worked out the times of eclipses of the sun to the year 1912.

In the books of medical and herbal recipes Murrell had made a very large number of additions and alterations. Nicholas Culpepper's knowledge and authority were freely challenged, and his state-

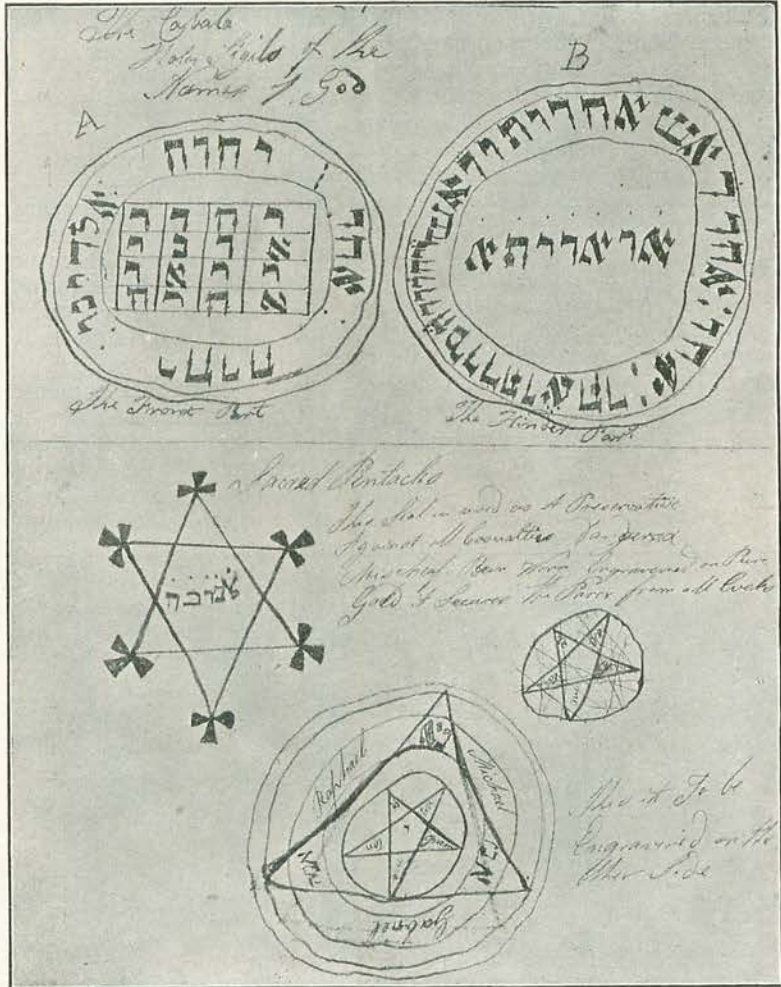


Murrell in his oft-repeated assurance that his father was a good wizard and not a dealer with the devil — “the devil’s master,” in fact, not his servant. Here is the general “conjuration of Wednesday,” exactly as written and spelt:—

“I Conjure and Call upon you ye Strong and Holy Angels Good and Powerfull in a Strong Name of Fear and Praise, Ja, Adonay, Elohim, Saday, Saday, Saday; Eie, Eie, Eie; Asamie, Asamie; and in the Name of Adonay the God of Israel who hath made the Two Great Lights and Distinguished Day from Night for the benefit of his creatures and by the names of all the Discerning Angels Governing Openly in the Second House, before the great angel Tetra, Strong

and Powerfull, and by the name of his star which is called Mercury and by the name of his Seal which is that of a Powerfull and Honoured God; and I call upon thee Raphael and by the names (abovementioned) thou Great Angel who presidest over the Fourth Day and by the Holy Name which is written in the front of Aaron created the Most High Priest and by the names of all the Angels who are constant in the Grace of Christ and by the name of Ammalium that you assist me in my labours.”

Two other of these manuscript books were something of a large duodecimo in size, but much thicker than the book of magic and conjurations. When I opened the first of these, Buck Murrell, doubtless recognising an old friend, said: “Now, there’s a book, sir—that’s a bit beyond ye, I’ll bet. Doctors



A PAGE OF THE BOOK OF CONJURATIONS, WITH SIGLS AND PENTACLES.

can't read he, nor nobody. That's witchcraft, sir, that book!"

It was not witchcraft, but astrology. A great mass of observations and notes on almost every possible combination of the planets, all in the familiar crabbed handwriting, with here and there a horoscope in diagram.

The other small book was one of geomancy. This was the art which Murrell used to find lost property and coerce thieves into restitution. A great deal was claimed for this system of divination—so much, in fact, as to make one wonder that the wise man had any necessity for astrology. It would “resolve any question or doubt whatsoever”; it would “tell truth from falsehood and the place of anything.” The system was a complicated and obscure one. The



names of the persons seeking information, of the articles lost, and of any other chief element in the "doubt or question," were written out, and various numerical values were assigned to the letters; these numerical values were manipulated until a symmetrical little group of noughts and crosses was evolved, and the shape, number, and disposition of these noughts and crosses conveyed to the eye of the seer the solution of the difficulty. The noughts seemed to convey the good and the crosses the bad auguries. The book contained a large number of examples of these signs, as they might occur in matters of fortune-telling, with their meanings. Here is a copy of one of these auguries—a pleasant one to read, being the most favourable the book contained—all noughts:

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o o           o o           o o
o o           o o           o o
o o           o o           o o
o            o o           o
  
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Question.	Answer.
Life.....	Long.
Money .....	Very fortunate.
Honour .....	Good.
Business .....	Fortunate.
Marriage .....	Fortunate.
Children.....	Daughter.
Sickness.....	Health.
Journey.....	Good.
Things lost.....	Found.

While I was copying this, and the form of conjuration previously set down, Buck Murrell neglected his beer and regarded my proceedings with respectful uneasiness. I have a notion that he rather feared that my copying might deprive the books of some part of their mystic virtues.

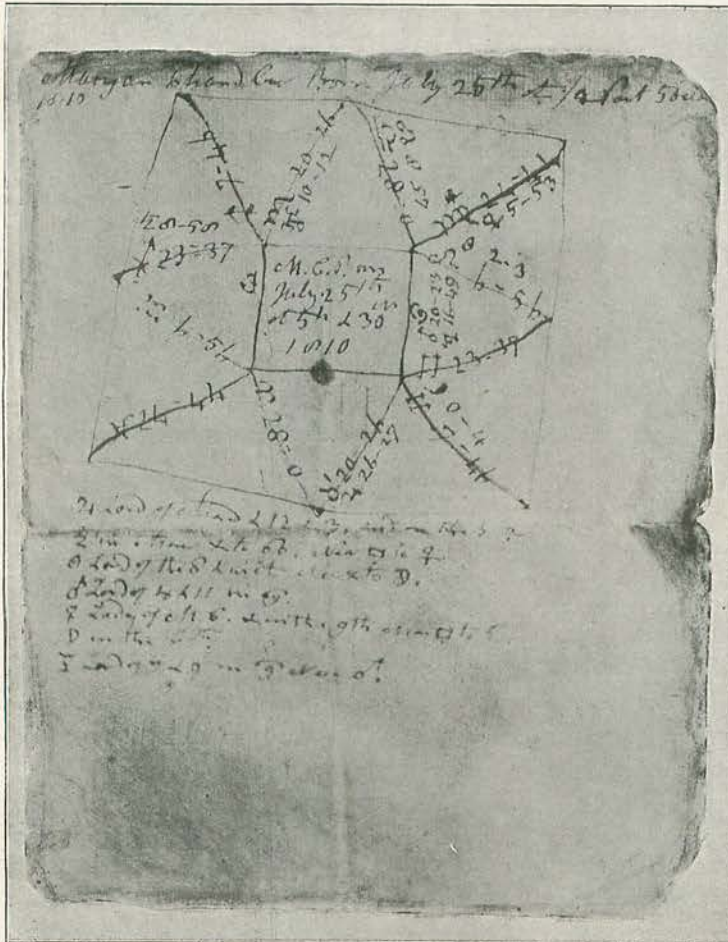
Among the immense heap of odd letters and scraps of paper there must have been hundreds of slips used for the geomantic process. One side of a piece of paper would be covered with strokes in groups of from two to six, each group being terminated by a dot, these strokes expressing the values of the letters in the question, and the whole being concluded by the result, something in this fashion:—

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x
o o
o x
o o
  
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Then there would follow, probably on the other side of the paper, an elaborate form of conjuration, calling upon all the angels of the day to afflict the thief (should it be a case of a thief) with miscellaneous discomforts until the plunder were restored.

In this same immense heap of odd scraps of paper there was a large and wonderful variety. Cunning Murrell did much writing and calculation, and he used whatever piece of paper came to hand—an envelope, the back of an old letter, a tradesman's bill, or



A SPECIMEN OF CUNNING MURRELL'S HOROSCOPIES.



anything at all that was paper. Any number of loose sheets contained horoscopes — Murrell must have cast a scheme of nativity for almost everyone in South Essex in his time. Many other scraps, again, contained exorcisms and conjurations. Among them I came upon the “whole bag of tricks” employed in the case of Sarah Mott, as to whose bewitching and subsequent relief from evil influence I had heard from an old lady in the district. First there was Sarah Mott’s scheme of nativity. Then there was another horoscope, cast for the exact moment of her first evil seizure. After this there was an immensely long conjuration calling upon the great Tetragrammaton and the whole host of Heaven to “drive out from Sarah Mott all evil spirits in the service of the Devil and to punish the witch who had put the harm upon her, but ten thousand times more to scarify and torture all the spirits of evil in bitterness of Great Wrath.” The end of all this, apparently, having been satisfactory, an amulet was next provided for her subsequent protection, and on still another piece of paper appeared the “charm and conjuration to bless” this amulet, and “to prevent all evil spirits that have power to hurt said Sarah Mott, whether directed by Sarah Dropty or any other witch or wizard.”

Marian Tretfords, too, had “tormented and bedevilled and bewitched and laid devilish powers on Benjamin Brown,” wherefore mighty powers were called upon to “dispel all the wicked enchantments and spells, and scatter them like chaff and dust and feathers before the wind.”

Then there were conjurations for any number of other purposes. George Abrams had promised to marry Susannah Sewell and failed of his pledge. Whereupon Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were adjured to bring the said George Abrams back, and allow him no peace on earth till he should marry said Susannah Sewell.

Cunning Murrell kept little bits of private information, too, in this chest. Any particulars of the life or circumstances of anybody whatsoever which came to his ears were carefully noted down, and then, should it ever chance that this person or any of his connections came for cunning advice, Mr. Murrell could startle his client with his knowledge, and secure another undoubting disciple.

And in the midst of all this hocus-pocus, all this extraordinary farrago of trickery and real knowledge of thaumaturgic systems, were two other carefully cherished manu-

script books. They were two of Cunning Murrell’s school books of a century back. One was “James Murrell his Copy Book,” and the other “James Murrell’s Ciphering.” On the cover of the smudgy copy-book the guileless school-boy had stuck a picture of a Prussian hussar at full gallop, cut from a sheet of “penny plain and twopence coloured” figures, and on the unoccupied spaces of the ciphering book the man of mystic lore, years afterwards, had worked horoscopes and divinations by geomancy.

I had wondered at a mere village cobbler possessing the knowledge of mathematics, astronomy, and botany which many of Murrell’s notes and manuscripts displayed, but my wonder had been somewhat lessened by Buck’s information that his father had been a stillman at a London chemist’s. Now I found an indenture which set forth that, after his release from school, James Murrell was bound, for a premium of £10, to a surveyor, Mr. G. Emans, of Burnham. I also found another paper, dated 1823, which showed that the wise man was not above the petty afflictions of common humanity, and, in fact, had “had the brokers in” for a year’s rent — £4 — of the cottage at Hadleigh.

Then the letters! Never was raked together such a heap of superstition, credulity, anxiety, and touching faith. Who would expect to see among the correspondence of a “wise man” in a dark corner of Essex many letters from an educated woman living in Eaton Square, asking for astrological predictions, charms for sickness, and the fate of lost articles? Yet here they were. And after all, Cunning Murrell probably came cheaper than a Bond Street palmist or clairvoyant of to-day.

Marvellous faith in Murrell’s healing powers was testified by long sequences of letters from all parts, often reporting either no change in the patient or one for the worse, yet breathing no syllable of doubt, but praying for more charms, more herbs, more spells, more anything to save the sick and dying. Many were the quaintnesses in the various letters. “I have took the powder it made me verrey queer in the stummuk pleas send sum more,” said somebody, and another letter ran:—

“Mr. Murl’s i have rote these few lines to ask you if you can tell us weather their is aney mony or Not hid in my fathers garden he is bin ded 4 years name william duce of mayland pleas say how much and what to pay you.”

Another letter, with a superscription to the



postman—"haste haste with all speed," was from someone who reported that the devils had not yet been driven out of the house, and there was still so heavy a smell and smoke of sulphur that all windows had to be left open.

Here is a quaintly pathetic letter from Mary Ann D—, whose name I will not print in full in case she or the one she so loved still lives in some quiet cottage in her part of the country, where few seem to die younger than eighty:—

"SIR,—The spring is nearly gone but no sign of happiness for me yet. Deceit deepens upon me. The one I most wish to see happy is unsettled; some trouble presses upon his mind. Send me word whether I shall ever see him and tell him I am true.

"Speak openly to the person who brings this. Tell her the truth.

"And I will repay you,  
"MARY ANN D—."

But to describe or even to catalogue half the queer notes and scraps in this old chest would fill a small book. The odd recipes, the memoranda of the character, ages, and circumstances of all kinds of people, the letters inclosing "some more hair and finger-nails," the entreaties of the true lovers upon whose feelings Cunning Murrell played as upon a dulcimer, the requests of farmers to destroy the bedevilment which was upon their cows and crops—all would defy enumeration within reasonable limits.

A phial or two of some sort of powder and one or two queer little tin instruments, the use whereof no man knows, were all else in the box beside: the papers and books. Other memorials of Murrell have been scattered about the county; Mr. Philip Benton, the historian of the district—now dead—had two human skulls phrenologically marked, and certain of the wizard's books; and still, ten years ago among the old women and the farm servants of Rochford Hundred the name of Cunning Murrell was one of awe.

We closed the chest and turned to Buck—the simple heir to all the glamour and mystery, to a certain amount of the awe. There he sat, good simple soul, with his pipe and his mug of ale, and his shock head of white hair, placidly happy in the importance of his redoubtable father, and proud in the interest shown in him so long after his death.

Buck Murrell told us of this death, and still with pride. On his deathbed his father held learned disputations with the Reverend John Godson, the curate, and maintained the reality of his mystic powers to the last. He triumphed over spiritual advisers with Talmudic and cabalistic questions, and to his daughter he prophesied the moment of his death precisely, a day and a few hours before it came to pass.

There at the east side of the little Norman church of Hadleigh Cunning Murrell lay, with twenty of his children about him, and Buck Murrell showed us the place; for it was marked by no stone—not even by the humblest wooden memorial. Even the mounds had sunk, and nothing but a brighter green in the turf marked the place of each grave. And now I believe not even that remains.

Many other things I learned of Cunning Murrell later, and of many of the people he lived with; so many, indeed, that I wrote a story about it all, with Cunning Murrell's name for title, and I trust that if any of my old Essex friends recognise themselves in my book they will not think I have treated them unkindly; for, indeed, they have all been very kind to me, and not least those who are now gone beyond reach of my thanks.

"You know now about my father, sir," said Buck Murrell. "Remember, sir, he were a good man—enemy to all witches, an' the devil's master. He never *put on*—he took off. Remember that, sir." And I have tried to remember it well.

