

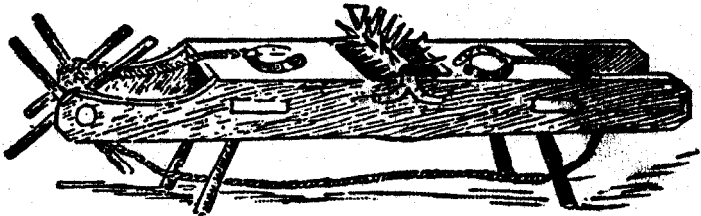
# THUMBSCREW AND RACK.

TORTURE IMPLEMENTS EMPLOYED IN THE XVth AND XVth CENTURIES.

FOR THE PROMULGATION OF CHRISTIANITY

BY

*Geo. E. Macdonald*



THE NUREMBERG COLLECTION, INCLUDING SPECIMENS FROM  
THE HOLY INQUISITION.

NEW YORK  
THE TRUTH SEEKER COMPANY  
38 PARK ROW

Reproduced in electronic form 1998  
Bank of Wisdom  
P.O. Box 926  
Louisville, KY 40201 U.S.A.

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GEORGE B. MACDONALD

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is to again make the United States the  
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Emmett F. Fields

## THUMBSCREW AND RACK.

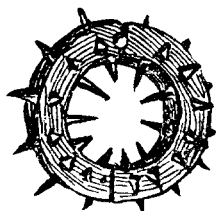
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“**I** USED to read in books,” says Colonel Ingersoll, “how our fathers persecuted mankind. But I never appreciated it. I read it, but it did not burn itself into my soul. I did not really appreciate the infamies that have been committed in the name of religion until I saw the iron arguments that Christians used. I saw the ‘thumbscrew’—two little pieces of iron, armed on the inner surfaces with protuberances to prevent their slipping; through each end a screw uniting the two pieces. And when some man denied the efficacy of baptism, or maybe said, ‘I do not believe that a fish ever swallowed a man to keep him from drowning;’ then they put his thumb between these pieces of iron, and in the name of universal love and forgiveness began to screw these pieces together. When this was done most men said, ‘I will recant.’” “The man who would not recant was not forgiven. They screwed the thumbscrews down to the last pang, and then threw their victim into some dungeon, where, in the throbbing silence and darkness, he might suffer the agonies of the fabled damned. This was done in the name of love—in the name of mercy—in the

name of the compassionate Christ. I saw, too, what they called the 'collar of torture.' Imagine a circle of iron, and on the inside a hundred points almost as sharp as needles. This argument was fastened about the throat of the sufferer. Then he could not walk, nor sit down, nor stir, without the neck being punctured by these points. In a little while the throat would begin to swell, and suffocation would end the agonies of that man. This man, it may be, had committed the crime of saying, with tears upon his cheeks, 'I do not believe that God, the father of us all, will damn to eternal perdition any of the children of men.' I saw another instrument, called the 'scavenger's daughter.' Think of a pair of shears with handles not only where they now are but at the points as well, and just above the pivot that unites the blades a circle of iron. In the upper handles the hands would be placed; in the lower, the feet; and through the ring at the center the head of the victim would be forced. In this condition he would be thrown prone upon the earth, and the strain upon the muscles produced such agony that insanity would in pity end his pain. I saw the 'rack.' This was a box like the bed of a wagon, with a windlass at each end, with levers and ratchets to prevent slipping; over each windlass went chains; some were fastened to the ankles of the sufferer; others to his wrists. And then priests, clergymen, divines, saints, began turning these windlasses, and kept turning until the ankles, the knees, the hips, the shoulders, the elbows, the wrists of the victim were all dislocated and the sufferer was wet with the sweat of agony. And they had standing by a physician to feel his pulse. What for? To save his life? Yes. In mercy? No; simply that they might rack him once again."

All these instruments of torture, these means of grace, as seen by Colonel Ingersoll, have been on exhibition in New York city. They were arranged for inspection in a hall at Sixth avenue and Twenty-

third street. The exhibit does not consist of duplicates or *fac similes* of the instruments of torture, but of the original instruments themselves,



SPANISH COLLAR.

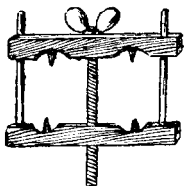
which in the past did the deadly and infamous work of breaking the bones and tearing the flesh of human beings. They are mostly from the royal castle of Nuremberg, in Bavaria, but include Spanish and Italian specimens. The collar introduced here, it will be noted, is a Spanish article—a piece of bric-

a-brac from the Holy Inquisition. The thumbscrews mentioned by the colonel were there. I saw them not long ago, and the sight of them corrected my impressions of what thumbscrews are. I had in some way got the erroneous notion that thumbscrews were intended solely for compressing thumbs and that they took their name from the members compressed. That, I now conclude, is not so, because they may be used on the wrists, legs, or head, or to prize the offender's teeth apart so that the "blasphemous" tongue may be torn out with pincers furnished with still other thumbscrews. These instruments are of various sizes; but, being always worked by a thumbscrew, like that which spreads and closes a pair of dividers for describing circles, or like those which fasten a clothes wringer on a washtub and depress the upper roller, they are all called *thumb* screws. The prevailing style used on the fingers and thumbs of prisoners are made of two pieces of iron about three inches long, and two short rods. The rods are riveted in one of the flat pieces;

A FAVORITE  
STYLE.

the other piece has a hole in each end so that it may slide up and down on the rods. Between the two rods is the thumbscrew, which is turned to bring the upper and lower pieces together. The inner

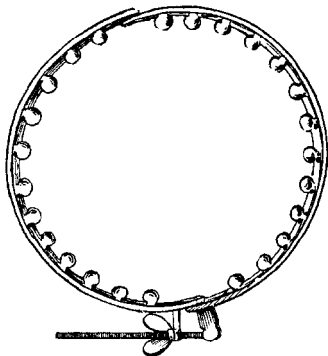
sides of the two latter are sometimes roughened like the sole of a rubber boot, so that the flesh is pierced by blunt protuberances; others have little



spikes that penetrate the upper and lower sides of the thumbs. I here present my drawing of one of these, which I have christened a "Happy Thought." The large ones crush the shin bones, or the bones of the wrists. There is also an open iron band with knobs

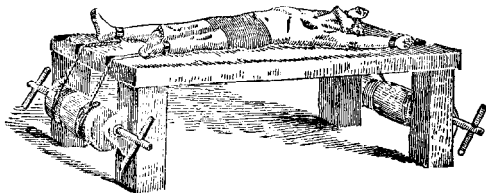
A HAPPY THOUGHT.

on the inside, put on the head and tightened by means of the thumbscrew, pressing the knobs against the skull. This is called the "iron crown," and was worn by religious martyrs on the way to execution. Here again appears the deadly thumbscrew, which runs through the whole system of religious torture as the cross runs through the system of worship. A comparison of the influence of the one and



FOR THE HEAD—KNOBBY CROWN.

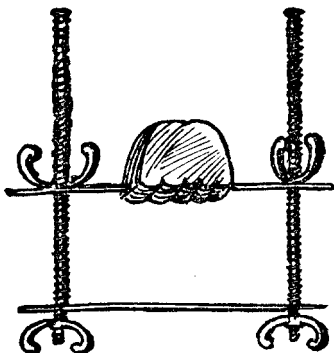
of the other upon the growth of Christianity might be decided in favor of the screw.



THE PLAIN RACK.

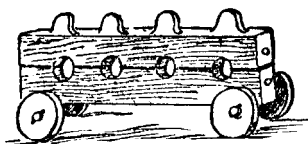
The plain, every-day rack, for simple stretching

purposes, was without the spiked roller. As shown by this copy of an old print, they hauled the victim taut and left him to suffer.



LEG CRUSHER.

Stocks for ordinary offenders were less diabolical than those in which offenders against heaven—that



THE STOCKS.

is to say, the church—were fastened; nevertheless, the agony inflicted by them must have been something horrible. Whether the four apertures in these stocks were used for confining the feet of two persons at the same time, or whether they received both the hands and feet of a single individual, I have no way of knowing.

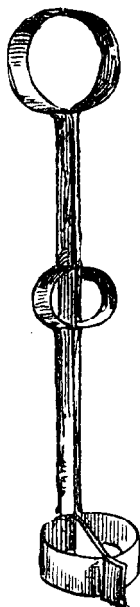
The collar of torture is as described in the foregoing quotation from Ingersoll, except that in some specimens the iron spikes on the inner side have springs back of them to maintain a constant pressure on the neck of the wearer. The dead spikes would appear to be bad enough, but rendering them alive and perpetually active by means of the springs is an ingenious refinement of cruelty that I was not



prepared for. I imagine that a sensitive person looking upon this instrument could almost feel the points puncturing the skin of his neck. It made me run my finger around inside my collar to press it away from my throat.

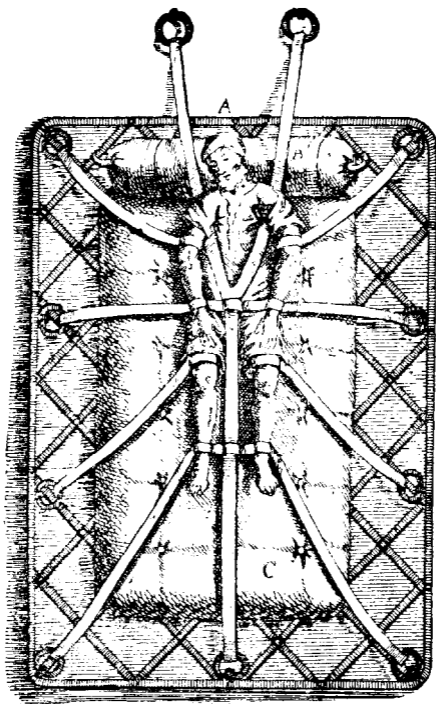
The scavenger's daughter noted by Ingersoll is a horror, but how about torture stocks with accommodations for the neck as well as for the wrists and ankles, like this?

Then the rack, like the wagon bed with the windlass at one end for stretching the joints of the sufferer and drawing him forward and backward. This apparatus in the present collection is furnished with a spiked wooden roller placed across the bed under the victim's middle. The spikes on one of them are sometimes blunt and merely bruise the flesh, but this roller can be exchanged for another (see cover, "The Rack") called the "spiked hare," the points of which are sharpened, and these would puncture a man's flesh to a depth of two or three inches if he lay upon his back. If turned on his face, they would disembowel him.



TORTURE  
STOCKS.

The picture of a man secured to his bed is comparatively modern, and is introduced here to show the kind of torture employed only one hundred and twenty-five years ago. It represents a Frenchman named Damiens "chained to his iron bed, on which he was carried to the judgment chamber, and on which he could be tortured without being released." Damiens interfered in a quarrel between the pope and the king of France. Before being put to death, his flesh was torn and molten lead, wax, and boiling oil poured into his wounds. The picture is a rare one.



DAMIEN'S IRON BED.

But the rack was not the only system in vogue for stretching men's limbs and joints. The accom-



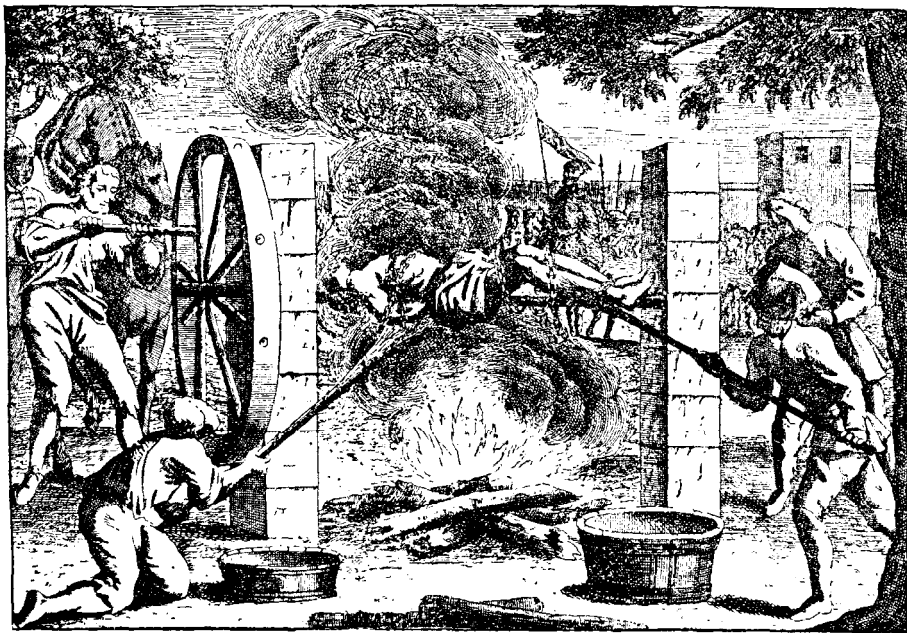
GELEYN CORNELIUS.

panying illustration, which shows another method, is from a historic engraving of "Geleyn Cornelius, hung by his thumb with weight to his feet, 1572." Cornelius was afterwards burnt. The engraving from which I obtain the picture of Cornelius hanging by the thumb is inclusive enough to show the victim's torturers seated at a table playing cards! No doubt it is historically accurate.

A third stretching machine appears in "A Specimen Group." The feet are either weighted or lashed to ring-bolts in the floor. The wrists are made fast to the triangle, and then—the windlass is turned! Alongside "Fearful Eliza," as this stretching gallows is called, is a chair. Will you take a seat long enough to reconsider the views you have expressed about the whale story? Will you sit down and reflect that after

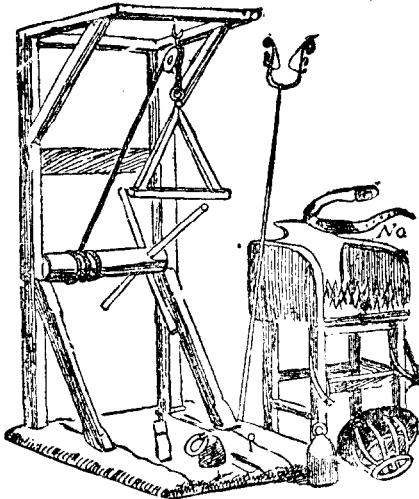
all Joshua may have "held up" the sun for a day? The spikes in the seat will prevent you from slipping out, while the strap will see to it that you do not arise until you have had plenty of time to think of your latter end.\*

\* See cut, "A Specimen Group," on page 12.



“HE WAS AFTERWARDS BURNT” (See Gelyn Cornelius, p. 10)

This chair and gallows, like many of the other devices, bear testimony that sometime they were applied to the purpose for which they were constructed, being worn in a manner that could come only from use.

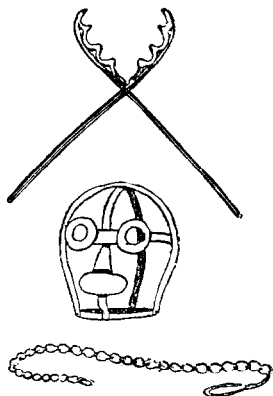


A SPECIMEN GROUP.

The crown just in front of the chair in the "Specimen Group" is of iron, susceptible of being heated. Back of the chair is a constable's thief-catcher. It is not spiked inside like the heretic-catcher, stealing being a minor offense compared with a failure to be orthodox. Presumably, if the fugitive had only committed murder, the instrument would be lined with fur.

Among the instruments of torture is a mouth-opener used on blasphemers. It is made of two small iron plates. These are inserted between the

upper and lower teeth and spread apart by turning the deadly screw. The



A TRINITY.

of a snake is a metal scourge. This trinity was in its time of material service in stimulating the worship of that heavenly Trinity in whose name the implements were manufactured and applied. There was a perforated iron spoon for dropping hot lead upon naked bodies.

The instruments for flaying do not indicate that a victim was skinned after the fashion adopted by butchers of cattle. The man or woman was strung up by the hands or feet, while the skin, with the flesh adhering to it, was dragged off with pronged hooks.

Some of the torture implements are of polished steel, damascened with pious inscriptions. The shackles especially are punctured with holes in the form of a cross. Among the irons used for branding, the letter "U" predominates, which in most languages means unbeliever. The little coal stove in which the branding iron was heated, together with the bellows used for blowing up the fire in it, are exhibited. Executioners' swords are numerous and ornamental. The average blade

jaws being thus forced open molten lead was turned down the throat or the tongue caught with pincers and either slitted, torn out, or cut off. The pincers used for this purpose have hooked teeth like the fangs of a serpent. The vicious little group which I have labeled "a trinity" includes the pincers for removing the tongue. The second member is a mask (put on red-hot); and the thing that looks like the skeleton

is some two feet nine inches in length by two and three-fourths inches in width. The end is blunt as though broken square off, and the handle is made to be grasped with both hands. The con-



FOR JESUS'S SAKE.

demned one sat in a chair, with bowed head; the executioner whirled his blade in the air and if sufficiently strong and expert severed the neck at a blow. The swords are piously inscribed with the names of the deity and Christ, or with rhymes that may be freely translated about like these:

O God, this sinner to thy kingdom take  
That he may taste of joy, for J<sup>e</sup>sus' sake.

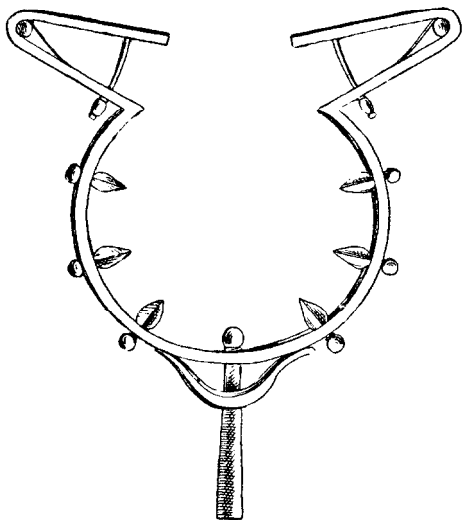
Or,

Christ is the judge, and I the instrument,  
To execute God's law from heaven sent.

Or again,

When I upraise the fatal knife,  
God give the sinner eternal life.

They had a heretic and witch catcher—a hoop on

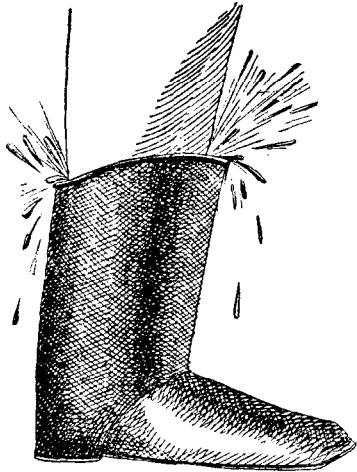


HERETIC CATCHER.

the end of a pole. The ends of the hoop at the aperture were so arranged that they opened when the thing was pushed upon the neck; then they sprung together again. Some of them were provided with a spike in the ferrule, with which the constable could prod the culprit's shoulders as he pushed him along. The superstition of the days when this instrument was in use is revealed in the belief that there was some spell about witches and heretics making it dangerous to lay hands upon them. Hence the variety of devices like the one shown above for avoiding direct contact.



Large iron boots, to be put on red-hot or filled with melted lead after they were donned, occur frequently. I present an exact drawing of the "Iron Boot." Wire mail mittens and hose were used for extorting confessions, and were always worn hot. The Spanish gag to prevent prisoners from crying out while undergoing torture looks somewhat like a bell slit into sections. The appliance being thrust into the mouth,

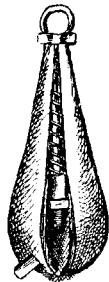


THE IRON BOOT.

a spring is released, which spreads the sections and distends the jaws. This religious device is called a mouth-pear. Another gag resembles a policeman's club, but the lower end of it is composed of hinged sections which are spread by turning the handle. It is a distinguishing characteristic of the devices for harassing unbelievers that they are almost universally lined with sharp points or spikes. There is a belt made of wire and called the "penitent's girdle," with teeth on the inside like those of the "card" used on cattle, only they are straight. The penitent's crown, collar, armet, wristlet, and manacle are all made with special reference to puncturing the skin and flesh.



THE HOT MITTEN.



MOUTH-PEAR.

For blasphemers an iron brank or mask is provided. It was heated before being placed on the head of the wearer. This device is highly recommended "by the holy Inquisition." It has funnels at the orifices of the ears for the more convenient introduction of melted lead.

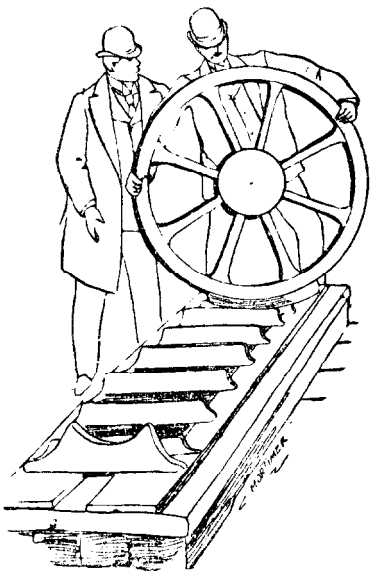


RECOMMENDED  
BY THE HOLY  
INQUISITION.

“Breaking on the wheel” is illustrated with a bed made like a corduroy road. The cross pieces are six inches apart, and the upper sides of them are sharp. The victim is laid along this bed, and bound down. The executioner takes a wheel with a heavy iron at the lower portion of its circumference, stands astride the condemned, and brings the iron down upon him at points above the spaces between the cross-pieces, breaking every bone in the victim's body.

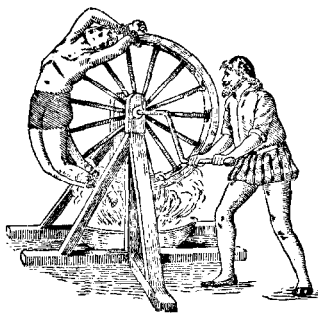
I am indebted to the New York *World* artist for the illustration of the wheel and bed.

The process of burning on the wheel, of which the



BREAKING ON THE WHEEL.

illustration here used is from an old and rare en-

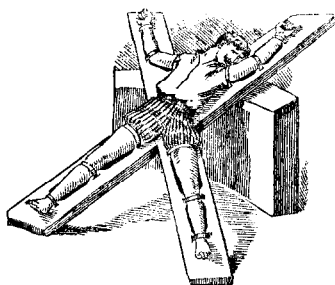


BURNING AT THE WHEEL.

gravings, shows us that sometimes the executioner varied the monotony of crushing a man's bones by roasting his flesh.

One instrument for execution is an upright plank, the top end beveled on both sides like the point of a cold chisel, or like an inverted V. The offender sat astride this upright plank, with heavy weights attached to his feet, and was gradually split in halves. That is the "Spanish Donkey."

A twin brother of the Spanish Donkey is a sort of quartering machine, composed of two planks pivoted



QUARTERING MACHINE.

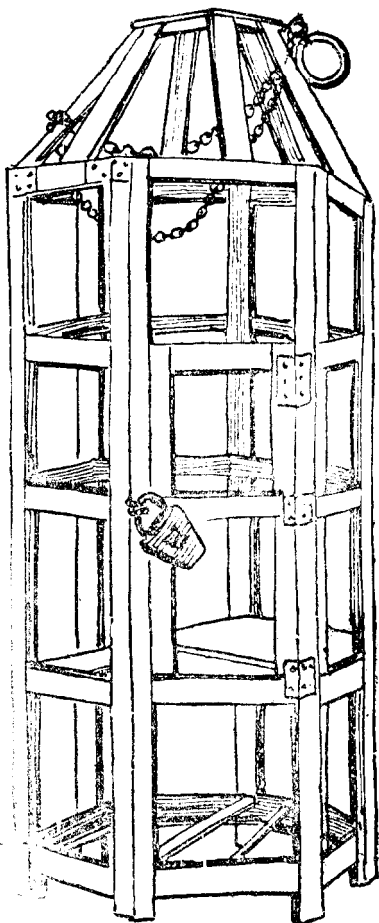
where they cross in the middle. Upon these a man might be stretched as shown in the accompanying cut, and the planks turned at right angles to each other, so that the victim was not only crucified but torn limb from limb. This cut is from an ancient print.

The church often claims to have been the repository of education and art during the Middle Ages. Whether or not that claim is true, she was apparently the patron of mechanics, since about all the inventions by which the era is marked were made under her auspices for the torturing of unbelievers.

The "cradle of unrest," used to induce children to testify against their parents, is a cradle, covered

inside with wooden spikes. The head-rest or cushion, also spiked, is movable, and the torture inflicted upon a child or youth rocked in this diabolical machine would doubtless make him commit perjury in self-defense.

Instruments of torture thus far described were used impartially, it is presumed, on both men and women, but there are a few which may be put in a special female department. For example: the "Ducking Stool Cage." Inside of the cage will be seen a seat; to this the offending woman was bound. Then, suspended by the ring and chains, the cage was lowered into the water, and the inmate "ducked" until half-drown-

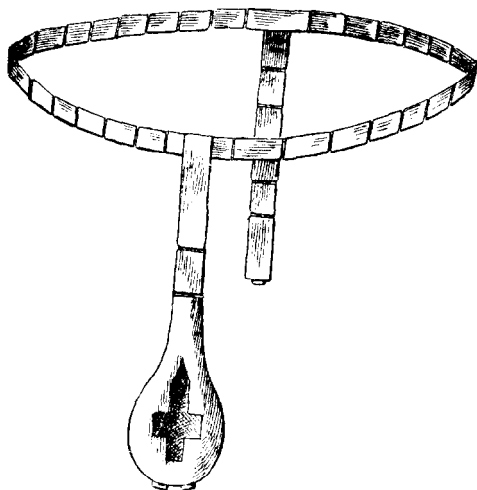


THE DUCKING STOOL CAGE.

ed. Before life was extinct she was hauled up, only to be doused again as soon as she had recov-

ered her breath. It was held by the priests, who ruled the home, that in this manner the lady would be made amiable and chaste, so far as other men were concerned, and complaisant toward the servants of God.

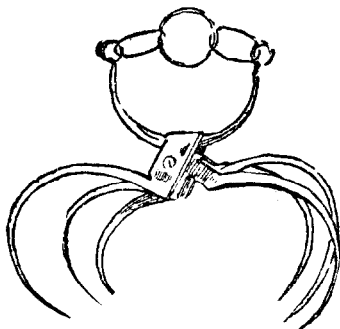
There are in the collection a large assortment of collars for scolds, and masks and branks for witches, but a device that seems about as abominable as anything to be imagined is the so-called "chastity belt." Some of these belts are wound with cloth, and show by the stains on them that they have been



CHASTITY BELT.

actually worn. But one is of rough and rusty hoop-iron, and there are teeth on it like those of a saw, pointing inward. Christian women should turn with a tender yearning toward the time when the church ruled the world and prescribed punishments, and long for those happy days to come once more.

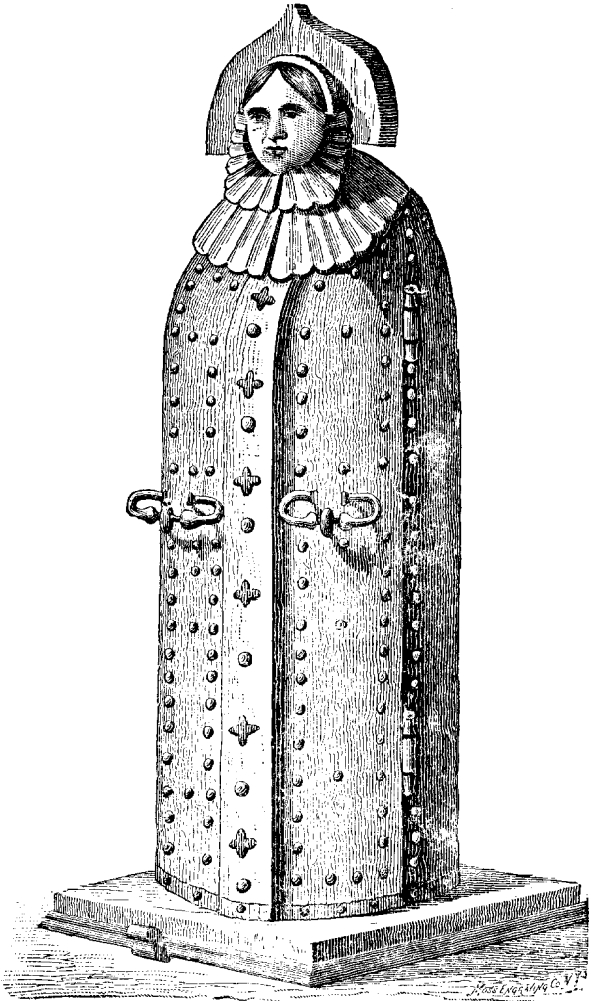
If not enough has been said let the women gaze on this horrible piece of ingenuity, the spider. It is a cluster of steel hooks pointed like needles. It is designed to be spread over the breast of the wo-



THE SPIDER.

man; the hand of the torturer grasps the central ring, drawing the points together, and then the flesh is torn away. And the Father of Mercies permitted this thing to be done in his name and under his all-seeing eye.

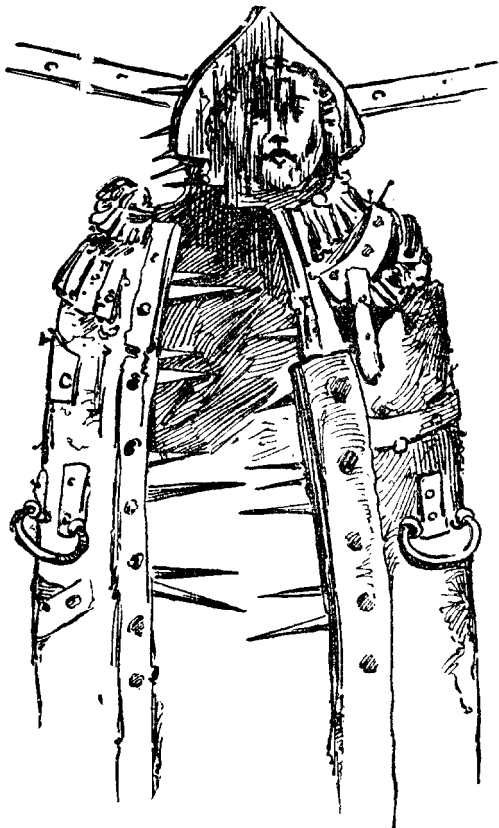
As the church made a virgin the vehicle for bringing its alleged founder into the world, it naturally made another one the instrument for putting its enemies out of the world. Hence was invented the "Iron Virgin." This chaste creature is preserved in a glass case. She is probably eight feet tall and nine feet in girth. She wears a cloak of wood and iron, which opens in front, revealing an interior lined with spikes shaped like harrow teeth, seven or eight inches in length and sharp as bayonets. Iron handles swing the virgin open and disclose the spikes. The figure stood above a trap-door opening into a moat or ditch, so that when the spikes let go of it the corpse dropped into the water and floated away. The spikes are not as numerous as some sketches of the virgin would indicate, but



THE IRON VIRGIN AS SHE WAS.

they are located where they will do the most damage. Two are apparently intended to enter the eyes, others the chest, and still others the abdomen. The virgin was the avenger of offenses against the church, such as doubt or unbelief.

This relic dates from some time in the fifteenth century and its habitat was Nuremberg. It is the

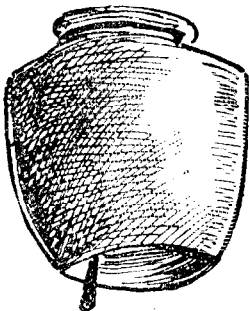


THE IRON VIRGIN UP TO DATE



only one ever made, and it is not in a remarkably good state of preservation. The wood, probably four hundred and fifty years old, is rotting, and the nose of the virgin has disappeared. The iron is rusty and crumbling where the wood has fallen away from it. The whole image, in fact, is typical of the faith in whose interest it was conceived and constructed, though it has outlasted the power which made it a terror. Despite her decay, the iron maiden's embrace would still be deadly. The spikes that once punctured the brain and heart of the heretic retain their ability to pierce, though the hands that actuated them have been dust for centuries. The doors might still swing inward to enfold the form of the unbeliever, but there is none that dares to close them upon him in the name of God. To the Christian the figure must be a melancholy emblem of the golden days of the church that can no more return than the exhumed monsters of prehistoric times can be reanimated and made to walk the earth.

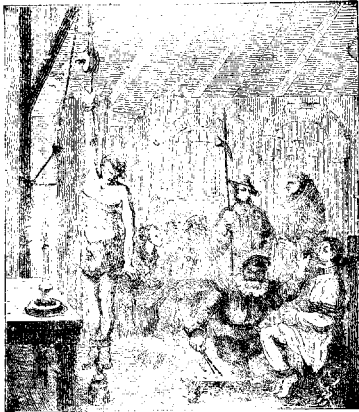
Such are a few of the instruments of torture and death in the collection I have attempted to describe. Visitors walk about the hall, catalogue in hand, with funereal quietness, as though the place were a



graveyard. At stated intervals they are called from a contemplation of rusty relics by the ringing of an unmusical bell. It may be a little startling to persons who happen to be reading the description of Exhibit No. 632: "This bell was rung while the condemned was taken to the block or scaffold." But it rings now only to call the visitors to their seats and listen to a lecture, by Professor Freeland, on what they have

THE EXECUTION BELL.

been contemplating. So that, if we class the ordinary stereotyped *musée* lecture among instruments of torture, as inflicting cruel and unusual, and therefore unconstitutional, punishment upon American citizens, we have to admit that the function of this bell has been mitigated. It ought sometime to toll the funeral knell of a religion which lags superfluous, whose fundamental dogmas have been discarded, and whose most effective means of grace have become the showman's stock in trade.



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