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Demonology and Devil-Lore

Moncure Daniel Conway (1832–1907), the son of a Virginian plantation-owner, became a Unitarian minister but his anti-slavery views made him controversial. He later became a freethinker, and following the outbreak of the Civil War, which deeply divided his own family, he left the United States for England in 1863. He gained a reputation for being the ‘least orthodox preacher in London’, and was acquainted with many figures in the literary and scientific world, including Charles Dickens and Charles Darwin. In this two-volume work, first published in 1879, Conway draws from examples across the world to discuss the origins and decline of beliefs in demons. In Volume 1, he classifies types of demon and argues that the various types are personifications of the main obstacles to ‘primitive man’: he finds in mythology across the world examples of animal demons and demons of hunger, fire and disease.

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Demonology and Devil-Lore

VOLUME 1

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DEMONOLOGY

AND

DEVIL-LORE

BY

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WITH NUMEROUS ILLUSTRATIONS

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P R E F A C E.

THREE Friars, says a legend, hid themselves near the Witch Sabbath orgies that they might count the devils; but the Chief of these, discovering the friars, said—‘Reverend Brothers, our army is such that if all the Alps, their rocks and glaciers, were equally divided among us, none would have a pound’s weight.’ This was in one Alpine valley. Any one who has caught but a glimpse of the world’s Walpurgis Night, as revealed in Mythology and Folklore, must agree that this courteous devil did not overstate the case. Any attempt to catalogue the evil spectres which have haunted mankind were like trying to count the shadows cast upon the earth by the rising sun. This conviction has grown upon the author of this work at every step in his studies of the subject.

In 1859 I contributed, as one of the American ‘Tracts for the Times,’ a pamphlet entitled ‘The Natural History of the Devil.’ Probably the chief value of that essay was to myself, and this in that its preparation had revealed to me how pregnant with interest and importance was the subject selected. Subsequent researches in the same direction, after I had come to reside in Europe, revealed how slight had been my conception of the vastness of the domain upon which that early venture was made. In 1872, while preparing a series of lectures for the Royal

Institution on Demonology, it appeared to me that the best I could do was to print those lectures with some notes and additions; but after they were delivered there still remained with me unused the greater part of materials collected in many countries, and the phantasmal creatures which I had evoked would not permit me to rest from my labours until I had dealt with them more thoroughly.

The fable of Thor's attempt to drink up a small spring, and his failure because it was fed by the ocean, seems aimed at such efforts as mine. But there is another aspect of the case which has yielded me more encouragement. These phantom hosts, however unmanageable as to number, when closely examined, present comparatively few types; they coalesce by hundreds; from being at first overwhelmed by their multiplicity, the classifier finds himself at length beating bushes to start a new variety. Around some single form — the physiognomy, it may be, of Hunger or Disease, of Lust or Cruelty—ignorant imagination has broken up nature into innumerable bits which, like mirrors of various surface, reflect the same in endless sizes and distortions; but they vanish if that central fact be withdrawn.

In trying to conquer, as it were, these imaginary monsters, they have sometimes swarmed and gibbered around me in a mad comedy which travestied their tragic sway over those who believed in their reality. Gargoyles extended their grin over the finest architecture, cornices coiled to serpents, the very words of speakers started out of their conventional sense into images that tripped my attention. Only as what I believed right solutions were given to their problems were my sphinxes laid; but through this psychological experience it

PREFACE.

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appeared that when one was so laid his or her legion disappeared also. Long ago such phantasms ceased to haunt my nerves, because I discovered their unreality; I am now venturing to believe that their mythologic forms cease to haunt my studies, because I have found out their reality.

Why slay the slain? Such may be the question that will arise in the minds of many who see this book. A Scotch song says, 'The Devil is dead, and buried at Kirkcaldy;' if so, he did not die until he had created a world in his image. The natural world is overlaid by an unnatural religion, breeding bitterness around simplest thoughts, obstructions to science, estrangements not more reasonable than if they resulted from varying notions of lunar figures,—all derived from the Devil-bequeathed dogma that certain beliefs and disbeliefs are of infernal instigation. Dogmas moulded in a fossil demonology make the foundation of institutions which divert wealth, learning, enterprise, to fictitious ends. It has not, therefore, been mere intellectual curiosity which has kept me working at this subject these many years, but an increasing conviction that the sequelæ of such superstitions are exercising a still formidable influence. When Father Delaporte lately published his book on the Devil, his Bishop wrote—'Reverend Father, if every one busied himself with the Devil as you do, the kingdom of God would gain by it.' Identifying the kingdom here spoken of as that of Truth, it has been with a certain concurrence in the Bishop's sentiment that I have busied myself with the work now given to the public.

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