



# THE NATURAL HISTORY OF THE CHRISTIAN DEVIL.

BY ANNIE BESANT.

Among the many dethroned monarchs of the world Satan claims a melancholy eminence. Napoleon had his Chiselhurst, Louis Philippe his Claremont, but Satan now only finds a refuge in the most ill-furnished hovels of minds. His name, which was once terrifying as a whirlwind, is now regarded as a joke, and the fear with which he was once regarded is changed into mocking contempt. He is an absurdity who once was a terror, and the power which warred with God has now for antagonist only the shriekers of the Salvation Army. His road down hill has been rapid since he was formally outlawed from the Established Church. All will remember how a would-be communicant at Clifton disbelieved in the Devil but desired to eat the body and blood of God; how he was repelled from the Lord's table because he rejected the evil one; how he carried into the law courts his demand for the food denied him; and how he obtained a decision that belief in Satan was not a necessary preliminary for the faithful receiving of Christ. The Devil being thus declared unnecessary to salvation, he was no longer readily received in good society, and he has gone from bad to worse until he only hangs about very low neighborhoods and that principally during the night. "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, Son of the Morning!"

The title of this paper suggests the mode in which the Devil is to be treated: he is to be studied as a natural product, and just as the place of an animal is settled by studying it in the light of comparative anatomy, and its descent is traced by the study of its embryology, of its rudimentary organs, etc., so will the place of the Christian Devil be settled by studying him in the light of comparative mythology, and his descent be traced by seeking his embryonic form, his many now rudimentary organs, his gradual development, in a word by studying his evolution.

The belief in a devil, in one evil spirit, is a result of partial civilisation. As Theism grows from Fetichism, through Polytheism, to Monotheism, so does Devilism grow

from the same root of Fetichism, through Polydevilism, into Monodevilism. The Fetich of the savage is both good and evil; if things go well with its worshipper, the Fetich is caressed; if things go evilly, it is soundly beaten to teach amendment of its ways. The Fetich is neither God nor Devil, though it has some of the features of both: it resembles the Protista, which are neither animal nor vegetable, but have something of either; in these lowest organisms there is no specialisation of function, no differentiation of organ.

Gradually the good and evil powers became separated and severally personified. Then the beneficent forces of Nature were deified, and the destructive devilised, till Gods and Devils innumerable filled the air. Of these, those who were most dreaded were most worshipped, and those whose wrath was feared were most propitiated with offerings and sacrifices. Thus the Madagascans with their good Zamhor and their evil Nyang prayed:

“O Zamhor! to thee we offer no prayers. The good God needs no asking. But we must pray to Nyang. Nyang must be appeased. O Nyang, bad and strong spirit, let not the thunder roar over our heads! Tell the sea to keep within its bounds! Spare, O Nyang, the ripening fruit, and dry not up the blossoming rice! Let not our women bring forth children on the accursed days. Thou reignest, and this thou knowest, over the wicked; and great is their number, O Nyang. Torment not, then, any longer the good folk!” (“Demonology.” M. D. Conway, vol. i., p. 26.)

In truth, if a supernatural power is to be worshipped, it is tolerably obvious that both prayers and sacrifices should be offered only to an evil one. It would be folly to instruct a wise God, or to strive to propitiate a good God, for the wise will do the best, and the good the kindest, thing that can be done for the worshipper. But if indeed there be an omnipotent Devil, then to him may the prayers and the sacrifices of the world be brought, so that his cruel wrath may be turned away and his mercy may be bought with gifts. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God: he shall pour down rain upon the sinners, snares, fire and brimstone, storm and tempest; this shall be their portion to drink.” Clearly here we are dealing with a Devil, and the word “God” has slipped into the text by some copyist’s blunder.

Among the Hebrews the tribal God Jeue summed up in his own person the good and evil powers of nature.

Originally a God of the desert, of blood, and of fire, he possessed all the terrific attributes of the Devil, was worshipped with slaughtered animals and human sacrifices, and slew every male among his chosen people who was not ransomed by a bloody and indecent rite (Gen. xvii., 14). Jeue was the author of all evil: "I am the Lord, and there is none else. I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things" (Is. xlv., 6, 7). "Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?" (Amos iii., 6).

With such a God, a Devil was eminently superfluous, and we accordingly find that the Hebrew Satan was an "angel of the Lord", executing God's judgments on the wicked, and testing the worth of the pious.

In the "Fragments" appended to Calmet's "Dictionary of the Bible", p. 130, we find the suggestion that Satan is "the angel of punishment, the agent of retributive justice, whose office it is to distribute 'battle, murder, and sudden death' among the sons of men". He asks "Whether in early ages or under the Hebrew republic, the word Satan signified much, if anything, more than simply an adversary, an accuser, a remonstrant; one who takes to task, as our familiar expression is" (p. 134).

The fact that Satan was thus an angel of judgment and of testing, explains the apparent contradiction between 2 Sam. xxiv., 1, and 1 Chron. xxi., 1. According to Samuel "the Lord" moved David, according to Chronicles "Satan stood up" and provoked David, to number Israel. If Satan is God's angel, not his foe, and acts merely as an intermediary, the tempting of David was equally God's act whether done by himself directly or by means of the angel whose special duty it was to test and try men. Again, in the case of Job, it is obvious that Satan and "the Lord" are on perfectly friendly and familiar terms. Satan appears among the "sons of God", and is met with no rebuke; on the contrary he is greeted as a man might greet a friend coming into his house after an absence: "Whence comest thou?" Satan's answer is easy and straightforward: "From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it". And then the conversation goes on, God asking Satan what he thinks of Job, and Satan explaining that he regards Job's religion as merely a very prudent investment. Finally God bids Satan test Job as effectually as he can without injuring him personally, and Satan goes out on his errand and afflicts poor Job. (Job i.) A very

similar scene between God and Satan is related in the second chapter, and the trials of Job read very much as though Jeue and his friend were engaged in the settlement of a wager.

The character of the Hebrew Satan changed entirely after the captivity. The Jews brought back from Babylon a Devil who was the rival, the enemy of God, a dwarfed and misshapen copy of the mighty Persian Ahriman. The story of the Fall, with its seducing serpent, and the various identifications of the Devil with the serpent, found in the Jewish Scriptures, especially in the New Testament, are purely Persian; Zahak, the Prometheus of Persia, was the king of the serpents, and Ahriman after his fall to earth turned into a serpent. How the serpent became in Persia the emblem of the evil one, we shall see further on.

The Persian myth which the Jews partially borrowed was a very poetical one, far better than its Jewish and Christian copy. The Supreme Existence believed in by the Persians was a universal power, unnameable save by the descriptive epithet of "Boundless Time". From Boundless Time emanated two mighty beings, Ormuzd and Ahriman, both perfect and unstained. But Ahriman became jealous of Ormuzd and was cast out from happiness into the kingdom of darkness. Thenceforward war raged between the brothers, and whenever Ormuzd created aught perfect, Ahriman made somewhat to oppose or mar it. When Ormuzd created, Ahriman slew, and when Ormuzd made man and woman pure and happy Ahriman tempted them to fall. This fraternal conflict is to endure for 12,000 years, at the end of which period Ahriman is to set the universe on fire; the good shall pass unscathed through the flames, while the wicked shall be purified in them for three days and three nights and shall then ascend to paradise. Finally Ahriman himself shall become pure and holy, and eternal and universal happiness shall reign.

It is tolerably clear that the Christian Devil, inherited from the Jews, is a debased copy of Ahriman. Like God he is ubiquitous, tempting men simultaneously in all parts of the world. Like God he is immortal, as eternal in his hell as is God in his heaven. He quite holds his own in his long rivalry; when God creates man, the Devil mars him; he succeeds in so ravaging the world that was made "very good" that God is obliged to destroy it by water; he succeeds in winning the greater part of the human race which God made for his own glory; the finally saved are

few compared with the myriads of the lost (Matt. vii., 13, 14); a city contains the people of God, while the Devil has a bottomless pit, lest there should not be room enough for the millions upon millions of his subjects; his kingdom will endure for ever, its lurid flames challenging the radiance of the new Jerusalem; unconquered, unsubdued, he stands upright face to face with God, triumphing over him on earth as he will triumph through all eternity.

Outside the "Scriptures", Jewish writers have added some details to our knowledge of the Devil, as for instance that he married Adam's first wife, and that the latter was the real agent in the temptation of Eve in Paradise. It will be remembered that according to the Elohistic legend given in Gen. i. the first man and woman were created simultaneously, "male and female created he them" (Gen. i., 27). But in chapter ii. the woman is created long after the man, the creation and the naming of all the beasts and birds intervening between the making of the man and of the woman. It appears that there is no contradiction between these two accounts, for they refer to different women. The woman created simultaneously with man was Lilith, and Adam and Lilith were the "male and female" alluded to. Soon after they met, they unfortunately fell out, for Adam claimed superiority over his wife, and his wife denied his right to her submission. She asserted that she was quite as good as he was, that she was as old and made of the same material, and was in no wise inferior. At last the quarrel grew so hot that wings burst out of Lilith's shoulders and she flew away, leaving her husband with no wife to bully. As the peopling of the earth presented difficulties under these circumstances, God was obliged to create another woman, and he thereupon made her out of one of Adam's ribs, so that if she claimed equality he might be able to retort: "Well, you are nothing but a rib, and would never have existed at all if I had not lent a bone to make you out of."

Meanwhile Lilith had met Samaël, the head of the Devils, and had married him; these Devils were anxious that the human race should fall from purity, in order that they might be able to enter into them and live in their bodies. For God was making the Devils when the first Sunday morning began; "These beings were the last of the six days' creation, but they were made so late in the day that there was no daylight by which to fashion bodies for them. The Creator was just putting them off with a

promise that he would make them bodies next day, when lo! the Sabbath—which was for a long time personified—came and sat before him, to represent the many evils which might result from the precedent he would set by working even a little on the day whose sanctity had already been promulgated. Under these circumstances the Creator told the Devils that they must disperse and try to get bodies as they could find them. On this account they have been compelled ever since to seek carnal enjoyments by nestling in the hearts of human beings and availing themselves of human senses and passions” (“Demonology”. M. D. Conway, vol. ii., p. 94). Consequently the fall of Adam and Eve was of vital importance, and as Lilith was jealous of the happiness of her original husband with his second wife, she entered willingly into the plot, and it was she who entered into a serpent and tempted her rival into eating of the forbidden tree.

The description of the Devil as a serpent, a dragon, in the Old and New Testament, is one of the most interesting signs of his descent. As Mr. Conway well points out in the book above quoted, every religion is inclined to transform into Devils the Gods of the religion that it supplants. The Persian Devil is a serpent, because the serpent was the symbol of Vishnu, the Hindu deity, and in the bitter conflict between Parsee and Hindu each party devilised the Gods of the other. “The word *deva*, meaning deity to Brahmans, means devil to Parsees. . . . In the early hymns of India the appellation *asuras* is given to the Gods. *Asura* means a spirit. But in the process of time *asura*, like *dæmon*, came to have a sinister meaning. The Gods were called *suras*, the demons *asuras*, and these were said to contend together. But in Persia the *asuras*—demonised in India—retained their divinity, and gave the name *ahura* to the supreme deity, Ormuzd (*Ahura-mazda*). On the other hand, as Mr. Muir supposes, *Varenya*, applied to evil spirits of darkness in the *Zendavesta*, is cognate with *Varuna* (Heaven); and the Vedic *Indra*, king of the Gods—the Sun—is named in the Zoroastrian religion as one of the chief councillors of that Prince of Darkness” (“Demonology.” M. D. Conway, vol. 1, pp. 25, 26).

To the early Christians, the Pagan Gods were real beings, but beings of an evil kind. “The things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to Devils, and not to God: and I would not that ye should have fellowship with Devils. Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup

of Devils: ye cannot be partaker of the Lord's table, and of the table of Devils" (1 Cor. x. 20, 21). The early fathers of the Church regarded the Roman Gods as Devils who gained power over those who sacrificed to them; hence the refusal to cast incense on an altar of one of the Gods: the homage would have placed the incense-thrower in the power of the Devil there worshipped. The cloven foot of the Christian Devil was probably derived from the God Pan, the joyous pipe-playing God of the spring-blossoming woods, whose lower limbs were the limbs of a goat; when the merry Pan was slain by the melancholy Christ, the God's light-dancing legs became the appanage of Satan. The clubbed foot often given to the Devil, so that he goes limping, is a sign that he is fallen from his original high estate: as Hephaistos was flung from Olympus by Zeus and lamed for ever, so Satan is imaged as lame, having fallen from heaven. His horns are also symbols of his former glory: when Moses talked with God "his face shone", according to our translation (Ex. xxxiv. 29), but the Vulgate has it that he had horns, and in the great statue of Moses by Michael Angelo at St. Peter's, Rome, two horns spring from his head. Horns are ancient symbols of the rays of the sun, and hence of divine strength; the halo with which Christians decorate Christ and his saints is a solar symbol, and the horns of the despised Devil have exactly the same signification as the halo of the God. When Christians mockingly affixed the horns of Pan to the brow of their own Satan, they ignorantly bound upon him the symbol of divinity. Similarly the German word for idol is *Ab-Gott*, ex-God, and no more significant name could be chosen.

Significant too is the fact that all Devils are ugly; the triumphant religion caricatured and outraged its rivals, so as to divorce from them the hearts of the people. "The evolution of demons and devils out of deities was made real to the popular imagination in every country where the new religion found art existing, and by alliance with it was enabled to shape the ideas of the people. The theoretical degradation of deities of previously fair association could only be completed where they were presented to the eye in repulsive forms. . . . The great representations of evil, whether imagined by the speculative or the religious sense, have never been, originally, ugly. The Gods might be described as falling swiftly like lightning out of heaven, but in the popular imagination they retained for a long

time much of their splendor. The very ingenuity with which they were afterwards invested with ugliness in religious art, attests that there were certain popular religious sentiments about them which had to be distinctly reversed. It was because they were thought beautiful that they must be painted ugly; it was because they were—even among converts to the new religion—still secretly believed to be kind and helpful, that there was employed such elaboration of hideous designs to deform them. . . . These are not genuine demons or devils, but carefully caricatured deities. Who that looks upon the grinning bestial forms carved about the roof of any old church—as those on Melrose Abbey and York Cathedral—which, there is reason to believe, represent the primitive deities driven from the interior by potency of holy water, and chained to the uncongenial service of supporting the roof-gutter—can see in these gargoyles (Fr. *gargouille*, dragon), anything but carved imprecations? Was it to such ugly beings, guardians of their streams, hills, and forests, that our ancestors consecrated the holly and mistletoe, or with such that they associated their flowers, fruits, and homes? They were caricatures inspired by missionaries, made to repel and disgust, as the images of saints beside them were carved in beauty to attract. If the Pagans had been the artists, the good looks would have been on the other side” (“Demology.” M. D. Conway, vol. i., pp. 29—32). Strange and suggestive thought, that all Devils are dethroned Gods, and all reigning Gods Devils in embryo. As Zeus and Hermes, Isis and Osiris, Jupiter and Mercury, have passed first into Devils, and finally into acknowledged myths, so shall the Gods of the present in their turn fade away and dissolve into nonentity. But since men are wiser than of yore, the Christian Deities are likely to escape from being devilised as were their predecessors. The lineaments of the “Man of Sorrows” shall not be distorted into hideousness as were the fair faces of the elder Gods, for there will be no need to alienate the heart by ugliness when the brain has rejected all supernatural pretention. The Christian Trinity shall take its place in the Pantheon beside the rescued and restored forms of the Gods of old, and Gods and Devils shall alike be regarded as the dream-fancies of a child-world, some fair, some ugly, but all unworthy of credence in maturer life.

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