

## THE DEVIL'S DEATH

BY MAXIMILIAN RUDWIN

IT has been reported from various places at various periods that the Devil is dead.<sup>1</sup> Scotland, among other European countries, claims to possess his tomb. A Scotch song says: "The Devil is dead and buried at Kirkcaldy." Beelzebub is believed to be buried in Brittany. When slain by St. Michael, according to an old tradition among the fisher-folk of the Breton coast, he was buried by the Archangel under the mountain which faces Mont St. Michel, and which is, therefore, called Tombelaine—"Tumba Beleni, the tomb of Belenus, Belus, Bel, Belial, Beelzebub" (Victor Hugo: *Quatre-vingt-treize*, III, ii. 1)<sup>2</sup> The demon Saracen must have died at a certain period in the past, for in the novel, *Tristan le Roux* (1850), by Dumas *filz*, he is evoked from the dead. But his resurrection is not of long duration. In the end, his human ally once more inflicts upon him such death as he must suffer, and he is again buried at Poitiers, the site of his original tomb.

Jean-Pierre Béranger, the popular French song-writer, in his satirical poem, "la Mort du Diable" (1828), gives a new and novel turn to the old legend of the death of the Devil. He is not concerned with the demise of the high and mighty personage, but with the effect it had on the conduct of the Catholic clergy. This song is a satirical attack upon Satan's supposed successors among the monks.

<sup>1</sup> The Devil's death forms the subject of the story, "The Devil and the Old Man" (1905), by John Masefield, reprinted in the present writer's anthology of *Devil Stories* (1921). Arthur Landsberger also used this idea as the subject of his novel entitled *Wie Satan starb* (München, 1919).

<sup>2</sup> Maupassant, in his story "la Légende du Mont St. Michel" (1888), has given an interesting version of the legend of the combat between the Archangel and the Archenemy, which occurred, according to a local tradition, on the famous mountain situated on the Norman coast. This story, accompanied by a critical essay, will be found in the present writer's collection of *Devil Stories* already mentioned.

Béranger was always poking fun at the priests. Even the Pontiff in the Vatican was not spared by his bold and boisterous satire. In Voltairean fashion, Béranger laughed Old Mother Church to scorn. This poem figured prominently among the pieces selected as a basis for Béranger's indictment. It was denounced by the priests as irreligious and blasphemous, and its author was declared an enemy to religion. The archbishop of Paris and the other bishops hurled their anathemas in pastoral letters against the poet of "la Mort du Diable."

The song describes the commotion and consternation caused among the Catholic clergy by the rumor of the Devil's death. The priests wail when the news of the Devil's demise reaches them. The reason for their dismay over the death of the Devil is not that they loved Lucifer so well. What worries these good men is the fact that they have thus lost their means of a livelihood. The Devil being dead, what man will now pay them to be delivered from his clutches? But Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Order of the Jesuits, bids them to stop their wailing. He himself intends to succeed to the power of the prince of this world; and in order to be delivered from him, men will now pray and pay more than ever before. It is not easy to render in English the delicious humor and irony which this poem contains. We shall give it nevertheless in its first English translation for the benefit of the reader to whom it is not easy of access in the original:<sup>3</sup>

I sing today a lay of lays,  
A glorious miracle you'll see,  
Give the great saint Ignatius praise,  
Of little saints the glory he.  
A dirty trick—if saints can trick,  
And if the truth may all be said,  
Has done the business for Old Nick,  
The Devil's dead—the Devil's dead!

Old Nick went out one day to dine,  
And pledg'd the saint to drink his health,  
Aye, said the saint—and in the wine  
Some holy poison dropp'd by stealth;  
Gripes seiz'd the Devil—cruel-sick—  
He swears—he storms—and hangs his head,  
Then bursts, as bursts a heretic—  
The Devil's dead—the Devil's dead!

<sup>3</sup> This translation appeared in the *Westminster Review*, X (1829), 210-13.

"Alas! He's dead—the friars said,—  
The Devil an *Agnus* shall we sell;  
Alas! the canons cried—he's dead—  
Not one *Oremus* shall we tell.  
The conclave is in deep despair,  
Power and the iron chest are fled,  
O we have lost our Father dear,  
The Devil's dead—the Devil's dead!

Love is not half so strong as fear,  
For fear was constant with her gifts.  
Intolerance is fading here,  
Who now her blazing torch uplifts?  
If man from us should once be free,  
What light may beam upon his head;  
God greater than the Pope shall be—  
The Devil's dead—the Devil's dead!

Ignatius came—"Let me but take  
His place—his right—and see; in brief—  
He has made men for ages quake.  
I'll make kings tremble like a leaf!  
With plagues, thefts, massacres, I'll ban  
Both north and south—where'er I tread;  
Leave ruins both for God and man—  
The Devil's dead—the Devil's dead!"

"Come, blessed one," they uttered, "come,  
We hallow thy most saintly gall"—  
And now his Order—sent from Rome—  
O'ershadows, darkens, curses all.  
I heard a choir of angels tell  
Their sympathies for man, they said,  
"Ignatius is the heir of hell,  
The Devil's dead—the Devil's dead!"

The reader who is perhaps inclined to be overjoyed at the report of the Devil's death should recall that Satan has a successor who is fully capable of carrying on the government of Gehenna after his death. In the words of a famous quatrain:

"The Devil is dead. He died serene,  
Though somewhat oppressed by cares;  
But his wife, my friends, is a woman of mind—  
She looks after her lord's affairs."

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Moreover, the Devil's death would be the greatest of calamities for humanity. It would mean the end of all virtue, the extinction of the human race, and even the end of the world. First of all, virtue could not exist at all without vice to offset it. It is, moreover, doubtful whether men would still practise virtue if the Devil were gone. Even lacking temptation would they continue to be good without the pitchfork? No progress can be conceived without the Prince of this world. Conflict is the father of all things. It has been said that man must know the spirit of discontent if he is to advance. Moreover, with the passing of the Devil, life would simply disappear from the face of the earth. The history of the world has shown that the supposedly opposed realms of human activity personified in the Almighty and his Adversary are equally essential and eternal. Evil, no less than Good, is an indispensably necessary element in the economy of the cosmic system.

Anatole France states over and over again in his works that "Evil is the necessary counterpart of Good, as darkness is of light," and that the Devil, in whom Evil has been incorporated, is consequently immortal.

"Yes [this latterday diabolist affirms]. Evil is immortal. Satan, the genius, in whom the old theology incarnates it, will survive the last man and remain alone, seated with folded wings, upon the ruin of extinct worlds" (*la Vie littéraire*: "la Vertu en France," 1887).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Quotations in this essay are taken from the uniform English translation of the works of Anatole France published by John Lane, London and New York, 1902ff.

"Evil is necessary [he says elsewhere]. If it did not exist, neither would good. Evil is the sole potential of good. . . .

"It is thanks to Evil and sorrow that the earth is habitable and that life is worth living. We should not therefore be hard on the Devil. He is a great artist and a great *savant*; he has created at least one-half of the world. And his half is so cunningly embedded in the other that it is impossible to interfere with the first without at the same time doing a like injury to the second. Each vice you destroy has a corresponding virtue, which perishes along with it.

"I enjoyed the pleasure of seeing, one day, at a country fair, the life of St. Anthony the Great represented by marionettes. . . . Oh, how vividly it brings before us the two things working together to one end,—God's grace and the Devil's!

"St. Anthony is a great saint only because he successfully resisted the Queen of Sheba. Well, is it not obvious then that in sending the beauteous lady, . . . the Devil indispensably performed an act which was indispensably necessary to constitute his Saintship?

"Thus the marionettes confirmed me in my belief that Evil is an indispensable pre-condition of Good, and the Devil is a necessity for the moral beauty of the universe" (*le Jardin d'Epicure*, 1895).

"Evil is necessary [this author repeats himself]. It has like Good its source in human nature, and the one cannot be destroyed without the other" (*M. Bergeret à Paris*, 1901).<sup>5</sup>

In his autobiographical work, *le Livre de mon ami* (1905), Anatole France tells us that one day he took his baby-girl Suzanne to a Punch and Judy show, the culminating point of which was the death of the Devil.<sup>6</sup> This ending delighted the common crowd, which applauded the heroic act of Punch, but it saddened our philosopher, who thought that it was a great pity that the Devil had been

<sup>5</sup> The late James Huneker shows himself a pupil of the great French diabolist by his long encomium of the Prince of the Pit, which begins with the following: "The Devil is the mainspring of our moral system. Mock him and you mock God, who created him. Without him the world would be all light without shadow. . . ." (*Bedouins*, 1920).

<sup>6</sup> The Punch and Judy show invariably ends with the death of the Devil. *Peintre Collier*, in his book, *Punch and Judy* (5th ed., London, 1870, p. 66), mentions a marionette-player who had religious scruples about making Punch kill the Devil, but the audience were so attached to the canonical ending that they hooted and mishandled him. On the origin of this traditional ending of a Punch and Judy show, see F. M. Cornford: *The Origin of the Attic Comedy* (London, 1914), p. 146.

killed. Paying no attention to Suzanne sitting by his side, he went on musing:

"The Devil being dead, good-bye to sin! Perhaps Beauty, the Devil's ally, would have to go also. Perhaps we should never more behold the flowers that enchant us; and the eyes for the love of which we would lay down our lives. What, if that is so, what in the world would become of us? Should we still be able to practise virtue? I doubt it. Punch did not sufficiently bear in mind that Evil is the necessary counterpart of Good, as darkness is of light, that virtue consists wholly of effort, and that if the Devil is no longer to fight against, the Saints will remain as much out of work as the Sinners. Life will be mortally dull. I tell you that when he killed the Devil, Punch committed an act of grave imprudence.

"Well, Pulchinello came on and made his bow, the curtain fell, and all the little boys and girls went home; but still I sat on deep in meditation. Mam'zelle Suzanne, perceiving my thoughtful mien, concluded that I was in trouble. . . . Very gently and tenderly she takes hold of my hand and asks me why I am unhappy. I confess that I am sorry that Punch has killed the Devil. Then she throws her little arms round my neck, and putting her lips to my ears, she whispers:

"I tell you somefin: Punch, he killed the nigger, but he has not killed him for good."