

ASMODEUS, DANDY AMONG DEMONS

BY MAXIMILIAN RUDWIN

OF all the demons of distinction, Asmodeus has had the greatest fall in power and prestige. This Asmodeus, who has now become a laughing-stock, was in his day, on the authority of Anatole France, our great contemporary diabolist, "an important demon, more powerful than Ashtaroth, Cedon, Uriel, Beelzebub, Aborym, Azazel, Dagon, Magog, Magon, Isaacharum, Accaron, Orphaxat, or Beherith, who are nevertheless devils not to be despised."¹ Asmodeus, according to the demonologists, originally was a shining angel in heaven, and, after his fall, was counted among the most eminent personages in hell. In fact he was linked with Lucifer and the other luminaries of limbo. Medieval writers called him "Prince of Demons." In the opinion of Pope Gregory IX, Asmodi was the name under which the Devil was worshipped by the Stedingers of Friesland in the thirteenth century.

But if the demon Asmodeus is now treated by the Christians with derision, he is still in favor with the Jews, among whom he has enjoyed great popularity to this day. The sons of Israel speak of Satan with respect, but for Asmodeus they evince a warm affection. The mention of the Tempter of Job fills them with fear and trembling, but Asmodeus is their darling devil. King Ashmodaï, as this demon is popularly known among the Jewish masses, plays a prominent part in Jewish mythology. Many legends have been woven by the rabbis around this "king of the shedhim," the demons who are the offspring of fallen angels and human mothers.²

¹ Anatole France: "M. Maurice Bouchor et l'Histoire de Tobie," *le Temps*, December 8, 1899. Reprinted in *la Vie littéraire*, 3me série (1891), pp. 218-28. Quotations in this paper are taken from the English translation, *On Life and Letters*, 3rd series (1924), pp. 214-27.

² The *shedhim*, according to Talmudic tradition, are the demons who came from the union of the sons of heaven and the daughters of the earth, whereas the *satanim* are the fallen angels themselves. Samaël is regarded by the Talmud as the head of the latter group of demons.

Asmodeus himself, according to one Jewish tradition, is a *shed*, being the child of Shamdon, a fallen angel, and of Naamah, the sister of Tubal-Cain.³ According to another Jewish tradition, however, he is the son of Samaël and Lilith.

The Jews claim Asmodeus as their own. The truth of the matter is that they borrowed him from the Persians during their captivity under Zoroastrian kings. Asmodeus is no other than Æshma-dæva who, in the Persian religion, is the personification of violent wrath and carnal lust. In *Friar Rush*, a romance of the sixteenth century, this demon is called "Prince of Lechery." In popular belief, he is the prince of pleasures, the patron of passions, and the lord of luxury and lust. LeSage, in his novel, *le Diable boiteux* (1707), has Asmodeus say himself, "I am the demon of lewdness, or to put it more splendidly, the god Cupid." This devil is sensuality in person.⁴ In this capacity, he is the counterpart of Lilith, the demoness with the long golden hair. Just as Lilith is dangerous to men, so is Asmodeus dangerous to women. This danger to women from Asmodeus is due to the fact that he is the greatest dandy among the devils. For the Devil is most fascinating to fastidious women when he patronizes a good tailor.

Asmodeus, in addition to the qualities already mentioned, is also the father of new fads and fashions in dress, namely, the demon of frills and finery.⁵ He is so fashionable that Calmet, the French demonologist of the eighteenth century, believed that the name Asmodeus signified fine dress.⁶ This demon's beautiful clothes and fine manners represent the "pride of life" in Christian symbolism.

In this connection, the story told by Henry Stubbes, in his *Anatomie of Abuses* (1583), as a warning against the fashionable folly of starched ruffs, which prevailed in his day, will be of interest. According to this tale, there lived in Antwerp in 1582 a lady with a passion for dresses, the ruffs of which her washerwomen

³ Cf. Louis Ginzberg: *The Legends of the Jews* (4 vols., Philadelphia, 1909-25), I, 150-51.

⁴ This is the reason why Marcel Barrière named his highly sensual novel, *le Sang d'Asmodée* (1924).

⁵ In Jewish mythology it is Azazel who has devised the cosmetics and jewelry, with which women attract men; cf. Louis Ginzberg, *op. cit.*, I, 125.

⁶ Dom Augustin Calmet: *Dissertations sur les apparitions des anges, des démons et des esprits, sur les revenants et les vampires de Hongrie, de Bohême, de Moravie et de Silésie*, Paris, 1746. English translation (*The Phantom World; or, the History and Philosophy of Spirits and Apparitions*), 2 vols., London and Philadelphia, 1850.

could never succeed in starching to her satisfaction. One day in a rage she flung the starched ruffs to the ground, swearing that the Devil might take her if she wore such things again. Straightway in came the Devil himself in the guise of an elegant young man, holding out to her a beautiful ruff which he offered to adjust for her. Having done this to the great satisfaction of the lady, he wrung her neck.⁷



Asmodeus is primarily a ladies' demon. He tempts and torments especially the members of the fair sex. When he tries to bring men to fall, he employs women as his accomplices. "It is in this," says Anatole France, in the essay on Bouchor already quoted, "that his power lies in this world, especially among the white peoples." Asmodeus is the Don Juan among the devils. The story of his love-affairs would fill volumes. To attempt only to give the names of the ladies with whom he had a *liaison* would be beyond the powers even of the Recording Angel. This demon is often called the genius of matrimonial unhappiness. He is very cosmopolitan in his love-affairs, and disregards all tribal and ecclesiastical distinctions.

Tradition has it that Asmodeus plied Noah and Solomon with wine and seduced their wives. It is further recorded in the Book of Tobit (vi. 14) that this demon loved to distraction the beautiful Sarah, daughter of Raguel, and, out of jealousy, successively slew seven men to whom she was married as soon as each had entered the nuptial chamber. Asmodeus, you must know, is a fastidious devil and will not allow the object of his passions to be exposed to the embrace of any other person, terrestrial or infernal. His menace to newlyweds is, moreover, due to the fact that he maintains for himself a kind of *jus prima noctis*. He claims this right probably as a reward for his successful efforts in obtaining from the Church the

⁷ This story may have formed the subject of the play, *Friar Rush and the Proud Woman of Antwerp*, written by Haughton and Day and mentioned by Henslowe on July 1, 1601; cf. Robert Dodsley: *A Select Collection of Old Plays* (12 vols., 2nd ed., London, 1744-80), I, 192. Professor Schelling, in "Some Features of the Supernatural as Represented in Plays of the Reigns of Elizabeth and James," *Modern Philology*, I (1903-4), 31-47, has put erroneously Amsterdam for Antwerp. Of interest in this connection is an old Breton legend, representing the Devil as a tailor. This legend was dramatized, in 1894, by Louis Ciercelin and published with the title *le Diable couturier*.

sacramental inclusion of marriage.⁸ Raphael finally smoked him out of Sarah's chamber by the smell of fish-liver so that the angel's friend Tobias, who also loved Sarah, could marry her. Asmodeus, it should be mentioned, has delicate nostrils and cannot stand bad odors. The demon fled from the "fishy fume" to Upper Egypt with Raphael hot on his heels, and was finally bound by the angel in a cavern on the Nile, where the unfortunate demon long remained (Tob. viii. 3).⁹

"For he was still there in 1707 [says Anatole France in the essay on Bouchor already quoted], when a Rouen goldsmith called Paul Lucas, going up the Nile to Fayoum, saw and spoke to him, as he assures us in the story of his voyage, which was published in 1719, and forms three volumes in 12mo with maps and drawings. Few facts are better attested. None the less, this fact is embarrassing. For it is certain, on the other hand, that he was in Loudun on the 29th day of May, 1624; as he wrote on that day, in the register of the Church of Sainte-Croix, a declaration by which he engaged himself to torment Mme de Belciel, whom, in fact, he did torment. The document is preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale, in the department of manuscripts, where anyone may use it. It is equally certain that in 1635, in the same town of Loudun, he possessed Sister Agnes, who was seized with convulsions in the presence of the Duke of Orleans. She refused to kiss the pyx, and twisted herself so that she formed a perfect circle, her hands touching her feet. Meanwhile she uttered horrible blasphemies.¹⁰ At this period Asmodeus appeared before the Bishop of Poitiers; and as Paul Lucas found him in Egypt, it must be supposed that the devil left his cavern whenever he pleased, and that the angel Gabriel (*sic*) did not tie him up well. . . .

"After Colbert's edict forbidding devils to torment ladies, Asmodeus appeared in France only in the excellent company of LeSage, the author of *Gil Blas*. Asmodeus

⁸ Mephistopheles in Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* (ii.1), on the other hand, is opposed to marriage.

⁹ Maurice Bouchor, who, in 1889, has dramatized this story, has not taken the jealous Asmodeus very seriously.

¹⁰ Anatole France has reference to the famous episode of the Devils of Loudun, in which the priest Urbain Grandier was accused of having handed over the Ursuline nuns to the demons. This very interesting case of diabolical possession in modern times was treated by Alfred de Vigny in his romance, *Cinq-Mars* (1826). See also [Aubin:] *Histoire des diables de Loudun, ou de la Possession des religieuses Ursulines et de la condamnation et du supplice d'Urbain Grandier, curé de la même ville* (Amsterdam, 1737). A popular essay on "The Devils of Loudun" appeared in the *National Review*, XI (1860), 70-93.

lost his theology here, but he became a man of wit. He was then playing a rather low game, but it was at least a cheerful one."

The work to which Anatole France refers in this passage is LeSage's already quoted work, *le Diable boiteux*. In this novel, a young Spanish student from Alcala, named Don Cleophas Leandro Zambullo, for whom, on a certain evening, an ambush was laid by his perfidious mistress, escapes by jumping from roof to roof until he lands in a neighboring garret, which happens to be the laboratory of a magician. Upon entering this garret, he is besought by a voice out of a phial to deliver the speaker from durance by breaking the glass-bottle. The request is complied with, and the imprisoned sprite turns out to be Asmodeus. In gratitude, the demon bestows upon his rescuer the power to sail through the air, and brings him upon the tower of the Church of San Salvador in Madrid. From this vantage-point, by lifting the roofs of all the houses of the Spanish capital with a sign from his right hand, he shows the student the secret sights of a big city at midnight. With a cynical amusement the demon then explains to his friend the sufferings, transports and agitations thus revealed. The new confederates also journey to the different parts of Spain. The good-natured and grateful Asmodeus assists the student Cleophas in his various pranks and carries him triumphantly through a series of amusing adventures. He even takes the shape of his human companion in rescuing a young lady of high birth and thereby procures for his liberator a prosperous marriage. In the end, Asmodeus is recaptured and put back into the phial by the powerful conjurer with the help of envious demons.

In this novel, Asmodeus shows himself an excellent critic of men and morals, and a splendid satirist of the follies and foibles of the human family. As a result of this feat, he became very popular in France and even in other countries. His friends imposed upon him and had him lift the roof of every house for them so that they might see the life that went on within. He was called upon so often to perform the job of roofer, or still better, of unroofer, that, as it was said, "he was not even given the time to get dressed."

Through this novel, Asmodeus won a respectable position in French literature, and his resulting renown did much to bring about in France the friendly feeling for the Fiend which has long been a marked characteristic of the literature of that country. A great number of books, periodicals and newspapers have gained

popularity through this demon's name for half a century following the publication of LeSage's novel.¹¹

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Asmodeus has many other accomplishments and achievements to his credit. He is also a scholar, the most learned master of arts and the most prominent professor at his alma mater, the astrological college founded by the fallen angels Asa and Asael. Asmodeus is versed in the black arts and well known for his occult wisdom. In this quality, he is the successor to Thoth, the god of wisdom and learning in Thermopolis, who was identified by the Egyptians with Sirius, the god of occult and infernal arts.

Asmodeus is also a great philosopher, deriving his ideas from the various schools of thought. "Asmodeus is the very philosophy of all ages summed up in a caricature," says Jules Janin, the French dramatic critic.

Asmodeus also has a reputation for slyness and subtlety. In fact he is the most cunning spirit of hell (Goethe's *Faust* ii. 6961). This demon cheated Aladdin out of his ring in order to secure the magic lamp, and he also tricked Solomon out of his signet ring in order to obtain possession of the latter's harem. The Jewish monarch had great need of Asmodeus when he built the temple at Jerusalem. He wished to learn from this versatile demon the whereabouts of the worm *Shamir*, which splits and shapes stones noiselessly.¹² During their negotiations, the wisest of men and the wisest

¹¹ Among the books named after Asmodeus, mention may be made of S. Foote's farce *The Devil on Two Sticks* (1768); *Asmodeus; or, The Devil in London* (3 vols., London, 1808); William Combe: *The Devil Upon Two Sticks in England* (6 vols., London, 1817); and *Asmodeus in New York, or, Society and Manners in Gotham* (New York, 1868). Among the periodicals which bore his name, may be mentioned the following: *le Diable boiteux; journal critique et littéraire* (1810-1826); *le Diable boiteux; recueil politique et littéraire* (1818); *Asmodée*, a satirical periodical founded by the poet Louis Berthaud in Lyons in 1833; *le Diable boiteux; journal politique, véridique, charivarique*, a review started in 1848; *le diable boiteux à l'assemblée nationale*, a journal founded likewise in 1848 by Ch. Tondeur to report the deliberations of the French deputies; *le Diable boiteux*, which ran as a "feuilleton littéraire" in the *Journal des spectacles, des mœurs, des arts et des modes* from 1823 to 1825; *Asmodée à New York; revue critique des institutions politiques et civiles de l'Amérique; vie publique et privée, mœurs, coutumes, anecdotes romanesques, etc.* (Paris, 1868).

¹² Cf. Louis Ginzberg, *op. cit.*, IV. 166 ff.

of demons fought many a duel of wits. Asmodeus propounded difficult questions which Solomon was able to answer only with the help of his ring. The demon then tempted the king to lay aside the ring. He taunted Solomon with the challenge that all his wisdom lay in his ring and that he would be but an ordinary mortal without it. Solomon, being piqued into a denial and proudly thinking that he could answer the demon's questions by his unaided intelligence, rashly removed the ring. But the demon seized it, and, having by its might metamorphosed the monarch beyond recognition and transported him four hundred miles away, he himself assumed the appearance of Solomon, and for three years resided in the royal seraglio. According to this tradition, Asmodeus was the real author of the offences which history ascribes to the Jewish king. Solomon, after a long vagrancy, became the cook of the king of Amon. One day, as he was dressing a fish for dinner, he found in it the ring which Asmodeus had thrown into the sea, and with its aid he recovered from the demon his throne and his harem. As a punishment Solomon imprisoned Asmodeus together with many other demons in a bottle of black glass, which he cast into a deep well near Babylon. But the Babylonians, hoping to find a treasure in this well, descended into it, broke the bottle, and thus liberated the demons.¹³

Asmodeus is, moreover, the diabolic patron of letters and arts and even has literary aspirations himself. In his modesty, he refuses to publish anything under his own name, but he has helped many another writer. Among the great authors who owe their inspiration to this demon, we will mention Boccaccio, who is said to have composed his *Decameron* from the dictation of this demon, who thus wished to take his revenge on the monks, who maligned him.

But Asmodeus with all his learning has remained a play-boy. He is, in fact, an arch-Bohemian, a charlatan, a juggler and a mountebank. Asmodeus played a prominent part in the deviltry of the Middle Ages and charmed our ancestors with his tricks and antics.

Asmodeus is also addicted to gaming and card-playing. According to Johannes Wierus, the famous German demonologist, he is the banker at the *baccarat* table in the casino of hell and the superintendent of gambling houses on earth.

¹³ Cf. Moncure Daniel Conway: *Solomon and Solomonic Literature*, Chicago, 1899.

In brief, Asmodeus is the most energetic of all demons. He is, as he himself claims in the already quoted LeSage's novel, "the liveliest and the most laborious devil in hell." Asmodeus explains his profession in this book as follows: "I arrange ridiculous marriages; I unite gray-beards with minors, masters with servants, and ill-dowered girls with tender lovers who have no fortune. I am he that introduced into society extravagance, debauchery, games of chance, and chemistry. I am the inventor of tournaments, dances, music, comedy, and the new French fashions. . . ." But the foregoing list by no means exhausts the multitudinous and various tasks of our demon, who has all the world for his province.

Asmodeus is also the most sympathetic of all the demons of hell. He is the most engaging of friends, ready to lend a hand when man is at the end of his natural resources. Shakespeare was very fond of him, and called him Modo for short.

Asmodeus has a very pleasing personality and is as beautiful as Apollo. But he has one physical defect. He limps slightly with one foot. The demonologists say that he may be recognized by the fact that one of his limbs is like a cock's leg. The other is normal, but provided with claws. In LeSage's novel, Asmodeus appears walking with the aid of two sticks, which support will account for the English title of the book, *The Devil on Two Sticks*. His portrait, drawn by Collin de Plancy, was approved by the Archbishop of Paris. But Anatole France, in the essay on Bouchor already mentioned several times, with good reason, doubts whether it is a faithful likeness. Whatever his proper shape may be, it is known that, in order to appear among men, he adopts various forms, all of which are engaging. His manners are always refined, and his conduct is that of a perfect gentleman. It may well be said that, through Asmodeus, the Devil has become perilously associated with wit and wisdom, gaiety and gallantry, *finesse* and finery.