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**COCK LANE
AND COMMON-SENSE**

Andrew Lang

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ANDREW LANG



Cock Lane and Common-Sense by Andrew Lang.

First published in 1894.

This ebook edition was published by Global Grey.

This book can be found on the site here:

globalgreyebooks.com/cock-lane-and-common-sense-ebook.html

Global Grey 2025

globalgreyebooks.com

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To James Payn, Esq

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I. Introduction

It is not without hesitation that this book is offered to the reader. Very many people, for very various reasons, would taboo the subjects here discoursed of altogether. These subjects are a certain set of ancient beliefs, for example the belief in clairvoyance, in 'hauntings,' in events transcending ordinary natural laws. The peculiarity of these beliefs is, that they have survived the wreck of faith in such elements of witchcraft as metamorphosis, and power to cause tempest or drought. To study such themes is 'impious,' or 'superstitious,' or 'useless'. Yet to a pathologist, or anthropologist, the survivals of beliefs must always be curious and attractive illustrations of human nature.

Ages, empires, civilisations pass, and leave some members even of educated mankind still, in certain points, on the level of the savage who propitiates with gifts, or addresses with prayers, the spirits of the dead.

An example of this endurance, this secular survival of belief, may be more instructive and is certainly more entertaining than a world of assertions. In his *Études Égyptiennes* (Tome i. fascic. 2) M. Maspero publishes the text and translation of a papyrus fragment. This papyrus was discovered still attached to a statuette in wood, representing 'the singer of Ammen, Kena,' in ceremonial dress. The document is a letter written by an ancient Egyptian scribe, 'To the Instructed Khou of the Dame Onkhari,' his own dead wife, the *Khou*, or *Khu*, being the spirit of that lady. The scribe has been 'haunted' since her decease, his home has been disturbed, he asks Onkhari what he has done to deserve such treatment: 'What wrong have I been guilty of that I should be in this state of trouble? what have I done that thou should'st help to assail me? no crime has been wrought against thee. From the hour of my marriage till this day, what have I wrought against thee that I need conceal?'

He vows that, when they meet at the tribunal of Osiris, he will have right on his side.

This letter to the dead is deposited in the tomb of the dead, and we may trust that the scribe was no longer annoyed by a Khou, which being instructed, should have known better. To take another ancient instance, in his *Philopseudes* Lucian introduces a kind of club of superstitious men, telling ghost stories. One of them assures his friend that the spectre of his late wife has visited and vexed him, because he had accidentally neglected to burn one of a pair of gilt shoes, to which she was attached. She indicated the place where the shoe was lying hidden, and she was pacified. Lucian, of course, treats this narrative in a spirit of unfeeling mirth, but, if such tales were not current in his time, there would have been no point in his banter. Thus the belief in the haunting of a husband by the spirit of his wife, the belief which drives a native Australian servant from the station where his *gin* is buried, survived old Egypt, and descended to Greece. We now take a modern instance, closely corresponding to that of the Instructed *Khou* of the Dame Onkhari.

In the *Proceedings of the Psychical Society* (part xiv. p. 477) the late General Campbell sends, from Gwalior House, Southgate, N., April 27, 1884, a tale of personal experiences and actions, which exactly reproduces the story of the Egyptian Scribe. The narrative is long and not interesting, except as an illustration of survival,—in all senses of the word.

General Campbell says that his wife died in July, 1882. He describes himself as of advanced age, and cautious in forming opinions. In 1882 he had never given any consideration to 'the subject of ultra-mundane indications'. Yet he recounts examples of 'about thirty inexplicable sounds, as if inviting my attention specially, and two apparitions or visions, apparently of a

carefully calculated nature, seen by a child visitor, a blood relation of my late wife, whom this child had never seen, nor yet any likeness of her'. The general then describes his house, a new one, and his unsuccessful endeavours to detect the cause of the knocks, raps, crashes, and other disturbances. Unable to discover any ordinary cause, he read some books on 'Spiritualism,' and, finally, addressed a note, as the Egyptian Scribe directed a letter, to the 'agent':⁵ *Give three raps if from my deceased wife!*

He was rewarded by three crashing sounds, and by other peculiar phenomena. All these, unlike the scribe, he regarded as sent 'for my particular conviction and comfort'.

These instances prove that, from the Australian blacks in the Bush, who hear raps when the spirits come, to ancient Egypt, and thence to Greece, and last, in our own time, and in a London suburb, similar experiences, real or imaginary, are explained by the same hypothesis. No 'survival' can be more odd and striking, none more illustrative of the permanence, in human nature, of certain elements. To examine these psychological curiosities may, or may not, be 'useful,' but, at lowest, the study may rank as a branch of Mythology, or of Folklore.

It is in the spirit of these sciences, themselves parts of a general historical inquiry into the past and present of our race, that we would glance at the anecdotes, legends, and superstitions which are here collected. The writer has been chiefly interested in the question of the Evidence, its nature and motives, rather than in the question of Fact. It is desirable to know why independent witnesses, practically everywhere and always, tell the same tales. To examine the origin of these tales is not more 'superstitious' than to examine the origin of the religious and heroic mythologies of the world. It is, of course, easy to give both mythology, and 'the science of spectres,' the go by. But antiquaries will be inquiring, and these pursuits are more than mere 'antiquarian old womanries'. We follow the stream of fable, as we track a burn to its head, and it leads us into shy, and strange scenes of human life, haunted by very fearful wild-fowl, and rarely visited save by the credulous. There may be entertainment here, and, to the student of his species, there may be instruction.

On every side we find, as we try to show, in all ages, climates, races, and stages of civilisation, consentient testimony to a set of extraordinary phenomena. Equally diffused we find fraudulent imitations of these occurrences, and, on one side, a credulity which has accepted everything, on the other hand, a scepticism which denies and laughs at all the reports. But it is a question whether human folly would, everywhere and always, suffer from the same delusions, undergo the same hallucinations, and elaborate the same frauds. The problem is one which, in other matter, always haunts the student of man's development: he is accustomed to find similar myths, rites, customs, fairy tales, all over the world; of some he can trace the origin to early human imagination and reason, working on limited knowledge; about others, he asks whether they have been independently evolved in several places, or whether they have been diffused from a single centre. In the present case, the problem is more complicated. Taboos, totemism, myths explanatory of natural phenomena, customs like what, with Dr. Murray's permission, we call the *Couvade*, are either peculiar to barbarous races, or, among the old civilised races, existed as survivals, protected by conservative Religion. But such things as 'clairvoyance,' 'levitation,' 'veridical apparitions,' 'movements of objects without physical contact,' 'rappings,' 'hauntings,' persist as matters of belief, in full modern civilisation, and are attested by many otherwise sane, credible, and even scientifically trained modern witnesses. In this persistence, and in these testimonies, the alleged abnormal phenomena differ from such matters as nature-myths, customs like Suttee,

⁵ Not the house agent.