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**ARADIA
OR THE GOSPEL
OF THE WITCHES
CHARLES G. LELAND**

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Aradia, Or, the Gospel of the Witches by Charles G. Leland.

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Contents

Preface

1. How Diana Gave Birth to Aradia
2. The Sabbat: Treguenda or Witch-Meeting, How to Consecrate the Supper
3. How Diana Made the Stars and the Rain
4. The Charm of the Stones Consecrated to Diana
5. The Conjunction of the Lemon and Pins
6. A Spell To Win Love
7. To Find or Buy Anything, or to Have Good Fortune Thereby
8. To Have a Good Vintage and Very Good Wine by the Aid of Diana
9. Tana and Endamone, or Diana and Endymion
10. Madonna Diana
11. The House of the Wind
12. Tana, The Moon-Goddess
13. Diana and the Children
14. The Goblin Messengers of Diana and Mercury
15. Laverna

Appendix

The Children of Diana, or How the Fairies Were Born

Diana, Queen of the Serpents, Giver of the Gift of Languages

Diana as Giving Beauty and Restoring Strength

Note

Preface

If the reader has ever met with the works of the learned folk-lorist G. Pitre, or the articles contributed by “Lady Vere de Vere” to the Italian *Rivista*, or that of J. H. Andrews to *Folk-Lore*,¹ he will be aware that there are in Italy great numbers of strega, fortune-tellers or witches, who divine by cards, perform strange ceremonies in which spirits are supposed to be invoked, make and sell amulets, and, in fact, comport themselves generally as their reputed kind are wont to do, be they Black Voodoos in America or sorceresses anywhere.

But the Italian /strega/ or sorceress is in certain respects a different character from these. In most cases she comes of a family in which her calling or art has been practised for many generations. I have no doubt that there are instances in which the ancestry remounts to mediaeval, Roman, or it may be Etruscan times. The result has naturally been the accumulation in such families of much tradition. But in Northern Italy, as its literature indicates, though there has been some slight gathering of fairy tales and popular superstitions by scholars, there has never existed the least interest as regarded the strange lore of the witches, nor any suspicion that it embraced an incredible quantity of old Roman minor myths and legends, such as Ovid has recorded, but of which much escaped him and all other Latin writers.²

This ignorance was greatly aided by the wizards themselves, in making a profound secret of all their traditions, urged thereto by fear of the priests. In fact, the latter all unconsciously actually contributed immensely to the preservation of such lore, since the charm of the forbidden is very great, and witchcraft, like the truffle, grows best and has its raciest flavour when most deeply hidden. However this may be, both priest and wizard are vanishing now with incredible rapidity — it has even struck a French writer that a Franciscan in a railway carriage is a strange anomaly — and a few more years of newspapers and bicycles (Heaven knows what it will be when flying-machines appear!) will probably cause an evanishment of all.

However, they die slowly, and even yet there are old people in the Romagna of the North who know the Etruscan names of the Twelve Gods, and invocations to Bacchus, Jupiter, and Venus, Mercury, and the Lares or ancestral spirits, and in the cities are women who prepare strange amulets, over which they mutter spells, all known in the old Roman time, and who can astonish even the learned by their legends of Latin gods, mingled with lore which may be found in Cato or Theocritus. With one of these I became intimately acquainted in 1886, and have ever since employed her specially to collect among her sisters of the hidden spell in many places all the traditions of the olden time known to them. It is true that I have drawn from other sources, but this woman by long practice has perfectly learned what few understand, or just what I want, and how to extract it from those of her kind.

Among other strange relics, she succeeded, after many years, in obtaining the following “Gospel”, which I have in her handwriting. A full account of its nature with many details will

¹ March, 1897: “Neapolitan Witchcraft.”

² Thus we may imagine what the case would have been as regards German fairy-tales if nothing had survived to a future day except the collections of Grimm and Musaeus. The world would fall into the belief that these constituted all the works of the kind which had ever existed, when, in fact, they form only a small part of the whole. And folklore was unknown to classic authors: there is really no evidence in any ancient Latin writer that he gathered traditions and the like among the vulgar, as men collect at present. They all made books entirely out of books — there being still “a few left of the same sort” of literati.

be found in an Appendix. I do not know definitely whether my informant derived a part of these traditions from *written* sources or oral narration, but believe it was chiefly the latter. However, there are a few wizards who copy or preserve documents relative to their art. I have not seen my collector since the “Gospel” was sent to me. I hope at some future time to be better informed.

For brief explanation I may say that witchcraft is known to its votaries as *la vecchia religione*, or the old religion, of which Diana is the Goddess, her daughter *Aradia* (or Herodias) the female Messiah, and that this little work sets forth how the latter was born, came down to earth, established witches and witchcraft, and then returned to heaven. With it are given the ceremonies and invocations or incantations to be addressed to *Diana* and *Aradia*, the exorcism of Cain, and the spells of the holystone, rue, and verbena, constituting, as the text declares, the regular church-service, so to speak, which is to be chanted or pronounced at the witch-meetings. There are also included the very curious incantations or benedictions of the honey, meal, and salt, or cakes of the witch-supper, which is curiously classical, and evidently a relic of the Roman Mysteries.

The work could have been extended *ad infinitum* by adding to it the ceremonies and incantations which actually form a part of the Scripture of Witchcraft, but as these are nearly all — or at least in great number — to be found in my works entitled *Etruscan-Roman Remains* and *Legends of Florence*, I have hesitated to compile such a volume before ascertaining whether there is a sufficiently large number of the public who would buy such a work.

Since writing the foregoing I have met with and read a very clever and entertaining work entitled *Il Romanzo dei Settimani*, G. Cavagnari, 1889, in which the author, in the form of a novel, vividly depicts the manners, habits of thought, and especially the nature of witchcraft, and the many superstitions current among the peasants in Lombardy. Unfortunately, notwithstanding his extensive knowledge of the subject, it never seems to have occurred to the narrator that these traditions were anything but noxious nonsense or abominably un-Christian folly. That there exists in them *marvellous* relics of ancient mythology and valuable folklore, which is the very *cor cordium* of history, is as uncared for by him as it would be by a common *Zoccolone* or tramping Franciscan. One would think it might have been suspected by a man who knew that a witch really endeavoured to kill seven people as a ceremony or rite, in order to get the secret of endless wealth, that such a sorceress *must* have had a store of wondrous legends; but of all this there is no trace, and it is very evident that nothing could be further from his mind than that there was anything /interesting/ from a higher or more genial point of view in it all.

His book, in fine, belongs to the very great number of those written on ghosts and superstition since the latter has fallen into discredit, in which the authors indulge in much satirical and very safe but cheap ridicule of what to them is merely vulgar and false. Like Sir Charles Coldstream, they have peeped in the crater of Vesuvius after it had ceased to “erupt”, and found “nothing in it.”

But there was something in it once; and the man of science, which Sir Charles was not, still finds a great deal in the remains, and the antiquarian a Pompeii or a Herculaneum — ‘tis said there are still *seven* buried cities to unearth. I have done what little (it is really very little) I could, to disinter something from the dead volcano of Italian sorcery.

If this be the manner in which Italian witchcraft is treated by the most intelligent writer who has depicted it, it will not be deemed remarkable that there are few indeed who will care whether there is a veritable Gospel of the Witches, apparently of extreme antiquity,