

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Byron Schiller
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Hall
Baum Henry Kipling Doyle Willis
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac
Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Homer Tolstoy Whitman
Darwin Thoreau Twain
Potter Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato Scott
Kant Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen Burton Harte
London Descartes Cervantes Wells Hesse
Poe Aristotle Wells Voltaire Cooke
Hale James Hastings Shakespeare Chambers Irving
Bunner Richter Chekhov da Shaw Wodehouse
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Flowers of Freethought (First Series)

G. W. (George William) Foote

Imprint

This book is part of TREDITION CLASSICS

Author: G. W. (George William) Foote
Cover design: Buchgut, Berlin - Germany

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg - Germany
ISBN: 978-3-8472-1912-5

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FLOWERS OF FREETHOUGHT

(First Series)

BY G. W. FOOTE.

LONDON
1893.

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PREFACE.

Heinrich Heine called himself a soldier in the army of human liberation. It was a modest description of himself, for he was more; his position was that of a leader, and his sword was like the mystic Excalibur, flashing with the hues of his genius, and dealing death to the enemies of freedom.

Humbler fighters than Heine may count themselves as simple soldiers in that great army, whose leaders' names are graven deep in the history of modern Europe. I also venture to rank myself with them, and it is the summit of my ambition. To be indeed a soldier in that army, however low and obscure, is not to have lived in vain; to persevere, to fight to the end, is to live (if unknown) in the future of humanity.

In the course of my service to "the cause" I have wielded tongue and pen as weapons. The spoken word has gone, like spilt water, except as it may have made an impression on the listeners. The written word remains. Most of it, in truth, was only the week's work, done honestly, but under no special impulse. Some of the rest—as I have been told, and as in a few cases I feel—is of less doubtful value; having occasionally the merit of a free play of mind on subjects that are too often treated with ignorance, timidity, or hypocrisy.

This is my reason for publishing in a separate and durable form the articles in this collection. Whether it is a sufficient reason the reader will judge for himself.

No serious attempt has been made at classification. Here and there articles have been placed in intended proximity, though written at different intervals in the past ten years. Sometimes, for an obvious reason, the date of composition has been indicated. Otherwise there is no approach to systematic arrangement; and if this is a defect, the reader has on the other hand the benefit of variety.

The ambitious, and hardly excusable, thing about this collection is its title. But the selection of a label for such a miscellany was not an easy task, and I ask the reader's indulgence in consideration of the difficulty. The title I have chosen is at least a pretty one, and in a sense it is appropriate. These articles are flowers of *my* Freethought; the blossomings of my mind on particular occasions, after much investigation and pondering.

Wherever I have made a rash statement I shall be happy to be corrected; wherever I may have argued wrongly, I shall be happy to be set right. But I am less amenable to appeals on the ground of "taste." They are almost invariably made by those who wish failure to one's propaganda. A fair controversialist will refrain from personalities. I have done this, and I will do no more. I believe in free thought and honest speech. In the war of ideas there is neither treaty nor truce. To ask for quarter is to admit defeat; and to give it is treachery to Truth.

April, 1893. G. W. FOOTE.

OLD NICK.

This gentleman is of very ancient descent. His lineage dwarfs that of the proudest nobles and kings. English peers whose ancestors came in with the Conqueror; the Guelphs, Hapsburgs, and Hohenzollens of our European thrones; are things of yesterday compared with his Highness the Devil. The Cæsars themselves, the more ancient rulers of Assyria, and even the Pharaohs of the first dynasty, are modern beside him. His origin is lost in the impenetrable obscurity of primitive times. Nay, there have been sages who maintained his eternity, who made him coeval with God, and placed upon his head the crown of a divided sovereignty of the infinite universe.

But time and change are lords of all, and the most durable things come to an end. Celestial and infernal, like earthly, powers are subject to the law of decay. Mutability touches them with her dissolving wand, and strong necessity, the lord of gods and men, brings them to the inevitable stroke of Death. Senility falls on all beings and institutions—if they are allowed to perish naturally; and as our august Monarchy is the joke of wits, and our ancient House of Lords is an object of popular derision, so the high and mighty Devil in his palsied old age is the laughing-stock of those who once trembled at the sound of his name. They omit the lofty titles he was once addressed by, and fearless of his feeble thunders and lightnings, they familiarly style him Old Nick. Alas, how are the mighty fallen! The potentate who was more terrible than an army with manners is now the sport of children and a common figure in melodrama. Even the genius of Milton, Goethe, and Byron, has not been able to save him from this miserable fate.

When this sobriquet of Old Nick first came into use is unknown. Macaulay, in his essay on Machiavelli, says that "Out of his surname they have coined an epithet for a knave, and out of his Christian name a synonym for the Devil." A couplet from *Hudibras* is cited to support this view.

Nick Machiavel had ne'er a trick Tho' he gave his name to our Old Nick.

"But we believe," adds Macaulay, "there is a schism on this subject among the antiquaries." The learned Zachary Gray's edition of *Hudibras* shows that "our English writers, before Machiavel's time,

used the word Old Nick very commonly to signify the Devil," and that "it came from our Saxon ancestors, who called him Old Nicka." No doubt Butler, whose learning was so great that he "knew everything," was well acquainted with this fact. He probably meant the couplet as a broad stroke of humor. But there was perhaps a chronological basis for the joke. Our Saxon ancestors did not speak of Old Nicka in a spirit of jest or levity. The bantering sense of our modern sobriquet for the Devil appears to have crept in during the decline of witchcraft. That frightful saturnalia of superstition was the Devil's heyday. He was almost omnipotent and omnipresent. But as witchcraft died out, partly through the growth of knowledge, and partly through sheer weariness on the part of its devotees, the Devil began to lose his power. His agency in human affairs was seen to be less potent than was imagined. People called him Old Nick playfully, as they might talk of a toothless old mastiff whose bark was worse than his bite. At length he was regarded as a perfect fraud, and his sobriquet took a tinge of contempt. He is now utterly played out except in church and chapel, where the sky-pilots still represent him as a roaring lion. Yet, as a curious relic of old times, it may be noted that in the law-courts, where conservatism reigns in the cumbrous wig on the judge's head, and in the cumbrous phraseology of indictments, criminals are still charged with being instigated by the Devil. Nearly all the judges look upon this as so much nonsense, but occasionally there is a pious fossil who treats it seriously. We then hear a Judge North regret that a prisoner has devoted the abilities God gave him to the Devil's service, and give the renegade a year's leisure to reconsider which master he ought to serve.

During the witch mania the world was treated to a great deal of curious information about Old Nick. What Robert Burns says of him in *Tam O'Shanter* is only a faint reminiscence of the wealth of demonology which existed a few generations earlier. Old Nick used to appear at the witches' Sabbaths in the form of a goat, or a brawny black man, who courted all the pretty young witches and made them submit to his embraces. Some of these crazy creatures, under examination or torture, gave the most circumstantial accounts of their intercourse with Satan; their revelations being of such an obscene character that they must be left under the veil of a dead

tongue. It is, of course, absurd to suppose that anything of the kind occurred. Religious hysteria and lubricity are closely allied, as every physician knows, and the filthy fancies of a lively witch deserve no more attention than those of many females in our lunatic asylums.

Behind these tales of the Devil there was the pagan tradition of Pan, whose upper part was that of a man and his lower part that of a goat. The devils of one religion are generally the gods of its predecessor; and the great Pan, whose myth is so beautifully expounded by Bacon, was degraded by Christianity into a fiend. Representing, as he did, the nature which Christianity trampled under foot, he became a fit incarnation of the Devil. The horns and hooves and the goat thighs were preserved; and the emblems of strength, fecundity and wisdom in the god became the emblems of bestiality and cunning in the demon.

Heine's magnificent *Gods in Exile* shows how the deities of Olympus avenged themselves for this ill-treatment. They haunted the mountains and forests, beguiling knights and travellers from their allegiance to Christ. Venus wooed the men who were taught by an ascetic creed to despise sexual love; and Pan, appearing as the Devil, led the women a frightful dance to hell.

But as the Christian superstition declined, the gods of Paganism also disappeared. Their vengeance was completed, and they retired with the knowledge that the gods of Calvary were mortal like the gods of Olympus.

During the last two centuries the Devil has gradually become a subject for joking. In Shakespeare's plays he is still a serious personage, although we fancy that the mighty bard had no belief himself in any such being. But, as a dramatist, he was obliged to suit himself to the current fashion of thought, and he refers to the Devil when it serves his purpose just as he introduces ghosts and witches. His Satanic Majesty not being then a comic figure, he is spoken of or alluded to with gravity. Even when Macbeth flies at the messenger in a towering rage, and cries "the Devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon," he does not lose his sense of the Devil's dignity. In Milton's great epic Satan is really the central figure, and he is always splendid and heroic. Shelley, in fact, complained in his preface to *Prometheus Unbound* that "the character of Satan engenders in

the mind a pernicious casuistry, which leads us to weigh his faults with his wrongs, and to excuse the former because the latter exceed all measure." Goethe's Mephistopheles is less dignified than Milton's Satan, but he is full of energy and intellect, and if Faust eventually escapes from his clutches it is only by a miracle. At any rate, Mephistopheles is not an object of derision; on the contrary, the laugh is generally on his own side. Still, Goethe is playing with the Devil all the time. He does not believe in the actual existence of the Prince of Evil, but simply uses the familiar old figure to work out a psychological drama. The same is true of Byron. Satan, in the *Vision of Judgment*, is a superb presence, moving with a princely splendor; but had it suited his purpose, Byron could have made him a very different character.

The Devil is, indeed, treated with much greater levity by Coleridge and Southey, and Shelley knocks him about a good deal in *Peter Bell the Third*—

The Devil, I safely can aver, Has neither hoof, nor tail, nor sting;
Nor is he, as some sages swear, A spirit, neither here nor there,
In nothing — yet in everything. He is — what we are!
for sometimes The Devil is a gentleman; At others a bard bartering
rhymes For sack; a statesman spinning crimes; A swindler, living as he can.

These and many other verses show what liberties Shelley took with the once formidable monarch of hell. The Devil's treatment by the pulpiteers is instructive. Take up an old sermon and you will find the Devil all over it. The smell of brimstone is on every page, and you see the whisk of his tail as you turn the leaf. But things are changed now. Satan is no longer a person, except in the vulgar circles of sheer illiteracy, where the preacher is as great an ignoramus as his congregation. If you take up any reputable volume of sermons by a Church parson or a Dissenting minister, you find the Devil either takes a back seat or disappears altogether in a metaphysical cloud. None of these subtle resolvers of ancient riddles, however, approaches grand old Donne, who said in one of his fine discourses that "the Devil himself is only concentrated stupidity." What a magnificent flash of insight! Yes, the great enemy of man-

kind is stupidity; and, alas, against that, as Schiller said, the gods themselves fight in vain. Yet time fights against it, and time is greater than the gods; so there is hope after all.

Gradually the Devil has dropped, until he has at last peached the lowest depth. He is now patronised by the Salvation Army. Booth exhibits him for a living, and all the Salvation Army Captains and Hallelujah Lasses parade him about to the terror of a few fools and the amusement of everyone else. Poor Devil! Belisarius begging an obolus was nothing to this. Surely the Lord himself might take pity on his old rival, and assist him out of this miserable plight.

Old Nick is now used to frighten children with, and by-and-bye he may be employed like the old garden-god to frighten away the crows. Even his scriptural reputation cannot save him from such a fate, for the Bible itself is falling into disbelief and contempt, and his adventures from Genesis to Revelation are become a subject of merriment. Talking to Mrs. Eve about apples in the form of a serpent; whispering in David's ear that a census would be a good thing, while Jehovah whispers a similar suggestion on the other side; asking Jesus to turn pebbles into penny loaves, lugging him through the air, perching him on a pinnacle, setting him on the top of a mountain whence both squinted round the globe, and playing for forty days and nights that preposterous pantomime of the temptation in the desert; getting miraculously multiplied, bewildering a herd of swine, and driving them into a watery grave; letting seven of himself occupy one lady called Magdalen, and others inhabit the bodies of lunatics; going about like a roaring lion, and then appearing in the new part of a dragon who lashes the stars with his tail; all these metamorphoses are ineffably ludicrous, and calculated to excite inextinguishable laughter. His one serious appearance in the history of Job is overwhelmed by this multitude of comic situations.

Poor Old Nick is on his last legs and cannot last much longer. May his end be peace! That is the least we can wish him. And when he is dead, let us hope he will receive a decent burial. Those to whom he has been the best friend should follow him to the grave. His obsequies, in that case, would be graced by the presence of all the clergy, and the Burial Service might be read by the Archbishop

of Canterbury. Fancy them, burying their dear departed brother the Devil, in the sure and certain hope of a glorious resurrection!

FIRE!!!

Do not be alarmed, dear reader; there is no need to rush out into the street, like poor old Lot flying from the doomed Cities of the Plain. Sit down and take it easy. Let your fire-insurance policy slumber in its nest. Lean back in your chair, stretch out your legs, and prepare to receive another dose of Free-thought physic – worth a guinea a bottle. So! Are you ready? Very well then, let us begin.

What would man be without fire? Would he not be a perfect barbarian? His very food, even the meat, would have to be eaten raw, and as knives and forks would be unknown, it would have to be devoured with hands and teeth. We read that the Tartar horseman will put a beefsteak under his saddle, and supple and cook it in a ten-mile ride; but we cannot all follow his example, and many would think the game was not worth the candle. But not only should we be obliged to eat our food uncooked; we should enjoy none of the blessings and comforts bestowed upon us by science, which absolutely depends on fire. Nay, our houses would be too cold to shelter us in the winter, and we should be compelled to burrow in the ground. The whole human race would have to live in tropical countries; all the temperate regions would be deserted; and as it is in the temperate regions that civilisation reaches its highest and most permanent developments, the world would be reduced to a condition of barbarism if not of savagery.

No wonder, then, that this mighty civiliser has figured so extensively in legend and mythology. "Next to the worship of the sun," says Max Müller, "there is probably no religious worship so widely diffused as that of Fire." At bottom, indeed, the two were nearly identical. The flame of burning wood was felt to be akin to the rays of the sun, and its very upward motion seemed an aspiration to its source. Sun and fire alike gave warmth, which meant life and joy; without them there reigned sterility and death. Do we not still

speak of the *sunshine* of prosperity, and of basking in the *rays* of fortune? Do we not still speak of the *fire* of life, of inspiration, of love, of heroism? And thus when the tide of our being is at the flood, we instinctively think of our father the Sun, in whom, far more than in invisible gods, we live and move—for we are all his children.

Like everything else in civilised existence, fire was a human discovery. But superstitious ages imagined that so precious a thing must have descended from above. Accordingly the Greeks (to take but one illustration) fabled that Prometheus stole Jove's fire from Heaven and gave it to mankind. And as the gods of early ages are not too friendly to human beings, it was also fabled that Prometheus incurred the fierce anger of Jove, who fastened him to a rock on Mount Caucasus, where he was blistered by day and frozen by night, while Jove's vulture everlastingly preyed upon his vitals.

The sun himself, in oriental countries, shining down implacably in times of prolonged drought, became a terrible demon, and as Baal or Moloch was worshipped with cruel and bloody rites. The corruption of the best is the worst; beneficence changes to malignity. Thus fire, which is a splendid servant, is an awful master. The very wild beasts dread it. Famishing lions and tigers will not approach the camp-fire to seize their prey. Men have something of the same instinctive apprehension. How soon the nerves are disturbed by the smell of anything burning in the house. Raise the cry of "Fire!" in a crowded building, and at once the old savage bursts through the veneer of civilisation. It is helter-skelter, the Devil take the hindmost. The strong trample upon the weak. Men and women turn to devils. Even if the cry of "Fire!" be raised in a church—where a believer might wish to die, and where he might feel himself booked through to glory—there is just the same stampede. People who sit and listen complacently to the story of eternal roastings in an everlasting hell, will fight like maniacs to escape a singeing. Rather than go to heaven in a chariot of fire they will plod for half a century in this miserable vale of tears.

Man's dread of fire has been artfully seized upon by the priests. All over the world these gentlemen are in the same line of business—trading upon the credulous terrors of the multitude. They fill

Hell with fire, because it frightens men easily, and the fuel costs nothing. If they had to find the fuel themselves Hell would be cold in twenty-four hours. "Flee from the wrath to come," they exclaim. "What is it?" ask the people. "Consuming fire," the priests exclaim, "nay, not consuming; you will burn in it without dying, without losing a particle of flesh, for ever and ever." Then the people want to get saved, and the priests issue insurance policies, which are rendered void by change of opinion or failure to pay the premium.

Buddhist pictures of hell teach the eye the same lesson that is taught the ear by Christian sermons. There are the poor damned wretches rolling in the fire; there are the devils shovelling in fuel, and other devils with long toasting-forks thrusting back the victims that shove their noses out of the flames.

Wherever the priests retain their old power over the people's minds they still preach a hell of literal fire, and deliver twenty sermons on Hades to one on Paradise. Hell, in fact, is always as hot as the people will stand it. The priests reduce the temperature with natural reluctance. Every degree lost is a sinking of their power and profit.

Even in England—the land of Shakespeare and Shelley, Newton and Darwin, Mill and Spencer—the cry of "Fire!" is still raised in thousands of pulpits. Catholics bate no jot of their fiery damnation; Church of England clergymen hold forth on brimstone—with now and then a dash of treacle—in the rural districts and small towns; it is not long since the Wesleyans turned out a minister who was not cocksure about everlasting torment; Mr. Spurgeon preaches hell (hot, without sugar) in mercy to perishing souls; and General Booth, who caters for the silliest and most ignorant Christians, works hell into his trade-mark.

"Blood and Fire" is a splendid summary of the orthodox faith. All who would be saved must be washed in the Blood of the Lamb—a disgusting ablution! All who are not saved fall into the Fire. A blood-bath or a sulphur-bath is the only alternative.

Happily, however, the people are becoming more civilised and more humane. Science and popular education are working wonders. Reason, self-reliance, and sympathy are rapidly developing. The old primitive terrors are losing their hold upon us, and the

callous dogmas of savage religion are growing impossible. Priests cannot frighten men who possess a high sense of human dignity; and the doctrine of an angry God, who will burn his own children in hell, is loathsome to those who will fight the flames and smoke of a burning house to save the life of an unknown fellow creature.

How amusing, in these circumstances, are the wriggings of the "advanced" Christians. Archdeacon Farrar, for instance, in despite of common sense and etymology, contends that "everlasting" fire only means "eternal" fire. What a comfort the distinction would be to a man in Hell! Away with such temporising! Let the ghastly old dogma be defied. Sensible people should simply laugh at the priests who still raise the cry of "Fire!"

SKY PILOTS.

The authorship of the designation "sky pilot" is as unknown as that of the four gospels. Yet its origin is recent. It has only been in use for a few years, say ten, or at the outside twenty. Nobody knows, however, who was the first man from whose lips it fell. Probably he was an American, but his name and address are not ascertained. Surely this fact, which has thousands if not millions of parallels, should abate the impudence of religionists who ask "Who made the world?" when they do not know who made nine-tenths of the well-known things it contains.

Whatever its origin, the designation is a happy one. It fits like a glove, Repeat it to the first man you meet, and though he never heard it before, he will know that you mean a minister. For this very reason it makes the men of God angry. They feel insulted, and let you see it. They accuse you of calling them names, and if you smile too sarcastically they will indulge in some well-selected Bible language themselves.

There are some trades that will not bear honest designations, and the minister's is one of them. Call him what you please, except what he is, and he is not disquieted. But call him "sky-pilot" and he starts

up like Macbeth at the ghost of Banquo, exclaiming "Come in any other form but that!"

Go down to the seaside and look at one of those bluff, weather-beaten, honest fellows, who know all the rocks and shoals, and tides and channels, for miles around. Call one of them a "pilot," and he will not be offended. The term is legitimate. It exactly denotes his business. He is rather proud of it. His calling is honorable and useful. He pilots ships through uncertain and dangerous waters to their destination. He does his work, takes his pay, and feels satisfied; and if you cry "pilot!" he answers merrily with a "what cheer?"

But "sky" in front of "pilot" makes all the difference. It makes the man of God feel like having a cold shower bath; then the reaction sets in and he grows hot—sometimes as hot as H— — well, Hades.

We are not going to swear if the parson does, But after all, he
is a "pilot" and a "sky" pilot. He undertakes to pilot people to
Heaven.

Let him board your ship and take the helm, and he will guide you over the Black Sea of Death to Port Felicity that, at least, is what he says in his trade circular, though it turns out very differently in practice, as we shall see presently.

Let us first notice a great difference between the sea pilot and the sky pilot. The honest salt boards the ship, and takes her out to sea, or brings her into port. When the work is over he presents his bill, or it is done for him. He does not ask for payment in advance. He neither takes nor gives credit. But the sky pilot does take credit and he gives none. He is always paid beforehand. Every year he expects a good retaining fee in the shape of a stipend or a benefice, or a good percentage of the pew rents and collections. But when his services are really wanted he leaves you in the lurch. You do not need a pilot to Heaven until you come to die. Then your voyage begins in real earnest. But the sky-pilot does not go with you. Oh dear no! That is no part of *his* bargain. "Ah my friend," he says, "I must leave you now. You must do the rest for yourself. I have coached you for years in celestial navigation; if you remember my