Having accepted the very great honour of being allowed to deliver here two lectures, I have chosen as my subject Superstition and Science. It is with Superstition that this first lecture will deal.

The subject seems to me especially fit for a clergyman; for he should, more than other men, be able to avoid trenching on two subjects rightly excluded from this Institution; namely, Theology--that is, the knowledge of God; and Religion--that is, the knowledge of Duty. If he knows, as he should, what is Theology, and what is Religion, then he should best know what is not Theology, and what is not Religion.

For my own part, I entreat you at the outset to keep in mind that these lectures treat of matters entirely physical; which have in reality, and ought to have in our minds, no more to do with Theology and Religion than the proposition that theft is wrong, has to do with the proposition that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles.

It is necessary to premise this, because many are of opinion that superstition is a corruption of religion; and though they would agree that as such, "corruptio optimi pessima," yet they would look on religion as the state of spiritual health, and superstition as one of spiritual disease.

Others again, holding the same notion, but not considering that "corruptio optimi pessima," have been in all ages somewhat inclined to be merciful to superstition, as a child of reverence; as a mere accidental misdirection of one of the noblest and most wholesome faculties of man.

This is not the place wherein to argue with either of these parties: and I shall simply say that superstition seems to me altogether a physical affection, as thoroughly material and corporeal as those of eating or sleeping, remembering or dreaming.

After this, it will be necessary to define superstition, in order to have some tolerably clear understanding of what we are talking about. I beg leave to define it as--Fear of the unknown.

Johnson, who was no dialectician, and, moreover, superstitious enough himself, gives eight different definitions of the word; which is equivalent to confessing his inability to define it at all:

"1. Unnecessary fear or scruples in religion; observance of unnecessary and uncommanded rites or practices; religion without morality.

"2. False religion; reverence of beings not proper objects of reverence; false worship.

"3. Over nicety; exactness too scrupulous."
Eight meanings; which, on the principle that eight eighths, or indeed eight hundred, do not make one whole, may be considered as no definition. His first thought, as often happens, is the best—"Unnecessary fear." But after that he wanders. The root-meaning of the word is still to seek. But, indeed, the popular meaning, thanks to popular common sense, will generally be found to contain in itself the root-meaning.

Let us go back to the Latin word Superstitio. Cicero says that the superstitious element consists in "a certain empty dread of the gods"—a purely physical affection, if you will remember three things:

1. That dread is in itself a physical affection.
2. That the gods who were dreaded were, with the vulgar, who alone dreaded them, merely impersonations of the powers of nature.
3. That it was physical injury which these gods were expected to inflict.

But he himself agrees with this theory of mine; for he says shortly after, that not only philosophers, but even the ancient Romans, had separated superstition from religion; and that the word was first applied to those who prayed all day ut liberi sui sibi superstites essent, might survive them. On the etymology no one will depend who knows the remarkable absence of any etymological instinct in the ancients, in consequence of their weak grasp of that sound inductive method which has created modern criticism. But if it be correct, it is a natural and pathetic form for superstition to take in the minds of men who saw their children fade and die; probably the greater number of them beneath diseases which mankind could neither comprehend nor cure.

The best exemplification of what the ancients meant by superstition is to be found in the lively and dramatic words of Aristotle's great pupil Theophrastus.

The superstitious man, according to him, after having washed his hands with lustral water—that is, water in which a torch from the altar had been quenched—goes about with a laurel-leaf in his mouth, to keep off evil influences, as the pigs in Devonshire used, in my youth, to go about with a withe of mountain ash round their necks to keep off the evil eye. If a weasel crosses his path, he stops, and either throws three pebbles into the road, or, with the innate selfishness of fear, lets someone else go before him, and attract to himself the harm which may ensue. He has a similar dread of a screech-owl, whom he compliments in the name of its mistress, Pallas Athene. If he finds a serpent in his house, he sets up an altar to it. If he pass at a four-cross-way an anointed stone, he pours oil on it, kneels down, and adores it. If a rat has nibbled one of his sacks he takes it for a fearful portent—a superstition which Cicero also mentions. He dare not sit on a tomb, because it would be assisting at his own funeral. He purifies endlessly his house, saying that Hecate—that is, the moon—has exercised some malign influence on it; and many other purifications he observes, of which I shall only say that they are by their nature plainly, like the last, meant as preservatives against unseen malarial or contagions, possible or impossible. He assists every month with his children at the mysteries of the Orphic priests; and finally, whenever he sees an epileptic patient, he spits in his own bosom to avert the evil omen.

I have quoted, I believe, every fact given by Theophrastus; and you will agree, I am sure, that the moving and inspiring element of such a character is mere bodily fear of unknown evil. The only superstition attributed to him which does not at first sight seem to have its root in dread is that of the Orphic mysteries. But of them Muller says that the Dionysos whom they worshipped "was an infernal deity, connected with Hades, and was the personification, not merely of rapturous pleasure, but of a deep sorrow for the miseries of human life." The Orphic societies of Greece seem to have been peculiarly ascetic, taking no animal food save raw flesh from the sacrificed ox of Dionusos. And Plato speaks of a lower grade of Orphic priests, Orpheotelestai, "who used to come before the doors of the rich, and promise, by sacrifices and expiatory songs, to release them from their own sins, and those of their forefathers;" and such would be but too likely to get a hearing from the man who was afraid of a weasel or an owl.

Now, this same bodily fear, I verily believe, will be found at the root of all superstition whatsoever.

But be it so. Fear is a natural passion, and a wholesome one. Without the instinct of self-preservation, which causes the
sea-anemone to contract its tentacles, or the fish to dash into its hover, species would be exterminated wholesale by involuntary suicide.

Yes; fear is wholesome enough, like all other faculties, as long as it is controlled by reason. But what if the fear be not rational, but irrational? What if it be, in plain homely English, blind fear; fear of the unknown, simply because it is unknown? Is it not likely, then, to be afraid of the wrong object? to be hurtful, ruinous to animals as well as to man?

Any one will confess that, who has ever seen, a horse inflict on himself mortal injuries, in his frantic attempts to escape from a quite imaginary danger. I have good reasons for believing that not only animals here and there, but whole flocks and swarms of them, are often destroyed, even in the wild state, by mistaken fear; by such panics, for instance, as cause a whole herd of buffaloes to rush over a bluff, and be dashed to pieces. And remark that this capacity of panic, fear—of superstition, as I should call it—is greatest in those animals, the dog and the horse for instance, which have the most rapid and vivid fancy. Does not the unlettered Highlander say all that I want to say, when he attributes to his dog and his horse, on the strength of these very manifestations of fear, the capacity of seeing ghosts and fairies before he can see them himself?

But blind fear not only causes evil to the coward himself: it makes him a source of evil to others; for it is the cruellest of all human states. It transforms the man into the likeness of the cat, who, when she is caught in a trap, or shut up in a room, has too low an intellect to understand that you wish to release her: and, in the madness of terror, bites and tears at the hand which tries to do her good. Yes; very cruel is blind fear. When a man dreads he knows not what, he will do he cares not what. When he dreads desperately, he will act desperately. When he dreads beyond all reason, he will behave beyond all reason. He has no law of guidance left, save the lowest selfishness. No law of guidance: and yet his intellect, left unguided, may be rapid and acute enough to lead him into terrible follies. Infinitely more imaginative than the lowest animals, he is for that very reason capable of being infinitely more foolish, more cowardly, more superstitious. He can—what the lower animals, happily for them, cannot—organise his folly; erect his superstitions into a science; and create a whole mythology out of his blind fear of the unknown. And when he has done that—Woe to the weak! For when he has reduced his superstition to a science, then he will reduce his cruelty to a science likewise, and write books like the "Malleus Maleficarum," and the rest of the witch literature of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries; of which Mr. Lecky has of late told the world so much, and told it most faithfully and most fairly.

But, fear of the unknown? Is not that fear of the unseen world? And is not that fear of the spiritual world? Pardon me: a great deal of that fear—of superstition—is simply not fear of the spiritual, but of the material; and of nothing else.

The spiritual world—I beg you to fix this in your minds—is not merely an invisible world which may become visible, but an invisible world which is by its essence invisible; a moral world, a world of right and wrong. And spiritual fear—which is one of the noblest of all affections, as bodily fear is one of the basest—is, if properly defined, nothing less or more than the fear of doing wrong; of becoming a worse man.

But what has that to do with mere fear of the unseen? The fancy which conceives the fear is physical, not spiritual. Think for yourselves. What difference is there between a savage's fear of a demon, and a hunter's fear of a fall? The hunter sees a fence. He does not know what is on the other side, but he has seen fences like it with a great ditch on the other side, and suspects one here likewise. He has seen horses fall at such, and men hurt thereby. He pictures to himself his horse falling at that fence, himself rolling in the ditch, with possibly a broken limb; and he recoils from the picture he himself has made; and perhaps with very good reason. His picture may have its counterpart in fact; and he may break his leg. But his picture, like the previous pictures from which it was compounded, is simply a physical impression on the brain, just as much as those in dreams.

Now, does the fact of the ditch, the fall, and the broken leg, being unseen and unknown, make them a spiritual ditch, a spiritual fall, a spiritual broken leg? And does the fact of the demon and his doings, being as yet unseen and unknown, make them spiritual, or the harm that he may do, a spiritual harm? What does the savage fear? Lest the demon should appear; that is, become obvious to his physical senses, and produce an unpleasant physical effect on them. He fears lest the fiend should entice him into the bog, break the hand-bridge over the brook, turn into a horse and ride away with
him, or jump out from behind a tree and wring his neck--tolerably hard physical facts, all of them; the children of physical fancy, regarded with physical dread. Even if the superstition proved true; even if the demon did appear; even if he wrung the traveller's neck in sound earnest, there would be no more spiritual agency or phenomenon in the whole tragedy than there is in the parlour-table, when spiritual somethings make spiritual raps upon spiritual wood; and human beings, who are really spirits--and would to heaven they would remember that fact, and what it means--believe that anything has happened beyond a clumsy juggler's trick.

You demur? Do you not see that the demon, by the mere fact of having produced physical consequences, would have become himself a physical agent, a member of physical Nature, and therefore to be explained, he and his doings, by physical laws? If you do not see that conclusion at first sight, think over it till you do.

It may seem to some that I have founded my theory on a very narrow basis; that I am building up an inverted pyramid; or that, considering the numberless, complex, fantastic shapes which superstition has assumed, bodily fear is too simple to explain them all.

But if those persons will think a second time, they must agree that my base is as broad as the phenomena which it explains; for every man is capable of fear. And they will see, too, that the cause of superstition must be something like fear, which is common to all men: for all, at least as children, are capable of superstition; and that it must be something which, like fear, is of a most simple, rudimentary, barbaric kind; for the lowest savage, of whatever he is not capable, is still superstitious, often to a very ugly degree. Superstition seems, indeed, to be, next to the making of stone-weapons, the earliest method of asserting his superiority to the brutes which has occurred to that utterly abnormal and fantastic lusus naturae called man.

Now let us put ourselves awhile, as far as we can, in the place of that same savage; and try whether my theory will not justify itself; whether or not superstition, with all its vagaries, may have been, indeed must have been, the result of that ignorance and fear which he carried about with him, every time he prowled for food through the primeval forest.

A savage's first division of nature would be, I should say, into things which he can eat and things which can eat him: including, of course, his most formidable enemy, and most savoury food--his fellow-man. In finding out what he can eat, we must remember, he will have gone through much experience which will have inspired him with a serious respect for the hidden wrath of nature; like those Himalayan folk, of whom Hooker says, that as they know every poisonous plant, they must have tried them all--not always with impunity.

So he gets at a third class of objects--things which he cannot eat, and which will not eat him; but will only do him harm, as it seems to him, out of pure malice, like poisonous plants and serpents. There are natural accidents, too, which fall into the same category, stones, floods, fires, avalanches. They hurt him or kill him, surely for ends of their own. If a rock falls from the cliff above him, what more natural than to suppose that there is some giant up there who threw it at him? If he had been up there, and strong enough, and had seen a man walking underneath, he would certainly have thrown the stone at him and killed him. For first, he might have eaten the man after; and even if he were not hungry, the man might have done him a mischief; and it was prudent to prevent that by doing him a mischief first. Besides, the man might have a wife; and if he killed the man, then the wife would, by a very ancient law common to man and animals, become the prize of the victor. Such is the natural man, the carnal man, the soulish man, the (Greek) of St. Paul, with five tolerably acute senses, which are ruled by five very acute animal passions--hunger, sex, rage, vanity, fear. It is with the working of the last passion, fear, that this lecture has to do.

So the savage concludes that there must be a giant living in the cliff, who threw stones at him, with evil intent; and he concludes in like wise concerning most other natural phenomena. There is something in them which will hurt him, and therefore likes to hurt him; and if he cannot destroy them, and so deliver himself, his fear of them grows quite boundless. There are hundreds of natural objects on which he learns to look with the same eyes as the little boys of Teneriffe look on the useless and poisonous Euphorbia canariensis. It is to them--according to Mr. Piazzi Smyth--a demon who would kill them, if it could only run after them; but as it cannot, they shout Spanish curses at it, and pelt it with volleys of stones, "screeching with elfin joy, and using worse names than ever, when the poisonous milk spurts out
And if such be the attitude of the uneducated man towards the permanent terrors of nature, what will it be towards those which are sudden and seemingly capricious?--towards storms, earthquakes, floods, blights, pestilences? We know too well what it has been-- one of blind, and therefore often cruel, fear. How could it be otherwise? Was Theophrastus's superstitions so very foolish for pouring oil on every round stone? I think there was a great deal to be said for him. This worship of Baetyli was rational enough. They were aerolites, fallen from heaven. Was it not as well to be civil to such messengers from above?--to testify by homage to them due awe of the being who had thrown them at men, and who though he had missed his shot that time might not miss it the next? I think if we, knowing nothing of either gunpowder, astronomy, or Christianity, saw an Armstrong bolt fall within five miles of London, we should be inclined to be very respectful to it indeed. So the aerolites, or glacial boulders, or polished stone weapons of an extinct race, which looked like aerolites, were the children of Ouranos the heaven, and had souls in them. One, by one of those strange transformations in which the logic of unreason indulges, the image of Diana of the Ephesians, which fell down from Jupiter; another was the Ancile, the holy shield which fell from the same place in the days of Numa Pompilius, and was the guardian genius of Rome; and several more became notable for ages.

Why not? The uneducated man of genius, unacquainted alike with metaphysics and with biology, sees, like a child, a personality in every strange and sharply-defined object. A cloud like an angel may be an angel; a bit of crooked root like a man may be a man turned into wood--perhaps to be turned back again at its own will. An erratic block has arrived where it is by strange unknown means. Is not that an evidence of its personality? Either it has flown hither itself, or some one has thrown it. In the former case, it has life, and is proportionally formidable; in the latter, he who had thrown it is formidable.

I know two erratic blocks of porphyry--I believe there are three--in Cornwall, lying one on serpentine, one, I think, on slate, which--so I was always informed as a boy--were the stones which St. Kevern threw after St. Just when the latter stole his host's chalice and paten, and ran away with them to the Land's End. Why not? Before we knew anything about the action of icebergs and glaciers, that is, until the last eighty years, that was as good a story as any other; while how lifelike these boulders are, let a great poet testify; for the fact has not escaped the delicate eye of Wordsworth:

As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie Couched on the bald top of an eminence; Wonder to all who do the same espy, By what means it could thither come, and whence, So that it seems a thing endued with sense; Like a sea-beast crawled forth, that on a shelf Of rock or sand reposeth, there to sun itself.

To the civilised poet, the fancy becomes a beautiful simile; to a savage poet, it would have become a material and a very formidable fact. He stands in the valley, and looks up at the boulder on the far-off fells. He is puzzled by it. He fears it. At last he makes up his mind. It is alive. As the shadows move over it, he sees it move. May it not sleep there all day, and prowl for prey all night? He had been always afraid of going up those fells; now he will never go. There is a monster there.

Childish enough, no doubt. But remember that the savage is always a child. So, indeed, are millions, as well clothed, housed, and policed as ourselves--children from the cradle to the grave. But of them I do not talk; because, happily for the world, their childishness is so overlaid by the result of other men's manhood; by an atmosphere of civilisation and Christianity which they have accepted at second-hand as the conclusions of minds wiser than their own, that they do all manner of reasonable things for bad reasons, or for no reason at all, save the passion of imitation. Not in them, but in the savage, can we see man as he is by nature, the puppet of his senses and his passions, the natural slave of his own fears.

But has the savage no other faculties, save his five senses and five passions? I do not say that. I should be most unphilosophical if I said it; for the history of mankind proves that he has infinitely more in him than that. Yes: but in him that infinite more, which is not only the noblest part of humanity, but, it may be, humanity itself, is not to be counted as one of the roots of superstition. For in the savage man, in whom superstition certainly originates, that
infinite more is still merely in him; inside him; a faculty: but not yet a fact. It has not come out of him into consciousness, purpose, and act; and is to be treated as non-existent: while what has come out, his passions and senses, is enough to explain all the vagaries of superstition; a vera causa for all its phenomena. And if we seem to have found a sufficient explanation already, it is unphilosophical to look farther, at least till we have tried whether our explanation fits the facts.

Nevertheless, there is another faculty in the savage, to which I have already alluded, common to him and to at least the higher vertebrates--fancy; the power of reproducing internal images of external objects, whether in its waking form of physical memory--if, indeed, all memory be not physical--or in its sleeping form of dreaming. Upon this last, which has played so very important a part in superstition in all ages, I beg you to think a moment. Recollect your own dreams during childhood; and recollect again that the savage is always a child. Recollect how difficult it was for you in childhood, how difficult it must be always for the savage, to decide whether dreams are phantasms or realities. To the savage, I doubt not, the food he eats, the foes he grapples with, in dreams, are as real as any waking impressions. But, moreover, these dreams will be very often, as children's dreams are wont to be, of a painful and terrible kind. Perhaps they will be always painful; perhaps his dull brain will never dream, save under the influence of indigestion, or hunger, or an uncomfortable attitude. And so, in addition to his waking experience of the terrors of nature, he will have a whole dream-experience besides, of a still more terrific kind. He walks by day past a black cavern mouth, and thinks, with a shudder--Something ugly may live in that ugly hole: what if it jumped out upon me? He broods over the thought with the intensity of a narrow and unoccupied mind; and a few nights after, he has eaten--but let us draw a veil before the larder of a savage--his chin is pinned down on his chest, a slight congestion of the brain comes on; and behold he finds himself again at that cavern's mouth, and something ugly does jump out upon him: and the cavern is a haunted spot henceforth to him and to all his tribe. It is in vain that his family tell him that he has been lying asleep at home all the while. He has the evidence of his senses to prove the contrary. He must have got out of himself, and gone into the woods. When we remember that certain wise Greek philosophers could find no better explanation of dreaming than that the soul left the body, and wandered free, we cannot condemn the savage for his theory.

Now, I submit that in these simple facts we have a group of "true causes" which are the roots of all the superstitions of the world.

And if any one shall complain that I am talking materialism: I shall answer, that I am doing exactly the opposite. I am trying to eliminate and get rid of that which is material, animal, and base; in order that that which is truly spiritual may stand out, distinct and clear, in its divine and eternal beauty.

To explain, and at the same time, as I think, to verify my hypothesis, let me give you an example--fictitious, it is true, but probable fact nevertheless; because it is patched up of many fragments of actual fact: and let us see how, in following it out, we shall pass through almost every possible form of superstition.

Suppose a great hollow tree, in which the formidable wasps of the tropics have built for ages. The average savage hurries past the spot in mere bodily fear; for if they come out against him, they will sting him to death; till at last there comes by a savage wiser than the rest, with more observation, reflection, imagination, independence of will--the genius of his tribe.

The awful shade of the great tree, added to his terror of the wasps, weighs on him, and excites his brain. Perhaps, too, he has had a wife or a child stung to death by these same wasps. These wasps, so small, yet so wise, far wiser than he: they fly, and they sting. Ah, if he could fly and sting; how he would kill and eat, and live right merrily. They build great towns; they rob far and wide; they never quarrel with each other: they must have some one to teach them, to lead them--they must have a king. And so he gets the fancy of a Wasp-King; as the western Irish still believe in the Master Otter; as the Red Men believe in the King of the Buffaloes, and find the bones of his ancestors in the Mammoth remains of Big-bone Lick; as the Philistines of Ekron--to quote a notorious instance--actually worshipped Baal-zebub, lord of the flies.

If they have a king, he must be inside that tree, of course. If he, the savage, were a king, he would not work for his
bread, but sit at home and make others feed him; and so, no doubt, does the wasp-king.

And when he goes home he will brood over this wonderful discovery of the wasp-king; till, like a child, he can think of nothing else. He will go to the tree, and watch for him to come out. The wasps will get accustomed to his motionless figure, and leave him unhurt; till the new fancy will rise in his mind that he is a favourite of this wasp-king: and at last he will find himself grovelling before the tree, saying--"Oh great wasp-king, pity me, and tell your children not to sting me, and I will bring you honey, and fruit, and flowers to eat, and I will flatter you, and worship you, and you shall be my king."

And then he would gradually boast of his discovery; of the new mysterious bond between him and the wasp-king; and his tribe would believe him, and fear him; and fear him still more when he began to say, as he surely would, not merely--"I can ask the wasp-king, and he will tell his children not to sting you:" but--"I can ask the wasp-king, and he will send his children, and sting you all to death." Vanity and ambition will have prompted the threat: but it will not be altogether a lie. The man will more than half believe his own words; he will quite believe them when he has repeated them a dozen times.

And so he will become a great man, and a king, under the protection of the king of the wasps; and he will become, and it may be his children after him, priest of the wasp-king, who will be their fetish, and the fetish of their tribe.

And they will prosper, under the protection of the wasp-king. The wasp will become their moral ideal, whose virtues they must copy. The new chief will preach to them wild eloquent words. They must sting like wasps, revenge like wasps, hold altogether like wasps, build like wasps, work hard like wasps, rob like wasps; then, like the wasps, they will be the terror of all around, and kill and eat all their enemies. Soon they will call themselves The Wasps. They will boast that their king's father or grandfather, and soon that the ancestor of the whole tribe was an actual wasp; and the wasp will become at once their eponym hero, their deity, their ideal, their civiliser; who has taught them to build a kraal of huts, as he taught his children to build a hive.

Now, if there should come to any thinking man of this tribe, at this epoch, the new thought--Who made the world? he will be sorely puzzled. The conception of a world has never crossed his mind before. He never pictured to himself anything beyond the nearest ridge of mountains; and as for a Maker, that will be a greater puzzle still. What makers or builders more cunning than those wasps of whom his foolish head is full? Of course, he sees it now. A Wasp made the world; which to him entirely new guess might become an integral part of his tribe's creed. That would be their cosmogony. And if, a generation or two after, another savage genius should guess that the world was a globe hanging in the heavens, he would, if he had imagination enough to take the thought in at all, put it to himself in a form suited to his previous knowledge and conceptions. It would seem to him that The Wasp flew about the skies with the world in his mouth, as he carries a bluebottle fly; and that would be the astronomy of his tribe henceforth. Absurd enough: but--as every man who is acquainted with old mythical cosmogonies must know--no more absurd than twenty similar guesses on record. Try to imagine the gradual genesis of such myths as the Egyptian scarabeus and egg, or the Hindoo theory that the world stood on an elephant, the elephant on a tortoise, the tortoise on that infinite note of interrogation which, as some one expresses it, underlies all physical speculations, and judge: must they not have arisen in some such fashion as that which I have pointed out?

This, I say, would be the culminating point of the wasp-worship, which had sprung up out of bodily fear of being stung.

But times might come for it in which it would go through various changes, through which every superstition in the world, I suppose, has passed or is doomed to pass.

The wasp-men might be conquered, and possibly eaten, by a stronger tribe than themselves. What would be the result? They would fight valiantly at first, like wasps. But what if they began to fail? Was not the wasp-king angry with them? Had not he deserted them? He must be appeased; he must have his revenge. They would take a captive, and offer him to the wasps. So did a North American tribe, in their need, some forty years ago; when, because their maize-crops failed, they roasted alive a captive girl, cut her to pieces, and sowed her with their corn. I would not tell the story, for the horror of it, did it not bear with such fearful force on my argument. What were those Red Men thinking of? What
chain of misreasoning had they in their heads when they hit on that as a device for making the crops grow? Who can
tell? Who can make the crooked straight, or number that which is wanting? As said Solomon of old, so must we--"The
foolishness of fools is folly." One thing only we can say of them, that they were horribly afraid of famine, and took that
means of ridding themselves of their fear.

But what if the wasp tribe had no captives? They would offer slaves. What if the agony and death of slaves did not
appease the wasps? They would offer their fairest, their dearest, their sons and their daughters, to the wasps; as the
Carthaginians, in like strait, offered in one day 200 noble boys to Moloch, the volcano-god, whose worship they had
brought out of Syria; whose original meaning they had probably forgotten; of whom they only knew that he was a dark
and devouring being, who must be appeased with the burning bodies of their sons and daughters. And so the veil of
fancy would be lifted again, and the whole superstition stand forth revealed as the mere offspring of bodily fear.

But more: the survivors of the conquest might, perhaps, escape, and carry their wasp-fetish into a new land. But if they
became poor and weakly, their brains and imagination, degenerating with their bodies, would degrade their wasp-
worship till they knew not what it meant. Away from the sacred tree, in a country the wasps of which were not so large
or formidable, they would require a remembrancer of the wasp-king; and they would make one—a wasp of wood, or
what not. After a while, according to that strange law of fancy, the root of all idolatry, which you may see at work in
every child who plays with a doll, the symbol would become identified with the thing symbolised; they would invest
the wooden wasp with all the terrible attributes which had belonged to the live wasps of the tree; and after a few
centuries, when all remembrance of the tree, the wasp-prophet and chieftain, and his descent from the divine wasp—ay,
even of their defeat and flight—had vanished from their songs and legends, they would be found bowing down in fear
and trembling to a little ancient wooden wasp, which came from they knew not whence, and meant they knew not what,
save that it was a very "old fetish," a "great medicine," or some such other formula for expressing their own ignorance
and dread. Just so do the half-savage natives of Thibet, and the Irishwomen of Kerry, by a strange coincidence—unless
the ancient Irish were Buddhists, like the Himalayans—tie just the same scraps of rag on the bushes round just the same
holy wells, as do the Negroes of Central Africa upon their "Devil's Trees;" they know not why, save that their ancestors
did it, and it is a charm against ill-luck and danger.

And the sacred tree? That, too, might undergo a metamorphosis in the minds of men. The conquerors would see their
aboriginal slaves of the old race still haunting the tree, making stealthy offerings to it by night: and they would ask the
reason. But they would not be told. The secret would be guarded; such secrets were guarded, in Greece, in Italy, in
medieval France, by the superstitious awe, the cunning, even the hidden self-conceit, of the conquered race. Then the
conquerors would wish to imitate their own slaves. They might be in the right. There might be something magical,
uncanny, in the hollow tree, which might hurt them; might be jealous of them as intruders. They, too, would invest the
place with sacred awe. If they were gloomy, like the Teutonic conquerors of Europe and the Arabian conquerors of the
East, they would invest it with unseen terrors. They would say, like them, a devil lives in the tree. If they were of a
sunny temper, like the Hellenes, they would invest it with unseen graces. What a noble tree! What a fair fountain hard
by its roots! Surely some fair and graceful being must dwell therein, and come out to bathe by night in that clear wave.
What meant the fruit, the flowers, the honey, which the slaves left there by night? Pure food for some pure nymph. The
wasp-gods would be forgotten; probably smoked out as sacrilegious intruders. The lucky seer or poet who struck out
the fancy would soon find imitators; and it would become, after a while, a common and popular superstition that
Hamadryads haunted the hollow forest trees, Naiads the wells, and Oreads the lawns. Somewhat thus, I presume, did
the more cheerful Hellenic myths displace the darker superstitions of the Pelasgis and those rude Arcadian tribes who
offered, even as late as the Roman Empire, human sacrifices to gods whose original names were forgotten.

But even the cultus of nymphs would be defiled after awhile by a darker element. However fair, they might be
capricious and revengeful, like other women. Why not? And soon, men going out into the forest would be missed for
awhile. They had eaten narcotic berries, got sun-strokes, wandered till they lost their wits. At all events, their wits were
gone. Who had done it? Who but the nymphs? The men had seen something they should not have seen; done something
they would not have done; and the nymphs had punished the unconscious rudeness by that frenzy. Fear, everywhere
fear, of Nature—the spotted panther as some one calls her, as fair as cruel, as playful as treacherous. Always fear of
Nature, till a Divine light arise, and show men that they are not the puppets of Nature, but her lords; and that they are to
fear God, and fear naught else.

And so ends my true myth of the wasp-tree. No, it need not end there; it may develop into a yet darker and more hideous form of superstition, which Europe has often seen; which is common now among the Negros; {223} which we may hope, will soon be exterminated.

Note: {223} For an account of Sorcery and Fetishism among the African Negros, see Burton's "Lake Regions of Central Africa," vol. ii. pp. 341-60.

This might happen. For it, or something like it, has happened too many times already.

That to the ancient women who still kept up the irrational remnant of the wasp-worship, beneath the sacred tree, other women might resort; not merely from curiosity, or an excited imagination, but from jealousy and revenge. Oppressed, as woman has always been under the reign of brute force; beaten, outraged, deserted, at best married against her will, she has too often gone for comfort and help--and those of the very darkest kind--to the works of darkness; and there never were wanting--there are not wanting, even now, in remote parts of these isles--wicked old women who would, by help of the old superstitions, do for her what she wished. Soon would follow mysterious deaths of rivals, of husbands, of babes; then rumours of dark rites connected with the sacred tree, with poison, with the wasp and his sting, with human sacrifices; lies mingled with truth, more and more confused and frantic, the more they were misinvestigated by men mad with fear: till there would arise one of those witch-manias, which are too common still among the African Negros, which were too common of old among the men of our race.

I say, among the men. To comprehend a witch-mania, you must look at it as--what the witch-literature confesses it unblushingly to be-- man's dread of Nature excited to its highest form, as dread of woman.

She is to the barbarous man--she should be more and more to the civilised man--not only the most beautiful and precious, but the most wonderful and mysterious of all natural objects, if it be only as the author of his physical being. She is to the savage a miracle to be alternately adored and dreaded. He dreads her more delicate nervous organisation, which often takes shapes to him demoniacal and miraculous; her quicker instincts, her readier wit, which seem to him to have in them somewhat prophetic and superhuman, which entangled him as in an invisible net, and rule him against his will. He dreads her very tongue, more crushing than his heaviest club, more keen than his poisoned arrows. He dreads those habits of secrecy and falsehood, the weapons of the weak, to which savage and degraded woman always has recourse. He dreads the very medicinal skill which she has learnt to exercise, as nurse, comforter, and slave. He dreads those secret ceremonies, those mysterious initiations which no man may witness, which he has permitted to her in all ages, in so many--if not all--barbarous and semi-barbarous races, whether Negro, American, Syrian, Greek, or Roman, as a homage to the mysterious importance of her who brings him into the world. If she turns against him--she, with all her unknown powers, who is the sharer of his deepest secrets, who prepares his very food day by day--what harm can she not, may she not, do? And that she has good reason to turn against him, he knows too well. What deliverance is there from this mysterious house-fiend, save brute force? Terror, torture, murder, must be the order of the day. Woman must be crushed, at all price, by the blind fear of the man.

I shall say no more. I shall draw a veil, for very pity and shame, over the most important and most significant facts of this, the most hideous of all human follies. I have, I think, given you hints enough to show that it, like all other superstitions, is the child-- the last born and the ugliest child--of blind dread of the unknown.

(The end)

Charles Kingsley's essay: Superstition