

2. *Worship of Evil Spirits.*—While Siam is called and is a Buddhist country, yet along with Buddhism there flourishes everywhere, and especially among the Laos tribes, the worship of spirits. You may call them ghosts, demons, devils, genii, sprites, elves, or fairies. If you listen to the talk of the people you will at first think that now one and now another of these is what is meant by the ever-recurring word *phee*; but you will come at last to the sad conclusion that if you are to find an equivalent in English, it must be something not very different from "evil spirit." For whether the *phee* in question be thought of as the soul of a dead man, or the presiding genius of a family, or the invisible guardian of some brook or cave, or the inferior deity who has special charge of some natural phenomena like rain or thunder, or some event in human life, such as the weaning of a child or the marriage of a maiden, it may become at any moment and on the slightest provocation a malignant foe. And therefore one of the main anxieties of a Laos man or woman is to keep on friendly terms with these invisible powers. It is only by degrees that the foreigner can come to understand how large a part of life this is for the people about him; for this devil cult has no temples and no priests except as every house, from the carved and gilded palace of the "Lord of Life" to the thatch-roofed bamboo cottage of his humblest subject, is such a temple, and every man and every woman a priest or priestess of this worship. Go where you will and when you will, in city or country, by river, through forest, to the caves of the mountains, across the smiling rice fields, in wet season or dry, at rice planting or harvest, at birth or death, at wedding or funeral, when contracts are signed, when houses are built, when journeys are undertaken, when sickness or storm or drouth befalls, and you will find in charm and spell and offering the tokens of the sway of this dark superstition as to the presence and activity of spirits. And just in that word superstition lies one chief element of the power of spirit worship as a hindrance to the acceptance of the Gospel. It is not merely that for a Laos man to change his religion will surely offend the spirits of his ancestors and provoke the enmity of all those demons who have in the past been pleased by his worship; it is not merely that the heart in which the missionary sows the seed of God's Word is already preoccupied with a rank growth of weeds; but it is the peculiar character of this religion as a superstition which constitutes it an obstacle to the truth. An historical religion can be attacked in its history; a philosophical religion can be attacked in its philosophy; but how shall we attack a superstition? It is fighting with a ghost. We cut it in twain only to find that the impalpable substance of which it is made up closes behind the blade and suffers no harm. Not based on reason or fact, a superstition like this refuses to yield to reason or fact. And superstition enbrutes men's minds; it teaches them to count fact and fancy, truth and falsehood as of equal worth, and at last makes them incompetent to distinguish the one from the other. Much of what is believed by the people is so absurd that even they them-