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LEGENDS OF MOUNT PILATUS

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Legends of Mount Pilatus

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THE Spreuer bridge, with its 17th-century Dance of Death, spans the river Reuss at its entrance to the Lake of Lucerne. Across the lake rises the Rigi, the mountain of rock stripes, while above the ancient city towers the serrate crest of Mount Pilatus. It is a place of fabulous legend which the tide of modern travel cannot entirely dispel.

In 1421 Farmer Stemplin, of Neuenkirch, saw a dragon fly from the Rigi to Pilatus and let fall the dragon-stone, now said to be a meteorite and still to be seen in the natural history museum. In former days this stone had considerable reputation as a cure for many ailments, especially those in which hemorrhage was a symptom. All through the 15th and 16th centuries, such apparitions were noted, even by clerics and physicians; eye-witnesses reported dragons swimming under the Reuss bridges at least as often as they now report the Loch Ness monster—whose appearance seems to coincide with the beginning of each tourist season.

In ages even before dragons were known thereabouts, Pilatus was notable as a mountain of storms: Mons Pileatus, the cloud- gatherer. Such weather, accompanied by flood and ruin, arose particularly when the black tarn on the Oberalp was disturbed purposely by stones or other objects thrown into it.

No one has determined beyond question whether the dragon myth resulted from a discovery of prehistoric bones, or was an allegory of the ceaseless conflict between good and evil, or perhaps echoed some oriental tale spreading from the East. The connection, however, between tempest and water is well-known and widespread. Geysers can be brought into eruption if fatty substances such as soap or butter are thrown in; the surfaces of the Calendari lake in the Grisons, the dark lake on the Canatus peak in Spain, the Witches’ Pool on the Faulhorn, the swamp of Tabe in the Pyrenees, are a few of many that boiled and foamed, or gave rise to hurricanes and hail, when they were intentionally broken.

This is the background of the strange connection between Pontius Pilate and Mount Pilatus. Pilate is supposed to have committed suicide in Rome in 40 A.D. His body in the Tiber caused meteoric disturbance and is said to have been taken out and transported to the Rhone. In any case, about this time two Jewish patricians were banished to the Rhone Valley, one of them, named Archelaus, to Vienne. For some unknown reason, Archbishop Ado of Vienne (799-875) in his world chronicle confused this Archelaus with Pilate, and placed Pilate’s banishment in Vienne. It is a firm tradition of that city that Pilate ended his life there, and the story became more widely known in the 15th century. As recently as 1775, a Roman pyramid was shown in Vienne as marking Pilate’s grave; and in a near-by lakelet Pilate, clad in purple robes, was said to arise each year on Good Friday when the Passion was preached. Whoever dared or had the misfortune to look upon him would die within the year.

But Pilate did not rest in Vienne. His corpse, floating against the current, came to the Lake of Geneva; and violent gales at Lausanne led to transfer of the legend to this region, where it remained fixed between the 11th and 13th centuries. Crusades and pilgrimages spread the story abroad. In the year 1350, for example, there was in Rome a daily influx and exodus of 5000 persons. In that year the miraculous kerchief of St. Veronica was exhibited, and the surge of travellers across the St. Gotthard finally associated the Pilate legend with the Lucerne area.

The most mysterious and fearful spot on Mount Pilatus was the marshy pond of the Oberalp, connected with tempests which frequently arose near by. In 1387 six priests were punished for attempting to visit the place in defiance of a ban imposed by the Lucerne authorities. In 1518 Joachim von Watt (Vadianus), of St. Gallen, came to Lucerne from Vienna, where he had been teaching, to see the Pilatus lake. His companions were well-known humanists: Conrad Grebel, of Zürich, and Oswald Geisshüsler (Myconius) and Johann Zimmerman (Xylotectus), both of Lucerne. They left the city on horseback one August morning, gained the lake and returned to Lucerne that evening. Although they failed to see Pontius Pilate, and Vadianus thoroughly disbelieved the legend, the earnest entreaties of their peasant guide so impressed them that they did not make the conclusive test of troubling the water.

On 20 August 1555 the Zürich physician, Conrad Gesner, also stood beside the Pilate lake after ascending a minor summit of the mountain; and in the summer of 1585 the city pastor of Lucerne, Johann Müller, led a procession of citizens to the fabled spot. A servant waded in the shallow water, stone after stone was thrown in, and Pilate was called upon to appear; but the assembled company was rewarded with nothing more than ripples for this adventurous hazard. The spell was broken.

The lake has long since dried up and vanished. Nothing is left save a meadow in the woods, and scarcely a traveller knows its story.

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