DRAKE SAMUEL ADAMS

THE MYTHS AND FABLES OF TO-DAY

Samuel Drake

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Drake S.

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Содержание

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I
A RECKONING WITH TIME

"Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious."

To say that superstition is one of the facts of history is only to state a truism. If that were all, we might treat the subject from a purely philosophical or historical point of view, as one of the inexplicable phenomena of an age much lower in intelligence than our own, and there leave it.

But if, also, we must admit superstition to be a present, a living, fact, influencing, if not controlling, the everyday acts of men, we have to deal with a problem as yet unsolved, if not insolvable.

I know it is commonly said that such things belong to a past age – that they were the legitimate product of ignorance, and have died out with the education of the masses. In other words, we know more than our ancestors did about the phenomena of nature, and therefore by no means accept, as they did – good, superstitious souls! – the appearance of a comet blazing in the heavens, or the heaving of an earthquake under our feet, as events having moral significance. With the aid of electricity or steam we perform miracles every day of our lives, such as, no doubt, would have created equal wonder and fear for the general stability of the world not many generations ago.

Very true. So far as merely physical phenomena are concerned, most of us may have schooled ourselves to disunite them wholly from coming events; but as regards those things which spring from the inward consciousness of the man himself, his intuitions, his perceptions, his aspirations, his imaginative nature, which, if strong enough, is capable of creating and peopling a realm wholly outside of the little world he lives in – "ay, there's the rub." Who will undertake to span the gulf stretching out a shoreless void between the revelations of science and the incomprehensible mysteries of life itself? It is upon that debatable ground that superstition finds its strongest foothold, and, like the ivy clinging round old walls, defies every attempt to uproot it. As Hamlet so cogently puts it, —

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Superstition, we know, is much older than recorded history, and we now stand on the threshold of the twentieth century; yet just in proportion as humanity has passed over this enormous space of time, hand in hand with progress, superstition has followed it like its shadow. That shadow has not yet passed away.

There is no sort of use in denying the proneness of weak human nature to admit superstition. It is an open door, through which the marvellous finds easy access. Imbibed in the cradle, it is not even buried in the grave. "Age cannot stale, nor custom wither" those ancient fables of ghosts, giants, goblins, and brownies told by fond mothers to children to-day, just as they were told by mothers centuries ago. Even the innocent looking Easter egg, which continues to enjoy such unbounded popularity with old and young, comes of an old Aryan myth; while the hanging up of one's stocking, at Christmas, is neither more nor less than an act of superstition, originating in another myth; or, in plain English, no Santa Claus, no stocking.

How much of childhood's charm in the greatest of all annual festivals, the world over, would remain if Santa Claus, Kris Kringle, and St. Nicholas were stripped of their traditional, but wholly fictitious, character? One of our popular magazines for children – long life to it! – flourishes under

the title of St. Nicholas to-day; and during the very latest observance of the time-honored festival, a leading journal in New England's chief city devoted considerable space in its editorial columns to an elaborate defence of that dear old myth Santa Claus, with whom, indeed, we should be very loth to part, if only for the sake of old associations.

It is also noticed that quite recently stories of the wonderful brownies have enjoyed their greatest popularity. For a time these spindle-shanked, goggle-eyed puppets could be seen in every household, in picture-books, on book covers, in the newspapers – in short, everywhere. Should the children be told that there never were any such creatures as fairies or brownies, there would be an end to all the charm they possess; for, unquestionably, their only hold upon the popular mind rests upon the association with olden superstition. Otherwise they would be only so many commonplace rag dolls.

Kipling's popular "Jungle Stories," probably more widely read than any stories of the century, give still further effect to the same idea.

Now, is not the plea that these are mere harmless nothings by far the most short-sighted one that could be advanced? The critical thought to be impressed here is that about the first teaching little children receive is a lesson in superstition, and that, too, at a time when their young minds are most susceptible to lasting impressions. We have yet to hear of the mother, nursery-maid, or governess, who begins the story of Cinderella or Bluebeard with the warning that it is not "a real true story," as children say.

Are children of a larger growth any less receptive to the marvellous? "Great oaks from little acorns grow." The seed first planted in virgin soil later bears an abundant harvest. Stage plays, operas, poetry, romances, painting, and sculpture dealing with the supernatural command quite as great a popularity, to-day, as ever. Fortune telling, palmistry, astrology, clairvoyance, hypnotism, and the rest, continue to thrive either as a means of getting a living, or of innocent diversion, leaving their mark upon the inner consciousness just the same in one case as in the other.

So much being undeniable, it stands with every honest inquirer after truth to look these facts in the face without blinking. Ignorance we dare not plead. The dictates of a sound common sense will not permit us to dismiss what we do not understand with a laugh, a shrug, or a sneer. "To scold is not to answer."

Superstition is not easily defined. To say that it is a disposition to believe more than is warranted by reason, leaves us just as helpless as ever; for where reason is impotent we have nothing tangible left to fall back upon. There is absolutely no support on which to rest that lever. Religion and philosophy, which at first fostered superstition, long ago turned against it all the forces they possessed. Not even science may hope to overthrow what can only be reached through the inner consciousness of man, because science can have little to do with the spiritual side of man. That intangible something still eludes its grasp. If all these combined forces of civilization have so far signally failed to eradicate superstition, so much the worse for civilization.

We might also refer to the efforts of some very erudite scholars to interpret modern superstition by the aid of comparative mythology. Vastly interesting, if not wholly convincing, theories have been constructed on this line. Instructive, too, is the fact that some of our most familiar nursery stories may be traced to the ancient folk-lore of still older peoples. Even a remote antiquity is claimed for the familiar nursery tale of "Jack and Jill"; while something very similar to the story of "Little Red Riding Hood" is found, in its purity, in the grewsome werewolf folk-lore of Germany; and "Jonah's Gourd," of the East, we are told, probably is the original of "Jack and the Beanstalk" of the West.

But the very fact of the survival of all these hoary superstitions, some of them going back so far that all further trace is lost, certainly furnishes food for thought, since they seemingly enjoy as great a popularity as ever.

Superstition being thus shown to be as old as human history, the question naturally arises, not how it may have originated in the Dark Ages, but how it has kept its hold so tenaciously throughout all the succeeding centuries down to our own time.

Most peoples, barbarians even, believed in some sort of a future state, in the principle of good and evil, and of rewards and punishments. There needs no argument then to account for the insatiable longing to pry into futurity, and to discover its hidden mysteries. The same idea unsettled the minds of former generations, nor can it be truthfully said to have disappeared before the vaunted wisdom of this utilitarian age. Like all forbidden fruit, this may be said to be the subject of greatest anxiety to weak human kind.

What then is this talisman with the aid of which we strive to penetrate the secrets of the world beyond us?

Man being what he is, only "a little lower than the angels," endowed with the supernatural power of calling up at will mental images of both the living and the dead, of building air-castles, and peopling them according to his fantasy, as well in Cathay as in Spain, of standing by the side of an absent friend on the summit of Mont Blanc, one moment among the snows, the next flitting through the garden spots of sunny Italy – if he is thus capable of transporting himself into an enchanted land by the mere exercise of the power of his imagination – what could better serve him as a medium of communication with the unknown, and what shall deter him from seeking to fathom its deepest mysteries? Napoleon said truly that the imagination governs the universe. Every one has painted his own picture of heaven and hell as well as Dante or Milton, or the divine mysteries as truly as Leonardo or Murillo. Surely, the imagination could go no further.

Assuming this to be true, there is little need to ask why, in this enlightened age, the attempt should be made to revive vagaries already decrepit, that would much better be allowed to go out with the departed century, unhonored and unsung. Such a question could proceed only from a want of knowledge of the true facts in the case.

But whether superstition is justified by the dictates of a sound common sense, is not so material here, as whether it actually does exist; and if so, to what extent. That is what we shall try to make clear in the succeeding pages. The inquiry grows interesting in many ways, but most of all, we think, as showing the slow stages by which the human mind has enfranchised itself from a species of slavery, without its counterpart in any direction to which we may turn for help or guidance. Even science, that great leveller of popular error, limps here. Certainly, what has existed as long as human history must be accepted as a more or less active force in human affairs. We are not, therefore, dealing with futilities.

Of the present status of superstition, the most that can be truthfully said is that some of its worst forms are nearly or quite extinct, some are apparently on the wane, while those representing, perhaps, the widest extremes (the most puerile and the most vital), such, for example, as relate to vapid tea-table gossip on the one hand, and to fatal presentiments on the other, continue quite as active as ever. Uncivilized beings are now supposed to be the only ones who still hold to the belief in witchcraft, although within a very few months it has been currently reported as a fact that the judge of a certain Colorado court admitted the plea of witchcraft to be set up, because, as this learned judge shrewdly argued, more than half the people there believed in it. The defendant, who stood charged with committing a murderous assault upon a woman, swore that she had bewitched him, and was acquitted by the jury, mainly upon his own testimony.

Unquestionably modern hypnotism comes very close to solving the problem of olden witchcraft, which so baffled the wisdom, as it tormented the souls and bodies, of our ancestors, with this difference: that, while witchcraft was believed to be a power to work evil, coming direct from his Satanic Majesty himself, hypnotism is a power or gift residing in the individual, like that of mesmerism.

But if it be true that there are very few believers in witchcraft among enlightened beings to-day, it cannot be denied that thousands of highly civilized men and women as firmly believe in some indefinable relation between man and the spirit world as in their own existence; while tens of thousands believe in such a relation between mind and mind. Indeed, the former class counts

some very notable persons among its converts. For example, Camille Flammarion, the distinguished scientist, positively declares that he has had direct communication with hundreds of departed spirits.[1] And the Reverend M. J. Savage, pastor of the Church of the Messiah, in New York, is reported to have announced himself a convert to spiritualism to his congregation not long ago.

The true explanation for all these different beliefs must be sought for, we think, deep down in the nature of man, which is much the same to-day in its relation to the supernatural world as it was in the days of our fathers of bigoted memory. In reality, the supernatural element exists to a greater or less degree in all of us, and no merely human agency can pretend to fix its limits.

Unquestionably, then, those beliefs which have exerted so potent an influence in the past over the minds or affairs of men, which continue to exert such influence to-day, and, for ought we know to the contrary, may extend that influence indefinitely, are not to be whistled down the wind, or kept hidden away under lock and key, especially when we reflect that the most terrible examples of the frailty of all human judgments concerning these beliefs have utterly failed to remove the groundwork upon which they rest.

There still remains the sentimental side of superstition to consider. What, for example, would become of much of our best literature, if all those apt and beautiful figures culled from the rich stores of ancient mythology – the very flowers of history, so to speak – were to be weeded out of it with unsparing hand? What would Greek and Roman history be with their gods and goddesses left out? With what loving and appreciative art our greatest poets have gathered up the scattered legends of the fading past. Some one has cunningly said that superstition is the poetry of life, and that of all men poets should be superstitious.

As a matter of history, it is well known that our Puritan ancestors came over here filled full of the prevalent superstitions of the old country; yet even they had waged uncompromising warfare against all such ceremonious observances as could be traced back to heathen mythology. Thus, although they cut down May-poles, they had too much reverence for the Bible to refuse to believe in witches. Writers like Mr. Hawthorne have supposed that the wild and extravagant mysteries of their savage neighbors, may, to some extent, have become incorporated with their own beliefs. However that may be, it is certain that the Puritan fathers believed in no end of pregnant omens, also in ghosts, apparitions, and witches, as well as in a personal devil, with whom, indeed, later on, they had no end of trouble. In short, if anything happened out of the common, the devil was in it. So say many to-day.

A certain amount of odium has attached itself to the Puritan fathers of New England, on this account, among unreflecting or ill-natured critics at least, just as if, upon leaving Old England, those people would be expected to leave their superstitions behind them, like so much useless luggage. As a matter of fact, rank superstition was the common inheritance of all peoples of that day and generation, whether Jew or Gentile, Frenchman or Dutchman, Virginian or New Englander. Of its wide prevalence in Old England we find ample proof ready to our hand. For example:

"At Boston, in Lincolnshire, Mr. Cotton being their former minister, when he was gone the bishop desired to have organs set up in the church, but the parish was unwilling to yield; but, however, the bishop prevailed to be at the cost to set them up. But they being newly up (not playing very often with them) a violent storm came in at one window and blew the organs to another window, and brake both organs and window down, and to this day the window is out of reputation, being boarded and not glazed."[2]

Still further to show the feeling prevailing in England toward superstition at the time of the settlement of this country, in the historical essay entitled "With the King at Oxford," we find this anecdote: The King (Charles I.), coming into the Bodleian Library on a certain day, was shown a very curious copy of Virgil. Lord Falkland persuaded his Majesty to make trial of his fortune by thrusting

[1] "L'Inconnu et les Problems Psychiques."

[2] Wallington, "Historical Notices, Reign of Charles I."

a knife between the leaves, then opening the book at the place in which the knife was inserted. The king there read as follows: —

> "Yet let him vexed bee with arms and warres of people wilde,
> And hunted out from place to place, an outlaw still exylde:
> Let him go beg for helpe, and from his childe dissevered bee,
> And death and slaughter vile of all his kindred let him see."

The narrative goes on to say that the king's majesty was "much discomposed" by this uncanny incident, and that Lord Falkland, in order to turn the king's thoughts away from brooding over it, proposed making the trial himself.

We continue to draw irrefragable testimony to the truth of our position from the highest personages in the realm. Again, according to Wallington, Archbishop Laud, arch persecutor of the Puritans, has this passage in his diary: "That on such or such a day of the month he was made archbishop of Canterbury, and on that day, which was a great day of honor to him, his coach and horses sunk as they came over the ferry at Lambeth, in the ferry-boat, and he prayed that this might be no ill omen."

Our pious ancestors put a good deal of faith in so-called "judgments," or direct manifestations of the divine wrath toward evildoers, as all readers of Mather's "Remarkable Providences" well know. But they were by no means alone in such beliefs. It is related of the poet Milton, after he became blind, that the Duke of York (later James II.) asked him if he did not consider the loss of his eyesight as a judgment inflicted upon him for what he had written of the late king. In reply Milton asked the duke, if such afflictions were to be regarded as judgments from heaven, in what manner he would account for the fate of the late king; … he, the speaker, had only lost his eye, while the king had lost his head."

John Josselyn, Gent., an Englishman, but no Puritan, who spent some time in New England, chiefly at Scarborough in Maine, published, in 1672, in England, a little book under the title of "New England's Rarities Discovered." Some things which Josselyn "discovered" would be rarities indeed to this generation. For instance, he describes the appearance of several prodigious apparitions – all of which has a value in enabling us properly to gauge the tone and temper of popular feeling where the book was written, and where it was published. One of his "rarities" is worth repeating here, if only for the pretty sentiment it embodies. He says of the twittering chimney-swallows, "that when about to migrate they commonly throw down (the chimney) one of their young into the room below, by way of gratitude," presumably in return for the hospitalities of the house. He then goes on to say, "I have more than once observed that, against the ruin of a family, these birds will forsake the house and come no more." This comes from a more or less close observer, who himself occupied the relation we desire to establish, namely that of a transplanted Englishman, so thoroughly grounded in old superstition that all the marvels he relates are told with an air of truth quite refreshing.

An amusing instance of how far prevalent superstition can lead astray minds usually enlightened is soberly set forth in Governor Winthrop's celebrated history. It is a fit corollary to the organ superstition, just narrated.

"Mr. Winthrop the younger, one of the magistrates, having many books in a chamber, where there was corn of divers sorts, had among them one wherein the Greek Testament, the Psalter and the Common Prayer were bound together. He found the Common Prayer eaten with mice, every leaf of it, and not any of the two other touched, nor any other of his books, though there were above a thousand."

All these superstitious beliefs were solemnly bequeathed by the fathers to their children under the sanction of a severe penal code, together with all the accumulated traditions of their own immediate ancestors. And in some form or other, whether masquerading under some thin disguise or foolish notion, superstition has continued from that day to this. As Polonius says:

"… 'Tis true, 'tis pity;
And pity 'tis 'tis true."

Although a great many popular beliefs may seem puerile in the extreme, they none the less go to establish the fact to be kept in mind. Since I began to look into the matter I have been most astonished at the number of very intelligent persons who take care to conform to prevailing beliefs in things lucky or the reverse. It is true Lord Bacon tells us that "in all superstitions wise men follow fools." But this blunt declaration of his has undoubted reference to the schoolmen, and to the monastic legends which were such powerful aids in fostering the growth of superstition as it existed long before Bacon's time: —

"A bone from a saintly anchorite's cave,
A vial of earth from a martyrs grave."

The class of persons just spoken of, is, however, so keenly sensitive to ridicule that only some chance remark betrays their real mental attitude.

With the unlettered it is different. Superstition is so much more prevalent among them that less effort is made at concealment. Perhaps the many agencies at work to put it down have not had so fair a trial in the country as in the city. And yet the recent "Lucky-Box" craze makes it difficult to draw the line. Be that as it may, it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that some rural communities in New England are simply honeycombed with it. Indeed, almost every insignificant happening is a sign of something or other.

One result of my own observation in this field of research is, that women, if not by nature more superstitious than men, hold to these old beliefs much more tenaciously than men. In the country, it is the woman who is ready to quarrel with you, if, in some unguarded moment, you should venture to doubt the potency of her manifold signs. In the city, it is still the woman who presents her husband with some charm or other to be worn on his watch-chain, as a safeguard against disease, inconstancy, late hours, or other uncounted happenings of life, believing, as she does, more or less implicitly, in its traditional efficacy. In all that relates to marriage, too, women are usually most careful how they disregard any of the accepted dicta on a subject of so much concern to their future happiness, as will appear later on.

Fifty years ago the poet Whittier declared that "There is scarcely a superstition of the past three centuries which has not, at this very time, more or less hold upon individual minds among us." The broad declaration demands less qualification to-day than is generally supposed.

Most of the examples collected in this volume have come under my own observation; some have been contributed by friends, many by the newspapers. If their number should prove a surprise to anybody, I can only say that mine has fully equalled their own. But let us, at least, be honest about it. We can conceal nothing from ourselves. Silence may be golden, but it makes no converts.

II
THE FOLK-LORE OF CHILDHOOD

"Why this is the best fooling when all is done." —*Twelfth Night.*

The trite saying that "children and fools are soothsayers" goes straight to the heart of those familiar superstitions with which the folk-lore of childhood abounds. We, the children of a larger growth, often call to mind with what avidity we listened in our childhood's days to the nursery tales of giants, dwarfs, ghosts, fairies, and the like creations of pure fancy. We still remember how instantly all the emotions of our childish nature were excited by the recital of these marvels – told us, too, with such an air of truth, that never for a moment did we doubt them. Oh, how we hated Blue Beard, and how we adored Jack the Giant-Killer! Are we not treated, just as soon as we are out of the cradle, as if superstition was the first law of nature? What is the wonder, then, that the effects of these early impressions are not easily got rid of, or the impressions themselves soon, if ever, forgotten? "Brownie" is put into the arms of toddling infants before they can articulate two words plainly. Just as soon as the child is able to prattle a little, it is taught the familiar nursery rhyme of

"Bye, bye, Baby Bunting,
Papa's gone a-hunting,"

drawn from ancient folk-lore, with which the rabbit and hare are so intimately associated. After the innocent face rhymes, found with little variation, in no less than four different languages, giving names to each of the chubby little features, —

"Eyes winker, Tom Tinker," etc.

come the well-known button rhymes, like this:

"Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief,
Doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief;"

or this one, told centuries ago to children across the water: —

"A tinker, a tailor,
A soldier or sailor,
A rich man, a poor man,
A priest or a parson,
A ploughman or a thief."

The virgin soil being thus artfully prepared to receive superstition, the boy or girl goes forth among playmates similarly equipped, with them to practice various forms of conjuration in their innocent sports, without in the least knowing what they are doing. Here are a few of them: —

Making a cross upon the ground before your opponent, at the same time muttering "criss-cross," when playing at marbles, to make him miss his shot, as I have often seen done in my schoolboy days. This is merely a relic of that superstition attached to making the sign of the cross, as a charm against the power of evil spirits.

The innocent sounding words “criss-cross” we believe originally to have been Christ’s Cross.

Children of both sexes count apple seeds by means of the pretty jingling rhymes, so like to the German flower oracle, often employed by children of a larger growth. It has been set to music.

“One I love,
Two I love.
Three I love, I say,
Four I love with all my heart,
Five I cast away;
Six he loves,
Seven she loves,
Eight both love;
Nine he comes,
Ten he tarries,
Eleven he courts,
Twelve he marries.”

Holding the pretty field buttercup under another’s chin, in order to see if he or she loves butter, is a good form of divination. So is the practice of blowing off the fluffy dandelion top, after the flower has gone to seed, to determine the hour, as that flower always opens at about five in the morning, and shuts at about eight in the evening, thus making it stand in the room of a clock for shepherds. This plant has also been called the rustic oracle. To find the time of day, as many puffs as it takes to blow away the downy seed balls gives the answer. The same method of divination is employed by children to find out if their mothers want them; or to waft a message to some loved one; or to know if such or such a person is thinking of them; and whether he or she lives north, east, south, or west.

To the same general purport is the invocation:

“Rain, rain, go away,
Come again another day.”

We understand that the equally familiar form, —

“Snail, snail, put out your horn,”

is repeated in China as well as in this country, though sometimes altered to

“Snail, snail, come out of your hole,
Or else I’ll beat you black as a coal.”

One equally familiar form of childish invocation appears in the pretty little lady-bird rhyme, so often repeated by the young: —

“Lady-bird, lady-bird,
Fly away home,
Your house is on fire,
Your children will burn.”

A favorite way, with boys, of choosing sides for a game of ball is by measuring the stick. To do this, the leader of one side first heaves the stick in the air, skilfully catching it, as it falls, at a point as

near a hand's-breadth to the end as possible, as his opponent must then measure the stick with him, alternately hand-over-hand, from the point where it is caught. The one securing enough of the last of the stick for a hold, has the first choice. This is determination by lot.

Still another form of invocation, formerly much used to clinch a bargain between boys, when "swapping" jack-knives or marbles, runs to this effect: —

"Chip, chop, chay,
Give a thing, give a thing,
Never take it back again."

The process of counting a person out in the familiar phrase as being "it," is fairly traced back to the ancient custom of designating a criminal from among his fellows by lot. The form that we know the best in New England, a sort of barbaric doggerel, according to Mr. Burton, is still current in Cornwall, England, and goes in this wise: —

"Ena, mena, bora, mi:
Kisca, lara, mova, di:
Eggs, butter, cheese, bread,
Stick, stock, stone dead."

The resemblance between the foregoing, and what is current among playfellows on this side of the water easily suggests that the boys of the "good Old Colony times," so often referred to with a sigh of regret, brought their games and pastimes along with them. As now remembered, the doggerel charm runs as follows: —

"Eny, meny, mony might,
Huska, lina, bony tight,
Huldy, guldy, boo!"

In getting ready for a game of "tag," "I spy," or "hide and seek," the one to whom this last magic word falls becomes the victim or is said to be "it." So in like manner the rhymed formula, following, is employed in counting a child "out": —

"One-ery, two-ery, ickery Ann,
Fillicy, fallicy, Nicholas, John,
Queever, quaver, English knaver,
Stinckelum, stanckelum, Jericho, buck."

A more simple counting-out rhyme is this:

"One, two, three,
Out goes he (or she)."

"Tit, tat, toe," is still another form, repeated with variations according to locality.

These few examples may serve to show that what the performers themselves regard only as a simple expedient in the arranging of their games, if they ever give the matter a thought, is really a survival of the belief in the efficacy of certain magical words, turned into rhyme, to propitiate success. If this idea had not been instilled into our children by long custom and habit, it is not believed that

they would continue to repeat such unmeaning drivel. Yet, as childish as it may seem, it advances us one step in solving the intricate problem in hand; for here, too, “the child is father to the man.”

III
WEATHER LORE

"Fair is foul, and foul is fair." —*Shakespeare.*

There is a certain class of so-called signs, that from long use have become so embedded in the every-day life of the people as to pass current with some as mere whimsical fancies, with others as possessing a real significance. At any rate, they crop out everywhere in the course of common conversation. Most of them have been handed down from former generations, while not a few exhale the strong aroma of the native soil itself.

Of this class of familiar signs or omens, affecting only the smaller and more casual happenings one may encounter from day to day, or from hour to hour, those only will be noticed which seem based on actual superstition. Many current weather proverbs accord so exactly with the observations of science as to exclude them from any such classification. They are simply the homely records of a simple folk, drawn from long experience of nature in all her moods. As even the prophecies of the Weather Bureau itself often fail of fulfilment, it is not to be wondered at if weather proverbs sometimes prove no better guide, especially when we consider that "all signs fail in a dry time."

The following are a few examples selected from among some hundreds: —

When a cat races playfully about the house, it is a sign that the wind will rise.

It is a sign of rain if the cat washes her head behind her ears; of bad weather when Puss sits with her tail to the fire.

Spiders crawling on the wall denote rain.

If a dog is seen eating green grass it is a sign of coming wet weather.

Hang up a snake skin for rain.

If the grass should be thickly dotted in the morning with cobwebs of the ground spider, glistening with dew, expect rain. Some say it portends the exact opposite. This puts us in mind of Cato's quaint saying that "two auguries cannot confront each other without laughing."

If the kettle should boil dry, it is a sure sign of rain. Very earnestly said a certain respectable, middle-aged housewife to me: "Why, sir, sometimes you put twice as much water in the kettle without its boiling away."

If the cattle go under trees when the weather looks threatening, there will be a shower. If they continue feeding, it will probably be a steady downpour.

A threatened storm will not begin, or the wind go down, until the turning of the tide to flood. Not only the people living along shore, but all sailors believe this.

Closely related to the above is the belief that a sick person will not die until ebb tide. When that goes out, the life goes with it. I have often heard this said in some seaports in Maine.

These popular notions, concerning the influence of the tides, be it said, have come down to us from a remote antiquity. The Pythagorean philosopher, indeed, stoutly affirmed that the ebbing and flowing of the sea was nothing less than the respiration of the world itself, which was supposed to be a living monster, alternately drawing in water, instead of air, and heaving it out again.

Again, an old salt, who had perhaps heard of Galileo's theory, once tried to illustrate to me the movement of the tides by comparing it to that of a man turning over in bed, and dragging the bedclothes with him, his notion being that as the world turned round, the waters of the ocean were acted upon in a like manner.

To resume the catalogue: —

A bee was never caught in the rain – that is, if the bee scents rain, it keeps near the hive. If, on the contrary, it flies far, the day will be fair. The ancients believed this industrious little creature possessed of almost human intelligence.

When the squirrels lay in a greater store of nuts than usual, expect a cold winter.

If the November goose-bone be thick, so will the winter weather be unusually severe. This prediction appears as regularly as the return of the seasons.

Many meteors falling presage much snow.

"If it rains before seven,
It will clear before eleven."

"You can tell before two.
What it's going to do."

There will be as many snow-storms in a winter as there are days remaining in the month after the first fall of snow.

Children are told, of the falling snow, that the old woman, up in the sky, is shaking her feather-bed.

High tides on the coast of Maine are considered a sign of rain.

When the muskrat builds his nest higher than usual, it is a sign of a wet spring, as this means high water in the ponds and streams.

"A winter fog
Will kill a dog,"

which is as much as to say that a thaw, with its usual accompaniments of fog and rain, is invariably productive of much sickness.

Winter thunder is to old folks death, and to young folks plunder.

"Sound, travelling far and wide,
A stormy day will betide."

Do business with men when the wind is northwest – that signifies that a clear sky and bracing air are most conducive to alertness and energy; yet Hamlet says: "I am but mad north-northwest; when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw."

That was certainly a pretty conceit, no matter if it has been lost sight of, that the sun always dances upon Easter morning.

One of the oldest of weather rhymes runs in this wise: —

"Evening gray and morning red,
Brings down rain on the traveller's head;
Evening red and morning gray,
Sends the traveller on his way."

Science having finally accepted what vulgar philosophy so long maintained, namely that the moon exerts an undoubted influence upon the tides of the sea, all the various popular beliefs concerning her influence upon the weather that have been wafted to us over, we know not how many centuries, find ready credence. If the mysterious luminary could perform one miracle, why not others? Thus reasoned the ignorant multitude.

The popular fallacy that the moon is made of "greene cheese," as sung by Heywood, and repeated by that mad wag Butler, in "Hudibras," may be considered obsolete, we suppose, but in our youth we have often heard this said, and, it is to be feared, half believed it.

Cutting the hair on the waxing of the moon, under the delusion that it will then grow better, is another such.

As preposterous as it may seem, our worthy ancestors, or some of them at least, firmly believed that the Man in the Moon was veritable flesh and blood.

In "Curious Myths," Mr. Baring-Gould refers the genesis of this belief to the Book of Numbers.[3]

An old Scotch rhyme runs thus: —

"A Saturday's change and a Sunday's prime,
Was nivver gude mune in nae man's time."

If the horns of the new moon are but slightly tipped downward, moderate rains may be looked for; if much tipped, expect a downpour. On the other hand, if the horns are evenly balanced, it is a sure sign of dry weather. Some one says in "Adam Bede," "There's no likelihood of a drop now an' the moon lies like a boat there." The popular notion throughout New England is that when the new moon is turned downward, it cannot hold water. Hence the familiar sayings of a wet or a dry moon.

If the Stormy Petrel (Mother Cary's Chicken) is seen following in the wake of a ship at sea, all sailors know that a storm is brewing, and that it is time to make all snug on board. As touching this superstition, I find the following entry in the Rev. Richard Mather's *Journal*: "This day, and two days before, we saw following ye ship a little bird, like a swallow, called a Petterill, which they say doth follow ships against foule weather."

Therefore, in honest Jack's eyes, to shoot one of these little wanderers of the deep, not only would invite calamity, but would instantly bring down a storm of indignation on the offender's head. And why, indeed, should this state of mind in poor Jack be wondered at, when he hears so much about kraaken, mermaids, sea-serpents, and the like chimera, and when those who walk the quarter-deck readily lend themselves to the fostering of his delusions?

A mare's tail in the morning is another sure presage of foul weather. This consists in a long, low-hanging streak of murky vapor, stretching across a wide space in the heavens, and looking for all the world like the trailing smoke of some ocean steamer, as is sometimes seen long before the steamer heaves in sight. The mare's tail is really the black signal of the advancing storm, drawn with a smutty hand across the fair face of the heavens. Hence the legend, —

"Mackerel sky and mare's tails
Make lofty ships carry low sails."

If the hedgehog comes out of his hole on Candlemas Day,[4] and sees his shadow, he goes back to sleep again, knowing that the winter is only half over. Hence the familiar prediction: —

"If Candlemas day is fair and clear,
There'll be two winters in the year."

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[3] Chap. 15, 32 v.

[4] Candlemas Day (2 February) is observed as a festival day by the Roman Catholics, and still holds a place in the calendar of the Episcopal Church. It is kept in memory of the purification of the Virgin, who presented the infant Jesus in the Temple. A number of candles were lighted, it is said in memory of Simeon's song (Luke ii, 32), "A light to lighten the Gentiles." Hence the name of Candlemas. Edward VI. forbade the practice of lighting the churches in 1548.

The same thing is said of the bear, in Germany, as of the hedgehog or woodchuck.

The Germans say that the badger peeps out of his hole on Candlemas Day, and if he finds snow on the ground, he walks abroad; but if the sun is shining, he draws back into his hole again. At any rate, the habits of this predatory little beast are considered next to infallible by most country-folk in New England.

A similar prediction carries this form: On Candlemas Day just so far as the sun shines in, just so far will the snow blow in.

"As far as the sun shines in on Candlemas Day
So far will the snow blow in before May:
As far as the snow blows in on Candlemas Day
So far will the sun shine in before May."

From these time-honored prophecies is deduced the familiar warning: —

"Just half your wood and half your hay
Should be remaining on Candlemas Day."

An old Californian predicted a dry season for the year 1899, because he had noticed that the rattlesnakes would not bite of late, a never failing sign of drought which few, we fancy, would feel inclined to put to the test.

An unusually cold winter is indicated by the greater thickness of apple skins, corn husks, and the like.

The direction from which the wind is blowing usually indicates what the weather will be for the day, – wet or dry, hot or cold, – but here is a rhymed prediction which puts all such prophecies to shame: —

"The West wind always brings wet weather
The East wind wet and cold together,
The South wind surely brings us rain,
The North wind blows it back again.
If the sun in red should set,
The next day surely will be wet;
If the sun should set in gray,
The next will be a rainy day."

This falls more strictly in line with many of the so-called signs which, like the old woman's indigo, if good would either sink or swim, she really didn't know which; or like the predictions of the old almanac makers, who so shrewdly foretold rain in April, and snow in December.

IV
SIGNS OF ALL SORTS

"Authorized by her grandam." —*Macbeth.*

If you sneeze before breakfast, you will have company before dinner.

If you pick the common red field lily, it will make you freckled.

A spark in the candle denotes a letter in the post office for you.

To hand a cup with two spoons in it to any one, is a sign of a coming wedding in the family.

If a cat is allowed to get into bed with an infant, the child will be strangled by the animal sucking its breath, or by lying across its chest.

If my right ear burns, some one is talking about me, hence the familiar saying, "I'll make his ears tingle for him." Pliny records this omen. Also in "Much Ado About Nothing," Beatrice exclaims, "What fire is in mine ears!"

When the right ear itches or burns, the person so affected will shortly cry; when it is the left, he will laugh. One version runs in this wise: —

"Left or right
Good at night."

Late blossoming of vines or fruit trees will be followed by much sickness. This probably rests upon the theory that a mild autumn will be a sickly autumn, which is the same thing as saying that unseasonable weather is pretty sure to be unwholesome weather. The same prediction is expressed by the old saying that "A green Christmas makes a fat church-yard." Both predictions agree with the observations of medical science.

A spoon in the saucer and another in the cup denote that the person using them will be a spendthrift, and probably come to want; but two spoons to one dish of ice-cream denote foresight and true thrift.

"Sing before you eat,
Cry before you sleep."

Or, if you sing before breakfast, you will cry before supper.

Pull out one gray hair, and ten will grow in its place.

Should you happen to let drop your scissors, or other sharp instrument, and they should stick upright in the floor, it is a sign that you will soon see a stranger.[5]

Dropping the dishcloth has the same significance.

Two cowlicks, growing on the same person's head, denote that he will eat his bread in two kingdoms – that is, be a traveller in foreign parts.

Should a cow swallow her cud, the animal will die, unless another cud be immediately given her.

Hard-hack[6] was thus named by the early colonists, who declared that the tough stalk turned the edge of the mower's scythe.

If you see a white horse, you will immediately after see a red-haired woman.

[5] See the ominous import of this farther on.

[6] The white and purple spiræa.

Bubbles gathering on top of a cup of coffee or chocolate indicate, if they cluster at the middle, or “form an island” in prophetic parlance, money coming to you. If, however, the bubbles gather at the sides of the cup, you will not get the money.

Two chairs, placed by accident back to back, are a sign of a stranger.

Coming in at one door, and immediately going out at another, has the same meaning.

A tea-stem floating in the tea-cup – a common thing before the day of tea-strainers – also foreshadows the coming of a stranger. Old people say “you must butter his head and throw him under the table, if the charm is to work.” A tea-leaf means the same thing, its length denoting whether the stranger will be short or tall.

To let fall your fork is a sure sign that you are going to have a caller on that very evening, or, as the girls declare, have “a beau.” A very estimable lady said when telling me this, that when she was a young girl she never had that accident happen to her that she did not immediately get ready for a caller; and she added that seldom, or never, was this sign known to fail.

If a young girl has the nosebleed, it is a sign that she is in love.[7]

If your nose itches you will either

“See a stranger,
Kiss a fool,
Or be in danger.”

If your left hand itches, you will shortly receive money; if it is the right hand, get ready to shake hands with a stranger.

A ringing or “dumb-bell” in the ear denotes that you may expect startling news of some sort.

A swarm of bees in June is worth a silver spoon.

Four persons meeting in a crowded place and shaking hands cross-wise, is a sign that one of the party will be married within the year.

Should you meet a person on the stairs, one or the other must go back, or some misfortune will happen to both.

If you should fail to fold up your napkin after a meal at which you are a guest, you will not again be invited to that table.

Think of the devil and he is at your elbow. The point of this robust saying is now much softened into “think of some one and he is at your elbow”; but it seems at first to have had reference to an enemy or to one you would rather avoid. The saying is quite common to-day.

A very old rhyme about the way in which one wears out a shoe, runs in this way: —

“Tip at the toe, live to see woe,
Wear at the side, live to be a bride,
Wear at the ball, live to spend all,
Wear at the heel, live to save a deal.”

Even the days of the week possess peculiar significance to the future welfare of the newborn infant: —

“Sunday’s child is full of grace,
Monday’s child is fair of face,
Tuesday’s child is solemn and sad,
Wednesday’s child is merry and glad;

[7] For the ill omens of nosebleed, see Chapter ix.

Thursday's child is inclined to thieving,
Friday's child is free in giving:
Saturday's child works hard for his living."

This saying is familiar to every one: —

"Whistling girls and crowing hens
Always come to no good ends."

Or, as they say it in the Old Country: —

"A whistling woman and crowing hen,
Are neither fit for God nor men."

An old woman, skilled in such matters, declares that when vagrant cats begin to collect around the back-yards, "it's a sure sign the winter's broken."

Whistling to keep one's courage up, or for a wind, are rather in the nature of an invocation to some occult power than a sign. Sailors, it is well known, have a superstitious fear of whistling at sea, believing it will bring on a storm.

Yawning is said to be catching. Well, if it is not catching, it comes so near to being so, that most persons accept it as a fact; and laugh as we may, daily experience goes to confirm it as such, and must continue to do so until some more satisfactory explanation is found than we yet know of.

V
CHARMS TO GOOD LUCK

"The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm."

Of the things closely associated in the popular mind with good or bad luck, what in short one may or may not do to obtain the favors or turn aside the frowns of fortune, the list is a long one. We say "God bless me!" when we sneeze, as an invocation to good luck. Then, for instance, it is considered lucky to find a cast-off horseshoe, or a four-leaved clover, or to see the new moon over the right shoulder, or to have a black cat in the house, especially one that comes to you of its own accord. Then there also is the lucky pocket-piece, which the owner will seldom part with, although I once heard a man loudly lamenting that he had "sold his luck" by doing so. There also is the lucky-bone of a haddock,[8] the wishing-bone of a chicken, the lucky base-ball bat, and, what is still more strange, the lucky spider, if one happens to be found on one's clothes, – though this will hardly prevent, we imagine, all womankind from screaming out to the nearest person to come and brush off the hateful little creature. Many will not kill a spider on account of this belief, which is supposed to be derived from the romantic story of King Robert Bruce and the spider.

The familiar saying, "There's luck in odd numbers," lingers in song and story. Does not Rory O'More say so? Odd numbers or combinations of odd numbers are almost invariably chosen in buying lottery tickets. Moreover, they have received the highest official sanction for a very long time. In the "Art of Navigation," printed in the year 1705, the following rule is laid down for firing salutes by ships of the royal navy: "to salute with an odd number of guns, the which are to be answered with fit correspondency. And the number of odd guns is so punctually observed, that whenever they are given *even* 'tis received for an infallible sign that either the captain or some noted officer is dead in the voyage."

The above rule or custom has held good to this day. In the United States the prescribed salute to the President is twenty-one guns; seventeen to the Vice-President, and so on in descending scale, according to rank, in the several branches of the civil, military, and naval service. Medicines are often taken an odd number of times, though not invariably, as they once were. A hen is always set on an odd number of eggs, although I could never find any one who could give any other reason than custom for it. What Biddy does when she "steals her own nest" is not ascertained.

It appears from such data as we have been able to gather that the number Three and its multiple Nine were formerly held to be indispensable to the successful working of the magician's arts. In "Macbeth," the weird sisters mutter the dark incantation: —

"Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,
And thrice again to make up nine! —
Peace! – the charm's wound up."

And yet again, when concocting their charmed hell-broth, while awaiting the coming of the ambitious thane to learn his fate of them, the mystic rite begins by declaring the omens propitious: —

[8] It was commonly believed that the haddock bore the mark of St. Peter's thumb, ever since that saint took the tribute penny out of a fish of that species.

"1 *Witch*. Thrice the brinded cat hath mewed.
2 *Witch*. Thrice and once the hedge-pig whined."

With the Romans, three handfuls of salt cast over a dead body had all the virtues of a funeral. Pirates were formerly hung at low-water mark and left hanging there until three tides had overflowed them. Shakespeare makes Falstaff say: "This is the third time; I hope good luck lies in odd numbers." Even now, the cabalistic phrase "third time never fails," prompts the twice unsuccessful candidate for fortune's favors to renewed and more vigorous effort. In short, there seems to be no end to the virtues inherent in odd numbers.

But as all rules have their exceptions, so with this prophetic rule of three, the fates would seem to have ordained that it might be made to work both ways. Simply by keeping one's eyes and ears open one sees and hears many things. An enterprising news-gatherer jots down a bit of superstition touching the fateful side of the rule in question that came to him in this easy sort of way: "I heard," he says, "a most sensible person, the other day, exclaim because Queen Victoria had been obliged twice to postpone her trip to the south of France, once on account of the unsettled state of affairs over there, and again because of the unsettled state of the weather. 'The third time will be fatal to her,' added this cheerful individual; 'you just mark my words.'"

It is nevertheless true, however, that the cabalistic number Thirteen stands quite alone, so far as we are informed, as the sombre herald of misfortune. But here, as elsewhere, the exception only goes to prove the rule.

A gentleman holding a lucrative office under the government once told me that two of his clerks wore iron finger rings, because they were supposed to be lucky. It is a matter of general knowledge that certain gems or precious stones are worn on scarf-pins, watch-chains, finger rings, or other articles of personal adornment solely on account of the prevailing belief in their efficacy to ward off sickness or disease, prevent accidents, keep one's friends, – in short, to bring the wearer good luck. This branch of the subject will be more fully treated of presently.

More unaccountable still is the practice of wearing or carrying about on one's person a rabbit's foot as a talisman, that timid little animal always having been intimately associated with the arts of the magician and sorcerer. But it must always be bunny's hind foot. The insatiate passion for novelty, we understand, has now installed a turkey's claw in the room of the rabbit's foot, to some extent, showing that even credulity itself is the obedient slave of fashion. Of course neither the rabbit's foot nor turkey's claw is worn in its natural rough state, but under the jeweller's skilful hands, tipped with gold or silver and set with the wearer's favorite gem (topaz, amethyst, or whatever it may be), the charm, or mascot, becomes an ornament to be worn, either suspended from the neck, the wrist, or belt, or as a clasp for the cape. The practice of wearing a caul,[9] or an amulet blessed by the priest, clearly denotes that here rich and poor meet on common ground. It is not proposed, however, to treat of those beliefs which may be directly traced to the teachings of a particular church, or that have become so embedded in the faith it inculcates as to be an inseparable part of it The Protestant world, or that part of it we live in, is intrenched in no such stronghold.

To continue the catalogue: —

A black cat, without a single white hair, is a witch of the sort that brings luck to the house. Keeping one also insures to unmarried females of the family plenty of sweethearts.

A branch of the mountain ash kept in the house, or hung out over the door, will keep the witches out.

[9] It is deemed lucky to be born with a caul or membrane over the face. In France *être né coiffée* signifies that a person is extremely fortunate. It is believed to be an infallible protection against drowning, and under that idea is frequently advertised for sale in the newspapers and purchased by seamen. If bought by lawyers they become as eloquent as Demosthenes or Cicero, and thereby get a great deal of practice. – Fielding.

Good luck is frequently crystallized in certain uncouth but expressive sayings, such, for example, as “nigger luck,” “lucky strike,” or “Cunard luck,” referring to the remarkable exemption of a certain transatlantic steamship company from loss of life by disasters to its ships. This particular saying has been quite frequently heard of late in consequence of the really providential escape of the steamship *Pavonia*, of that line, from shipwreck, while on her voyage from Liverpool to Boston. What was uppermost in the minds of some of the passengers and crew may easily be inferred from the following extract, with which a relation of the good ship’s fortunate escape from foundering concludes: —

“The change of the moon passed at 9.30 A.M., and the light breeze changed at almost the same moment. The gulls were sitting on the water, which was a sign of luck, according to the sailors. Then we discovered a lot of ‘Mother Carey’s chickens’ near the ship, which was also a lucky omen, so we felt that Friday was to be our lucky day.”

Unquestionably, the horseshoe is the favorite symbol of good luck the world over. You will seldom see a man so much in a hurry that he will not stop to pick one up. Although the iron of which the shoe is fashioned is no longer endowed with magic power, as it once was, no sooner has it been beaten by the smith into the form of a shoe than, *presto*, it becomes a power to conjure with. Popular *dictum* even prescribes that the shoe must be placed with the prongs upward or its virtue will be lost. It must, moreover, be a cast-off shoe or the charm will not work.

The luck of the horseshoe has become proverbial. We are now dealing with facts of common knowledge. Indeed, we do not see how any form of superstition could be more fully or more freely recognized in the everyday affairs of life. Even those who scout the superstition itself, as a thing unworthy of serious attention, do not hesitate to avail themselves of its popularity for their own ends, thus giving it a still wider currency. In short, this hoary superstition is thriftily turned to account by every imaginable device to tickle the fancy or to turn a penny, although in being thus employed it has quite cut loose from its ancient traditions.

Thus it is that we now see the horseshoe stamped on monograms, on Christmas cards, on book covers, or even used in the title of a book, most effectively, as in the case of “Horseshoe Robinson.” It also is seen worked into floral designs to be hung above the bride’s head, at a wedding, or reverently laid upon the last resting-place of the dead. Surely superstition could go no farther.

The horseshoe has also come to be a favorite trade-mark with manufacturers and dealers in all sorts of wares. It is elaborately worked up in gold and silver charms for those who would rather be lucky than not, regardless of the original *dictum* that, to be serviceable, the shoe must be made of iron and nothing else. There lies before me, as I write this, the advertisement of a certain farrier, who rests his plea for custom upon the fact that as horseshoes bring luck to the purchaser, therefore every horse should be shod with his shoes. A certain horseshoers’ union attributes its victory over the employers, in the matter of shorter hours, to the efficacy of its trade symbol. And not long ago the fortunate escape of Boston from a disastrous conflagration was heralded in a daily paper with a cut of a horseshoe prefixed to the account.

Of late years, too, the horseshoe has grown to be a favorite symbol in the house, – a sort of household fetich, as it were, – if not because of any faith in its traditional ability to bring good luck, one is at loss to know why a piece of old iron should be so conspicuously hung up in the houses of rich and poor alike.

The horseshoe was always, also, the favorite emblem of the tavern and inn, in all countries. Such signs as the “Three Horseshoes,” once swung in Boston streets. In Samuel Sewall’s Diary we find the following entry: “Sanctifie to me ye deth of old Mrs. Glover who kept the 3 horseshoes, and who dyed ye last night.” Sewall, who lived in the immediate neighborhood, leaves us in the dark as to whether he mourned most for Mrs. Glover or her exhilarating mixtures.

Returning to its proper place in folk-lore, I myself have seen the horseshoe nailed to the bowsprit of a vessel, over house and barn doors, and even to bedsteads. In the country, its supposed

virtues continue to hold much of their old sway, while among sailors a belief in them has suffered little, if any, loss since the day of Nelson and of the *Victory*. On some very old country house, as old as the witchcraft times, one can still see the shape of a horseshoe wrought in the brickwork of the chimneys, as well as one nailed above the door, thus cleverly closing every avenue against the entrance of witches. But of all the odd caprices connected with the use of the horseshoe, that related of Samuel Dexter, of Boston, must carry off the palm for oddity. He, being dissatisfied with his minister, Dr. Codman, nailed a horseshoe to his pew door, and then nailed up the pew itself.

The origin of this remarkable superstition is involved in the obscurity of past ages. It is usually attributed to the virtue of cold iron to keep witches out, through their inability to step over it, and is probably allied to that other superstition about the driving of iron nails into the walls of Roman houses, with a like object. Beyond that point its meaning grows more and more obscure. The conjunction, so essential to perfect the charm, between iron in any form and the horse, is said to have come from the magical properties attributed to the animal by the ancients, in whose mythology the horse always plays an important part. King Richard, on Bosworth field, offers his kingdom for a horse, and Poor Richard, in his Almanac, tells us how a man lost his life for want of a nail in his horse's shoe. Butler, from whose pen figures of speech gush forth like water from a never-failing spring, declares that evil spirits are chased away by dint

"of sickle, horseshoe, hollow flint."

In Gay's fable of "The Old Woman and her Cats," the alleged witch laments that

"Straws laid across my path retard;
The horseshoes nail'd each threshold's guard."

Turning now from the merely passive to the active agency on the part of the seeker after fortune's favors, we enter upon a no less marvellous, but vastly more attractive, field. Here is something that is tried every day: —

Of two persons breaking apart the wishing-bone of a chicken before forming a wish, the one getting the longer piece is assured of the fulfilment of his or her wish; the shorter piece bodes disappointment.

Another way to test fickle fortune is to form a wish while a meteor is falling; if one can do so the desire will be gratified. This saying would be no bad symbol of the importance of seizing a golden opportunity ere it has escaped us. As the immortal Shakespeare says: —

"There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune."

If a load of hay goes by, make a wish on it and your wish will be gratified, provided you instantly look another way. But the charm will surely be broken if, like Lot's wife, you should look back.

To see the new moon with the old in her arms, a much more common thing by the way in this country than in England, is considered lucky; as runs an old couplet: —

"Late, late yestreen, I saw the new moone
Wi' the auld moone in hir armes."

Here is another instance wherein the auguries differ. An old sea-rhyme founded on the same thing adds this prediction: —

"And if we gang to sea, master,
I fear we'll come to harm."

It is also accounted good luck to see the new moon over the right shoulder, especially if you instantly feel in your pocket and find money there, as your luck thereby will be prodigiously increased, but you must take care instantly to turn the money over in your pocket.

Burglars are said to carry a piece of coal, or some other object, about with them for luck.

Upon getting out of bed in the morning, always put the right foot foremost. Slightly altered, this injunction has been turned into the familiar saying: "Put your best foot foremost." Dr. Johnson was so particular about this rule, that if he happened to plant his left foot on the threshold of a house, he would turn back, and reënter right foot foremost. Similarly, one must always begin dressing the right foot first. An exception occurs to us: in military tactics it is always the left foot that goes foremost.

Professional gamblers are firm believers in the element of luck, the world over. According to their *dictum*, a youth who has never gambled before, is sure to be lucky at his first essay at play. Finding a piece of money or carrying a dice in the pocket also insures good fortune, they say.

To secure luck at cards or to change your luck, when it is going against you, you must walk three times around your chair or else blow upon the cards with your breath. Beyond reasonable doubt you will be a winner. Not so very long ago, it was the custom for women to offer to sit cross-legged in order to procure luck at cards for their friends. I have seen players spit on their hands for the same purpose. Sitting cross-legged, with the fingers interlaced, was formerly considered the correct magical posture.

The hair will grow better if cut on the waxing of the moon. This notion is probably based on the symbolism of the moon's waxing and waning, as associated with growing and declining nature.

A Newfoundland fisherman to-day spits on the first piece of silver given him for luck. In the Old Country this was also a common practice among the lower class of hucksters, upon receiving the price of the first goods sold on that day, which they call "hansell."[10] Boxers often spit into their hands before engaging in a set-to, as also did the schoolboys of my own age, who thought it a charm to prevent the master's ferule from hurting them as much as it otherwise would, but later found out their mistake.

In some country districts the belief still holds that if a live frog can be passed through a sick cow the animal will get well, but the frog must be alive and kicking, or the charm will not work.

Salt was formerly the first thing taken into a new house, in the belief that the occupants would never want for bread in that house.

"Happy is the corpse that the rain rains on." This is a sort of corollary to the belief, that it is a fortunate sign if the sun shines on a newly wedded couple.

The long established custom of laying the head of the dead to the east is probably a survival of the ancient sun-worship. It is traced back to the Phœnicians. In Shakespeare's "Cymbeline" we find this reference to it: —

"We must lay his head to the east:
My father hath reason for't."

We are reminded that ropes are coiled, cranks turned, and eggs beaten with the sun. One writer upon Folk-lore[11] remarks that passing the bottle at table from right to left, instead of being merely proper form, really comes from this ancient superstition.

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[10] Edward Winslow makes use of this word in speaking of an Indian who had been taken prisoner at Plymouth, and confined in the fort newly built there. "So he was locked in a chain to a staple in the court of guard and there kept. Thus was our fort handselled, this being the first day, as I take it, that ever any watch was there kept." – Winslow's "Relation."

[11] Mr. Coxe.

Telling the bees of a death in the family was formerly a quite general practice, if indeed it has entirely died out. I know that it has been practised in New England within my own recollection. It was the belief that a failure to so inform the bees would lead to their dwindling away and dying, according to some interpreters, or to their flying away, according to others. The manner of proceeding was to knock with the house-key three times against the hives, at the same time telling the noisy inmates that their master or mistress, as the case might be, was dead. One case is reported where an old man actually sung a psalm in front of some hives. In New England the hives were sometimes draped in black. The semi-sacred character with which antiquity invested this wonderful little insect sufficiently accounts for the practice. Mr. Whittier has some verses about it in “Home Ballads.” Beating upon a pot or kettle when bees are swarming comes from Virgil’s injunction, in the like case, to raise tinkling sounds.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.