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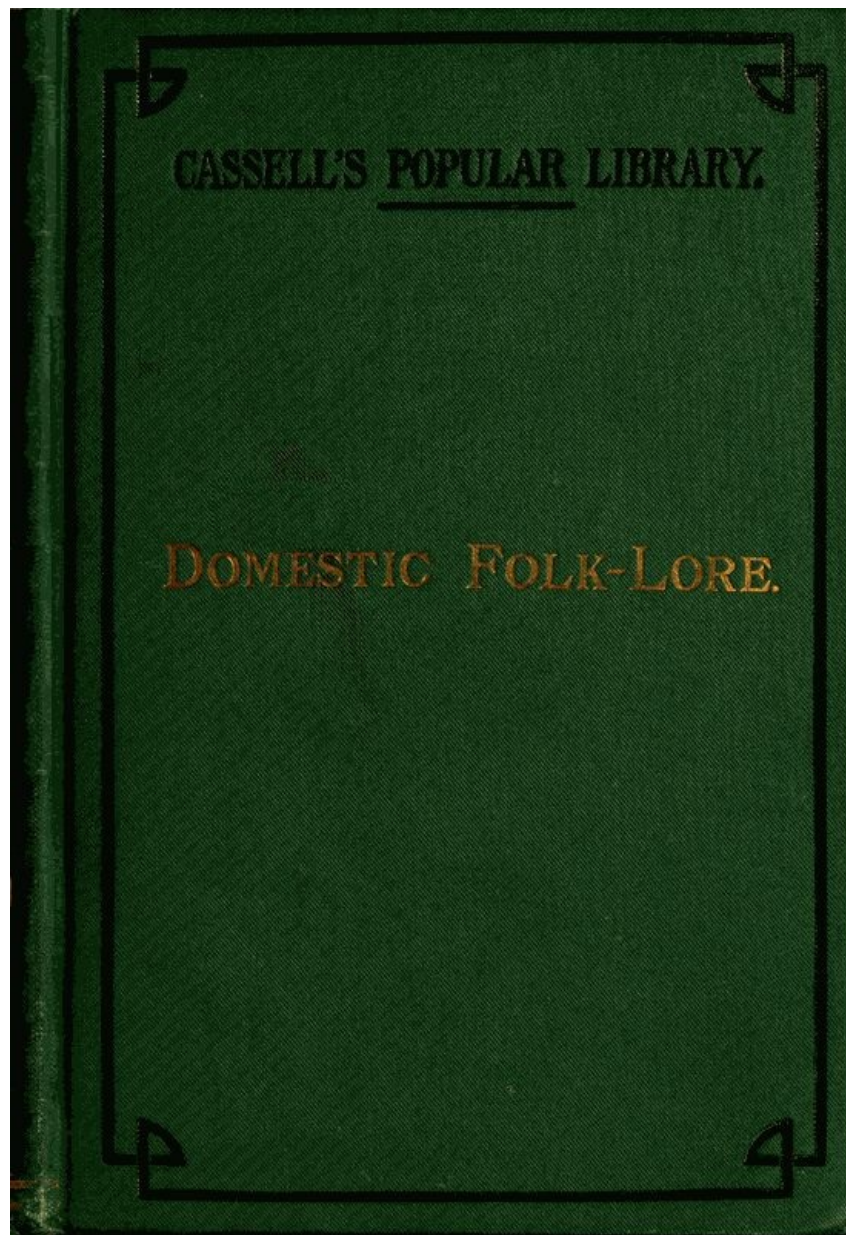
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# DOMESTIC FOLK-LORE.

BY

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## PREFACE.

For the name "Folk-lore" in its present signification, embracing the Popular Traditions, Proverbial Sayings, Superstitions, and Customs of the people, we are in a great measure indebted to the late editor of *Notes and Queries*—Mr. W. J. Thoms—who, in an anonymous contribution to the *Athenæum* of 22nd August, 1846, very aptly suggested this comprehensive term, which has since been adopted as the recognised title of what has now become an important branch of antiquarian research.

The study of Folk-lore is year by year receiving greater attention, its object being to collect, classify, and preserve survivals of popular belief, and to trace them as far as possible to their original source. This task is no easy one, as school-boards and railways are fast sweeping away every vestige of the old beliefs and customs which, in days gone by, held such a prominent place in social and domestic life. The Folk-lorist has, also, to deal with remote periods, and to examine the history of tales and traditions which have been handed down from the distant past and have lost much of their meaning in the lapse of years. But, as a writer in the *Standard* has pointed out, Folk-lore students tread on no man's toes. "They take up points of history which the historian despises, and deal with monuments more intangible but infinitely more ancient than those about which Sir John Lubbock is so solicitous. They prosper and are happy on the crumbs dropped from the tables of the learned, and grow scientifically rich on the refuse which less skilful craftsmen toss aside as useless. The tales with which the nurse wiles her charge asleep provide for the Folk-lore student a succulent banquet—for he knows that there is scarcely a child's story or a vain thought that may not be traced back to the boyhood of the world, and to those primitive races from which so many polished nations have sprung."

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The field of research, too, in which the Folk-lorist is engaged is a most extensive one, supplying materials for investigation of a widespread character. Thus he recognises and, as far as he possibly can, explains the smallest item of superstition wherever found, not limiting his inquiries to any one subject. This, therefore, whilst enhancing the value of Folk-lore as a study, in the same degree increases its interest, since with a perfect impartiality it lays bare superstition as it exists among all classes of society. Whilst condemning, it may be, the uneducated peasant who places credence in the village fortune-teller or "cunning man," we are apt to forget how oftentimes persons belonging to the higher classes are found consulting with equal faith some clairvoyant or spirit-medium.

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Hence, however reluctant the intelligent part of the community may be to own the fact, it must be admitted that superstition, in one form or another, dwells beneath the surface of most human hearts, although it may frequently display itself in the most disguised or refined form. Among the lower orders, as a writer has observed, "it wears its old fashions, in the higher it changes with the rapidity of modes in fashionable circles." Indeed, it is no matter of surprise that superstition prevails among the poor and ignorant, when we find the affluent and enlightened in many cases quite as ready to repose their belief in the most illogical ideas.

In conclusion, we would only add that the present little volume has been written with a view of showing how this rule applies even to the daily routine of Domestic Life, every department of which, as will be seen in the following pages, has its own Folk-lore.

*Brighton, May, 1881.*

T. F. THISELTON DYER.

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# CHAPTER I.

## BIRTH AND INFANCY.

Value of Superstitions—Lucky Days and Hours of Birth—The Caul—The Changeling—  
The Evil Eye—"Up and not Down"—Rocking the Empty Cradle—Teeth, Nails, and  
Hands—The Maple and the Ash—Unchristened Children.

Around every stage of human life a variety of customs and superstitions have woven themselves, most of which, apart from their antiquarian value, as having been bequeathed to us from the far-off past, are interesting in so far as they illustrate those old-world notions and quaint beliefs which marked the social and domestic life of our forefathers. Although, therefore, many of these may appear to us meaningless, yet it must be remembered that they were the natural outcome of that scanty knowledge and those crude conceptions which prevailed in less enlightened times than our own. Probably, if our ancestors were in our midst now, they would be able in a great measure to explain and account for what is often looked upon now-a-days as childish fancy and so much nursery rubbish. In the present chapter it is proposed to give a brief and general survey of the folk-lore associated with birth and infancy, without, however, entering critically into its origin or growth, or tracing its transmigration from one country to another. Commencing, then, with birth, we find that many influences are supposed to affect the future fortune and character of the infant. Thus, in some places great attention is paid to the day of the week on which the child is born, as may be gathered from the following rhyme still current in Cornwall:—

[2]

"Sunday's child is full of grace,  
Monday's child is full in the face,  
Tuesday's child is solemn and sad,  
Wednesday's child is merry and glad,  
Thursday's child is inclined to thieving,  
Friday's child is free in giving,  
Saturday's child works hard for his living"—

a piece of folk-lore varying, of course, in different localities. By general consent, however, Sunday is regarded as a most lucky day for birth, both in this country and on the Continent; and according to the "Universal Fortune-teller"—a book very popular among the lower classes in former years—"great riches, long life, and happiness" are in store for those fortunate beings born on Sunday, while in Sussex they are considered safe against drowning and hanging. Importance is also attached to the hour of birth; and the faculty of seeing much that is hidden from others is said to be granted to children born at the "chime hours," *i.e.*, the hours of three, six, nine, or twelve—a superstition found in many parts of the Continent. There is, too, an idea prevalent in Germany that when a child is born in leap-year either it or its mother will die within the course of the year—a notion not unknown in our own country. Again, from time immemorial various kinds of divination have been in use for the purpose of discovering the sex of an infant previous to its birth. One of these is by means of a shoulder-of-mutton bone, which, after the whole of the flesh has been stripped clean off, must be hung up the last thing at night over the front door of the house. On the following morning the sex of the first person who enters, exclusive of the members of the household, indicates the sex of the child.

[3]

We will next turn to some of the countless superstitions connected with the new-born child. A highly popular one refers to the caul—a thin membrane occasionally found covering the head at birth, and deemed specially lucky, as indicating, among other things, that the child will never be drowned. It has been, in consequence, termed the "holy" or "fortunate hood," and great care is generally taken that it should not be lost or thrown away, for fear of the death or sickness of the child. This superstitious fancy was very common in the primitive ages of the Church, and St. Chrysostom inveighs against it in several of his homilies. The presence of a caul on board ship was believed to prevent shipwreck, and owners of vessels paid a large price for them. Most readers will, no doubt, recollect how Thomas Hood wrote for his early work, "Whims and Oddities," a capital ballad upon this vulgar error. Speaking of the jolly mariner who confidently put to sea in spite of the ink-black sky which "told every eye a storm was soon to be," he goes on to say—

[4]

"But still that jolly mariner  
Took in no reef at all;  
For in his pouch confidingly  
He wore a baby's caul."

It little availed him, however; for as soon as the storm in ruthless fury burst upon his frail bark, he

"Was smothered by the squall.  
Heaven ne'er heard his cry, nor did  
The ocean heed his *caul!*"

Advocates also purchased them, that they might be endued with eloquence, the price paid having often been from twenty to thirty guineas. They seem to have had other magical properties, as Grose informs us that any one "possessed of a caul may know the state of health of the person who was born with it. If alive and well, it is firm and crisp; if dead or sick, relaxed and flaccid." In

France the luck supposed to belong to a caul is proverbial, and *être né coiffé* is an expression signifying that a person is extremely fortunate. Apart from the ordinary luck supposed to attach to the "caul," it may preserve the child from a terrible danger to which, according to the old idea, it is ever exposed—namely, that of being secretly carried off and exchanged by some envious witch or fairy for its own ill-favoured offspring. This superstition was once very common in many countries, and was even believed by Martin Luther, if we are to rely on the following extract from his "Table Book:"—"Changelings Satan lays in the place of the genuine children, that people may be tormented with them. He often carries off young maidens into the water." This most reprehensible of the practices attributed to the fairies is constantly spoken of by our old writers, and is several times mentioned by Shakespeare. In the speech of Puck, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Act ii., sc. 1), that jovial sprite says of Titania's lovely boy—the cause of quarrel between the King and Queen of Elfland:—

[5]

"She never had so sweet a changeling."

In the *Winter's Tale* (Act iv., sc. 4) the Shepherd, on discovering the babe Perdita, tells the Clown, "It was told me I should be rich by the fairies. This is some changeling." As a preservation against this danger, sundry charms are observed. Thus, in the North of England, a carving-knife is still hung from the head of the cradle, with the point suspended near the child's face. In the Western Isles of Scotland idiots are believed to be the fairies' changelings, and in order to regain the lost child, parents have recourse to the following device:—They place the changeling on the beach, below high-water mark, when the tide is out, and pay no heed to its screams, believing that the fairies, rather than allow their offspring to be drowned by the rising waters, will convey it away and restore the child they had stolen. The sign that this has been done is the cessation of the child's crying. In Ireland, too, the peasants often place the child supposed to be a changeling on a hot shovel, or torment it in some other way. A similar practice is resorted to in Denmark, where the mother heats the oven, and places the child on the peel, pretending to put it in; and sometimes she whips it severely with a rod, or throws it into the water. The only real safeguard, however, against this piece of fairy mischief is baptism, and hence the rite has generally been performed among the peasantry as soon as possible after birth.

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Another danger to which the new-born child is said to be exposed, and to counteract which baptism is an infallible charm, is the influence of the "evil eye;" certain persons being thought to possess the power of inflicting injury by merely looking on those whom they wish to harm. Although this form of superstition has been gradually dying out for many years past, yet it still retains its hold in certain country places. It is interesting to trace this notion as far back as the time of the Romans; and in the late Professor Conington's translation of the "Satires of Persius" we find it thus laughably spoken of:—"Look here! A grandmother or a superstitious aunt has taken baby from his cradle, and is charming his forehead against mischief by the joint action of her middle finger and her purifying spittle; for she knows right well how to check the evil eye." Confining ourselves, however, to instances recorded in our own country, we find that, even now-a-days, various charms are practised for counteracting the baneful influence of this cruel species of witchcraft. Thus, in Lancashire, some of the chief consist in spitting three times in the child's face, turning a live coal in the fire, exclaiming, "The Lord be with us;" whilst in the neighbourhood of Burnley "drawing blood above the mouth" was once a popular antidote. Self-bored or "lucky stones" are often hung by the peasantry behind their cottage doors; and in the South of England a copy of the apocryphal letter of our Lord to Abgarus, King of Edessa, may occasionally be seen pasted on the walls. In many places, when a child pines or wastes away, the cause is often attributed to the "evil eye," and one remedy in use against this disaster is the following:—Before sunrise it is brought to a blacksmith of the seventh generation, and laid on the anvil. The smith then raises his hammer as if he were about to strike the hot iron, but brings it gently down on the child's body. This is done three times, after which the child is considered certain to amend. This superstition survives in Cornwall; and the late Mr. Hawker, of Morwenstow, a noted authority on such topics, tells us that two-thirds of the inhabitants of the Tamar side believe in the power of the evil eye. In Scotland this piece of folk-lore has prevailed extensively from time immemorial, and one of the charms to avert it is the "gold and silver water." A sovereign and a shilling are put into water, which is sprinkled over the patient in the name of the Trinity. Again, in the Highlands of Scotland, ash-sap is given to new-born children, because, in common with the rowan, that tree is supposed to possess the property of resisting the attacks of witches, fairies, and other imps of darkness. The Irish think that not only their children but their cattle are "eye-bitten" when they fall suddenly sick.

[7]

Among other important items of folk-lore associated with birth may be mentioned the popular belief that a child should go up in the world before it goes down. On leaving its mother's room for the first time, it is considered absolutely necessary that it should be carried *up-stairs* before it goes *down-stairs*, otherwise it will always keep low in the world, and never rise in after-life either to riches or distinction. When, however, as often happens, the mother's room is on the top storey, the nurse overcomes the obstacle by placing a chair near the door, on which she steps before leaving the room. In Yorkshire it is further stated that a new-born infant should always be placed first in the arms of a maiden before any one else touches it. It has been aptly questioned by Mr. Henderson, in his "Folk-lore of the Northern Counties," whether we may not trace in this practice an outgrowth of the mediæval belief that the Virgin Mary was present at the birth of St. John the Baptist, and received him first in her arms. Some, too, will never permit an infant to sleep upon bones—that is, the lap—a piece of folk-lore founded on some degree of truth; for it has been pointed out that it is undoubtedly better for a child to support it throughout its whole length, than to allow its head or legs to hang down, as they might probably do if the infant was sleeping on the lap. Again, there is a common idea that a baby and a kitten cannot thrive in the same

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house; and should, therefore, as is not unfrequently the case, a cat have kittens at the time of a birth, these are immediately either destroyed or given away. Few nurses, also, can be found [9] courageous enough to weigh a young child, from a superstitious conviction that it is unfortunate so to do, the child often dying, or, at any rate, not thriving afterwards. Equally unlucky, too, is it considered to rock baby's empty cradle, it being an omen of its death—a belief which also prevails in Scotland. The same notion exists in many parts of the Continent, and the Swedish folk tell us that it should be avoided, as it is apt to make the child noisy and given to crying. It is also deprecated on another ground, that it is ominous of another claimant for that place of rest—a piece of folk-lore which the Sussex peasantry express in the following rhyme:—

"If you rock the cradle empty,  
Then you shall have babies plenty."

Many consider it a bad sign when the first tooth makes its appearance in the upper jaw, denoting, it is said, that the child will not survive its infancy. Whilst speaking of teeth, it may be noted that they occupy an important place in the folk-lore of infancy. Many readers will no doubt recollect how the Duke of Gloucester, in *3 Henry VI.* (Act v., sc. 6), when describing the peculiarities connected with his birth, relates that—

"The midwife wondered, and the women cried,  
'O Jesus bless us, he is born with teeth!'  
And so I was, which plainly signified  
That I should snarl, and bite, and play the dog."

In Sussex it is still customary for little children to wear a necklace of beads made from the root of the peony, as this is supposed to act as a charm in assisting the cutting of their teeth. In the same county, too, the peasantry have a great dislike to throwing away the cast teeth of young children, believing that should any be accidentally found and gnawed by an animal, the child's new tooth would exactly correspond with the animal's which had bitten the old one. Once more, in Scotland and the North of England, when the first teeth come out, sundry precautions are taken, to make sure that the fresh ones may be sound and healthy. One of these consists in filling the cavity with salt, after which the tooth must be burnt, while the following formula is repeated:— [10]

"Fire! fire! burn bone;  
God send me my tooth again."

This practice exists in Sweden, and likewise in Switzerland, where the tooth is wrapped up in paper, with a little salt, and then thrown into the fire. The teeth, however, are not the only objects of superstition in infancy, similar importance being attached to the nails. In many places, for instance, it is considered imprudent to cut them till baby is a year old, and then they should be bitten off, or else there is a likelihood of its growing up dishonest, or of its being, as the Sussex peasantry say, "light-fingered." Anyhow, special attention is to be paid to the day of the week on which the child's nails are cut, if there be any truth in a well-known proverb—

"Better a child had ne'er been born,  
Than cut his nails on a Sunday morn."

The same warning is given in Germany, and if it is disregarded, it is said that the child will be liable to stammer as it grows up. A curious Northumberland belief affirms that if the first parings of a child's nails are carefully buried under an ash-tree, it will turn out in after-life a capital singer. It is also a popular fancy in nursery folk-lore that the child's future career in this world can be easily augured from the little specks on its nails, a species of palmistry still extensively credited by even educated persons, and one, too, not confined to infancy. Again, the infant's tiny hands are not free from superstition, and here and there, throughout the country, there is a notion that for the first few months after its birth the right one should remain unwashed, the reason assigned for this strange piece of eccentricity being that it may gather riches. According to another idea, children born open-handed are said to be of a bountiful disposition. In Scotland, too, great attention is paid as to which hand a child uses when taking up for the first time a spoon to eat. If it should happen to be the left, then, alas! he is doomed to be an unlucky fellow all through his life. Indeed, as far as we can judge from the numerous items of folk-lore still in vogue, it would seem that the early period of infancy, in one way or another, furnishes countless opportunities for ascertaining what kind of life is in store for the child in years to come, almost every trivial action being regarded as indicative of something or other that shall befall it. Although many of these ideas may seem to us in this nineteenth century apparently senseless, yet it must be remembered they are frequently survivals of primitive culture, and are interesting as having been handed down to us from the distant past. According to an old superstition, parents desirous of securing long life for their children should pass them through the branches of a maple. A few years ago one of these trees had long been resorted to for this purpose in West Grinstead Park, and as soon as a rumour spread through the parish that it was about to be demolished, quite a consternation prevailed in the neighbourhood. Similar properties are supposed to belong to the ash, weakly infants that do not thrive being drawn through a cleft in its trunk. This charm, as performed in Cornwall, is thus:—A large knife is inserted into the trunk of a young ash, about a foot from the ground, and a vertical opening made for about three feet. Two men then forcibly pull the parts asunder, and hold them so, whilst the mother passes the child through the cleft three times. The ceremony does not end here, as the child has to be washed for three successive mornings in the dew from the leaves of the "charmed ash." This supposed [11] [12]

magical property of the ash has an additional interest, when we consider that some thousands of years ago our ancestors regarded it as one of their wonder-working trees, and associated it with some of their oldest traditions. At the present day, too, it is the subject of an extensive folk-lore, to which we shall have occasion to refer [in a succeeding chapter](#).

Again, if a baby frets and does not appear to thrive, it is supposed by some to be "longing." Thus, a Sussex nurse one day said to a lady, "Baby is so uncommon fretty, I do believe he must be longing for something." When asked what he could be longing for, she replied, "Something that his mother longed for, but did not get, before he was born, and the best way to satisfy him would be, I think, to try him with a brandied cherry, or some hare's brains." This piece of superstition, however, is not confined to Sussex. Once more, in addition to the popular notion that cats suck the breath of infants and so cause their death—one, indeed, without a particle of truth—there is another in which poor pussy is the victim, an illustration of which we quote from "Rambles in an Old City," by a Norfolk author:—"Not long since a woman, holding quite a respectable rank among the working classes, avowed herself determined to 'drownd' the cat as soon as ever her baby, which was lying ill, should die. The only explanation she could give for this determination was that the cat jumped upon the nurse's lap as the baby lay there soon after it was born, from which time it ailed, and ever since that time the cat had regularly gone under its bed once a day and coughed twice. These mysterious actions of poor 'Tabby' were assigned as the cause of the baby wasting, and its fate was to be sealed as soon as that of the poor infant was decided. That the baby happened to be the twenty-fourth child of his mother, who had succeeded in rearing only four of the two dozen, was a fact that seemed to possess no weight whatever in her estimation." This strange antipathy to our domestic animal no doubt took its origin in the old belief that the cat's is one of the numerous forms which witches are fond of assuming, and on this account, in days gone by, poor pussy was oftentimes subjected to gross ill-treatment at the hands of the ignorant classes. At the present day, in Germany, there is a deep-rooted belief that witches, when bent on doing mischief, take the form of a cat, and many stories are current of their frightening their victims by appearing as "the nightmare;" or, if dishonestly disposed, of their drinking their neighbour's beer. Returning, however, again to the subject of our present chapter, there is a superstitious fancy in the North of England that it is unlucky to walk over the graves of unchristened children, which is vulgarly called "unchristened ground," the person who does so rendering himself liable to catching the fatal disease of the "grave-scab." This complaint, we are told by Mr. Henderson, "comes on with a trembling of the limbs and hard breathing, and at last the skin burns as if touched with hot iron," in allusion to which an old ballad tells us—

"And it ne'er will be cured by doctor on earth,  
Tho' every one should tent him, oh!  
He shall tremble and die like the elf-shot eye,  
And return from whence he came, oh!"

There is, however, a remedy, though not easy of attainment—"It lies in the wearing a sark, thus prepared:—The lint must be grown in a field which shall be manured from a farmyard heap that has not been disturbed for forty years. It must be spun by Habbitrot, the queen of spinsters; it must be bleached by an honest bleacher, in an honest miller's mill-dam, and sewed by an honest tailor. On donning this mysterious vestment, the sufferer will at once regain his health and strength." Unfortunately the necessary conditions for the successful accomplishment of this charm are so difficult, that he must be a clever man who can fulfil them. In the South of England, on the other hand, we do not find the same dread attaching to the graves of still-born children. Thus on a certain occasion, when one of the Commissioners of Devonport complained that a charge of one shilling and sixpence should have been made upon the parish authorities for the grave and interment of a still-born child, he added that "when he was a young man it was thought lucky to have a still-born child put into an open grave, as it was considered to be a sure passport to heaven for the next person buried there." According to another superstitious notion, if a mother frets and pines after her baby when it is dead, it is said that it cannot rest, and will come back to earth again. Various stories are on record of children thus visiting their mothers after death, an instance of which we quote from the "Dialect of Leeds:"—It appears that soon after the birth of the mother's next child, the previous one that had died entered her room with eyes deeply sunken, as if with much weeping, and on approaching the bed, said, "Mother, I can't rest if you will go on fretting." She replied, "Well, lad, I wean't fret any more." He then looked upon the bed and said, "Let's luke at it, mother!" She turned down the coverlet and let him look at her new-born babe. "It'll die," he said, and vanished. These, then, are some of the boundless dangers and difficulties that are supposed to beset the beginnings of life; and, taking into consideration the importance of that momentous crisis, when a fresh actor is introduced upon the world's great stage, it is not surprising that this event has, in most ages and countries, been associated with divers superstitions, and given rise to sundry customs, each of which has helped to invest man's entry into this world with all that grandeur which such a solemn occasion requires.

## CHAPTER II.

### CHILDHOOD.

Nursery Literature—The Power of Baptism—Confirmation—Popular Prayers—Weather Rhymes—School Superstitions—Barring out.

It must not be supposed that childhood has no special folk-lore of its own. It is, in fact, of a most varied kind, many of the old traditional beliefs and practices associated with the nursery being relics of what the Scandinavian mothers taught their children in days of long ago. The familiar fairy-tales of our own childhood still form the nursery literature in most homes, and are of unusual interest as embodying not only the myths and legends of the ancient Aryan race, but their conceptions about the world around them. Thus, for instance, the well-known story of "Cinderella," like many others of the same character, such as "Jack the Giant Killer," or "Beauty and the Beast," are to be found in almost all countries, and although the versions differ in some respects, yet they point to a common origin at a very remote period. Indeed, it is curious that there should still exist among the children of the nineteenth century an undying love for these survivals of Aryan literature, couched in such graceful and simple language that few modern compositions can be found to equal them. In reading, therefore, about the dwellers in Wonderland, the young mind is unconsciously taking in primitive notions about the workings of nature as seen in the succession of day and night, the changes of the seasons, and so on. In the story of "Cinderella," we have the ancient nature-myth of the sun and the dawn, representing the morning sun in the form of a fairy prince pursuing Cinderella, the dawn, to claim her for his bride, whilst the envious clouds, her sisters, and the moon, her stepmother, strive to keep her in the background. It would, however, take too long and require a book of itself to discuss the history and meaning of these fairy tales which so delight the childish fancy, and exercise such a wholesome influence, inculcating some of the noblest sentiments and loftiest teachings of the founders of our race. Referring then more particularly to the superstitions connected with childhood, we would, first of all, briefly speak of those relating to certain outward circumstances, which are believed to affect more or less the child's welfare in life.

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Thus, it is a deep-rooted belief that a child never thrives until after its baptism; and in cases of illness the clergyman is more often perhaps sent for by the poor from a belief in the physical virtue of the sacred rite itself, rather than from any actual conviction of its religious importance. Indeed, how much potency is supposed to reside in baptism may be gathered from the countless superstitions with which it is associated, the omission of this rite being attended more often than not with fatal results. Hence it is frequently performed as soon as possible after birth, one reason being, as we have already seen, that so long as the child remains unbaptised it is thought to be at the mercy of ill-disposed fairies, and subject to the influence of the evil eye. According to another popular fancy, not confined to our own country, should a child have the misfortune to die unchristened, it is doomed either to flit restlessly around its parents' abode, or to wander about in deserted spots, daily repining over its hard and unenviable lot. In Germany, tradition says that such children are transformed into that delusive little meteor known as the will-o'-the-wisp, and so ceaselessly hover between heaven and earth. On one occasion, we are told of a Dutch parson who, happening to go home to his village late one evening, fell in with no less than three of these fiery phenomena. Remembering them to be the souls of unbaptised children, he solemnly stretched out his hand and pronounced the words of baptism over them. Much, however, to his terrible consternation and surprise, in the twinkling of an eye a thousand or more of these apparitions suddenly made their appearance—no doubt all equally anxious to be christened. The good man, runs the story, was so terribly frightened, that forgetting all his good intentions, he took to his heels and ran home as fast as his legs could take him. In Lusatia, where the same superstition prevails, the souls of these unhappy children, which hover about in the form of will-o'-the-wisps, are said to be relieved from their unhappy wanderings so soon as any pious hand throws a handful of consecrated ground after them.

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In Scotland, to make quite sure of baptism being altogether propitious, it was deemed highly important that the person entrusted with the care of the child should be known by common report to be lucky. She was generally provided with a piece of bread and cheese, which she presented to the first person she met as an offering from the infant. If the party readily accepted and partook of the proffered gift, it was undoubtedly a good omen; but if refused it was considered tantamount to wishing evil to the child. Hence the future destiny of the little one was often augured from this superstitious ceremony, which, by-the-by, is also practised in the West of England, but the events of its after-life only too often belied the weal and woe predicted for it. Again, it is thought highly necessary that the child should cry at its baptism, or else ill-luck will sooner or later overtake it, the idea being that, when the child screams and kicks, the evil spirit is in the act of quitting it; its silence, on the other hand, indicating that it is too good for this wicked world. An amusing little episode in illustration of this curious superstition is related by Mrs. Latham, in the "Folk-lore Record:"—"I was lately present at a christening in Sussex, when a lady of the party, who was grandmother of the child, whispered in a voice of anxiety, 'The child never cried; why did not the nurse rouse it up?' After we had left the church she said to her, 'O nurse, why did not you pinch baby?' And when the baby's good behaviour was afterwards commented upon, she observed, with a very serious air, 'I wish that he had cried.'" In the same county it is considered unlucky to divulge a child's intended name before its baptism; and the water sprinkled on its forehead at the font must on no account be wiped off. Whilst on the subject of baptism, we would just note that in former years peculiar curative properties were supposed to reside in water that had been used at this rite, and on this account it was employed for various

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disorders. It was also regarded in Scotland as a preservative against witchcraft; and eyes bathed in it were rendered for life incapable of seeing ghosts.

It may not be inappropriate to allude here to the superstitions relative to confirmation, following in due time, as this rite does, on baptism. In Norfolk, for instance, it is considered unlucky to be touched by the bishop's left hand; and in Devonshire, also, where a similar notion prevails, young people look upon his right hand as the lucky one, and should it not be their privilege to receive it, they leave the church much disappointed. In some of the northern counties, we are informed that the unfortunate recipients of the left hand are doomed, then and there, to a life of single blessedness. This is not the only species of superstition belonging to confirmation, for instances are on record of persons who, although confirmed in their early life, have again presented themselves for confirmation in their old age, under a conviction that the bishop's blessing would cure them of some bodily ailment. It is related that, at one of the confirmations of the venerable Bishop Bathurst, an old woman was observed eagerly pressing forward to the church. A bystander, somewhat amazed at her odd conduct, and struck with her aged appearance, inquired if she was going to be confirmed, and, being answered in the affirmative, expressed his astonishment that she should have procrastinated it to such an advanced time of life. The old woman, however, resented his reproof, replying "that it was not so; that she had already been bishopped seven times, and intended to be again, it was so good for her rheumatism!"

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In some cases the prayers taught by the poor to their children are curious. Thus, a popular prayer, formerly in use, and not yet forgotten, is evidently a relic of Roman Catholic times, having been handed down from a period anterior to the Reformation. As the reader will see, the version below contains a distinct appeal to certain saints for their intercession with God on the child's behalf:—

"Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John,  
Bless the bed I lie upon;  
Four corners to my bed,  
Four angels at its head,  
One to watch, two to pray,  
And one to bear my soul away;  
God within and God without,  
Sweet Jesus Christ all round about;  
If I die before I wake,  
I pray to God my soul to take."

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It has been pointed out that it is very singular that this prayer should have survived the great change which took place in religious opinion in the sixteenth century, and that it even still remains in use. There are many variations of it, and the following two distiches obtained from Lancashire are quaint, having been written, it has been thought, by the Puritans, in ridicule:—

"Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John,  
Hold the horse that I leap on.  
Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John,  
Take a stick and lay upon."

A Lincolnshire clergyman, anxious to learn something of the nature of the prayers said by the children of the agricultural poor, visited some of their cottages a few years ago in the evening, and listened to the little ones as they said their prayers. The concluding portion, he tells us, was always intercession for relations, but the form it generally took was peculiar. In the first place, it was not, as is the case with the more educated classes, "Pray God bless father and mother," &c., but "Pray for father, pray for mother, pray for brothers and sisters," and so on. In certain cases, through carelessness and rapidity, the words had degenerated into "Pray father, pray mother," &c. There can be no doubt that originally the prayer was this:—"Pray for father;" then a *Pater noster*, or an *Ave Maria*, or both, would be said; then "Pray for mother," &c. After the Reformation, as time went on, the constant repetition of the *Pater* and the use of the *Ave Maria* would gradually die out with the change of religious ideas, and thus the prayer would assume its present form, "Pray for father, pray for mother."

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Referring, in the second place, to the superstitions of children, we find an immense number of curious rhymes on various subjects used by them throughout the country. While many of these have, no doubt, been taught them by nurserymaids, a great part, as Mr. Chambers has pointed out in his "Popular Rhymes of Scotland," may be thought to have taken their rise in the childish imagination during that familiar acquaintance with natural objects, which it is one of the most precious privileges of the young to enjoy in rural districts. Besides, too, we must not forget that children seem to have a peculiar love for all natural objects, often finding pleasure in looking at some wayside flower, or in watching the movements of some tiny insect, which in after-years do not bring them the same interest. The fact, indeed, that the young mind is a true admirer of nature in all probability accounts for many of those pleasing rhymes which constitute much of the child's folk-lore.

Some of the charms, for instance, used to influence the weather are curious, and it is worthy of note that these, in many cases, are not confined to childhood only, but are frequently found in the mouths of our peasants. Thus the child's appeal to rain for its departure has become a general charm, and is familiar to most readers:—

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"Rain, rain, go to Spain,  
Fair weather, come again."

Aubrey considers this rhyme of great antiquity, and says that "it is derived from the Gentiles." Often in summer-time, when a thunder-shower interrupts some out-door game, one may hear a chorus of young voices shouting—

"Rain, rain, go away,  
Come another summer's day."

Or, as other versions have it, "Come again on washing-day." The appearance of a rainbow is generally, too, the signal for various marks of dissatisfaction on the part of the young, who, besides entreating it to vanish as soon as possible, frequently try to charm it away. This they do by placing a couple of straws or twigs crossways on the ground, and so, to quote their phrase, "cross out the rainbow." Another way is to make a cross of two sticks, and to lay four pebbles on it, one at each end. Again, some of the rhymes relating to snow are highly quaint, the following being repeated when it makes its first appearance:—

"The men of the East  
Are picking their geese,  
And sending their feathers here away, here away."

When, however, boys wish the snow to go away, they sing:—

"Snow, snow, give over,  
The cow's in the clover."

Thunder, in the North of England, is called by children "Rattley-bags," and during a storm the boys are in the habit of singing:— [25]

"Rowley, Rowley, Rattley-bags,  
Take the lasses and leave the lads."

There is a rhyme which is often repeated by the juvenile folks in the north and midland counties upon seeing the new moon, which, perhaps, may have an indirect allusion to its supposed lucky influence:—

"I see the moon and the moon sees me,  
God help the parson that baptised me!"—

containing, evidently, a congratulation upon their birth. Boys, too, have a curious saying respecting the reflection of the sun's beams upon a ceiling, which they term "Jack-a-dandy beating his wife with a stick of silver." If a mischievous boy, with a piece of looking-glass, throws the reflection into the eyes of a neighbour, the latter complains "he's throwing Jack-a-dandy in my eyes."

Passing on to other charm-rhymes connected with natural objects, there are a very numerous class relating to the animal creation. In evening-time, for instance, when the dew begins to fall, boys are fond of hunting the large black snails, on discovering which they exclaim:—

"Snail, snail, put out your horn,  
Or I'll kill your father and mother i' th' morn."

This charm, however, is not confined to our own country, but under a variety of forms is found on the Continent. In Scotland, too, children prognosticate the coming weather from the movements of this little creature:— [26]

"Snailie, snailie, shoot out your horn,  
And tell us if it will be a bonny day the morn."

School-life, again, has its customs and superstitions, many of which have been transmitted from generation to generation; and childhood, indeed, would seem quite incomplete without them. Thus, according to an odd notion universally accepted in days gone by, and still received with implicit faith, if the master's cane is carefully nicked at the upper end, and a hair inserted, it will, as soon as used, split immediately to the very tip. In school-games, the usual antipathy to odd numbers is found, and a child is easily persuaded to give away a marble to make the number even. A kind of divination, also, is still frequently employed by boys to settle matters of difficulty, such, for example, as who shall be the leaders in a game, the choice of partners, and other details which are deemed of equal importance. The mode of procedure is this:—A long stick is thrown into the air, and caught by one of the parties. Each one then grasps it hand over hand, and he who succeeds in getting the last hold is the successful party. Mr. Henderson says that an odd expression was formerly connected with the lending a knife among boys for the cutting up of a cake or other dainty, the borrowers being asked to give it back "laughing," *i.e.*, with some of the good things it was used to cut.

Among the many old school customs, we may close our present chapter by mentioning a popular one known as "barring out," upon which, it may be remembered, Miss Edgeworth has founded one of her instructive stories. The practice consisted in "barring out" the masters from the scene [27]

of their educational labours, the agents in this ceremony being the pupils of the school. It was an occasion of no small disorder—

"Not school-boys at a barring out,  
Raised ever such incessant rout."

Addison is reported to have been the leader of a barring out at the Lichfield Grammar School, and to have displayed on the occasion a spirit of disorderly daring very different to that timid modesty which so characterised his after-life. So much, then, for the folk-lore of childhood, a subject indeed full of interest, and possessing a worth far beyond the circle of its own immediate influence, inasmuch as even the simplest nursery jingle or puerile saying has often been found of help in proving the affinity of certain races, and has an ethnological value which the student of comparative philology would be slow to underrate in his task of research.

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## CHAPTER III. LOVE AND COURTSHIP.

Love-tests—Plants used in Love-charms—The Lady-bird—The Snail—St. Valentine's Day  
—Midsummer Eve—Hallowe'en—Omens on Friday.

No event in human life has, from the earliest times, been associated with a more extensive folk-lore than marriage, which is indeed no matter of surprise, considering that this is naturally looked upon as the happiest epoch—the *summum bonum*—of each one's career in this world. Hence, to write a detailed account of the charms, omens, and divinations, as well as of the superstitions and customs, connected with marriage, including its early stages of love and courtship, would require a volume for itself, so varied and widespread is this subject of universal interest.

In the present chapter, however, have been collected together, in as condensed a form as possible, some of the principal items of folk-lore connected with love and courtship, as we find them scattered here and there throughout the country. Commencing, then, with love-divinations, these are of every conceivable kind, the anxious maiden apparently having left no stone unturned in her anxiety to ascertain her lot in the marriage state. Hence in her natural longings to raise the veil of futurity, the aspirant to matrimony, if she be at all of a superstitious turn of mind, seldom lets an opportunity pass by without endeavouring to gain from it some sign or token of the kind of husband that is in store for her. As soon, too, as the appointed one has at last presented himself, she is not content to receive with unreserved faith his professions of love and life-long fidelity; but, in her sly moments, when he is not at hand, she proves the genuineness of his devotion by certain charms which, while they cruelly belie his character, only too often unkindly deceive the love-sick maiden. [29]

In the first place, we may note that love-tests have been derived from a variety of sources, such as plants, insects, animals, birds, not to mention those countless other omens obtained from familiar objects to which we shall have occasion to allude. At the outset, however, it may not be uninteresting to quote the following account of love-charms in use about one hundred and fifty years ago, and which was written by a young lady to the editor of the *Connoisseur*:—

"Arabella was in love with a clever Londoner, and had tried all the approved remedies. She had seen him several times in coffee grounds with a sword by his side; he was once at the bottom of a tea-cup in a coach and six, with his two footmen behind it. On the last May morning she went into the fields to hear the cuckoo; and when she pulled off her left shoe, she found a hair in it the exact colouring of his. The same night she sowed hempseed in the back yard, repeating the words:—

'Hempseed I sow, hempseed I hoe,  
And he that is my true love,  
Come after me and mow.'

After that she took a clean shift and turned it, and hung it on the back of a chair; and very likely he would have come and turned it, for she heard a step, and being frightened could not help speaking, and that broke the spell. The maid Betty recommended her young mistress to go backwards, without speaking a word, into the garden on Midsummer Eve, and gather a rose, keep it in a clean sheet of paper without looking in it till Christmas Day, it will be as fresh as in June; and if she sticks this rose in her bosom, he that is to be her husband will come and take it out. Arabella had tried several other strange fancies. Whenever she lies in a strange bed, she always ties her garters nine times round the bed-post, and knits nine knots in it, saying all the time:— [30]

'This knot I knit, this knot I tie,  
To see my love as he goes by,  
In his apparel and array,  
As he walks in every day.'

On the last occasion Mr. Blossom drew the curtains and tucked up the clothes at the bed's feet. She has many times pared an apple whole, and afterwards flung the peel over her head, and on each occasion the peel formed the first letter of his Christian name or surname."

Referring to the use of plants in love-charms, they are very numerous. One popular one consists in taking the leaves of yarrow, commonly called "nosebleed," and tickling the inside of the nostrils, repeating at the same time these lines:—

"Green 'arrow, green 'arrow, you bear a white blow,  
If my love love me, my nose will bleed now;  
If my love don't love me, it 'ont bleed a drop;  
If my love do love me, 'twill bleed every drop." [31]

Some cut the common brake or fern just above the root to ascertain the initial letters of the future wife's or husband's name; and the dandelion, as a plant of omen, is much in demand. As soon as its seeds are ripe they stand above the head of the plant in a globular form, with a feathery top at the end of each seed, and then are without any difficulty detached. When in this condition the flower-stalk must be carefully plucked, so as not to injure the globe of seeds, the

charm consisting in blowing off the seeds with the breath. The number of puffs that are required to blow every seed clean off indicates the number of years that must elapse before the person is married. Again, nuts and apples are very favourite love-tests. The mode of procedure is for a girl to place on the bars of the grate a nut, repeating this incantation:—

"If he loves me, pop and fly;  
If he hates me, live and die."

As may be imagined, great is the dismay if the anxious face of the inquirer gradually perceives the nut, instead of making the hoped-for pop, die and make no sign. Again, passing on to insects, one means of divination is to throw a lady-bird into the air, repeating meanwhile the subjoined couplet:—

"Fly away east, and fly away west,  
Show me where lives the one I like best."

Should this little insect chance to fly in the direction of the house where the loved one resides, it is regarded as a highly-favourable omen. The snail, again, was much used in love-divinations, many an eager maiden anxious of ascertaining her lover's name following the example of Hobnelia, who, in order to test the constancy of her Lubberkin, did as follows:— [32]

"Upon a gooseberry bush a snail I found,  
For always snails near sweetest fruit abound.  
I seized the vermin, home I quickly sped,  
And on the hearth the milk-white embers spread;  
Slow crawled the snail, and, if I right can spell,  
In the soft ashes marked a curious L.  
Oh! may this wondrous omen lucky prove,  
For 'L' is found in Lubberkin and Love."

Three magpies are said to prognosticate a wedding; and in our rural districts the unmarried of either sex calculate the number of years of single blessedness still allotted to them by counting the cuckoo's notes when they first hear it in the spring.

Some days are considered specially propitious for practising love-divinations. Foremost among these is St. Valentine's Day, a festival which has been considered highly appropriate for such ceremonies, as there is an old tradition that on this day birds choose their mates, a notion which is frequently alluded to by the poets, and particularly by Chaucer, to which reference is made also in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:—

"Good morrow, friends, St. Valentine is past;  
Begin the wood-birds but to couple now."

Thus, the Devonshire young ladies have a fancy that on St. Valentine's Day they can, if they wish, make certain of their future. If so disposed, they go into the churchyard at midnight, with some hempseed in their hand, which, after they have walked round the church a certain number of times, they scatter on either side as they return homewards, repeating a certain charm. It is supposed that the true lover will be seen taking up the hempseed just sown, attired for the ceremony in a winding-sheet. Another species of love-divination once observed consisted in obtaining five bay leaves, four of which the anxious maiden pinned at the four corners of her pillow, and the fifth in the middle. If she was fortunate enough to dream of her lover, it was a sure sign that he would be married to her in the course of the year. Again, some young people would boil an egg hard, and, after taking out the contents, fill the shell with salt, the charm consisting in eating the shell and salt on going to bed at night without either speaking or drinking after it. A further method of divination was practised in the following way:—The lady wrote her lovers' names upon small pieces of paper, and, rolling them up in clay, put them into a tub of water. The first that rose to the surface was to be not only her Valentine, but, in all probability, her future husband. [33]

Another time, which has been equally popular from time immemorial for such superstitious practices, is Midsummer Eve. People gathered on this night the rose, St. John's wort, trefoil, and rue, each of which was supposed to have magical properties. They set orpine in clay upon pieces of slate in their houses, under the name of a Midsummer man. As the stalk next morning was found to incline to the right or left, the anxious maiden knew whether her lover would prove true to her or not. [34]

Hallowe'en, again, has been supposed to be the time, of all other times, when supernatural influences prevail, and on this account is regarded as a night of sure divination in love matters. All kinds of devices have, therefore, been resorted to at this season, and in the North of England many superstitions still linger on, where this festival is known as "nutcrack-night," from nuts forming a prominent feature in the evening feast. Once more, Christmas Eve is well known to love-sick swains and languishing maidens as an excellent day for obtaining a glimpse into futurity. Numerous are the spells and ceremonies by which this is attempted. Thus in some places, at "the witching hour of night," the young damsel goes into the garden and plucks twelve sage leaves, under the belief that she will see the shadowy form of her future husband approach her from the opposite end of the ground. In trying this delicate mode of divination great care must be taken not to break or damage the sage-stalk, as should this happen serious consequences might ensue. The following barbarous charm was also much practised in days gone



by:—The heart was taken from a living pigeon, stuck full of pins, and laid on the hearth, and while it was burning, the form of the young person's future partner was believed to become visible to mortal eye.

Friday has been held a good day of the week for love omens, and in Norfolk the following lines are repeated on three Friday nights successively, as on the last one it is believed that the young lady will dream of her future husband:— [35]

"To-night, to-night, is Friday night,  
Lay me down in dirty white,  
Dream who my husband is to be;  
And lay my children by my side,  
If I'm to live to be his bride."

There are numerous other modes of matrimonial divination which still find favour in the eyes of those who prefer the married state to that of virginity. Thus the seeds of butter-dock must be scattered on the ground by a young unmarried girl half an hour before sunrise on a Friday morning in a lonesome place. She must strew the seeds gradually on the grass, saying these words:—

"I sow, I sow!  
Then, my own dear,  
Come here, come here,  
And mow, and mow."

After this she will see her future husband mowing with a scythe at a short distance from her. She must, however, display no symptoms of fear, for should she cry out in alarm he will immediately vanish. This method is said to be infallible, but it is regarded as a bold, desperate, and presumptuous undertaking. Some girls, again, make a hole in the road where four ways meet, and apply their ear to it, with the hope of learning of what trade their future husband is to be. It is unnecessary, however, to illustrate this part of our subject further, for the preceding pages amply show how varied and extensive are the omens and divinations connected with an event without which life is considered in the eyes of most persons incomplete. Although these may seem trivial and often nonsensical, yet they have often exercised an important influence over that period of anxious suspense which intervenes between courtship and marriage, often tantalising and damping in a cruel manner the hopes of many an ardent lover. [36]

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## CHAPTER IV.

### MARRIAGE.

Seasons and Days propitious to Marriage—Superstitions connected with the Bride—  
Meeting a Funeral—Robbing the Bride of Pins—Dancing in a Hog's Trough—The  
Wedding-cake—The Ring.

In selecting the time for the marriage ceremony precautions of every kind have generally been taken to avoid an unlucky month and day for the knot to be tied. Indeed, the old Roman notion that May marriages are unlucky survives to this day in England, a striking example, as Mr. Tylor has pointed out in his "Primitive Culture," of how an idea, the meaning of which has perished for ages, may continue to exist simply because it has existed. That May with us is not a month for marrying may easily be seen any year from the list of weddings in the *Times* newspaper, the popular belief being summed up in the familiar proverb, "Marry in May and you'll rue the day." Some of the numerous reasons assigned for the ill-luck attaching to this month are the following:—That women disobeying the rule would be childless; or if they had children, that the first-born would be an idiot, or have some physical deformity; or that the married couple would not live happily together in their new life, but soon become weary of each other's society—superstitions which still retain their hold throughout the country. In spite, however, of this absurd prejudice, it seems that in days gone by May was honoured in feudal England as the month of all months especially congenial to lovers. Most readers are no doubt acquainted with the following stanza in the "Court of Love:"—

[37]

"I had not spoke so sone the words, but she,  
My souveraine, did thank me heartily,  
And saide, 'Abide, ye shall dwell still with me  
Till season come of May, for then truly  
The King of Love and all his company  
Shall holde his feste full rially and well,'  
And there I bode till that the season fell."

On the other hand, June is a highly popular month for marrying, one reason perhaps being that the earth is then clothed in her summer beauty, and that this is a season of plenty. At any rate, this notion may be traced up to the time of the Romans, and thus when Ovid was anxious about the marriage of his daughter, he—

"Resolved to match the girl, and tried to find  
What days unprosp'rous were, what moons were kind;  
After June's sacred Ides his fancy strayed,  
Good to the man and happy to the maid."

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Among the other seasons admitting or prohibiting matrimony may be mentioned the following, contained in a well-known rhyme:—

"Advent marriages doth deny,  
But Hilary gives thee liberty;  
Septuagesima says thee nay,  
Eight days from Easter says you may;  
Rogation bids thee to contain,  
But Trinity sets thee free again."

Equal importance has been attached by some to the day of the week on which the marriage is performed. Thus Friday, on account of its being regarded as an inauspicious and evil day for the commencement of any kind of enterprise, is generally avoided, few brides being found bold enough to run the risk of incurring bad luck from being married on a day of ill-omen. In days gone by, Sunday appears to have been a popular day for marriages; although, as Mr. Jeaffreson, in his amusing history of "Brides and Bridals," remarks, "A fashionable wedding, celebrated on the Lord's Day in London, or any part of England, would now-a-days be denounced by religious people of all Christian parties as an outrageous exhibition of impiety. But in our feudal times, and long after the Reformation, Sunday was, of all days of the week, the favourite one for marriages. Long after the theatres had been closed on Sundays, the day of rest was the chief day for weddings with Londoners of every social class." The brides of Elizabethan dramas are usually represented as being married on Sunday. Thus in the *Taming of the Shrew*, Petruchio, after telling his future father-in-law "that upon Sunday is the wedding-day," and laughing at Katharine's petulant exclamation, "I'll see thee hanged on Sunday first," says:—

[39]

"Father, and wife, and gentlemen, adieu;  
I will to Venice; Sunday comes apace:  
We will have rings, and things, and give array;  
And, kiss me, Kate, we will be married o' Sunday."

Among the Scottish people, we are informed by the Registrar-General, there is a peculiar fondness for marrying on the last day of the year. Indeed, there are more marriages in Scotland on that day than in any week of the year, excepting, of course, the week in which that day occurs. Thus, in the year 1861, the returns give the number of marriages in the eight principal towns as

averaging about twenty-five a day, exclusive of Sunday, as marrying is one of the things not to be done on this day in Scotland. On the 31st of December, however, in the same towns there were between 400 and 500 marriages. Curious to say, too, in Scotland, Friday seems to be considered a lucky day for weddings; for Mr. Watson, the City Chamberlain of Glasgow, affirms that "it is a well-established fact that nine-tenths of the marriages in Glasgow are celebrated on a Friday; only a few on Tuesday and Wednesday; Saturday and Monday are still more rarely adopted, and I have never heard of such a thing in Glasgow as a marriage on Sunday."

Leaving seasons and days considered propitious for marriage, we find, in the next place, a number of superstitions associated with that prominent and all-important personage on such an occasion, the bride. Thus it is above all things necessary that the sun should shine on her—"Blest is the bride that the sun shines on!"—a notion, indeed, which, it has been suggested, had a practical application in years gone by when marriages were celebrated in the church porch. A wet day, at such a time, was a serious matter, especially as our forefathers had not the many contrivances of modern times for preservation from rain. Whereas, now-a-days, young ladies when alluding to being married speak of "going to church," formerly they spoke of "visiting the church-porch." After prevailing for centuries, this ancient usage was discountenanced, if not actually abolished, by the ecclesiastical reformers of Edward VI.'s reign, who "ordained that the performance of the binding ceremony should take place in the body of the church." Referring again to the bride, it is deemed absolutely necessary by very many that she should weep on her wedding-day, if it be only a few tears, the omission of such an act being considered ominous of her future happiness. It is, too, the height of ill-luck for either the bride or the bridegroom to meet a funeral on going to or coming from the church, for if it happen to be that of a female, it is an indication that the bride will not live long, and if it should be that of a male, then the bridegroom is doomed to an early death. In the North of England there is a strong prejudice against a marriage taking place while there is a grave open in the churchyard. In many parts of the country, also, special care is taken that the bees are informed of a wedding, and as a mark of respect to them their hives are decorated with a favour. In Sussex a bride on her return home from church is often robbed of all the pins about her dress by the single women present, from a belief that whoever possesses one of them will be married in the course of a year. Much excitement and amusement are occasionally caused by the youthful competitors for this supposed charm; and the bride herself is not unfrequently the victim of rather rough treatment. According to another piece of superstition, the bride, in removing her bridal robe and chaplet at the completion of the marriage ceremonies, must take care to throw away every pin worn on this eventful day. Evil fortune, it is affirmed, will sooner or later inevitably overtake the bride who keeps even one pin used in the marriage toilet. Woe also to the bridesmaids if they retain one of them, as their chances of marriage will thereby be materially lessened, and anyhow they must give up all hope of being wedded before the following Whitsuntide.

Again, in some parts of Yorkshire, to rub shoulders with the bride or bridegroom is considered an augury of a speedy marriage; and a piece of folk-lore prevalent in the neighbourhood of Hull is to this effect: "Be sure when you go to get married that you don't go in at one door and out at another, or you will always be unlucky." Cuthbert Bede, in "Notes and Queries," records an instance of a similar superstition that occurred at a wedding in a Worcestershire village in October, 1877. He says, "The bride and bridegroom at the conclusion of the ceremony left the church by the chancel door, instead of following the usual custom of walking down the church and through the nave door. One of the oldest inhabitants, in mentioning this to me, said that it 'betokened bad luck,' and that she had never known a like instance but once in her life when the married couple went out of the church through the chancel door, and the bride was a widow before the twelve months was out."

Alluding briefly to other superstitions associated with marriage, we are told in the North of England that she who receives from the bride a piece of cheese, cut by her before leaving the table, will be the next bride among the company. In Yorkshire, too, when a newly-married couple first enter their house, a hen is brought and made to cackle as a sign of good luck. The old Roman practice, also, of lifting the bride over the threshold of her husband's home, had its counterpart in Scotland within the present century, it being customary to lift the young wife over the doorstep, lest any witchcraft or evil eye should be cast upon and influence her. Indeed, we are informed that the same practice prevailed in the North of England some years ago—an interesting survival of the primitive superstitions of our ancestors.

Another curious custom which was once practised in different parts of the country was that of the elder sister dancing in a hog's trough in consequence of the younger sister marrying before her. "Upon one occasion," says Mr. Glyde in his "Norfolk Garland," "a brother went through the ceremony also; and the dancers performed their part so well that the trough itself was danced to pieces." It was considered the most correct thing to dance in green stockings. It was also customary in former years for elder sisters to dance barefooted at the marriage of a younger one, as otherwise they would inevitably become old maids. Hence Katharine says to her father, in allusion to Bianca:—

"She is your treasure, she must have a husband.  
I must dance barefoot on her wedding-day,  
And for your love to her lead apes in hell."

The last line, the meaning of which, however, is somewhat obscure, expresses a common belief as to the ultimate fate of old maids. Malone, on this passage, remarks that in Shakespeare's time "to lead apes" was one of the employments of a bear-ward, who often carried about one of those

animals along with his bear.

Referring in the next place to some of the chief ceremonies associated with marriage, we may note that "the putting up of the banns" is not without its superstitions, for in the North of England it is considered highly unlucky for a young woman to be present at church when this important event takes place, any children she may hereafter have running the terrible risk of being born deaf and dumb. Thus, a Worcestershire girl, some years since, refused to attend church and hear the publication of her own banns, lest by doing so she should bring the curse of dumbness on her offspring. She stated that one of her friends had transgressed this rule "by hearing herself asked out at church," and in due course had six children, all of whom were deaf and dumb. Again, the wedding-cake, without which no wedding would be considered complete, is evidently a survival of the symbolical corn-ears originally worn by the bride, and which in after-times were made into cakes and sprinkled upon the bride's head. In course of time these cakes were by degrees converted into one large mass, enriched with almond paste; and that the ingredients of a wedding-cake in the seventeenth century did not differ materially from one at the present day may be gathered from Herrick, who says:—

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"This day, my Julia, thou must make,  
For mistress bride, the wedding-cake;  
Knead but the dough, and it will be  
To paste of almonds turned by thee;  
Or kiss it thou but once or twice,  
And for the bride-cake there'll be spice."

Indeed, corn in one form or another has always entered into the marriage-ceremony, a practice which, as Sir John Lubbock, in his "Origin of Civilisation," has pointed out, may be found among remote savages or semi-civilised people. It would be difficult to enumerate the many superstitions, beliefs, and usages that have at different times clustered round the wedding-cake, some of which are as popular as ever. In days gone by, either corn ears or fragments of broken biscuit or cake were dropped on the newly-married couple on their return from church, a custom which is still kept up in some country districts. In Scotland and the North of England, for instance, as soon as the bride returns to her new home, one of the oldest inhabitants, who has been stationed on the threshold in readiness, throws a plateful of shortbread over her head, taking care that it falls outside the house. This is immediately scrambled for, as it is considered most fortunate to secure a piece, however small. Thus, just a century ago, Smollett, in his "Expedition of Humphrey Clinker" (1771), described how Mrs. Tabitha Lismahago's wedding-cake was broken over her head, and its fragments distributed among the bystanders, who imagined that to eat one of the hallowed pieces would insure the unmarried eater the delight of seeing in a vision the person to be his wife or her husband. Numerous other divinations, also, have been practised by means of wedding-cake, one of the most popular being that of passing it through a wedding-ring, and placing it under the pillow to dream upon. In some parts of Lancashire and Cumberland it is customary to put a ring amongst the ingredients of the wedding-cake, and to invite the guests in turn to cut a slice. The person who is fortunate enough to hold the knife when it comes upon the hidden ring is considered to be sure of happiness during the ensuing twelve months. Again, Mr. Henderson mentions an exciting custom practised in the North at the wedding-feast. He says:—"The bride sticks her knife into the cheese, and all at table endeavour to seize it. He who succeeds without cutting his fingers in the struggle thereby insures happiness in his married life. The knife is called 'the best man's prize,' because the 'best man' generally secures it. Should he fail to do so, he will indeed be unfortunate in his matrimonial views. The knife is, at any rate, a prize for male hands only; the maidens try to possess themselves of a 'shaping' of the wedding-dress, for use in certain divinations regarding their future husbands." The custom of throwing the shoe for luck at a bridal couple we shall notice elsewhere, a practice which is perhaps the principal source of merry-making and fun at most weddings. We must not omit to allude to that indispensable little article at a marriage, the wedding-ring, concerning which so much has been written. The Puritans, it may be remembered, tried to abolish it, on account of, as they thought, its superstitious and heathen origin. Thus, Butler, in his "Hudibras," says:—

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"Others were for abolishing  
That tool of matrimony, a ring,  
With which the unsanctified bridegroom,  
Is marry'd only to a thumb."

Though, however, the ring of gold is generally looked upon as a necessity in the marriage-ceremony, yet it is not legally so, but there is a very strong prejudice against being married without it, and it would be no easy task to find a couple brave enough to act in opposition to this universal superstition. Thus, by way of example, Mr. Jeaffreson, in his "Brides and Bridals," tells us that the poor Irishman is so convinced that a marriage lacks validity unless it has been solemnised with a golden ring, that, when he is too needy to buy a circlet of the most precious metal, he hires a hoop of gold for use on his wedding-day. Not long since a tradesman, in a market town at Munster, made a considerable addition to his modest income by letting out rings of gold to persons about to marry, who restored the trinkets to their owner after being wedded at church. A case is related, on the other hand, of a party that came to the church and requested to be married with a church key. It was "a parish wedding," and the parish authorities, though willing to pay the church fees, because, as the account runs, "they were glad to get rid of the girl," had not felt disposed to provide the wedding-ring. The clerk, however, feeling some

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hesitation as to the substitution of the church key, stepped into a neighbouring house, and there borrowed an old *curtain ring*, with which the marriage was solemnised. Again, most ladies are especially particular in their notions respecting their wedding-ring, objecting under any pretence to take it off from their finger, extending, it would seem, the expression of "till death us do part," even to this pledge and token of matrimony.

In various parts of the country we find many a curious marriage custom, of which, however, we can only give one or two instances. Thus, in some parts of Kent, it was formerly customary to strew the pathway to the church of the bridal couple, not with flowers, but with emblems of the bridegroom's trade. A carpenter, for instance, walked on shavings, a paperhanger on slips of paper, a blacksmith on pieces of old iron, and so on. In some parts of Durham the bridal party was, in days gone by, generally escorted to church by men armed with guns, which they fired again and again in honour of the festive occasion. In Scotland there was an amusing custom, called "Creeling the bridegroom." A basket or creel was filled with heavy stones and fixed to the bridegroom's shoulder, and with this burden he was obliged to run about until his wife unfastened the creel.

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## CHAPTER V. DEATH AND BURIAL.

Warnings of Death—The Howling of Dogs—A Cow in the Garden—Death-presaging  
Birds—Plants—The Will-o'-the-Wisp—The Sympathy between Two Personalities—  
Prophecy—Dying Hardly—The Last Act—Place and Position of the Grave.

The superstitions associated with the last stage of human life are most numerous; and that this should be so is not surprising when it is considered how, from the earliest time, a certain dread has been attached to death, not only on account of its awful mysteriousness, but owing to its being the crisis of an entirely new phase of the soul's existence.

Commencing then with popular omens, it may be noted that every incident out of the common course of natural events is looked upon by the superstitious as indicative of approaching death. [49] Hence we find the credulous ever conjuring up in their minds imaginary prognostications of this sad occurrence, which, apart from the needless terror they cause, are based on no foundation of truth. Foremost among these is the howling of a dog at night, a superstition which, while not confined to our own country, appears to have been almost as well known in ancient times as at the present day. As a plea, however, for its prevalence, even among the educated, we might urge that it is not unnatural for the mind, when unstrung and overbalanced by the presence of sickness and impending death, to be over-sensitive, and to take notice of every little sound and sight which may seem to connect themselves with its anxiety. Out of the innumerable instances which are recorded in our own country respecting this popular superstition, may be mentioned one which happened a few years ago at Worthing. It appears that no slight consternation was caused by a Newfoundland dog, the property of a clergyman in the neighbourhood, lying down on the steps of a house and howling piteously, refusing to be driven away. As soon as it was known that a young lady, long an invalid, had died there, so much excitement took place that news of the occurrence reached the owner of the dog, who came to Worthing to inquire into the truth of it. [50] Unfortunately, however, for the lovers of and believers in the marvellous, it eventually turned out that the dog had by accident been separated from his master late in the evening, and had been seen running here and there in search of him, and howling at the door of the stable where he put up his horse, and other places which he often visited in Worthing. It happened, moreover, that his master had been in the habit of visiting the particular house where the young lady had died, which at once accounted for the apparent mystery. In the same way, indeed, other similar instances of this superstition might be easily cleared up, if only properly investigated at the time of the occurrence. The howling of the dog is ascribed by some to its keen sense of the odour of approaching mortal dissolution; whereas others affirm that this animal can see the spirits which hover round the house of sickness, ready at the moment of death to bear away the soul of the departed one to its distant home. In Aryan mythology the dog is said to see ghosts, and in Germany, at the present day, a dog howling before a house portends either a death or a fire. In Wales, it is thought that horses, too, have the gift of seeing spirits. Carriage-horses, it is said, have been known to display every sign of the utmost terror, although the occupants of the carriage could see no cause for alarm. Such an occurrence is considered highly ominous, and thought to forebode that a funeral will soon pass by that way, bearing to his resting-place some person not dead at the time of the horse's fright.

Whilst speaking of animals in connection with death, it may be noted that an ox or a cow [51] breaking into a garden is an omen of death. In illustration of this notion a correspondent of *Notes and Queries* relates the following narrative as written down by himself about the time to which it relates. He says, "Though I laugh at the superstition, the omen was painfully fulfilled in my case. About the middle of March, 1843, some cattle were driven close to my house, and the back door being open, three got into our little bit of garden, and trampled it. When our school-drudge came in the afternoon, and asked the cause of the confusion, she expressed great sorrow and apprehension on being told—said that it was a bad sign—that we should hear of three deaths within the next six months. Alas! in April we heard of dear J—'s murder; a fortnight after A— died; and to-morrow, August 10th, I attend the funeral of my excellent son-in-law. I have just heard of the same omen from another quarter. But what is still more remarkable is that when I went down to Mr. M—'s burial, and was mentioning the superstition, they told me that while he was lying ill, a cow got into the front garden and was driven out with great difficulty. It is still a common saying in Scotland, when any one is dangerously ill, and not likely to recover, "The black ox has trampled upon him."

Another common omen of death is the hovering of birds around a house, and their tapping against the window-pane. Amongst the death-presaging birds may be mentioned the raven, the crow, and the swallow. The crowing of the cock, also, at the dead of night is regarded as equally [52] ominous. The appearance of a jackdaw is in some parts of the country much dreaded. Thus a correspondent of *Notes and Queries* tells us, that a stonemason at Clifton related to him an accident that happened to a workman at the suspension bridge over the Avon, at the time when the river was simply spanned by a single chain, placing much emphasis on the fact that a single jackdaw had been noticed by some of the workmen perched upon the centre of the chain, and had been regarded by them as a precursor of death. We must not omit the evil reputation of the owl and the magpie; and a well-known superstition current in some parts that to catch a sparrow and keep it confined in a cage is an omen of death. Once more, it is a bad sign when an invalid asks for a dish of pigeons to eat, such an occurrence being considered an omen of his approaching death. Some also affirm that if one hears the cuckoo's first note when in bed, illness

or death is certain to come upon the hearer or one of his family. If any one be about to die suddenly, or lose a relation, the cuckoo will light upon a piece of touchwood, or rotten bough, and *cuckoo*.

Plants, in the next place, are sometimes regarded as ominous of approaching mortality. When, for example, an apple-tree or pear-tree blooms twice in the year it denotes a death in the family. If, too, green broom be picked when in bloom it is believed that the father or mother will die in the course of the year. Mrs. Latham, in her "West Sussex Superstitions," gives the following touching little anecdote:—"A poor girl, who was lingering in the last stage of consumption, but whose countenance had always lighted up with pleasure at the sight of flowers, appeared one morning so exceedingly restless and unhappy after a fresh nosegay of gay spring flowers had been laid upon her bed, that I asked her if the scent of them was disagreeable to her. 'Oh, no!' she exclaimed, 'they are very nice indeed to smell; but yet I should be very glad if you would throw away that piece of yellow broom; for they do say that death comes with it if it is brought into the house in blossom during the month of May.'" According to a Yorkshire superstition, if a child gathers the germander speedwell its mother will die during the year; and others consider it equally unlucky to bring the first snowdrop of the year into the house. To dream that a tree is uprooted in one's garden is regarded as a death-warning to the owner. Indeed plants may be said to hold an important place in the folk-lore of death, so many curious legends and quaint superstitions having clustered round them both in ancient and modern times. Thus, to quote one further instance, if yew is accidentally brought into the house at Christmas among the evergreens, it is looked upon as a sign that a death will occur in the family before the end of the year.

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Among other omens of death, may be noticed the will-o'-the-wisp, which has on this account been much dreaded, its undulating movement being carefully observed, from an anxiety to ascertain in which direction it disappears, as it is supposed to be—

"The hateful messenger of heavy things,  
Of death and dolour telling"

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to the inhabitants of the house nearest that spot. We have heard also of an occasion in which considerable uneasiness was created by a pale light moving over the bed of a sick person, and after flickering for some time in different parts of the room to vanish through the window. It happened, however, that the mystery was cleared up soon afterwards, for, on a similar light appearing, it was found to proceed from a luminous insect, which proved to be the male glow-worm. In the same way the "corpse-candles" in Wales, also called the "fetch-lights," or "dead man's candles," are regarded as forerunners of death. Sometimes this unlucky sign appears in the form of a plain yellow candle, in the hand of a ghost, and at other times it looks like "a stately flambeau, stalking along unsupported, burning with ghastly blue flame." It is considered highly dangerous to interfere with this fatal portent, and persons who have attempted to check its course are reported to have been severely afflicted in consequence, many being actually struck down on the spot where they stood as a punishment for their audacity.

There is a popular idea prevalent in Lancashire that to build or even to rebuild a house is always fatal to one member of the family—generally to the one who may have been the principal promoter of the plans for the building or alteration. Again, we are also told how the household clock has been known to depart from its customary precision in order to warn its owner of approaching death by striking *thirteen*. A clergyman relates that one evening he called on an old friend more than eighty years of age, who had lost her husband about six months before. Whilst sitting with her he heard the clock strike the hour in an adjoining room, and counted it *seven*. Being surprised that it was no later he involuntarily took out his watch, and found that it was in reality *eight* o'clock. The old lady noticing this remarked, "Ah! the clock lost a stroke against my poor husband's death, and I have not altered it since."

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According to another very common superstition there seems to be a kind of sympathy and harmony between two personalities, whereby dying persons themselves announce their departure to their friends in certain mysterious ways. Countless instances are on record of such supposed forebodings of death. A curious and interesting example of this species of folk-lore happened not so very long ago, in connection with the lamented death of Mr. George Smith, the eminent Assyriologist. This famous scholar died at Aleppo, on the 19th of August, 1876, at or about the hour of six in the afternoon. On the same day, and at about the same time, a friend and fellow-worker of Mr. Smith's—Dr. Delitzsch—was passing within a stone's-throw of the house in which Mr. Smith had lived whilst in London, when he suddenly heard his own name uttered aloud in a "most piercing cry," which, says *The Daily News* (Sept. 12th, 1876) thrilled him to the marrow. The fact impressed him so strongly that he looked at his watch, noted the hour, and, although he did not mention the circumstance at the time, recorded it in his note-book.

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Again, as a further illustration, we are told how on board one of Her Majesty's ships lying off Portsmouth, the officers being one day at mess, a young lieutenant suddenly laid down his knife and fork, pushed away his plate, and turned extremely pale. He then rose from the table, covered his face with his hands, and retired. The president of the mess, supposing him to be ill, sent to make inquiries. At first he was unwilling to reply; but on being pressed he confessed that he had been seized by a sudden and irresistible impression that a brother he had in India was dead. "He died," said he, "on the 12th August, at six o'clock; I am perfectly convinced of it." No argument could overthrow his conviction, which in due course of time was verified to the letter. Events of this kind, which in the minds of many seem to point to a mysterious sympathy between two individuals, are explained by others as simply the result of "fancy and coincidence." Any one, it is

argued, may fall into a brown study, and emerge from it with a stare, and the notion that he heard his name spoken. That is the part of fancy, and the simultaneous event is the part of coincidence. Against this theory it will always be argued that these coincidences are too many to be accidental, and this position, as a writer in *The Daily News* has shown, will generally be met by counter-efforts to weaken the evidence for each individual case, and so to reduce the cumulative evidence to nothing. Taking into consideration however, the countless instances which are on record of this kind, many of them apparently resting on evidence beyond impeachment, we must, whilst allotting to them the credence they deserve, honestly admit they are occasionally beyond the limits of human explanation.

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From a very early period there has existed a belief in the existence of the power of prophecy at that period which precedes death. It probably took its origin in the assumed fact that the soul becomes divine in the same rate as the connection with the body is loosened. It has been urged in support of this theory that at the hour of death the soul is, as it were, on the confines of two worlds, and may possibly at the same moment possess a power which is both prospective and retrospective. Shakespeare in his *Richard II.* (Act ii., sc. 1) makes the dying Gaunt, alluding to his nephew, the young and self-willed king, exclaim:—

"Methinks I am a prophet new inspired,  
And thus expiring do foretell of him."

Again in *1 Henry IV.* (Act v., sc. 4), the brave Percy, when in the agonies of death, conveys the same idea in the following words:—

"O, I could prophesy,  
But that the earthy and cold hand of death  
Lies on my tongue."

Some have sought for the foundation of this belief in the forty-ninth chapter of Genesis:—"And Jacob called his sons, and said, Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you that which shall befall you in the last days. And when Jacob had made an end of commanding his sons, he gathered up his feet into his bed, and yielded up the ghost, and was gathered unto his people." This notion has not died out, but still prevails in Lancashire and other parts of England.

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Referring to death itself, there is a widespread belief that deaths mostly occur during the ebbing of the tide: a superstition to which Charles Dickens has so touchingly alluded in "David Copperfield." While the honest-hearted Mr. Peggotty sat by the bedside of poor Barkis, and watched life's flame gradually growing dimmer, he said to David Copperfield, "People can't die along the coast except when the tide's pretty nigh out. They can't be born unless it's pretty nigh in. Not properly born till flood. He's agoing out with the tide—he's agoing out with the tide. It's ebb at half-arter three, slack water half an hour. If he lives till it turns, he'll hold his own till past the flood, and go out with the next tide." And after many hours' watching, "it being low water, he went out with the tide."

Persons, too, are said to "die hard," to quote a popular phrase, or, in other words, to have a painful and prolonged death, when there are pigeons' feathers in the bed. Hence, some will not allow dying persons to lie on a feather bed at all, maintaining that it very much increases the pain, and retards the inevitable crisis of their departure. Many, on the other hand, have a superstitious feeling that it is a great misfortune, nay, even a judgment, not to die in a bed. Many are the anecdotes illustrative of the former superstition, one or two of which we will quote. Thus a Sussex nurse one day told the wife of her clergyman that "never did she see any one die so hard as old Master Short; and at last she thought (though his daughter said there were none) that there must be game-feathers in the bed. She, therefore, tried to pull it from under him, but he was a heavy man and she could not manage it alone, and there was no one with him but herself, and so she got a rope and tied it round him and pulled him by it off the bed, and he went off in a minute quite comfortable, just like a lamb." Again, one day, when an old woman near Yarmouth was speaking of the burning of game-feathers as a precaution in case of death, her neighbours said to her, "Of course we don't believe that can have anything to do with a hard death," whereupon she replied, "Then you yourself use such feathers." "Oh, no; we always burn them, unless we want them for a chair-cushion." The same notion prevails in Yorkshire with regard to cocks' feathers. According to another popular fancy a person cannot die comfortably under the cross-beam of a house, and we are told of the case of a man of whom it was said at his death, that after many hours' hard dying, being removed from the position under the cross-beam, he departed peaceably.

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Again, the interval between death and burial has generally been associated with various superstitious fears and practices. Thus, as soon as the corpse is laid out there is still a widespread custom of placing a plate of salt upon the breast, the reason being no doubt to prevent the body swelling; although there is a belief that it acts as a charm against any attempt on the part of evil spirits to disturb the body. Pennant tells us that formerly in Scotland, "the corpse being stretched on a board and covered with a coarse linen wrapper, the friends laid on the breast of the deceased a wooden platter, containing a small quantity of salt and earth, separate and unmixed; the earth an emblem of the corruptible body, the salt as an emblem of the immortal spirit." Mr. Napier, in his "Folk-Lore of the West of Scotland," points out that we may find another explanation for the plate of salt on the breast in the "sin-eaters," persons who, in days gone by, when a person died, were sent for to come and eat the sins of the deceased. On their arrival their first act was to place a plate of salt and one of bread on the breast of the corpse, repeating a series of incantations, after which they devoured the contents of the plates.

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By this ceremony the deceased person was supposed to be relieved of such sins as would have kept his spirit hovering about his relations to their discomfort and annoyance.

It is customary, especially among the poor, for those who visit a house while the dead body is lying in it to touch the corpse, thereby showing that they owe the departed one no grudge. This practice, in all probability, originated in the belief that a corpse would bleed at the touch of the murderer, constant allusions to which we find in old authors.

The practice of watching the dead body until its burial is not yet obsolete, a custom indeed which, among the Irish, is even still occasionally the scene of the most unseemly revelries, those present oftentimes indulging in excessive drinking and riotous merry-making. In days gone by, however, this practice was attended with every mark of respect to the deceased one, the leading idea being to see that the devil did not carry off the body. [61]

Lastly, since the formation of cemeteries, many of the quaint old funeral customs which formerly existed in many of our country villages have passed away. Now-a-days, the "last act," as the committal of the body to the grave has been termed, has been shorn of much of its pomp. Thus, in the North of England it was customary, only a few years ago, to carry "the dead with the sun" to the grave, a practice corresponding with the Highland usage of making "the deazil," or walking three times round a person, according to the course of the sun. On one occasion, in the village of Stranton, near West Hartlepool, the vicar was standing at the churchyard gate, awaiting the arrival of the funeral procession, when, much to his surprise, the entire group, who had come within a few yards of him, suddenly turned back and marched round the churchyard wall, thus traversing its west, north, and east boundaries. On inquiring the reason of this extraordinary procedure, one of the mourners quickly replied, "Why, ye wad no hae them carry the dead again the sun; the dead maun ay go wi' the sun." This is not unlike a Welsh custom mentioned by Pennant, who tells us that when a corpse was conveyed to the churchyard from any part of the town, great care was always taken that it should be carried the whole distance on the right-hand side of the road. A curious custom, which still survives at Welsh funerals, is termed "the parson's penny." After reading the burial service in the church, the clergyman stands behind a table while a psalm is being sung. In the meantime each of the mourners places a piece of money on the table for his acceptance. This ceremony is regarded as a token of respect to the deceased, although it was no doubt originally intended to compensate the clergyman for praying for the soul of the departed. In some Welsh parishes a similar custom, called "spade-money," is observed. As soon as the corpse has been committed to its resting-place, the grave-digger presents his spade as a receptacle for donations, these offerings, which often amount to a goodly sum, being regarded as his perquisites. [62]

From time immemorial there has been a popular prejudice among the inhabitants of rural villages against "burial without the sanctuary." This does not imply in unconsecrated ground, but on the north side of the church, or in a remote corner of the churchyard. The origin of this repugnance is said to have been the notion that the northern part was that which was appropriated to the interment of unbaptised infants, excommunicated persons, or such as had laid violent hands upon themselves. Hence it was generally known as "the wrong side of the church." In many parishes, therefore, this spot remained unoccupied while the remaining portion of the churchyard was crowded. White, in his "History of Selborne," alluding to this superstition, says that as most people wished to be buried on the south side of the churchyard, it became such a mass of mortality that no person could be interred "without disturbing or displacing the bones of his ancestors." A clergyman of a rural parish in Norfolk says:—"If I were on any occasion to urge a parishioner to inter a deceased relative on the north side of the church, he would answer me with some expression of surprise, if not of offence, at the proposal, 'No, sir, it is not in the sanctuary.'" [63]

Great attention has, also, generally been paid to the position of the grave, the popular idea being from east to west, while that from north to south has been considered not only dishonourable, but unlucky. Indeed, the famous antiquary, Thomas Hearne, was so particular on this point that he left orders for his grave to be made straight by a compass, due east and west. In *Cymbeline* (Act iv., sc. 2), Guiderius, speaking of the apparently dead body of Imogen disguised in man's apparel, says:—

"Nay, Cadwal, we must lay his head to the east;  
My father hath a reason for 't."

It is worthy of notice that the burial of the dead among the Greeks was in the line of east and west; and thus it is not to late and isolated fancy, but to the carrying on of ancient and widespread solar ideas, as Mr. Tylor has so clearly shown, that we trace the well-known legend that the body of Christ was laid towards the east, and the Christian usage of digging graves east and west. A pretty custom was once observed in many of our country villages at the funeral of a young unmarried girl, or of a bride who died in her honeymoon; a chaplet of flowers being carried before the corpse by a girl nearest in age, size, and resemblance, and afterwards hung up in the church over the accustomed seat of the deceased. [64]

Among other customs connected with burial may be mentioned "funeral feasts," which have prevailed in this and other countries from the earliest times, and are supposed to have been borrowed from the *Cœna feralis* of the Romans: an offering, consisting of milk, honey, wine, aloes, and strewed flowers, to the ghost of the deceased. In a variety of forms this custom has prevailed amongst most nations, the idea being that the spirits of the dead feed on the viands set before them. In Christian times, however, these funeral offerings have passed into commemorative banquets, under which form they still exist amongst us. In the north of England

the funeral feast is called "an arval," and the loaves that are sometimes distributed among the poor are termed "arval bread."

The poor seem to have always been fond of inviting a large number of friends to attend a funeral. Instances are on record of a barrel of beer, two gallons of sack, and four gallons of claret being consumed at a funeral, and the cost of wine has been five times more than the cost of the coffin. In one of the parishes on the borders of Norfolk there is a tradition, says Mr. Glyde in his "Norfolk Garland," that when the warrior Sir Robert Atte Tye was buried, four dozen of wine were drunk, according to his last directions, over his grave, before the coffin was covered with earth. Many curious anecdotes might be given of funerals having been solemnised within the church-porch, and of the scruples entertained by great men as to the practice of interment in churches. A part of the churchyard, too, was occasionally left unconsecrated for the purpose of burying excommunicated persons. Among some of the superstitions associated with burial we may just note that it is considered by some unlucky to meet a funeral; and that, according to another notion, the ghost of the last person buried keeps watch over the churchyard till another is buried, to whom he delivers his charge.

## CHAPTER VI. THE HUMAN BODY.

Superstitions about Deformity, Moles, &c.—Tingling of the Ear—The Nose—The Eye—  
The Teeth—The Hair—The Hand—Dead Man's Hand—The Feet.

In the preceding pages we have given a brief survey of that widespread folk-lore with which the life of man has been invested, stage by stage, from the cradle to the grave. In like manner the popular imagination has, in most countries from the earliest times, woven round the human body a thick network of superstitions, many of which, while of the nature of omens, are supposed to indicate certain facts, such as the person's character, the events connected with his life, and to give that insight into his future career which eager curiosity would strive to ascertain. Thus, according to an old prejudice, which is not quite extinct, those who are defective or deformed are marked by nature as prone to mischief, in accordance with which notion Shakespeare makes Margaret, speaking of Richard, Duke of Gloucester, in *King Richard III.* (Act i., sc. 3), say:—

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"Thou elvish-mark'd, abortive, rotting hog  
Thou that was seal'd in thy nativity  
The slave of nature and the son of hell."

Moles, too, have generally been thought to denote good or ill-luck from their position on the body. Thus one on the throat is a sign of luck, but one on the left side of the forehead near the hair is just the reverse. Again, a mole on either the chin, ear, or neck is an indication of riches, but one on the breast signifies poverty. Indeed, if we are to believe the "Greenwich Fortune-teller," a popular chap-book in former years, omens to be drawn from moles are almost unlimited.

Referring, however, more especially to the folk-lore associated with the different parts of the human body, this, as we have already stated, is very extensive, being in many cases the legacy bequeathed to us by our ancestors. Commencing, then, with the ear, there is a well-known superstition that a tingling of the right one is lucky, denoting that a friend is speaking well of one; a tingling of the left implying the opposite. This notion differs according to the locality, as in some places it is the tingling of the left ear which denotes the friend, and the tingling of the right ear the enemy. Shakespeare, in *Much Ado about Nothing* (Act iii., sc. 1), makes Beatrice say to Ursula and Hero, who had been talking of her, "What fire is in mine ears?" in allusion, it is generally supposed, to this popular fancy, which is old as the time of Pliny, who says, "When our ears tingle some one is talking of us in our absence." Sir Thomas Browne also ascribes the idea to the belief in guardian angels, who touch the right or left ear according as the conversation is favourable or not to the person. The Scotch peasantry have an omen called the "death-bell"—a tingling in the ears which is believed to announce some friend's death. Hogg alludes to this superstition in his "Mountain Bard":—

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"O lady, 'tis dark, an' I heard the death-bell,  
An' I darena gae yonder for gowd nor fee,"

and gives also an amusing anecdote illustrative of it:—"Our two servant-girls agreed to go on an errand of their own, one night after supper, to a considerable distance, from which I strove to persuade them, but could not prevail; so, after going to the apartment where I slept, I took a drinking-glass, and coming close to the back of the door made two or three sweeps round the lip of the glass with my finger, which caused a loud shrill sound, and then overheard the following dialogue:—

"*B.* 'Ah, mercy! the dead-bell went through my head just now with such a knell as I never heard.' [68]

"*I.* 'I heard it too.'

"*B.* 'Did you indeed? That is remarkable. I never knew of two hearing it at the same time before.'

"*I.* 'We will not go to Midgehope to-night.'

"*B.* 'I would not go for all the world! I shall warrant it is my poor brother Wat. Who knows what these wild Irish may have done to him?'"

The itching of the nose, like that of the ears, is not without its signification, denoting that a stranger will certainly appear before many hours have passed by, in allusion to which Dekker, in his "Honest Whore," says:—"We shall ha' guests to-day; my nose itcheth so." In the north of England, however, if the nose itches it is reckoned a sign that the person will either be crossed, vexed, or kissed by a fool; whereas an old writer tells us that "when a man's nose itcheth it is a signe he shall drink wine." Many omens, too, are gathered from bleeding of the nose. Thus Grose says, "One drop of blood from the nose commonly foretells death or a very severe fit of sickness; three drops are still more ominous;" and according to another notion one drop from the left nostril is a sign of good luck, and *vice versâ*. Bleeding of the nose seems also to have been regarded as a sign of love, if we may judge from a passage in Boulster's "Lectures," published early in the seventeenth century:—"Did my nose ever bleed when I was in your company?" and, poor wretch, just as she spake this, to show her true heart, her nose fell a-bleeding." Again, that bleeding of the nose was looked upon as ominous in days gone by, we may gather from Launcelot's exclamation in the *Merchant of Venice* (Act ii., sc. 5), "It was not for nothing that my nose fell a-bleeding on Black Monday last at six o'clock"—a superstition to which many of our old writers refer. Among further superstitions connected with the nose we may mention one in

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Cornwall, known as "the blue vein," an illustration of which occurs in Mr. Hunt's "Popular Romances of the West of England," who relates the following little anecdote:—"A fond mother was paying more than ordinary attention to a fine healthy-looking child, a boy about three years old. The poor woman's breast was heaving with emotion, and she struggled to repress her sighs. Upon inquiring if anything was really wrong, she said, 'The old lady of the house had just told her that the child could not live long because he had a blue vein across his nose.'" This piece of folklore, which caused the anxious mother such distress, is not confined to the West of England, but crops up here and there throughout the country. While speaking of the nose, we may just note that it is the subject of various proverbs. Thus "to put the nose out of joint" means to supplant one in another's favour, and the popular one of "paying through the nose," implying extortion, may, it has been suggested, have originated in a poll-tax levied by Odin, which was called in Sweden a nose-tax, and was a penny per nose or poll. Once more, we have the term "nose of wax" applied to a person who is very accommodating, and one may occasionally hear the phrase "wipe the nose" used in the sense of affront.

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Leaving the nose, however, we find similar odd fancies attached to the eye. In many places we are told that "it's a good thing to have meeting eyebrows, as such a person will never know trouble," although, curious to say, on the Continent quite a different significance is attributed to this peculiarity. In Greece, for instance, it is held as an omen that the man is a vampire, and in Denmark and Germany it is said to indicate that he is a werewolf. In China, also, there is a proverb that "people whose eyebrows meet can never expect to attain to the dignity of a minister of state." There can be no doubt that, according to the general idea, meeting eyebrows are not considered lucky:—

"Trust not the man whose eyebrows meet,  
For in his heart you'll find deceit."

Thus, Charles Kingsley, in "Two Years Ago," speaks of this idea in the following passage:—"Tom began carefully scrutinising Mrs. Harvey's face. It had been very handsome. It was still very clever, but the eyebrows clashed together downwards above her nose, and rising higher at the outward corners, indicated, as surely as the restless down-drop eye, a character self-conscious, furtive, capable of great inconsistencies, possibly of great deceit."

Again, the itching of the right eye is considered a lucky omen, an idea that is very old, and may be traced as far back as the time of Theocritus, who says:—

"My right eye itches now, and I shall see my love."

According to the antiquary Grose, however, who collected together so many of the superstitions prevalent in his day, "When the right eye itches, the party affected will shortly cry; if the left, they will laugh." The power of fascination has generally been considered to be a peculiar quality of the eye, a notion by no means obsolete, and numerous charms have been resorted to for counteracting its influence. In our [chapter on "Birth and Infancy"](#) we have already spoken of the danger to which young children are said to be subject from the malevolent power of some evil eye, and of the pernicious effects resulting from it. Shakespeare gives several references to it, one of which occurs in the *Merry Wives of Windsor* (Act v., sc. 5), where Pistol says of Falstaff:—

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"Vile worm, thou wast o'erlook'd even in thy birth."

And once more, in *Titus Andronicus* (Act ii., sc. 1), Aaron speaks of Tamora as

"—fetter'd in amorous chains—  
And faster bound to Aaron's charming eyes,  
Than is Prometheus tied to Caucasus."

It was not very long ago that a curious case of this superstition was brought before the guardians of the Shaftesbury Union, in which an applicant for relief stated his inability to work because he had been "overlooked" by his sister-in-law. Although his wife had resorted for help to a wise-woman, yet she was unable to remove the spell under which he lay, and thus the unfortunate man, incapable of labour, applied for relief, which he did not obtain.

In the next place, some of the superstitions connected with the teeth are quaint, and afford opportunities to the credulous for drawing omens of various kinds. Thus, to dream about teeth is held to be a warning that sorrow of some kind is at hand; and it is even unluckier still to dream of one's teeth falling out. It is also frequently the custom, for the sake of luck, to throw a tooth when extracted into the fire, a practice which, as we have already seen, is frequently most scrupulously kept up in the case of young children, to make sure of the remainder of their teeth coming properly. Furthermore, to have teeth wide apart is a sign of prosperity, and is said to indicate one's future happiness in life. As an instance of this piece of folk-lore we may quote the following, narrated by a correspondent in *Notes and Queries*:—"A young lady the other day, in reply to an observation of mine, 'What a lucky girl you are!' replied, 'So they used to say I should be when at school.' 'Why?' 'Because my teeth were set so far apart; it was a sure sign I should be lucky and travel.'" Trivial as many of these superstitions may seem, yet they are interesting, inasmuch as they show how minutely the imagination has at different times surrounded the human body with countless items of odd notions, some of which in all probability originated from practical experience, while others have been the result of a thousand circumstances, to ascertain the history of which would be a matter of long and elaborate research.

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Passing on to the hair, there is a popular notion that sudden fright or violent distress will, to use Sir Walter Scott's words, "blanch at once the hair." Thus, in Shakespeare's *1 Henry IV.* (Act ii.,

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sc. 4), Falstaff, in his speech to Prince Henry, says:—

"Thy father's beard is turned white with the news."

Although this has been styled "a whimsical notion," yet in its support various instances of its occurrence have been from time to time recorded. The hair of Ludwig of Bavaria, for example, it is said, became almost suddenly white as snow on his learning the innocence of his wife, whom he had caused to be put to death on a suspicion of infidelity; and the same thing, we are told, happened to Charles I. in a single night, when he attempted to escape from Carisbrooke Castle. A similar story is told of the unfortunate Marie Antoinette, when her flight from France was checked at Varennes. According to another notion, excessive fear has occasionally caused the hair to stand on end, a belief which Shakespeare has recorded. In *Hamlet* (Act iii., sc. 4), in that famous passage where the Queen is at a loss to understand her son's mysterious conduct and strange appearance, during his conversation with the ghost which is hidden to her eyes, she says:

"And, as the sleeping soldiers in th' alarm,  
Your bedded hair, like life in excrements,  
Starts up, and stands on end."

Once more, too, in that graphic scene in the *Tempest* (Act i., sc. 2), where Ariel describes the shipwreck, he says:—

"All but mariners  
Plunged in the foaming brine and quit the vessel,  
Then all afire with me; the king's son, Ferdinand,  
With hair up-staring—then like reeds, not hair—  
Was the first man that leap'd."

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The sudden loss of hair is considered unlucky, being said to prognosticate the loss of children, health, or property; whereas many consider it imprudent to throw it away, or to leave the smallest scrap lying about. One reason assigned for this notion is that if hair is left about, birds might build their nests with it, a fatal thing for the person from whose head it has fallen. Thus, should a magpie use it for any such purpose—by no means an unlikely circumstance—the person's death will be sure to happen "within a year and a day." Some say, again, that hair should never be burnt, but only buried, a superstition founded on a tradition that at the resurrection its owner will come in search of it. On the other hand, it is customary with some persons to throw a piece of their hair into the fire, drawing various omens from the way it burns. Should it gradually smoulder away, it is an omen of death; but its burning brightly is a sign of longevity, and the brighter the flame the longer the life. In Devonshire, too, if the hair grows down on the forehead and retreats up the head above the temples, it is considered an indication that the person will have a long life. There is a very prevalent idea that persons who have much hair or down on their arms are, to quote the common expression, "born to be rich," although the exception, in this as in many other similar cases, rather proves the rule; but abundance of hair on the head has been supposed to denote a lack of brains, from whence arose an odd proverb, "Bush natural, more hair than wit." Once more, Judas is said to have had red hair, and hence, from time immemorial, there has been a strong antipathy to it. Shakespeare, in *As You Like It* (Act iii., sc. 4), alludes to this belief, when he makes Rosalind say of Orlando:—

"His very hair is of the dissembling colour."

To which Celia replies:—

"Something browner than Judas's."

It has been conjectured, however, that the odium attached to red hair took its origin in this country from the aversion felt to the red-haired Danes. One reason, perhaps, more than another why this dislike to it arose, originated in the circumstance that the colour was thought ugly and unfashionable, and the antipathy to it, therefore, would naturally be increased by this opinion. Thus, in course of time, a red beard was also held in contempt, and was regarded as an infallible token of a vile disposition. Yellow hair, too, was formerly esteemed a deformity, and in ancient tapestries both Cain and Judas are represented with yellow beards, in allusion to which, in the *Merry Wives of Windsor* (Act i., sc. 4), Simple, when interrogated, says of his master, "He hath but a little wee face, with a little yellow beard—a Cain-coloured beard." While alluding to beards, we may note that in former years they gave rise to various customs, many of which, however, have long ago fallen into disuse. Thus, dyeing beards was a common practice, and our readers may recollect how Bottom, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Act i., sc. 2), is perplexed as to what beard he should wear in performing his part before the Duke. He says, "I will discharge it either in your straw-coloured beard, your orange-tawny beard, your purple-in-grain beard, or your French-crown-colour beard, your perfect yellow." It was evidently quite as much the habit for gentlemen to dye their beards in Shakespeare's day as it is said to be for ladies to dye their locks now-a-days. When beards, too, were the fashion, to mutilate or cut off one was considered an irreparable outrage.

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Pursuing our subject, we find that the cheek is not without its quota of folk-lore; for, like the ear, nose, and eye, it is considered ominous when one's cheek itches. According to Grose, "If the right cheek burns, some one is speaking to the person's advantage; if the left, to their disadvantage." One may still occasionally hear the following charm uttered by a person whose cheek suddenly burns:—

"Right cheek! left cheek! why do you burn?  
Cursed be she that doth me any harm;  
If she be a maid, let her be staid;  
If she be a widow, long let her mourn;  
But if it be my own true love—burn, cheek, burn."

Again, the hand has been honoured with a very extensive folk-lore, and the following extract from an old writer shows that nearly every peculiarity of the hand has been made emblematical of some personal trait of character. Thus, we are told:—"A great thick hand signifies one not only strong, but stout; a little slender hand, one not only weak, but timorous; a long hand and long fingers betoken a man not only apt for mechanical artifice, but liberally ingenious. Those short, on the contrary, note a fool, and fit for nothing; a hard brawny hand signifies one dull and rude; a soft hand, one witty, but effeminate; a hairy hand, one luxurious. Long joints signify generosity; yet, if they be thick withal, one not so ingenious. The often clapping and folding of the hands note covetousness; and their much moving in speech, loquacity. Short and fat fingers mark a man out as intemperate and silly; but long and lean, as witty. If his fingers crook upward, that shows him liberal; if downward, niggardly. Long nails and crooked signify one to be brutish, ravenous, and unchaste; very short nails, pale and sharp, show him subtle and beguiling." Among other omens, we are told that the itching of the right hand signifies that it will shortly receive money, whereas if the left hand be the one to itch, it is a sign that money will before very many days have to be paid away. In Suffolk the peasants have the following rhyme on the subject:—

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"If your hand itches,  
You're going to take riches;  
Rub it on wood,  
Sure to come good;  
Rub it on iron,  
Sure to come flying;  
Rub it on brass,  
Sure to come to pass;  
Rub it on steel,  
Sure to come a deal;  
Rub it on tin,  
Sure to come agin."

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A moist hand is said to denote an amorous constitution, and in *2 Henry IV.* (Act i., sc. 2), the Lord Chief Justice enumerates a dry hand among the characteristics of age and debility.

Palmistry, or divination by means of the hands, a species of fortune-telling still much practised, we have already described in [another chapter](#). A superstition, however, which we must not omit to mention, is the practice of rubbing with a dead hand for the purpose of taking away disease, instances of which, even now-a-days, are of occasional occurrence. Mr. Henderson mentions a case that happened about the year 1853. The wife of a pitman at Castle Eden Colliery, who was suffering from a wen in the neck, went alone, according to advice given her by a "wise woman," and lay all night in the out-house, with the hand of a corpse on her wen. She had been assured that the hand of a suicide was an infallible cure. The shock, at any rate, to her nervous system from that terrible night was so great that she did not rally for some months, and eventually she died from the wen. As a further specimen of this incredible superstition, we may quote the following case, which happened some years ago in an Eastern county. A little girl of about eight years of age had from birth been troubled with scrofulous disease, and had been reared with great difficulty. Her friends consulted the "wise man" of the neighbourhood, who told the mother that if she took the girl and rubbed her naked body all over with the hand of a dead man she would be cured. The experiment was tried, and the poor little girl was nearly killed with fright, and, of course, made no progress whatever towards health.

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Many of our readers are, no doubt, acquainted with the famous "dead man's hand," which was formerly kept at Bryn Hall, in Lancashire. It is said to have been the hand of Father Arrowsmith, a priest who, according to some accounts, was put to death for his religion in the time of William III. Preserved with great care in a white silken bag, this hand was resorted to by many diseased persons, and wonderful cures are reported to have been effected by this saintly relic. Thus, we are told of a woman who, afflicted with the small-pox, had this dead hand in bed with her every night for six weeks; and of a poor lad who was rubbed with it for the cure of scrofulous sores. It is, indeed, generally supposed that practices of this kind are rare and of exceptional occurrence, but they are far more common than might be imagined, although not recorded in newspapers. This is, however, in a great measure owing to the fact that those who believe in and have recourse to such rites observe secrecy, for fear of meeting with ridicule from others.

The nails, also, as we have mentioned in our [chapter on Childhood](#), have their folk-lore, the little specks which are seen on them being regarded as ominous. Many have their particular days for cutting the nails. Of the numerous rhymes on the subject, we may quote the following as a specimen, from which it will be seen that every day has its peculiar virtue:—

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"Cut them on Monday, you cut them for health;  
Cut them on Tuesday, you cut them for wealth;  
Cut them on Wednesday, you cut them for news;  
Cut them on Thursday, a new pair of shoes;  
Cut them on Friday, you cut them for sorrow;  
Cut them on Saturday, see your true love to-morrow;  
Cut them on Sunday, the devil will be with you all the week."

This old rhyming-saw differs in various localities, although in the main points it is the same; as by general consent both Friday and Sunday are regarded as most inauspicious days for cutting both the nails and hair.

Once more, to sit cross-legged is said to produce good fortune; and occasionally at a card-table one may find some superstitiously-inclined person sitting in this attitude with a view of securing good luck. Sir Thomas Browne, on the contrary, tells us that in days gone to "sit cross-legged, or with the fingers pectinated" or shut together, was accounted a sign of bad luck: a superstition alluded to by Pliny. Referring to the feet, we cannot do more than just allude to two or three items of folk-lore with which they are connected. Thus, a flat-footed person is generally considered to have a bad temper, a notion indeed which daily experience often proves to be incorrect. The itching of the foot has been supposed to indicate that its owner will shortly undertake a strange journey; while that unpleasant sensation popularly styled "the foot going to sleep," is often charmed away by crossing the foot with saliva. When the division between the toes is incomplete, and they are partially joined, they are called "twin toes," and are said to bring good luck. This section of our "Domestic Folk-lore" might have been prolonged to an almost indefinite extent had space permitted, but as the preceding pages amply bear witness to the prevalence of such ideas, we will proceed to discuss another, and, it is to be hoped, not less interesting class of superstitions.

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## CHAPTER VII.

### ARTICLES OF DRESS.

New Clothes at Easter and Whitsuntide—Wearing of Clothes—The Clothes of the Dead  
—The Apron, Stockings, Garters, &c.—The Shoe—The Glove—The Ring—Pins.

One would scarcely expect to find a host of odd fancies attached to such matter-of-fact necessities as articles of dress, but yet they hold a prominent place in our domestic folk-lore. However trivial at first sight these may seem, they are nevertheless interesting, in so far as they illustrate certain features of our social history, and show from another point of view how superstition is interwoven with all that appertains to human life. Beginning, then, with a well-known piece of folk-lore, most persons wear new clothes on Easter-Day, mindful of the old admonition:—

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"At Easter let your clothes be new,  
Or else be sure you will it rue"

—a notion that still retains its hold on the popular mind, few being found bold enough to transgress this long-rooted custom. In the North of England, so strong is the feeling on this point, that young people rarely omit visiting the nearest market-town prior to Eastertide, to buy some new article of dress or personal ornament, as otherwise they believe the birds—notably rooks—will spoil their clothes. A similar fancy prevails with regard to Whitsuntide, and many would consider that they had forfeited their good luck for the next twelve months if they did not appear in "new things" on Whitsunday.

The superstitions relating to clothes are very numerous, varying in different localities. Thus, according to a Suffolk notion, "if you have your clothes mended on your back, you will be ill-spoken of," or as they say in Sussex, "you will come to want." Again, many before putting on a new coat or dress, take care to place some money in the right-hand pocket, as this insures its always being full. If by mistake, however, the money is put in the left-hand pocket, then the person will never have a penny so long as the coat lasts. It is also a very prevalent belief that if one would secure luck with any article of dress, it must be worn for the first time at church. Equal attention, too, is paid by many to the way they put on each article of dress—as, in case of its being accidentally inside out, it is considered an omen of success. It is necessary, however, if one wishes the omen to hold good, to wear the reversed portion of attire with the wrong side out till the regular time comes for taking it off. If reversed earlier, the luck is immediately lost. The idea of the "hind-side before" is so closely related to that of "inside out," that one can hardly understand their being taken for contrary omens; yet, "It is worthy of remark, in connection with this superstition," says a correspondent of Chambers's "Book of Days," "that when William the Conqueror, in arming himself for the battle of Hastings, happened to put on his shirt of mail with the hind-side before, the bystanders seem to have been shocked by it, as by an ill-omen, till William claimed it as a good one, betokening that he was to be changed from a duke to a king." Another piece of superstition tells us that the clothes of the dead never last very long, but that as the body decays, so in the same degree do the garments and linen which belonged to the deceased. Hence, in Essex there is a popular saying to the effect that "the clothes of the dead always wear full of holes." When therefore a person dies, and the relatives, it may be, give away the clothes to the poor, one may frequently hear a remark of this kind, "Ah, they may look very well, but they won't wear; they belong to the dead." A similar belief prevails in Denmark, where a corpse is not allowed to be buried in the clothes of a living person, lest as the clothes rot in the grave, that person to whom they belonged should waste away and perish. In accordance also with a superstition prevalent in the Netherlands, the rings of a dead friend or relative are never given away, as it is a sure sign that the giver too will soon die. An absurd notion exists in many parts—one much credited by our country peasantry—that if a mother gives away all the baby's clothes in her possession, she will be sure to have another addition to her family, although the event may be contrary to all expectation. Among other items of folk-lore associated with clothes, we may mention that in the North of England to put a button or hook into the wrong hole while one is dressing in the morning, is held to be a warning that some misfortune will happen in the course of the day; and in Northamptonshire it is said that servants who go to their places in black will never stay the year out. A Dorsetshire superstition is that if a gentleman accidentally burns the tail of his coat, or a lady the hem of her skirt, during a visit at a friend's house, it is a proof they will repeat their visit.

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Another article of dress that has its superstitions is the apron, which some women turn before the new moon, to insure good luck for the ensuing month. In Yorkshire, when a married woman's apron falls off, it is a sign that something is coming to vex her; when, however, the apron of an unmarried girl drops down, she is frequently the object of laughter, as there is considered no surer sign than that she is thinking about her sweetheart. Again, if a young woman's petticoats are longer than her dress, this is a proof that her mother does not love her so much as her father, a notion which extends as far as Scotland. This piece of folk-lore may have originated in the mother not attending so much to the child's dress as was her duty, whereas, however much the father may love his child, he may at the same time be perfectly ignorant of the rights and wrongs of female attire: an excuse which does not hold good in the case of the mother. Some of the descriptions of plants in use among the rural peasantry refer to the petticoat. Thus, the poppy is said to have a red petticoat and a green gown; the daffodil, a yellow petticoat and green gown, and so on; these fancies being the subject of many of our old nursery rhymes, as, for instance:—

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"Daffadown-dilly is come up to town,  
In a yellow petticoat and a green gown."

Passing on in the next place to stockings, it is lucky, as with other articles of dress, to put one wrong-side out, but unlucky to turn it on discovering one's mistake. Some, too, consider it a matter of importance as to which foot they put the stocking on first when dressing themselves in the morning—the luck of the day being supposed in a great measure to depend on this circumstance—as to clothe the left foot before the right one is a sign of misfortune. "Flinging the stocking" was an old marriage custom, being really a kind of divination, which Misson, in his "Travels through England," thus describes:—"The young men, it seems, took the bride's stockings, and the girls those of the bridegroom, each of whom, sitting at the foot of the bed, threw the stocking over their heads, endeavouring to make it fall upon that of the bride or her spouse; if the bridegroom's stocking, thrown by the girls, fell upon the bridegroom's head, it was a sign that they themselves would soon be married; and similar luck was derived from the falling of the bride's stockings, thrown by the young men."

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There is a superstitious notion in some places that when the bride retires to rest on her wedding-night, her bridesmaids should lay her stockings across, as this act is supposed to guarantee her future prosperity in the marriage state. Another use to which the stocking has been put is its being hung up to receive presents at Christmas-time, a custom which, as Mr. Henderson points out, the Pilgrim Fathers carried to America, and bequeathed to their descendants.

It is curious to find even the garter an object of superstition, being employed by young women in their love divinations on Midsummer Eve, a period, it must be remembered, considered most propitious for such ceremonies. Their mode of procedure is this:—The maiden anxious to have a peep of her future husband must sleep in a county different from that in which she usually resides, and on going to bed must take care to knit the left garter about the right stocking, repeating the following incantation, and at every pause knitting a knot:—

"This knot I knit  
To know the thing I know not yet;  
That I may see  
The man that shall my husband be;  
How he goes, and what he wears,  
And what he does all days and years."

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On retiring to rest the wished-for one will appear in her dreams, wearing the insignia of his trade or profession.

Again, as a popular object of superstition the shoe is unrivalled, and antiquaries are still undecided as to why our forefathers invested this matter-of-fact article of dress with such mysterious qualities, selecting it as the symbol of good fortune, one of the well-known uses in which it has been employed being the throwing of it for luck, constant allusions to which practice occur in our old writers. Thus, Beaumont and Fletcher, in *The Honest Man's Fortune*, refer to it:—

"Captain, your shoes are old; pray put 'em off,  
And let one fling 'em after us."

And Ben Jonson, in his *Masque of the Gipsies*, represents one of the gipsies as saying:—

"Hurle after an old shoe,  
I'll be merry what e'er I doe."

This custom, which was once so prevalent, has not yet died out, for in Norfolk, whenever servants are going after new situations, a shoe is thrown after them, with the wish that they may succeed in what they are going about. Some years ago, when vessels engaged in the Greenland whale fishery left Whitby, in Yorkshire, the wives and friends of the sailors threw old shoes at the ships as they passed the pier-head. Indeed, this practice is frequently observed in towns on the sea-coast, and a correspondent of *Notes and Queries* informs us that one day, when at Swansea, he received a shoe on his shoulder which was intended for a young sailor leaving his home to embark upon a trading voyage. Tennyson has not omitted to speak of this piece of superstition:—

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"For this thou shalt from all things seek  
Marrow of mirth and laughter;  
And wheresoe'er thou move, good luck  
Shall throw her old shoe after."

As an emblem of good luck, the shoe is thrown with much enthusiasm after a bridal couple. Various explanations have been given of this popular custom. Some think that it was originally intended as a sham assault on the bridegroom for carrying off the bride; and hence a survival of the old ceremony of opposition to the capture of a bride. Others again are of opinion that the shoe was in former times a symbol of the exercise of dominion and authority over her by her father or guardian; the receipt of the shoe by the bridegroom, even if accidental, being an omen that the authority was transferred to him. Thus, in the Bible, the receiving of a shoe was an evidence and symbol of asserting or accepting dominion or ownership; whereas the giving back of the shoe was the symbol of resigning it. Another reason for throwing the shoe is given in the following old rhyme:—

"When Britons bold  
Wedded of old,  
Sandals were backward thrown,  
The pair to tell  
That, ill or well,  
The act was all their own."

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Throwing the shoe after the wedded pair was, also, no doubt intended as an augury of long life to the bride. In Yorkshire the ceremony of shoe-throwing is termed "thrashing," and the older the shoe the greater the luck; and in some parts of Kent the mode of procedure is somewhat peculiar. After the departure of the bride and bridegroom the single ladies are drawn up in one row, and the bachelors in another. When thus arranged, an old shoe is thrown as far as possible, which the fair sex run for: the winner being considered to have the best chance of marriage. She then throws the shoe at the gentlemen, when the first who gets it is believed to have the same chance of matrimony. A somewhat similar custom prevails in Germany, where the bride's shoe is thrown among the guests at the wedding, the person who succeeds in catching it being supposed to have every prospect of a speedy marriage.

Many auguries are still gathered from the shoe. Thus young girls on going to bed at night place their shoes at right angles to one another, in the form of the letter T, repeating this rhyme:—

"Hoping this night my true love to see,  
I place my shoes in the form of a T."

As in the case of the stocking, great importance is attached by many superstitious persons as to which shoe they put on first, in allusion to which Butler, in his "Hudibras," says:—

"Augustus, having b' oversight  
Put on his left shoe 'fore his right,  
Had like to have been slain that day  
By soldiers mutin'ing for pay."

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An old writer speaking of Jewish customs tells us that "some of them observe, in dressing themselves in the morning, to put on the right stocking and right shoe first without tying it. Then afterwards to put on the left shoe, and so return to the right; that so they may begin and end with the right one, which they account to be the most fortunate." A Suffolk doggerel respecting the "wear of shoes" teaches us the following:—

"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."

Among some of the many charms in which the shoe has been found efficacious, may be mentioned one practised in the North of England, where the peasantry, to cure cramp, are in the habit of laying their shoes across to avert it. Mrs. Latham, in her "West Sussex Superstitions," published in the "Folk-lore Record," tells us of an old woman who was at a complete loss to understand why her "rheumatics was so uncommon bad, for she had put her shoes in the form of a cross every night by the side of her head, ever since she felt the first twinge." In the same county, a cure for ague consists in wearing a leaf of tansy in the shoe.

It is curious that the shoe should have entered into the superstitions associated with death. According to an Aryan tradition, the greater part of the way from the land of the living to that of death lay through morasses, and vast moors overgrown with furze and thorns. That the dead might not pass over them barefoot, a pair of shoes was laid with them in the grave. Hence a funeral is still called in the Henneberg district "dead-shoe," and in Scandinavia the shoe itself is known as "hel-shoe." There are countless other items of folk-lore connected with the shoe: thus in days gone by the phrase, "Over shoes, over boots" was equivalent to the popular phrase, "In for a penny, in for a pound," an allusion to which we find in Taylor's "Workes" (1630):—

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"Where true courage roots,  
The proverb says, once over shoes, o'er boots."

Again, "to stand in another man's shoe" is a popular expression for occupying the place or laying claim to the honours of another. "Looking for dead men's shoes" is still an every-day phrase denoting those who are continually expecting some advantage which will accrue to them on the death of another. The shoe-horn, too, from its convenient use in drawing on a tight shoe, was formerly applied in a jocular metaphor to subservient and tractable assistants. Thus, for instance, Shakespeare in *Troilus and Cressida* (Act v., sc. 1) makes Thersites in his railing mood give this name to Menelaus, whom he calls "a thrifty shoeing-horn in a chain, hanging at his brother's (Agamemnon's) leg." It was also employed as a contemptuous phrase for dangles after young women.

A further article of dress that has had much honour conferred upon it is the glove, holding as it does a conspicuous place in many of our old customs and ceremonies. Thus in days gone by it was given, by way of delivery or investiture, in sales or conveyances of lands and goods. It was also employed as the token of a challenge to fight, a symbolical staking, perhaps of the prowess of the hand to which the glove belonged. Hence to hang up a glove in church was a public

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challenge, very much as a notice affixed to a church-door is a public notice. *Apropos* of this custom, a story is given in the life of the Rev. Bernard Gilpin, of the diocese of Durham, who died in 1583. It appears that he observed a glove hanging high up in his church, and ascertaining that it was designed as a challenge to any one who should dare to displace it, he desired his sexton to do so. "Not I, sir, I dare do no such thing," he replied. Whereupon the parson called for a long staff, and taking it down himself, put it in his pocket. Preaching afterwards on the subject, he denounced this unseemly practice, saying, "Behold, I have taken it down myself," and producing the glove, he exhibited it to the whole congregation as a spectacle of honour. This custom, we are told, does not appear to have been much older in this country than the thirteenth century, for Matthew Paris, in writing of the year 1245, speaks of it expressly as French. Noblemen wore their ladies' gloves in front of their hats, a practice mentioned by Drayton as having been in vogue at the battle of Agincourt:—

"The noble youth, the common rank above,  
On their courveting coursers mounted fair,  
One wore his mistress' garter, one her glove,  
And he her colours whom he most did love;  
There was not one but did some favour wear;  
And each one took it on his happy speed,  
To make it famous by some knightly deed."

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The gift of a pair of gloves was at one time the ordinary perquisite of those who performed some small service; and in process of time, to make the reward of greater value, the glove was "lined" with money; hence the term "glove-money." Relics of the old custom still survive in the presentation of gloves to those who attend weddings and funerals. It is difficult, however, to discover the connection between gloves and a stolen kiss. Our readers, for example, may recollect how, in Sir Walter Scott's "Fair Maid of Perth," Catharine steals from her chamber on St. Valentine's morn, and catching Henry Smith asleep, gives him a kiss; then we have the following:—"Come into the booth with me, my son, and I will furnish thee with a fitting theme. Thou knowest the maiden who ventures to kiss a sleeping man, wins of him a pair of gloves." Gloves are still given to a judge at a maiden assize, a custom which, it has been suggested, originated in a Saxon law, which forbade the judges to wear gloves while sitting on the Bench. Hence, to give a pair of gloves to a judge was tantamount to saying that he need not trouble to come to the Bench, but might wear gloves. Again, in bygone times gloves were worn as a mark of distinction by sovereigns, ecclesiastical dignitaries, and others; their workmanship being excessively costly, richly embroidered as they were and decorated with jewels. "The association of gloves with ecclesiastical dignity survived," says Mr. Leadam in the *Antiquary*, "the Reformation in England; for although they ceased to be worn in the services of the Church, yet as late as the reign of Charles II. bishops upon their consecration were accustomed to present gloves to the archbishop, and to all who came to their consecration banquet. The lavender gloves with golden fringes which do often adorn their portraits, may still remind our modern prelates of the ancient glories of their predecessors." It was also customary to hang a pair of white gloves on the pews of unmarried villagers who had died in the flower of their youth, and at several towns in England it has been customary from time immemorial to announce a fair by hoisting a huge glove upon a pole—a practice which exists at Macclesfield, Portsmouth, Southampton, and Chester; the glove being taken down at the conclusion of the fair. Hone, in his description of Exeter Lammas Fair, says:—"The charter for this fair is perpetuated by a glove of immense size, stuffed and carried through the city on a very long pole, decorated with ribbons, flowers, &c., and attended with music, parish beadles, and the nobility. It is afterwards placed on the top of the Guildhall, and then the fair commences; on the taking down of the glove the fair terminates." Mr. Leadam also quotes a passage from the "Speculum Saxonicum" which throws light on the origin of this custom:—"No one is allowed to set up a market or a mint, without the consent of the ordinary or judge of that place; the king ought also to send a glove as a sign of his consent to the same." The glove, therefore, was the king's glove, the earliest form of royal charter, the original sign-manual. Among other items of folk-lore connected with this useful article of dress, we may mention that the term "right as my glove" is a phrase, according to Sir Walter Scott, derived from the practice of pledging the glove as the sign of irrefragable faith. Gloves, too, were in olden times fashionable new year's gifts, having been far more expensive than now-a-days. When Sir Thomas More was Lord Chancellor, he happened to determine a case in favour of a lady named Croaker, who, as a mark of her gratitude, sent him a new year's gift in the shape of a pair of gloves with forty angels in them. But Sir Thomas returned the money with the following letter:—"Mistress, since it were against good manners to refuse your new year's gift, I am content to take your gloves, but as for the lining I utterly refuse it." In the time of Queen Elizabeth, the rural bridegroom wore gloves in his hat as a sign of good husbandry; and on the "Border" to bite the glove was considered a pledge of deadly vengeance, in allusion to which Sir Walter Scott, in his "Lay of the Last Minstrel," says:—

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"Stern Rutherford right little said,  
But bit his glove and shook his head."

The ring, apart from its eventful history, has from the most remote period been surrounded, both in this and other countries, not only with a most extensive legendary lore, but with a vast array of superstitions, a detailed account of which would be impossible in a small volume like the present one; so we must confine ourselves to some of the most popular.

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In the first place, then, certain mysterious virtues have been supposed to reside in rings, not so

much on account of their shape as from the materials of which they have been composed. Thus, they have been much worn as talismans or charms, being thought to be infallible preservatives against unseen dangers of every kind. Referring to some of these, we find, for instance, that the turquoise ring was believed to possess special properties, a superstition to which Dr. Donne alludes:—

"A compassionate turquoise, that doth tell,  
By looking pale, the wearer is not well."

Fenton, too, in his "Secret Wonders of Nature," describes the stone:—"The turkeys doth move when there is any peril prepared to him that weareth it." The turquoise ring of Shylock, which, we are told in the *Merchant of Venice* (Act iii., sc. 1), he would not part with for a "wilderness of monkeys," was, no doubt, valued for its secret virtues.

The carbuncle, again, amongst other properties, was said to give out a natural light, to which it has been supposed Shakespeare alludes in *Titus Andronicus* (Act ii., sc. 3), where, speaking of the ring on the finger of Bassianus, he says:—

"Upon his bloody finger he doth wear  
A precious ring, that lightens all the hole,  
Which, like a taper in some monument,  
Doth shine upon the dead man's earthy cheeks,  
And shows the ragged entrails of the pit."

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A piece of popular superstition makes it unlucky to wear an opal ring, although this lovely stone has always been an object of peculiar admiration from the beautiful variety of colours which it displays, and in the Middle Ages was even thought to possess the united virtues of all the gems with whose distinctive colours it was emblazoned. The diamond was believed to counteract poison, a notion which prevailed to a comparatively late period; though, according to another belief, it was considered the most dangerous of poisons, and as such we find it enumerated among the poisons administered to Sir Thomas Overbury, when a prisoner in the Tower. An emerald ring was thought to insure purity of thought; and a toadstone ring was worn as an amulet to preserve new-born children and their mothers from fairies.

Among the omens associated with rings, we may briefly note that to lose a ring which has been given as a pledge of affection is unlucky; as also is the breaking of a ring on the finger; while further superstitions relating to the wedding-ring have been noticed at length in our [chapter on marriage](#). In days gone by, too, "medicated rings" were held in great repute, and were much used for the cure of diseases, instances of which we find among the remedies still in use for cramp, epilepsy, and fits. Silver seems to have been considered highly efficacious; and rings made of lead, mixed with quicksilver, were worn as charms against headaches and other complaints. Dactylomancy, or divination by rings, is not quite forgotten among eager aspirants after matrimony, one mode being to suspend a ring by a thread or hair within a glass tumbler, notice being taken as to how many times it strikes the sides of the glass without being touched. Once more, there is an old piece of folk-lore on the colours of stones in "keepsake rings":—

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"Oh, green is forsaken,  
And yellow is forsworn,  
But blue is the prettiest colour that's worn."

Passing from the ring to another article of dress—perhaps the most insignificant—namely, the pin, we nevertheless find it invested with all kinds of curious superstitions. Thus, it is said that on seeing a pin, one should always pick it up for the sake of good luck, as those who omit to do so run into imminent danger of being overtaken by misfortune, a notion embodied in the following rhyme:—

"See a pin and pick it up,  
All the day you'll have good luck;  
See a pin and let it lie,  
All the day you'll have to cry."

Why, however, North-country people are so persistent in their refusal to give one another a pin, it is not easy to discover. When asked for a pin, they invariably reply, "You may take one; but, mind, I do not give it." One of the most popular species of enchantment to which pins have been applied is that sometimes employed in counteracting the evil effects of witchcraft. One mode is by "pin-sticking," a case of which recently occurred in the parish of Honiton Clyst, in Devonshire. A landlord having lost one of his tenants, certain repairs and improvements were found necessary to prepare for the next. In carrying out the work a chimney had to be explored, when, in the course of the operation, there was found carefully secreted a pig's heart stuck all over with thin prickles, evidently a substitute for pins. This is supposed to have been done by the direction of some "wise" or cunning person, as a means of taking revenge on the witch to whose incantations the party considered some mischief due, in the belief that the heart of the ill-wisher would be pierced in like manner, until it eventually became as pulseless as that of the pig.

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It appears, too, that pins were largely used in a particular species of sorcery. Whenever, for instance, some malevolent individual wished to carry out her ill-natured designs, she made a clay image of the person she intended to harm, baptised the said image with the name of the party whom it was meant to represent, and stuck it full of pins or burnt it. Where the pins were placed

the person whom it represented was afflicted with pain, and as the figure wasted, so he was said to waste away. Shakespeare alludes to this superstition, and in *Richard III.* (Act iii., sc. 4) makes the Duke of Gloucester say to Hastings:—

"Then be your eyes the witness of this ill,  
See how I am bewitch'd; behold, mine arm  
Is, like a blasted sapling, withered up!  
And this is Edward's wife, that monstrous witch  
Consorted with that harlot strumpet Shore,  
That by their witchcraft thus have marked me."

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Pins, too, have been in extensive demand for divination, and here and there throughout the country we find "wishing wells," into which if the passers-by only drop a crooked pin and breathe their wish, it is said they may rest assured of its fulfilment at some future date.

So much, then, for our illustrations of the folk-lore of dress, a subject which, interesting though it is, we have now discussed at sufficient length.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### TABLE SUPERSTITIONS.

Thirteen at Table—Salt-spilling—The Knife—Bread, and other Articles of Food—Wishing  
Bones—Tea-leaves—Singing before Breakfast—Shaking Hands across the Table.

It is frequently found that even strong-minded persons are not exempt from the prejudice against sitting down to dinner when there are only thirteen present. Many amusing anecdotes are recorded of the devices resorted to for avoiding the consequences supposed to be incurred by the neglect of this superstition—the notion being that one of the thirteen, generally the youngest, will die within the next twelve months. To avoid, therefore, any such contingency, many persons, should they be disappointed in one of their guests, have the empty place filled by a child, and should one not always be forthcoming, no slight inconvenience is occasionally produced. Not very long ago a case was recorded in which a lady, not being able at the last moment to make up the number fourteen, had her favourite cat seated at the table, hoping thereby to break the fatal spell attaching to the unlucky number thirteen. [101]

The origin popularly assigned to this widespread superstition is the fact that thirteen was the number at the Last Supper, Judas being the thirteenth. A correspondent of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, however, writing at the close of the last century, says that it is "founded on the calculations adhered to by the insurance offices, which presume that out of thirteen persons, taken indiscriminately, one will die within a year." But this is not the probable origin, that which connects it with the Last Supper being no doubt the correct one. Some, says Lord Lyttelton, in *Notes and Queries*, have carried the superstition "to the extent of disliking the number thirteen at all times; but the commoner form limits it to Friday—not that there is any ground for fact in this, for the Last Supper was on the fifth, not the sixth day of the week. Sailors are held somewhat superstitious, and I knew an eminent naval officer who actually would walk out of the room when the conjunction happened on a Friday, after the death of the wife and eldest daughter, both of which events were preceded by the said conjunction." Among other instances of this piece of superstition, we may quote the following, related by Addison in the *Spectator*:—"I remember," he says, "I was one in a mixed assembly that was full of wine and mirth, when on a sudden an old woman unluckily observed that there were thirteen of us in company. This remark struck a panic terror into several who were present, insomuch that one or two of the ladies were going to leave the room; but a friend of mine, taking notice that one of our female companions was likely to become a mother, affirmed there were fourteen in the room, and that instead of portending that one in the company should die, it plainly foretold that one of them should be born. Had not my friend found this expedient to break the omen, I question not but half the women in the company should have fallen sick that very night." Again, we may give another anecdote recorded by Rachel, the celebrated *tragédienne*. On her return from Egypt, in the spring of 1857, she installed herself in a villa in the neighbourhood of Montpellier. There she received a visit from the poet Ponsard and Arsène Houssaye, the latter of whom was making a tour as inspector of the Departmental Museums. "Do you recollect the dinner we had at the house of Victor Hugo, at the close of the repetition of *L'Angelo*?" she said to the former. "You remember there were *thirteen* of us. There was Hugo and his wife, you and your wife, Rebecca and I, Girardin and his wife, and some others. Well! where to-day are the thirteen? Victor Hugo and his wife are in Jersey; your wife is dead; Madame de Girardin is dead; my poor Rebecca is dead; Gerard de Nerval, Oradie, Alfred de Musset are dead. I—say no more. There remain but Girardin and you. Adieu! my friends. Never laugh at thirteen at a table!" Anecdotes, indeed, relating to this superstition are without number, and form many an amusing episode in the lives of noted characters. It may be mentioned here that the number thirteen is considered ominous in other ways. Fuller, by way of example, tells us how a covetous courtier complained to King Edward VI. that Christ College, Cambridge, was a superstitious foundation, consisting of a master and twelve fellows, in imitation of Christ and His twelve Apostles. He, therefore, advised the king to take away one or two fellowships, so as to dissolve that unlucky number. "Oh, no," replied the king, "I have a better way than that to mar their conceit; I will add a thirteenth fellowship to them," which he accordingly did. [102]

Another equally popular superstition is the ill-luck supposed to attach to salt-spilling: one notion being that to upset the salt-cellar while in the act of handing it to any one is a sign of an impending quarrel between the parties. It is also said to indicate sorrow or trouble to the person spilling it, and to counteract the evil consequences of this unlucky act one should fling some salt over the shoulder. Gay speaks of this popular fancy in the fable of the "Farmer's Wife and the Raven":— [103]

"The salt was spilt, to me it fell,  
Then to contribute to my loss,  
My knife and fork were laid across."

Indeed constant allusions are found to this widespread superstition both in our old and modern writers. Gayton, describing two friends, says:— [104]

"I have two friends of either sex, which do  
Eat little salt, or none, yet are friends too,  
Of both which persons I can truly tell,  
They are of patience most invincible  
Whom out of temper no mischance at all  
Can put—no, if towards them the salt should fall."

This piece of folk-lore dates back up to the time of the Romans, and at the present day is not limited to our own country. It has been suggested that it may have originated from the circumstance that salt was formerly used in sacrifices, and that to spill it when once placed on the head of the victim was regarded as a bad omen. Bailey, however, assigns a very different reason, telling us that salt was considered by the ancients incorruptible, and on this account was made the symbol of friendship. If it, therefore, was spilt, the persons between whom it happened thought their friendship would not be of long duration.

Some people dislike even so much as to put salt on another person's plate, considering this act equivalent to wishing one's neighbour misfortune. Hence there is a well-known couplet:—

"Help me to salt,  
Help me to sorrow."

A correspondent of *Notes and Queries* relates how one day he offered to help an old Highland lady at dinner to some salt from the cellar, which stood much nearer to him than to her; when she gravely put back his hand, and drew away her plate, saying at the same time, with a kind of shudder, between her teeth, "Help me to salt, help me to sorrow." The ill-luck may be averted by a second help. Salt has also been considered a powerful safeguard against evil spirits; and in Scotland it was once customary in brewing to throw a handful of salt on the top of the mash to ward off witches. Again, as an interesting illustration of the change which has passed over our domestic manners, we may quote the phrase "to sit above the salt," that is, in a place of honour, whereby a marked and invidious distinction was formerly maintained among those at the same table. A large salt-cellar was usually placed about the middle of a long table, the places above which were assigned to the guests of distinction, those below to inferiors and poor relations. It argues little for the delicacy of our ancestors that they should have permitted such ill-natured distinctions at their board; often, as it has been said, placing their guests "below the salt" for no better purpose than that of mortifying them. Hence Ben Jonson, speaking of the characteristics of an insolent coxcomb, says:—"His fashion is not to take knowledge of him that is beneath him in clothes. He never drinks below the salt."

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Among the many other odd items of folk-lore associated with the table, we may mention in the next place those relating to the knife. Thus, to let a knife drop is a sign that a visitor is coming to the house; and to lay the knife and fork crosswise on one's plate is an omen that crosses and troubles will soon occur. Equally unlucky, too, is it to give any kind of knife away, for, as Gay in his "Shepherd's Week" says:—

[106]

"But woe is me! such presents luckless prove,  
For knives, they tell me, always sever love."

Indeed, this superstition is not confined to a knife, but extends to any sharp or cutting instrument, such as a pair of scissors, a razor, &c. To avoid the danger of such a misfortune, some trifling recompense must be made in return. This superstition was confuted by a versifier of the last century—the Rev. Samuel Bishop—who presented a knife to his wife on her fifteenth wedding-day, with a copy of some very clever verses of which the following are a specimen:—

"A knife, dear girl, cuts love, they say,  
Mere modish love perhaps it may;  
For any tool of any kind  
Can separate what was never joined;  
The knife that cuts our love in two  
Will have much tougher work to do;  
Must cut your softness, worth, and spirit,  
Down to the vulgar size of merit," &c.

Some consider it unlucky to find a knife, from a notion that it will bring ill-luck to them; while others again often place a knife near a sleeping child as a charm to preserve it from danger, a belief to which Herrick thus refers:—

"Let the superstitious wife  
Near the child's heart lay a knife;  
Point be up, and haft be down;  
While she gossips in the town.  
This 'mongst other mystic charms  
Keeps the sleeping child from harms."

[107]

Even the loaf of bread, too, without which the most frugal board would be incomplete, has not escaped without its quota of folk-lore. Thus, many a housewife still marks the sign of the cross upon her loaf before placing it in the oven, just as the Durham butcher does to the shoulder of a sheep or lamb after taking off the skin—the notion probably being to protect it against the

injurious influence of witchcraft. In many parts of Scotland peasants were formerly in the habit of making a cross on their tools, considering that by so doing they would be rendered safe against the mischievous pranks of the fairy folks as they went on their midnight errands. Again, if a loaf accidentally parts in the hand while an unmarried lady is cutting it, this either prognosticates that she will not be married during the next twelve months, or, what is still worse, that there will be a dissension of some kind in the family. Some, too, have a superstitious objection to turning a loaf upside-down after cutting it. Herrick refers to the custom of carrying a crust of bread in the pocket for luck's sake—a practice which is not quite obsolete:—

"If ye fear to be affrighted  
When ye are, by chance, benighted;  
In your pocket for a trust  
Carry nothing but a crust,  
For that holy piece of bread  
Charms the danger and the dread."

While speaking of bread it may not be inappropriate to refer to a few other articles of fare around which superstition has cast its mantle. Thus, eggs have an extensive folk-lore both in this and other countries. Many persons, for instance, after eating an egg take special care to crush the shell; the omission of this ceremony, as they fancy, being attended with ill-luck. Sir Thomas Browne informs us that the real reason is to prevent witchcraft: "lest witches should draw or prick their names therein, and veneficiously mischief their person, they broke the shell." It is also considered a bad omen to bring eggs into the house after dark, and many persons avoid burning egg-shells lest the hens should cease to lay. According to a superstition current in the West of England, one should always make a hole through an egg-shell before throwing it away, as, unless this is done, there is a danger of witches using them to put to sea for the purpose of wrecking ships. Beaumont and Fletcher in their "Women Pleas'd" allude to this notion:— [108]

"The devil should think of purchasing that egg-shell  
To victual out a witch for the Burmoothies."

Just as it is considered, too, unlucky to bring eggs into the house after dark, so the same prejudice exists with regard to taking them out. One day, we are told in the *Stamford Mercury* (Oct. 29, 1852), a person in want of some eggs called at a farmhouse and inquired of the good woman whether she had any eggs to sell, to which she replied that she had a few scores to dispose of. "Then I'll take them home with me in the cart," was his answer, to which she somewhat indignantly replied, "That you will not; don't you know the sun has gone down? You are welcome to the eggs at a proper hour of the day, but I would not let them go out of the house after the sun is set on any consideration whatever." A Norfolk superstition warns persons against eating the marrow of pork lest they should go mad; and, in the North of England, we are told that should the meat for dinner shrink in the pot, it presages a downfall in life. Should it swell, on the contrary, to a large size, it denotes that the head of the family will be prosperous in his undertakings. These odd fancies vary in different localities, and in out-of-the-way districts where the railway has not yet penetrated, they still retain their hold on the primitive and uncultivated minds of our agricultural peasantry. At the same time, however, occasional survivals of many of these old worn-out superstitions crop up in unexpected quarters, showing they are not completely dead. Thus, our children still practise their divination by means of the "wishing bone" of a fowl, and are, moreover, ever on the alert to discover, what they consider, infallible omens from any article of food which nursery tradition has stamped as possessing such remarkable qualities. As we have already pointed out [in another chapter](#), tea-leaves often afford to both old and young a constant source of amusement; and we may, now and then, find some elderly damsel, who still aspires to enter one day on the marriage state, taking care to put the milk into her tea before the sugar lest she should lose her chance of securing a sweetheart. Mrs. Latham, too, tells us how matrimonial fortunes are often told by seers at home from the grounds or sediment remaining at the bottom of a tea-cup; and where to unenlightened eyes nothing is apparent but a little black dust floating in a slop, those who have the wit to do so may discern a hidden meaning. Again, among the host of small superstitions connected with our daily meals, one at the very outset relates to breakfast; there being a widespread belief that if a person sings before breakfast, he will cry before supper. This notion probably has some reference to another popular one, namely, that high spirits forebode evil, proving the forerunner of adversity. Many anecdotes illustrative of this theory have been recorded at various times. In the last act of *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo is introduced as saying:— [109]

"If I may trust the flattering truth of sleep,  
My dreams presage some joyful news at hand;  
My bosom's lord sits lightly on his throne;  
And all this day an unaccustomed spirit  
Lifts me above the ground with cheerful thoughts."

In the evidence given at the inquest upon the bodies of four persons killed by an explosion at a firework manufactory in Bermondsey, October 12th, 1849, one of the witnesses stated:—"On Friday they were all very merry, and Mrs. B. said she feared something would happen before they went to bed, because they were so happy."

If, in a social gathering of any kind, an unmarried person is inadvertently placed between a man and his wife, it is an indication that the individual so seated will be married within the course of a [111]



year. Many consider it unlucky to shake hands across the table; and there is also an old superstition mentioned by Grose, that, in eating, to miss the mouth and let the food fall is a bad omen, betokening approaching sickness. Once more, if a person in rising from table overturns his chair, this is not a very fortunate occurrence, as it is said to show that he has been speaking untruths. Without further extending our list of the superstitious beliefs and practices that have clustered round the table—to which many of our readers will doubtless be able to make their own additions—we may briefly sum up this branch of the subject by saying:—

"Tis a history  
Handed from ages down; a nurse's tale,  
Which children open-eyed and mouth'd devour,  
And thus, as garrulous ignorance relates,  
We learn it and believe."

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## CHAPTER IX.

### FURNITURE OMENS.

Folk-lore of the Looking-glass—Luck of Edenhall—Clock-falling—Chairs—Beds—The Bellows.

The desire to gather omens from the various surrounding objects of every-day life has naturally included articles of furniture; and hence we find signs and portents attached to certain of these which are implicitly credited by many, from the highest to the lowest, who, notwithstanding, would consider themselves deeply insulted if the idea of their being superstitious were only so much as hinted at by some sceptical friend. Among the most common of these odd fancies are those relating to the looking-glass. As a piece of furniture this is most necessary, and its very importance is, perhaps, the chief reason why superstition has invested it with those mysterious qualities which certainly do not belong in the same ratio to chairs and tables. A chair, however beautiful and costly in its manufacture, may nevertheless be cruelly broken with perfect impunity; whereas, if some wretched, dilapidated looking-glass is accidentally cracked, the inmates of the house are thoroughly discomposed, from a conviction that such an event is sure to be followed by misfortune of some kind or other. In Cornwall, the supposed penalty for such an offence is seven years of sorrow; and a Yorkshire proverb informs us that this unfortunate occurrence entails "seven years' trouble, but no want." It has also been said to foretell the speedy decease of the master of the house; and in Scotland it is regarded as an infallible sign that some member of the family will shortly die. It has been suggested that this popular superstition dates very many years back, and probably originated in the terror inspired by the destruction of the reflected human image—an interesting illustration of how the formation of certain ideas is often determined by mere analogy. A similar style of thinking also underlies the mediæval necromancer's practice of making a waxen image of his enemy, and shooting at it with arrows in order to bring about his death. [112]

The folk-lore, however, of the looking-glass does not end here; for many consider it the height of ill-luck to see the new moon reflected in a looking-glass or through a window-pane; and some mothers studiously prevent their youngest child looking in one until a year old. It is also associated with marriage and death. Thus, in the South of England it is regarded as a bad omen for a bride on her wedding morning to take a last peep in the glass when she is completely dressed in her bridal attire, before starting for the church. Hence very great care is generally taken to put on a glove or some slight article of adornment after the final lingering and reluctant look has been taken in the mirror. The idea is that any young lady who is too fond of the looking-glass will be unfortunate when married. This is by no means the only occasion on which superstitious fancy interferes with the grown-up maiden's peeps into the looking-glass. Thus, Swedish young ladies are afraid of looking in the glass after dark, or by candle-light, lest by so doing they should forfeit the goodwill of the other sex. [113]

The practice of covering the looking-glass, or removing it from the chamber of death, still prevails in some parts of England—the notion being that "all vanity, all care for earthly beauty, are over with the deceased." It has also been suggested that, as the invisible world trenches closely upon the visible one in the chamber of death, a superstitious dread is felt of some spiritual being imaging himself forth in the blank surface of the mirror. Mr. Baring Gould considers that the true reason for shrouding the looking-glass before a funeral was that given him in Warwickshire, where there is a popular notion that if a person looks into a mirror in the chamber of death he will see the corpse looking over his shoulder. Again, Brand informs us that looking-glasses were generally used by magicians "in their superstitious and diabolical operations." He quotes an old authority, who says:—"Some magicians, being curious to find out by the help of a looking-glass, or a glass full of water, a thing that lies hidden, make choice of young maids to discern therein those images or sights which a person defiled cannot see." Sometimes, too, our ancestors dipped a looking-glass into the water when they were anxious to ascertain what would become of a sick person. Accordingly as he looked well or ill in the glass, when covered with the drops of water, so they foretold whether he would recover or not. Mirrors were also regarded by our forefathers as the most effective agencies in divining secrets and bringing to light hidden mysteries. Thus, there is a tradition that the Gunpowder Plot was discovered by Dr. John Dee with his magic mirror. We find in a prayer-book, printed by Baskett in 1737, an engraving which depicts the following scene:—In the centre is a circular looking-glass, in which is the reflection of the Houses of Parliament by night, and a person entering carrying a dark lantern. On the left side there are two men in the costume of James's time looking into the mirror—one evidently the king, the other probably Sir Kenelm Digby. On the right side, at the top, is the eye of Providence darting a ray on to the mirror; and below are some legs and hoofs, as if evil spirits were flying out of the picture. This plate, says a correspondent of *Notes and Queries*, "would seem to represent the method by which, under Providence (as is evidenced by the eye), the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot was at that time seriously believed to have been effected. The tradition, moreover, must have been generally believed, or it never could have found its way into a prayer-book printed by the king's printer." It may be noted, however, that as the fame of Dee's magic mirror was at its zenith about the time of the Gunpowder Plot, this may have led to the mirror being adopted as a popular emblem of discovery, or "throwing light" upon a subject. Hence it has been reasonably suggested that the mirror in the print may simply be a piece of artistic design, rather than evidence of its actual employment in the discovery. [114]

In days gone by, too, it appears to have been customary for both sexes to wear small looking-

glasses—a fantastic fashion much ridiculed by Ben Jonson and others of his time. Men even wore them in their hats—an allusion to which custom we find in Ben Jonson's *Cynthia's Revels* (Act ii., sc. 1): "Where is your page? Call for your casting-bottle, and place your mirror in your hat as I told you." We may infer that this was the very height of affectation by the manner in which the remark is introduced. While men of fashion wore mirrors as brooches or ornaments in their hats, ladies carried them at their girdles or on their breasts. Thus Lovelace makes a lady say:— [116]

"My lively shade thou ever shalt retaine  
In thy inclosed feather-framed glasse."

It was a popular superstition in former years that fine glass, such as that of Venice, would break if poison were put into it. To this curious notion Massinger thus gracefully alludes:—

"Here crystal glasses . . . .  
. . . . . This pure metal  
So innocent is, and faithful to the mistress,  
Or master, that possesses it, that rather  
Than hold one drop that's venomous, of itself  
It flies in pieces, and deludes the traitor."

This is among the errors noticed by Sir Thomas Browne, who says, "And although it be said that poison will break a Venice glass, yet have we not met with any of that nature. Were there a truth herein, it were the best preservative for princes and persons exalted to such fears, and surely far better than divers now in use." It may not be inappropriate here to refer to the well-known tradition connected with the "Luck of Edenhall." From time immemorial there has been a current belief that any one who had the courage to rush upon a fairy festival and snatch from the merry throng their drinking-glass, would find it prove to him a constant source of good fortune, supposing he could carry it across a running stream. A glass has been carefully preserved at Edenhall, Cumberland, which was in all probability a sacred chalice; but the legend is that the butler, one day going to draw water, surprised a company of fairies who were amusing themselves on the grass near the well. He seized the glass that was standing upon its margin, which the fairies tried to recover, but, after an ineffectual struggle, they vanished, crying:— [117]

"If that glass do break or fall,  
Farewell the luck of Edenhall."

The good fortune, however, of this ancient house was never so much endangered as by the Duke of Wharton, who, on one occasion having drunk the contents of this magic glass, inadvertently dropped it, and here most assuredly would for ever have terminated the luck of Edenhall, if the butler, who stood at his elbow to receive the empty glass, had not happily caught it in his napkin.

Referring, however, more particularly to our subject, we find several items of folk-lore associated with the clock. Thus, in the North of England, there is a superstition called "Clock-falling," the idea being that if a woman enters a house after her confinement, and before being churched, the house-clock will immediately fall on its face. So strong was this belief in years past that a woman would never think of transgressing this rule under any circumstances whatever. In some places the house-clock is stopped on the occasion of a death, no doubt to remind the survivors that with the deceased one time is over, and that henceforth the days and hours are no longer of any account to him. A correspondent of *Notes and Queries* informs us that he knew "an intelligent, well-informed gentleman in Scotland who, among his last injunctions on his death-bed, ordered that as soon as he expired the house-clock was to be stopped, a command which was strictly obeyed." Aubrey also tells us that formerly it was customary for people of a serious turn of mind to say, every time they heard the clock strike, "Lord, grant my last hour may be my best hour." [118]

Chairs, again, have their superstitions. It is regarded as a bad omen, for instance, if, when a person leaves a house, he replaces the chair on which he has been sitting against the wall, the probability being that he will never visit the house again. The chair on which a woman sits after her confinement to receive the congratulations of her friends is popularly termed "a groaning chair," an allusion to which we find in "Poor Robin's Almanack":—

"For a nurse, the child to dandle,  
Sugar, soap, spiced pots, and candle,  
A groaning chair, and eke a cradle."

Another article of furniture not without its folk-lore is the bed. Thus some superstitious persons always have their bedsteads placed parallel to the planks of the floor, considering it unlucky to sleep across the boards. Others again pay particular attention to the point of the compass towards which the head should be when in bed, a belief we find existing even among the Hindoos, who believe that to sleep with the head to the north will cause one's days to be shortened. To lie in the direction of the south they say is productive of longevity, whereas the east and west, it is asserted, are calculated to bring riches and change of scene respectively. Various theories in this country have been, at different times, started as to the proper position of the bedstead during the hours of sleep, which find ready acceptance among those who are ever ready to grasp any new idea, however fanciful it may be. A correspondent of *The Builder*, writing on the subject, says:—"So far as my own observations have gone, I know that my sleep is always more sound when my head is placed to the north. There are persons whom I know, the head of whose bed is to the north, and who, to awake early, will reverse their usual position in the bed, [119]

but without knowing the reason why, beyond 'that they could always wake earlier,' the sleep being more broken." An eminent physician in Scotland states that, when he failed by every other prescription to bring sleep to invalid children, he recommended their couches or little beds to be turned due north and south—the head of the child being placed towards the north—a process which he had always found successful in promoting sleep. After all, however, as has been so often said, the best prescription for a good night's rest is a healthy body and a sound mind.

The well-known phrase, "to get out of bed the wrong way," or "with the left leg foremost," is generally said of an ill-tempered person; the term having originated in an ancient superstition, which regarded it as unlucky to place the left foot first on the ground on getting out of bed.

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Once more, as a mark of the simplicity of ancient manners, it was customary for persons even of the highest rank to sleep together, an allusion to which practice occurs in *Henry V.*, where Exeter says:—

"Nay, but the man that was his bedfellow,  
Whom he hath cloy'd and grac'd with kingly favours."

In conclusion, we may take one further illustration on this subject from that useful little article, the bellows, to place which on a table is considered extremely unlucky, and few servants will either do it or allow it to be done.

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## CHAPTER X. HOUSEHOLD SUPERSTITIONS.

Prevalence and Continuity of Superstitions—Sneezing—Stumbling—A Whistling Woman  
—Sweeping—Breaking Crockery—Fires and Candles—Money—Other Superstitions.

It has often been asked how that formidable array of superstitions, which are so firmly established in most houses, came into being, and what is their origin? Although indeed one may occasionally smile at the "reign of terror" which these frequently exercise over their credulous believers, yet it must be admitted they are not limited to any one class. In discussing and comparing the intellectual condition of one class of society with another, we are apt, while passing censure on the one for its odd notions and fanciful beliefs, to forget how the other often cherishes the very same, although it may be in a more disguised form. Thus, by way of example, whereas some ignorant persons resort to a cunning man or "wise woman" for advice in case of emergency, many an educated person is found consulting with equal faith a clairvoyant or spirit-medium. While, too, some uneducated person believes in a particular omen, which is condemned by an intelligent community as the height of folly, many cultivated people, as we have said, may be found who hesitate before sitting down to dinner when the party consists of thirteen. However much, therefore, we may dislike to own the fact, we must acknowledge that superstition is a distinct element in the human character, although under the influence of education it has not the same opportunity for development as in the case of those whose mental powers have never been thoroughly trained. These superstitions, beliefs, and practices, too, it must be remembered, have not sprung up in a day, but have been handed down from generation to generation in popular traditions, tales, rhymes, and proverbs, and consequently have become so interwoven with the daily life as to make it no easy task to root them out. It has been truly said:—

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"How superstitiously we mind our evils!  
The throwing down salt, or crossing of a hare,  
Bleeding at nose, the stumbling of a horse,  
Or singing of a cricket, are of power  
To daunt whole man in us."

As Mr. Tylor has truly shown, when a custom or superstition is once fairly started in the world, disturbing influences may long affect it so slightly that it may keep its course from generation to generation, as a stream once settled in its bed will flow on for ages. Thus thousands of superstitions, the true meanings of which have perished for centuries, continue to exist simply because they have existed. A striking example of this fact may be found in the widespread folklore associated with the act of sneezing in this and other countries, which may be traced back to the most remote period. Thus, in the classic ages of Greece and Rome, we read of the lucky sneeze of Telemachus, and of Aristotle's remark that people consider a sneeze as divine, but not a cough. On account of sneezing being deemed lucky, it has always been customary to salute the sneezer, a custom which the ancient Greeks claimed to have derived from Prometheus, who stole celestial fire to animate his newly-made figure of clay. Tradition says that as the fire permeated its frame, the creature sneezed, which caused Prometheus to invoke blessings on it. Anyhow the practice of salutation on sneezing dates from the earliest times, and it is interesting to find a superstition of this kind, which may be looked on as a curiosity of primitive civilisation, still existing in our midst. Thus, in the Midland counties, grandmothers still exclaim, "God help you!" when they hear a child sneeze; and it is a very common notion that to sneeze three times before breakfast is a pledge that one will soon receive a present of some kind. The sneezing of a cat is considered an evil omen, it being a sign that the family will all have colds. According to a Scotch superstition a new-born child is in the fairy spells until it sneezes, but when this takes place all danger is past. A correspondent of *Notes and Queries* tells us that he once overheard "an old and reverend-looking dame crooning over a new-born child, and then, watching it intently and in silence for nearly a minute, she said, taking a huge pinch of snuff, 'Oich! Oich! No yet—no yet.' Suddenly the youngster exploded in a startling manner, into a tremendous sneeze; when the old lady suddenly bent down and, as far as I could see, drew her fore-finger across the brows of the child, very much as if making the sign of the cross (although as a strict Calvinist she would have been scandalised at the idea), and joyfully exclaimed, 'God sain the bairn it's *no a warlock*.'" Indeed it is a very prevalent idea that no idiot ever sneezed or could sneeze. Some attach importance to the day on which a person sneezes; and in the West of England it is said that—

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[123]

"Sneeze on Sunday morning fasting,  
You'll enjoy your own true love to everlasting."

Another household superstition which has come down to us from the far-off past is connected with stumbling; frequent allusions to which occur in the classic writers. Thus, at the present day to stumble up-stairs is considered unlucky by some, but just the reverse by others. Grose remarks that to stumble up the stairs is a prognostic of good luck, and in some places it is supposed to indicate that the stumbler if unmarried will cease to be so before the year is out. Others affirm that to stumble in the morning as soon as one goes out of doors is a sign of ill-luck. As an instance of this omen in ancient times, it is stated that Tiberius Gracchus, as he was leaving his house on the day of his death, stumbled upon the threshold with such violence that he broke the nail of his great toe. It is not necessary, however, to quote further cases of this superstition in years gone by, it being sufficient for our purpose to show that it has been handed down to us by our

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ancestors, and that stumbling, like sneezing, has always been regarded as an ominous act. Again, stumbling at a grave has been ranked among unlucky omens, a superstition to which Shakespeare refers in *Romeo and Juliet* (Act v., sc. 3), where Friar Laurence says:—

"How oft to-night  
Have my old feet stumbled at graves."

We may also compare Gloucester's words in *3 Henry VI.* (Act v., sc. 3):—

"For many men that stumble at the threshold  
Are well foretold that danger lurks within."

Hence various charms have been practised to counteract the supposed ill-effect of this unlucky act, upon which Poor Robin, in his "Almanack for 1695," quaintly remarks:—"All those who, walking the streets, stumble at a stick or stone, and when they are past it turn back again to spurn or kick the stone they stumbled at, are liable to turn students in Goatam College, and upon admittance to have a coat put upon him, with a cap, a bauble, and other ornaments belonging to his degree." [125]

Again, in most places there is a very strong antipathy to a woman whistling about a house, or even out of doors, this act being said to be always attended with fatal results. Thus, there is a Cornish saying to the following effect:—"A whistling woman and a crowing hen are the two unluckiest things under the sun;" and the Northamptonshire peasantry have this rhyme which is to the same purport:—

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

Or, according to another version:—

"A whistling wife and a crowing hen  
Will call the old gentleman out of his den."

Why there should be this superstitious dislike to a woman's whistling it is difficult to decide, but at the same time it is a curious fact that one seldom hears any of the fair sex amusing themselves in this manner. Mr. Henderson informs us that the seafaring part of the population on the coast of Yorkshire have the same dread of hearing a woman whistle. A few years ago, when a party of friends were going on board a vessel at Scarborough, the captain astonished them by declining to allow one of them to enter it. "Not that young lady," he said, "she whistles." Curiously enough the vessel was lost on her next voyage; so, had the poor girl set foot on it, the misfortune would certainly have been ascribed to her. According to one legend, this superstition originated in the circumstance that a woman stood by and whistled while she watched the nails for the Cross being forged. A correspondent of *Notes and Queries* assigns another origin. He tells us that one day, after attempting in vain to get his dog to obey orders to come into the house, his wife essayed to whistle, when she was suddenly interrupted by a servant, a Roman Catholic, who exclaimed in the most piteous accents, "If you please, ma'am, don't whistle. Every time a woman whistles, the heart of the Blessed Virgin bleeds." The French, it seems, have a similar prejudice to hearing a woman whistle about a house, their proverb being as follows:—"Une poule qui chante le coq, et une fille qui siffle, portent malheur dans la maison." [126]

There are numerous signs and omens connected with household work. Thus, in Suffolk, the people say that if after sweeping a room the broom is accidentally left up in a corner, strangers will visit the house in the course of that day; while others affirm, in the Northern counties, that to sweep dust out of the house by the front door is equivalent to sweeping away the good fortune and happiness of the family. Care should rather be taken to sweep inwards—the dust being carried out in a basket or shovel—and then no harm will happen. Furthermore, the spider, which in daily life is little noticed except for its cobweb, the presence of which in a house generally betokens neglect, is by no means an unfriendly intruder. Although the servant oftentimes ruthlessly sweeps this uncared-for little visitor away from the wall, yet a common proverb reminds us that— [127]

"If you wish to live and thrive,  
Let the spider run alive,"

ill-luck being supposed to quickly overtake those who kill or even so much as injure it. It was a notion formerly prevalent in many parts of Scotland that should a servant wilfully kill a spider, she would certainly break a piece of crockery or glass before the day was out. One reason why the spider is protected against ill-usage is that it is supposed to bring prosperity; but the real cause, perhaps, is due to the influence of an old legend which relates how, when Christ lay in the manger at Bethlehem, the spider came and spun a web over the spot where He was, thus preserving His life by screening Him from all the dangers that surrounded Him.

Referring to the breaking of crockery, of which we have just spoken, there is a prevalent idea that if a servant breaks two things she will break a third. On one occasion the mistress of a household in Suffolk was not a little horrified at seeing one of her servants take up a coarse earthenware basin and deliberately throw it down upon the brick floor. "What did you do that for?" she not unnaturally inquired. "Because, ma'am, I'd broke two things," answered the servant, "so I thout the third better be this here," pointing to the remains of the least valuable piece of

pottery in the establishment, which had been sacrificed to glut the vengeance of the offended ceramic deities. A correspondent of Chambers' "Book of Days," alluding to another piece of superstition of this kind, tells us that he once had a servant who was very much given to breaking glass and crockery. Plates and wine-glasses used to slip out of her hands as if they had been soaped; even spoons came jingling to the ground in rapid succession. "Let her buy something," said the cook, "and that will change the luck." "Decidedly," said the mistress, "it will be as well that she feel the inconvenience herself." "Oh, I didn't mean that, ma'am!" was the reply; "I meant that it would change the luck." A few days after this conversation, on being asked whether she had broken anything more, she answered, "No, sir, I haven't broken nothing since I bout the 'tater dish." Unluckily, however, this was too good to last; the breaking soon re-commenced, and the servant was obliged to go. [128]

A superstitious dread still attaches in household matters to Friday as being an unlucky day, and many will not even so much as turn a bed for fear of some misfortune befalling them. Thus, in Northamptonshire, we are told the housewife allows the bed to remain unturned; and a Sussex saying admonishes persons "never to begin a piece of work on Friday, or they will never finish it." We may note here that one tradition assigns a very early origin to the unfortunate reputation of Friday, affirming that it was on this day that Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. It is considered very unlucky to change servants on this day of the week, and many try to avoid, if possible, doing so.

That bright and ever-cheerful companion of our homes in winter time, the fire, has given rise to a host of omens and portents, many of which at times create no small consternation when the events supposed to be prognosticated are not of a very lucky character. A hollow cinder, for example, thrown out of the fire by a jet of gas from burning coals is looked upon as a coffin if it be long, but as a money-box if it be round. Some, too, exclaim on seeing the fire suddenly blaze up that a stranger is near; whereas in the Midland counties if the fire burn brightly after it has been stirred, this is considered a sign that the absent lover, wife, or husband, as the case may be, is in good spirits. A very popular charm for reviving a fire when it has burnt down is to set the poker across the hearth, with the fore-part leaning against the top bar of the grate. The poker and top bar thus combined form a *cross*, and so defeat the malice of the witches and demons who preside over smoky chimneys. One notion is that the poker when in this position creates a draught, but the real meaning of this harmless superstition is, perhaps, the one that we have just given. Various items of weather-lore, also, have been derived from the way fires burn, an enumeration of which we find in Willsford's "Nature's Secrets":—"When our common fires do burn with a pale flame, they presage foul weather. If the fire do make a buzzing noise, it is a sign of tempests near at hand. When the fire sparkleth very much, it is a sign of rain. If the ashes on the hearth do clodder together of themselves, it is a sign of rain. When pots are newly taken off the fire, if they sparkle, the soot upon them being incensed, it is a sign of rain. When the fire scorseth and burneth more vehemently than it useth to do, it is a sign of frosty weather; but if the living coals do shine brighter than commonly at other times, expect then rain. If wood, or any other fuel, do crackle and wind break forth more than ordinary, it is an evident sign of some tempestuous weather near at hand; the much and sudden falling of soot presages rain." Once more, there is a curious notion that if a person sit musing and intently looking into the fire, it is a sign that a badly-disposed person is either fascinating him for evil, or throwing an evil spell over him. When this is the case, in order to break the spell, some one without speaking or attracting notice should take the tongs and turn the centre piece of coal in the grate right over, at the same time repeating certain words. While speaking of fires, we may note that there is a belief among the Yorkshire peasants that it is unlucky to allow a light to be taken out of their houses on Christmas Day—a superstition which prevails in Lancashire with regard to New Year's Day. A few years ago a man was summoned at Bradford on a charge of wilful damage by breaking a pane of glass in a cottage window. Having entered for the purpose of lighting his candle, the woman of the house strongly remonstrated, but offered him instead a few matches. The man then created a disturbance, and on the husband trying to eject him he broke the window. [129]

Omens, too, from candles are very numerous. Thus, we may note that in some of the Northern counties a bright spark in the candle predicts the arrival of a letter, and if it drops on the first shake, it is an indication that the letter has already been posted. To snuff out a candle accidentally is a sign of matrimony, and a curious mode of divination is still practised by means of a pin and a candle. The anxious lover, while the candle is burning, takes a pin and cautiously sticks it through the wax, taking care that it pierces the wick, repeating meanwhile the following rhyme:— [131]

"It's not this candle alone I stick,  
But A. B.'s heart I mean to prick;  
Whether he be asleep or awake,  
I'd have him come to me and speak."

She then patiently watches, for if the pin remains in the wick after the candle has burnt below the place in which it was inserted, then the loved one will be sure to appear; but should the pin drop out, it is a sign that he is faithless.

There are, however, a host of other superstitions relating to home-life, some of which we can only briefly describe, scattered as they are here and there over the United Kingdom, and varying in different localities. Thus, according to a well-known superstition, if a person suddenly shivers, it is a sign that some one is walking over his future grave, a notion which is not limited to any particular county, extending as far north as Scotland. It is fortunate, however, that all persons

are not subject to this sensation, otherwise the inhabitants of those districts or parishes whose burial-grounds are much frequented would, as an old antiquarian writer has observed, "live in one continued fit of shaking." Some, too, deem it unlucky to turn back after they have once started on some errand, or to be recalled and told of something previously forgotten. This superstition extends beyond our own country, and is found on the Continent, as for example in Sweden, where it is considered unadvisable not only to turn round when one is going on business, lest it should turn out ill, but even so much as to look back. At the present day, too, in the Midland counties, children are frequently cautioned by their parents not to walk backwards when going on some errand, it being regarded as a sure sign that misfortune will befall them if they disobey this injunction. Akin to this superstition, there are several others of a similar kind, among which we may include the supposed ill-luck of walking under a ladder; and North-country people have a dislike to meeting a left-handed person on a Tuesday morning, although on other days it is considered fortunate to do so. Referring to the many other items of folk-lore associated with our daily life, we must not omit those relating to money. Thus, it is generally acknowledged to be a bad omen to find it; and to insure health and prosperity, one should always turn a piece of money in one's pocket on first seeing the new moon, and on hearing the cuckoo in spring. There is, too, the common custom of the lower orders to spit on money for "luck's sake," a practice which is not only found in foreign countries, but may be traced back to ancient times. Misson, in his "Travels in England," describes this piece of superstition as it prevailed in this country in former years:—"A woman that goes much to market told me t'other day that the butcher-women of London, those that sell fowls, butter, eggs, etc., and in general most tradespeople, have a peculiar esteem for what they call a *handsel*, that is to say, the first money they receive in the morning they kiss it, spit upon it, and put it in a pocket by itself." Many, too, as a charm against poverty, carry a piece of money, with a hole in it, or one that is bent, in allusion to which Gay says:—

"This silver ring beside,  
Three silver pennies, and a nine-pence bent,  
A token kind to Brunkinet is sent."

Others, again, dislike "counting their gains," a superstition which, it has been suggested, may have some connection with David's sin in numbering the people of Israel and Judah. Hence some regard with feelings of strong antipathy our own decennial census, and it is only the compulsion of the law which induces them to comply with this national means of ascertaining the state of the population. Among minor superstitions, it is said that smoke and dust always follow the fairest; and if without any neglect, but even with care, articles of steel, such as keys, knives, &c., continually become rusty, it is a sign that some kind-hearted person is laying up money for one's benefit.

When, too, as often by coincidence happens, two persons in conversation are on the point of telling each other the same thing, it is an indication that some lie will before long be told about them; others think that if the two immediately join hands and wish silently, their desires cannot fail to come to pass. Some again, have a strong objection either to being weighed or to having their likeness taken, the latter superstition being mentioned by Mr. Napier as prevalent in some parts of Scotland. Once more, there is a belief among the Sussex peasantry that bottles which have contained medicine should never be sold, or else they will soon be required to be filled again for some one in the house. These are some of the quaint superstitions with which even the trivial occurrences of home life are surrounded, and although, according to one view, many of these have little or no foundation for their existence beyond their traditionary history, yet it is a remarkable fact that they should have preserved their characteristic traits in spite of the long course of years through which they have travelled down to us from the past.



## CHAPTER XI. POPULAR DIVINATIONS.

Bible and Key—Dipping—Sieve and Shears—Crowing of the Cock—Spatulamancia—  
Palmistry and Onymancy—Look-divination—Astrology—Cards—Casting Lot—Tea-  
stalks.

The practice of divination, or foretelling future events, has existed amongst most nations in all ages; and, although not so popular as in days gone by, yet it still retains its hold on the popular mind. Many of the methods for diving into futurity are extremely curious, and instances of them occasionally find their way into the papers. In a [previous chapter](#) we have already shown how numerous are the divinations practised in love affairs, and what an importance is attached to them by the maiden bent on ascertaining her lot in the marriage state. There are, however, many other ends to which this species of superstition is employed, one being the detection of guilt. Thus, a common method is by the "Bible and the Key," which is resorted to more or less by the humbler classes from one end of the United Kingdom to the other, the mode of procedure being as follows:—The key is placed on a certain chapter, and the Sacred Volume closed and fastened tightly. The Bible and the key are then suspended to a nail, the accused person's name is repeated three times by one of those present, while another recites these words:—

"If it turns to thee thou art the thief,  
And we all are free."

This incantation being concluded, should the key be found to have turned, it is unanimously agreed that the accused is the guilty one. Not very long ago, a lady residing at Ludlow having lost a sheet made use of this test. Armed with a copy of the Sacred Book, she perambulated the neighbourhood, placing the key in the volume near several houses. At last, on arriving before a certain door, it was alleged that the key with much alacrity began, of its own accord, to turn; whereupon the owner of the lost sheet uttered the suspected person's name as loudly as she could; after which, it is said, the Bible turned completely round and fell on the ground. Again, a year or two ago, at Southampton, a boy working on a collier was charged with theft, the only evidence against him being such as was afforded by the ordeal of the Bible and key. It seems that the mate and some others swung a Bible attached to a key with a piece of yarn, the key being placed on the first chapter of Ruth. While the Bible was turning, the names of several persons suspected were called over, but on mention of the prisoner's the book fell on the ground. The bench, of course, discharged the prisoner.

Closely akin to this method of divination is the well-known mediæval diversion known as the *Sortes Virgilianæ*, which consisted in opening a volume of Virgil's works, and forecasting the future from some word or passage selected at random. The Sacred Book is now the modern substitute, and there is no doubt but that the superstition is thousands of years older than even the Virgil of the Augustan age. This custom, practised in many parts of England on New Year's Day, is called "Dipping." A Bible is laid on the table at breakfast-time, and those who wish to consult it open its pages at random; it being supposed that the events of the ensuing year will be in some way foreshown by the contents of the chapter contained in the two open pages. Sometimes the anxious inquirer will take the Bible to bed with him on New Year's Eve, and on awaking after twelve o'clock, open it in the dark, mark a verse with his thumb, turn down a corner of the page, and replace the book under the pillow. That verse is said to be a prophecy of the good or bad luck that will befall him during the coming year. This as a mode of divination is extensively practised. Another form of this superstition consists in foretelling the events in a man's life from the last chapter of the Book of Proverbs, the thirty-one verses of this chapter being supposed to have a mystical reference to the corresponding days of the month. Thus, it is predicted of persons born on the 14th that they will get their "food from afar." A correspondent of *Notes and Queries*, writing from a Northamptonshire village, tells us that "this is so fully believed in by some that a boy has actually been apprenticed to a *linen*-draper, for no other reason than because he was born on the 24th of the month; whilst those born on the 13th would be sent to a *woollen*-draper. The twenty-fourth verse speaks of 'fine linen,' and the thirteenth of 'wool.'"

Another means of discovering a guilty person is by the "Sieve and Shears," one of those divinatory instruments upon which such implicit reliance has been placed by superstitious folk from time out of mind, described as it is in the "Hudibras" as

"Th' oracle of sieve and shears,  
That turns as certain as the spheres."

The sieve is held hanging by a thread, or else by the points of a pair of shears stuck into its rim, it being supposed to turn, or swing, or fall at the mention of a thief's name, and give similar signs for other purposes. This ancient rite was formerly known as the "Trick of the Sieve and Scissors," and was generally practised among the Greeks for ascertaining crime. We find an allusion to it in Theocritus:—

"To Agrio, too, I made the same demand;  
A cunning woman she, I cross'd her hand:  
She turn'd the sieve and shears, and told me true,  
That I should love, but not be lov'd by you."

Among other modes of divination practised for the same purpose, there is one by the crowing of the cock. Thus, a farmer in Cornwall having been robbed of some property, invited all his neighbours into his cottage, and when they were assembled he placed a cock under the "brandice" (an iron vessel formerly much used by the peasantry in baking), he then asked each one to touch the brandice with the third finger, and say, "In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, speak." Every one did as they were directed, and yet no sound came from beneath the brandice. The last person was a woman who occasionally laboured for the farmer in his field. She hung back, hoping to pass unobserved amidst the crowd. The neighbours, however, would not permit her to do so, and no sooner had she touched the brandice than, before she could even utter the prescribed words, the cock crew. Thereupon she fainted on the spot, and on recovering confessed her guilt.

In the North of England there was formerly a curious process of divination in the case of a person bewitched:—A black hen was stolen, the heart taken out, stuck full of pins, and roasted at midnight. It was then supposed that the "double" of the witch would come and nearly pull the door down. If, however, the "double" was not seen, any one of the neighbours who had passed a remarkably bad night was fixed upon. [139]

Referring in the next place to what may be considered the principal object of divination, a knowledge of futurity, we find various mystic arts in use to gain this purpose. Foremost among these may be reckoned "Spatulamancia," "reading the speal-bone," or "divination by the blade-bone," an art which is of very ancient origin. It is, we are told by Mr. Tylor, especially found in Tartary, whence it may have spread into all other countries where we hear of it. The mode of procedure is as follows:—The shoulder-blade is put on the fire till it cracks in various directions, and then a long split lengthwise is reckoned as "the way of life," while cross-cracks on the right and left stand for different kinds of good and evil fortune, and so on. In Ireland, Camden speaks of looking through the blade-bone of a sheep, to discover a black spot which foretells a death; and Drayton in his "Polyolbion" thus describes it:—

"By th' shoulder of a ram from off the right side par'd,  
Which usually they boile, the spade-bone being bar'd,  
Which when the wizard takes, and gazing thereupon  
Things long to come foreshows, as things done long agone."

This species of divination was in days gone by much practised in Scotland, and a good account of the Highland custom of thus divining is given by Mr. Thoms in the "Folk-Lore Record" (i. 177), from a manuscript account by Mr. Donald McPherson, a bookseller of Chelsea, a Highlander born, and who was well acquainted with the superstitions of his countrymen:—"Before the shoulder-blade is inspected, the whole of the flesh must be stripped clean off, without the use of any metal, either by a bone or a hard wooden knife, or by the teeth. Most of the discoveries are made by inspecting the spots that may be observed in the semi-transparent part of the blade; but very great proficients penetrate into futurity though the opaque parts also. Nothing can be known that may happen beyond the circle of the ensuing year. The discoveries made have relation only to the person for whom the sacrifice is offered." [140]

Chiromancy, or palmistry, as a means of unravelling hidden things, still finds favour not only with gipsy fortune-tellers, but even with those who profess to belong to the intelligent classes of society. This branch of fortune-telling flourished in ancient Greece and Italy, as we are informed it still does in India, where to say, "It is written on the palms of my hands," is the ordinary way of expressing what is looked upon as inevitable. The professors of this art formerly attributed to it a Divine origin, quoting as their authority the following verse from the Book of Job: "He sealeth up the hand of every man, that all men may know his work;" or as the Vulgate renders the passage: "Qui in manu omnium hominum signa posuit"—"Who has placed signs in the hand of all men"—which certainly gives it a more chiromantical meaning. Thus chiromancy, or palmistry, traces the future from an examination of the "lines" of the palm of the hand, each of which has its own peculiar character and name, as for instance the line of long life, of married life, of fortune, and so on. However childish this system may be, it still has its numerous votaries, and can often be seen in full force at our provincial fairs. Referring to its popularity in this country in former years, we find it severely censured by various writers. Thus one author of the year 1612 speaks of "vain and frivolous devices of which sort we have an infinite number, also used amongst us, as namely in palmistry, where men's fortunes are told by looking on the palms of the hand." [141]

A superstition akin to palmistry is onymancy, or divination by the finger-nails, which is still a widespread object of belief. Sir Thomas Browne, in his "Vulgar Errors," describing it, admits that conjectures "of prevalent humours may be gathered from the spots on the nails," but rejects the sundry prognostications usually derived from them, such as "that spots on the tops of the nails signify things past, in the middle things present, and at the bottom events to come; that white specks presage our felicity, blue ones our misfortunes; that those in the nail of the thumb have significations of honour, of the fore-finger riches." As practised at the present day, this mode of divination differs in various counties. Thus, in Sussex, we are told by Mrs. Latham that the fortune-tellers commence with the thumb, and say "A gift," judging of its probable size by that of the mark. They then touch the fore-finger, and add "A friend;" and should they find a spot upon the nail of the middle finger, they gravely affirm it denotes the existence of an enemy somewhere. It is the presence or absence of such a mark on the third finger that proves one's future good or ill success in love; whereas one on the little finger is a warning that the person will soon have to undergo a journey. [142]

Again, some profess to be able to tell events by the face, or "look-divination"—a species of

physiognomy which was formerly much believed in by all classes of society, and may still be met with in country villages. Indeed, there is scarcely a mark on the face which has not been supposed to betoken something or other; and in a book of "Palmistry and Physiognomy," translated by Fabian Withers, 1656, are recorded sundry modes of divination from "upright eyebrows, brows hanging over, narrow foreheads, faces plain and flat, lean faces, sad faces, sharp noses, ape-like noses, thick nostrils," &c. However foolish these may appear, yet there will always be simple-minded persons ready to make themselves miserable by believing that the future events of their life—either for weal or woe—are indelibly written on their face. Equally illogical and fanciful is that pseudo-science, astrology, whereby the affairs of men, it is said, can be read from the motions of the heavenly bodies. A proof of the extensive belief at the present day in this mode of divination may be gathered from the piles of "Zadkiel's Almanacks" which regularly appear in the fashionable booksellers' windows about Christmas-time. That educated people, who must be aware how names of stars and constellations have been arbitrarily given by astronomers, should still find in these materials for calculating human events, is a curious case of superstitious survival. Very many, for instance, are firmly convinced that a child born under the "Crab" will not do well in life, and that another born under the "Waterman" is likely to meet with a watery death, and so forth. This science, as is well known, is of very old institution, and originated in a great measure in the primitive ages of the world, when animating intelligences were supposed to reside in the celestial bodies. As these mythical conceptions, however, have long ago passed away under the influence of civilisation, one would scarcely expect to find in our enlightened nineteenth century so great a number of intellectual persons putting faith in such a system of delusion. In this respect, happily, we are not worse than our Continental neighbours; for there are many districts in Germany where the child's horoscope is still regularly kept with the baptismal certificate in the family chest. In days gone by, this kind of divination was very widely credited in this country, and by most of our old writers is most unsparingly condemned. Thus Shakespeare, in *King Lear* (Act i., sc. 2), has ridiculed it in a masterly way, when he represents Edmund as saying: "This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune—often the surfeit of our own behaviour—we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars, as if we were villains by necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves, and treachers by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars, and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence." Sir Thomas Browne goes so far as to attribute divination by astrology to Satan, remarking how he "makes the ignorant ascribe natural effects to supernatural causes; and thus deludes them with this form of error." And another old writer sensibly adds that, although astrologers undertake "to tell all people most obscure and hidden secrets abroad, they at the same time know not what happens in their own houses and in their own chambers." In spite, however, of the frequent denunciations of this popular form of superstition, it appears that they had little effect, for James I. was notorious for his credulity about such delusions; and both Charles I. and Cromwell are said to have consulted astrologers.

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A further form of divination still much practised is by a pack of cards, most of these being supposed to have a symbolical meaning; the king of hearts, for example, denoting a true-loving swain, and the king of diamonds indicating great wealth. The following quaint lines, extracted from an old chap-book quoted in Brand's "Popular Antiquities," describe this mode of fortune-telling as it was formerly consulted by our credulous countrymen:—

"This noble king of diamond shows,  
Thou long shalt live where pleasure flows;  
But when a woman draws the king,  
Great melancholy songs she'll sing.  
  
He that draws the ace of hearts,  
Shall surely be a man of parts;  
And she that draws it, I profess,  
Will have the gift of idleness."

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Indeed, scarcely a month passes without several persons being punished for extorting money from silly people, on the pretence of revealing to them by card-divination their future condition in life. Among the gipsies this is the favourite form of fortune-telling; and its omens are eagerly received by anxious aspirants after matrimony, who are ever desirous to know whether their husbands are to be tall or short, dark or fair, rich or poor, and so on. Mrs. Latham tells us of a certain woman who was reported to be skilful in such matters, and was in the habit of confidently foretelling with a pack of cards her fellow-servants' coming lot in matrimony. The mode of procedure was as follows:—The cards were dealt round by the diviner, with much mystical calculation, and the fortunate maiden who found the ace of diamonds in her heap was to marry a rich man. The one, however, who was unlucky enough to have the knave of clubs or spades was destined to have nothing but poverty and misery in her wedded state. Again, the presence of the king of diamonds or of hearts in hand was a sign that the possessor's partner for life would be a fair man, while the king of clubs or spades gave warning that he would be dark. To find in one's heap either the knave of hearts or of diamonds was most ominous, as it revealed an unknown enemy. Again, divination by casting lot has not yet fallen into disuse. According to some this means of deciding doubtful matters is of God's appointment, and therefore cannot fail, the following text being quoted as a proof: "The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord" (Proverbs xvi. 33). In Lancashire, when boys do not wish to divide anything they decide "who must take all" by drawing "short cuts." A number of straws, pieces of twine, &c., of different lengths, are held by one not interested, so that an equal portion of each is alone visible; each boy draws one, and he who gets the longest is entitled to the prize.

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A new-laid egg affords another means of diving into futurity. The person anxious to be enlightened about his future perforates with a pin the small end of an egg, and lets three drops of the white fall into a basin of water, which soon diffuse themselves on the surface into a variety of fantastic shapes. From these the fortune-teller will predict the fortune of the credulous one, the character of his future wife, and a variety of particulars concerning his domestic happiness. A similar practice is kept up in Denmark, where young women melt lead on New Year's Eve, and after pouring it into water, observe on the following morning what form it has assumed. If it resembles a pair of scissors, they will inevitably marry tailors; if a hammer, their husbands will be smiths, and so on.

Divination by a staff was formerly a common practice in Scotland. When a person wished to go on a pleasure excursion into the country, and was unsettled in his mind as to which way to go, he resorted to this form of consulting fate. Taking a stick, he would poise it perpendicularly, and then leave it to fall of itself; and he would select the direction towards which it pointed while it lay on the ground. It has been suggested by some of our Biblical scholars that it is to this sort of divination that the prophet Hosea referred when he said "Their staff declareth unto them;" but this is mere conjecture. [147]

Among other common modes of divination may be mentioned that by tea-stalks. If two appear on the surface of a cup of tea, they should be placed on the back of the left hand, and struck with the back of the right. If they remain unmoved on the left, or adhere to the right, then it is an omen that the absent loved one will remain faithful. Tea-stalks are also said to foretell visitors, indicating the person to be visited by floating to the side of the individual. We might easily extend our list of popular divinations, but space forbids our doing so; and those already enumerated in the preceding pages have perhaps given a sufficient idea of the devices which have been resorted to, from time to time, by our superstitious country-folk for gaining an insight into futurity.

## CHAPTER XII. COMMON AILMENTS.

Charm-remedies—For Ague—Bleeding of the Nose—Burns—Cramp—Epilepsy—Fits—  
Gout—Headache, &c.

At the present day, in spite of the "march of intellect," there is still a widespread belief in the prevention and cure of the common ailments of life by certain remedies, which take the form of charms and amulets, or are preserved in those countless quaint recipes which, from time immemorial, have been handed down from parent to child. Indeed, thousands of our population place far greater faith in their domestic treatment of disease than in the skill of medical science, one of the chief requirements being that the patient should submit to the treatment recommended for his recovery with a full and earnest belief that a cure will be effected. Hence, however eccentric the remedy for some complaint may be, we occasionally find not only the ignorant but even educated classes scrupulously obeying the directions enjoined on them, although these are often by no means easy of accomplishment. Therefore, as most of the ordinary ailments of every-day life have what are popularly termed in folk-medicine their "charm-remedies," we shall give a brief account of some of these remedies in the present chapter, arranging the diseases they are supposed to cure in alphabetical order. [149]

*Ague.*—No complaint, perhaps, has offered more opportunities for the employment of charms than this one, owing in a great measure to an old superstition that it is not amenable to medical treatment. Thus, innumerable remedies have been suggested for its cure, many of which embody the strangest superstitious fancies. According to a popular notion, fright is a good cure, and by way of illustration we may quote the case of a gentleman, afflicted by this disease in an aggravated form, who entertained a great fear of rats. On one occasion he was accidentally confined in a room with one of these unwelcome visitors, and the intruder jumped upon him. The intensity of his alarm is said to have driven out the ague, and to have completely cured him. An amusing anecdote is also told of a poor woman who had suffered from this unenviable complaint for a long time. Her husband having heard of persons being cured by fright, one day came to her with a very long face, and informed her that her favourite pig was dead. Her first impulse was to rush to the scene of the catastrophe, where she found to her great relief that piggy was alive and well. The fright, however, had done its work, and from that day forth she never had a touch of ague, although she resided in the same locality. A Sussex remedy prescribes "seven sage leaves to be eaten by the patient fasting seven mornings running;" and in Suffolk the patient is advised to take a handful of salt, and to bury it in the ground, the idea being that as the salt dissolves so he will lose his ague. [150] A Devonshire piece of folk-lore tells us that a person suffering from ague may easily give it to his neighbour by burying under his threshold a bag containing the parings of a dead man's nails, and some of the hairs of his head. Some people wear a leaf of tansy in their shoes, and others consider pills made of a spider's web equally efficacious, one pill being taken before breakfast for three successive mornings.

*Bleeding of the Nose.*—A key, on account of the coldness of the metal of which it is composed, is often placed on the person's back; and hence the term "key-cold" has become proverbial, an allusion to which we find in *King Richard III.* (Act i., sc. 2), where Lady Anne, speaking of the corpse of King Henry VI., exclaims:—

"Poor key-cold figure of a holy king."

A Norfolk remedy consists in wearing a skein of scarlet silk round the neck, tied with nine knots in the front. If the patient is a male, the silk should be put on and the knots tied by a female, and *vice versa*. In some places a toad is killed by transfixing it with some sharp-pointed instrument, after which it is enclosed in a little bag and suspended round the neck. [151]

*Burn or Scald.*—According to a deep-rooted notion among our rural population, the most efficacious cure for a scald or burn is to be found in certain word-charms, mostly of a religious character. One example runs as follows:—

"There came two angels from the north,  
One was Fire, and one was Frost.  
Out Fire: in Frost,  
In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."

Many of our peasantry, instead of consulting a doctor in the case of a severe burn, often resort to some old woman supposed to possess the gift of healing. A person of this description formerly resided in a village in Suffolk. When consulted she prepared a kind of ointment, which she placed on the part affected, and after making the sign of the cross, repeated the following formula three times:—

"There were two angels came from the north,  
One brought fire, the other brought frost;  
Come out fire, go in frost,  
Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."

This, as the reader will see, is in substance the same as the one quoted above, and is a fair sample of those used in other localities.

*Cramp.*—Of the many charms resorted to for the cure of this painful disorder, a common one consists in wearing about the person the patella or knee-cap of a sheep or lamb, which is known in some places as the "cramp-bone." This is worn as near the skin as possible, and at night is laid under the pillow. In many counties finger-rings made from the screws or handles of coffins are still considered excellent preservatives, and in Lancashire it is prevented by either placing the shoes at bed-time with the toes just peeping from beneath the coverlet, or by carrying brimstone about with one during the day. Some, again, wear a tortoise-shell ring, while others have equal faith in tying the garter round the left leg below the knee. In days gone by a celebrated cure for this complaint was the "cramp-ring," allusions to which we find in many of our old authors. Its supposed virtue was conferred by solemn consecration on Good Friday. [152]

*Epilepsy.*—The remedies for this terrible disorder are extremely curious, and in most cases vary in different localities. One, however, very popular charm is a ring made from a piece of silver money collected at the offertory. A correspondent of Chambers's "Book of Days" tells us that when he was a boy a person "came to his father (a clergyman) and asked for a 'sacramental shilling,' *i.e.*, one out of the alms collected at the Holy Communion, to be made into a ring and worn as a cure for epilepsy." In the North of England "a sacramental piece," as it is usually called, is the sovereign remedy for this complaint. Thirty pence are to be begged of thirty poor widows. They are then to be carried to the church minister, for which he is to give the applicant a half-crown piece from the communion alms. After being "walked with nine times up and down the church aisle," the piece is then to have a hole drilled in it, and to be hung round the neck by a ribbon. It has been suggested that these widows' pence may have some reference to the widow's mite which was so estimable in the eyes of Christ. According to one notion, persons afflicted with epileptic fits are supposed to be bewitched, and the following extraordinary remedy is sometimes resorted to for their cure. A quart bottle is filled with pins, and placed in front of the fire until the pins are red-hot. As soon as this takes place it is supposed they will prick the heart of the witch, who to avoid the pain caused by the red-hot pins will release her victim from the suffering she has imposed upon him. This mode of disenchantment seems to have been of common occurrence; and sometimes, when old houses are under repair, bottles full of pins are found secreted in out-of-the-way places. Another remedy is for the patient to creep, head foremost, down three pair of stairs, three times a day, for three successive days. Sir Thomas Brown, too, discourses of the virtues of mistletoe in this complaint; and Sir John Colbach, writing in the year 1720, strongly recommends it as a medicine, adding that this beautiful plant must have been designed by the Almighty "for further and more noble purposes than barely to feed thrushes, or to be hung up superstitiously in houses to drive away evil spirits." [153]

*Erysipelas.*—This distemper has been popularly called "St. Anthony's Fire," from the legend that it was miraculously checked by that saint when raging in many parts of Europe in the eleventh century. An amulet formerly worn to ward it off was made of the elder on which the sun had never shone. "If," says an old writer, "the piece between the two knots be hung about the patient's neck, it is much commended. Some cut it in little pieces, and sew it in a knot in a piece of a man's shirt." A remedy in use among the lower orders, and extending as far as the Highlands, is to cut off one half of the ear of a cat, and to let the blood drop on the part affected—a practice which is evidently a survival of the primitive notion that a living sacrifice appeased the wrath of God. [154]

*Fits.*—Numerous indeed have been the charms invented for those suffering from this malady, and in many cases they are "marvellously mystical withal." Thus that little animal the mole has been in request, as the following mystic prescription will show. A gentleman residing in 1865, on the border ground of Norfolk and Suffolk, was one day asked by a neighbour to catch a live mole, as "her darter's little gal was subject to fits, and she had been told that if she got a live mole, cut the tip of his nose off, and let nine drops bleed on to a lump of sugar, and gave that to the child, 'twas a sartin cure." Here again we have the same notion of a sacrifice, one which, it may be noticed, underlies many of the charms of this kind. A Devonshire remedy is to go into a church at midnight and to walk three times round the Communion table, while many single women wear a silver ring on the wedding-ring finger, made out of sixpences which have been begged from six young bachelors. [155]

*Gout.*—The periodical attacks of this disease have from the earliest times been subjected to the influence of charms, blackberries being considered by the Greeks a good specific. Culpeper has bequeathed to us a curious remedy. He says, "Take an owl, pull off her feathers, and pull out her guts; salt her well for a week, then put her into a pot, and stop it close, and put her into an oven, that so she may be brought into a mummy, which, being beat into powder and mixed with boar's grease, is an excellent remedy for gout, anointing the grieved place by the fire." The germander speedwell has been esteemed highly efficacious, and the Emperor Charles V. is reported to have derived benefit from it.

*Headache.*—Cures to alleviate this tiresome pain are numberless. Mrs. Latham mentions what is considered by the Sussex peasantry a sure way of avoiding it in the spring, a piece of superstition we have already noticed: "No hair, either cut or combed from the head, must be thrown carelessly away, lest some bird should find it and carry it off, in which case the person's head would ache during all the time that the bird was busy working the spoil into its nest. 'I knew how it would be,' exclaimed a servant, 'when I saw that bird fly away with a bit of my hair that blew out of the window this morning when I was dressing; I knew I should have a clapping headache, and so I have.'" In some counties the common corn-poppay is called "headache," from the cephalalgic tendency of the scent. [156]

*Hydrophobia.*—From the most remote period no disease, perhaps, has possessed such a curious history, or been invested with so many superstitions as hydrophobia, and the countless remedies suggested for its cure form an important chapter in folk-medicine. In tracing back its history, we find that it was not only regarded by our ancestors with the same horror as now-a-days, but that every conceivable device was resorted to for removing its fatal effects. Thus, Pliny relates the case of a Roman soldier who was cured by the dog-rose, a remedy said to have been revealed to the man's mother in a dream. Among sundry other remedies he enumerates the hair of a man's head, goose-grease, fuller's earth, colewort, fish-brine, &c., as applications to the wounds. The favourite cure of Dioscorides was hellebore, and Galen's principal one was the river-crab. Sucking the wound seems also to have been considered efficacious. Passing on to modern times, the extraordinary remedies still employed are a convincing proof of the extent to which superstition occasionally reaches. The list, indeed, is not an inviting one, consisting amongst other things of the liver of a male goat, the tail of a shrew-mouse, the brain and comb of a cock, the worm under the tongue of a mad dog, horse-dung, pounded ants, and cuckoo soup. It may seem, too, incredible to us that less than a century ago the suffocation of the wretched victim was not unfrequently resorted to, and instances of this barbarous practice may be found in the periodical literature of bygone years. Thus, in *The Dublin Chronicle* (28th October, 1798), the following circumstances are recorded:—"A fine boy, aged fourteen, was bitten by a lady's lap-dog near Dublin. In about two hours the youth was seized with convulsive fits, and shortly after with hydrophobia; and, notwithstanding every assistance, his friends were obliged to smother him between two feather beds." In the year 1712, four persons were tried at York Assizes for smothering a boy, who had been bitten by a mad dog, on a similar plea as that uttered by Othello: [157]

"I that am cruel am yet merciful:  
I would not have thee linger in thy pain."

As recently as the year 1867 this mode of death was put into execution in the town of Greenfield, Michigan. A little girl having been seized with hydrophobia, a consultation was held by the physicians, and as soon as it had been decided by them that she could not recover, her parents put an end to her sufferings by smothering her to death. The folk-lore of this disease is most extensive, and as our space is limited we cannot do better than recommend our readers to consult Mr. Dolan's capital volume on "Rabies, or Hydrophobia," which contains an excellent description of the antiquity and history of this cruel complaint, and of superstitions which surround it. [158]

*Hysteria.*—This disorder, which assumes so many deceptive forms, was formerly known as "the mother," or "hysterica passio," an allusion to which occurs in *King Lear* (Act ii., sc. 4), where Shakespeare represents the king as saying,

"O, how this mother swells up toward my heart!  
*Hysterica passio!* down, thou climbing sorrow,  
Thy element's below!"

Some of the charms used for its cure are much the same as those employed in cases of epilepsy, a favourite one being the wearing of a ring made of a certain number of silver pieces obtained from persons of the opposite sex.

*Jaundice.*—Many of the remedies recommended for this complaint are not of a very agreeable kind, as, for instance, the following one mentioned by a correspondent of *Notes and Queries*, first, as having been resorted to in a Dorsetshire parish, where the patient was ordered to eat nine lice on a piece of bread and butter. One popular charm in days gone by, and certainly not of a very refined character, was known as the cure by transplantation, and consisted in burying in a dunghill an odd number of cakes made of ashes and other ingredients.

*Lameness.*—Sleeping on stones, on a particular night, is an old method of curing lameness practised in Cornwall. [159]

*Lumbago.*—In Dundee it is customary to wear round the loins as a cure for lumbago a hank of yarn which has been charmed by a wise woman, and girls may be seen with single threads of the same round the head as an infallible specific for tic-douloureux.

*Measles.*—In the quarterly return of the marriages, births, and deaths registered in the provinces, &c., in Ireland, published in October, 1878, we find the following extraordinary cure for measles, administered with what results will be seen:—"Sixty-three cases of measles appear on the medical relief register for past quarter, but this does not represent a third of those affected, the medical officers being only called in when the usual amount of local nostrums had been tried without effect. Every case seen suffered from violent diarrhœa, caused by the administration of a noxious compound called *crooke*. This consists of a mixture of porter, sulphur, and the excrement of the sheep collected in the fields. Every unfortunate child that showed any symptom of measles was compelled to drink large quantities of this mixture. All ordinary remedies failed to stop the diarrhœa thus produced, in many cases the children nearly dying from exhaustion." Repulsive as this piece of folk-medicine is, yet it is only one of a most extensive class of the same kind, many being most revolting. It is difficult to conceive how either ignorance or superstition could tolerate any practice of so senseless and indelicate a nature.

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*Paralysis.*—One of the popular charms for this disease is the same as that used in the case of epilepsy, namely, a silver ring made from money solicited from a certain number of persons. Cowslips, too, have been esteemed highly efficacious, and have on this account been termed "Herbæ Paralysis" by medical writers. For the same reason they are called "Palsyworts" in many country places.

*Rheumatism.*—Professors of the healing art have advised the sufferer to carry about in his pocket the right fore-foot of a female hare, while others consider a potato equally efficacious. A Cornish cure is to crawl under a bramble which has formed a second root in the ground, or to drink water in which a thunder-stone has been boiled. There is, also, a strong belief that a *galvanic ring*, as it is called, worn on the finger will serve as an excellent preservative. "A large number of persons," says Mr. Glyde in his "Norfolk Garland," "may be seen with a clumsy-looking silver ring, which has a piece of copper let into the inside, and this, though in constant contact throughout, is supposed (aided by the moisture of the hand) to keep up a gentle but continual galvanic current, and so alleviate rheumatism." A Sussex remedy is to place the bellows in the sufferer's chair that he may lean against them, and so have his rheumatism charmed away.

*Spasms.*—The belief in the curative powers of the form of the cross still holds its sway in the popular mind, and in the case of spasms, or that painful state of the feet in which they are said "to sleep," it is used under an impression that it allays the pain.

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*Small-pox.*—The curative properties attributed to some colours is illustrated by the treatment formerly employed in cases of small-pox. Thus, red bed-coverings were thought to bring the pustules to the surface of the body, and the patient was recommended to look at red substances. Purple dye, pomegranate seeds, or other red ingredients were dissolved in his drink, with the idea that as red is the colour of the blood, so disorders of the blood system should be treated by red. The renowned English physician, John of Gaddesden, introduced the practice into this country, and tried its efficacy on one of the sons of King Edward I., adding to his report, "et est bona cura." Fried mice are considered in some counties a good specific for this complaint, it being thought necessary by some that they should be fried alive.

*Sprain.*—Many of the charms practised in an accident of this kind are of a semi-religious character, and of a not very reverent form. Thus, to cure a sprain, a thread called the "wresting-thread" is tied round the injured part, after which the following formula is repeated:—

"Our Saviour rade,  
His fore-foot slade,  
Our Saviour lighted down;  
Sinew to sinew—joint to joint,  
Blood to blood, and bone to bone,  
Mend thou in God's name."

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This incantation, which, it has been suggested, may have originated in some legend of Christ's life, is frequently mentioned in the witch trials of the early part of the seventeenth century.

*Sty.*—To prevent or cure this disorder, known in some places as "west," it is customary on the first sight of the new moon to seize a black cat by the tail, and after pulling from it one hair, to rub the tip nine times over the pustule. As this charm, however, is often attended with sundry severe scratches, a gold ring has been substituted, and is said to be equally beneficial. This superstition is alluded to by Beaumont and Fletcher, in the *Mad Lovers* (Act v., sc. 4):—

"—I have a sty here, Chilax.  
*Chil.* I have no gold to cure it, not a penny."

Earrings are considered a good remedy for sore eyes; and in districts where the teasle is grown for use in the manufacture of broadcloth, a preservative against them is found in the water which collects in the hollow cups of that plant. Pure rain-water is reported to be another infallible



remedy. This must be carefully collected in a clean open vessel during the month of June, and if preserved in a bottle will, it is said, remain pure for any length of time.

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*Thrush.*—There is a popular notion that a person must have this complaint once in his life, either at his birth or death. Norfolk nurses prefer to see it in babies, on the plea that it is healthy, and makes them feed more freely; but if it appears in a sick adult person he is generally given over as past recovery. Some of the remedies for this disease are curious, as, for instance, a Cornish one, which recommends the child to be taken fasting on three consecutive mornings, "to have its mouth blown into" by a posthumous child. In Devonshire the parent is advised to take three rushes from any running stream, and to pass them separately through the mouth of the infant. Afterwards the rushes should be thrown into the stream again, and as the current bears them away, so will the thrush, it is said, depart from the child. Should this prove ineffectual, the parent is recommended to capture the nearest duck that can be found, and to place its beak, wide open, within the mouth of the sufferer. As the child inhales the cold breath of the duck, the disease, we are told, will gradually disappear. A further charm consists in reading the eighth Psalm over the child's head three times every day on three days in the week for three successive weeks.

*Toothache.*—This common ailment, which produces so much discomfort, unfortunately rarely meets with a degree of sympathy proportionate to the agony it occasions, but has nevertheless been honoured with an extensive folk-lore; and the quaint remedies that superstitious fancy has suggested for its cure would occupy a small volume if treated with anything like fulness. Selecting some of the best known, we may mention one which, in point of efficacy, is considered by many as unsurpassed, namely, a tooth taken from the mouth of a corpse, and worn round the neck as an amulet. Occasionally a double-nut is carried in the pocket for the same purpose. There is a belief, too, that the possession of a Bible or a Prayer Book, with the following legend written in it, is an effectual charm:—"All glory, all glory, all glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ was walking in the Garden of Gethsemane, He saw Peter weeping. He called him unto Him, and said, 'Peter, why weepest thou?' Peter answered and said, 'Lord, I am grievously tormented with pain—the pain of my tooth.' Our Lord answered and said, 'If thou wilt believe in Me, and My words abide with thee, thou shalt never feel any more pain in thy tooth.' Peter said, 'Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief.' In the name, &c., God grant M. N. ease from the pain in his tooth." These charm formulas, which constitute an important element in folk-lore literature, are still extensively used in this country to arrest or cure some bodily disease; and they are interesting as being in most cases modified forms of those used by our Anglo-Saxon ancestors.

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*Typhus Fever.*—Even for so dangerous a disease as typhus fever, our peasantry do not hesitate to practise their own remedies. One consists in applying the skirt of a sheep to the soles of the feet, and keeping it there for several hours, under a notion that this will draw away the fever from the head. Some years ago a clergyman in Norfolk, whilst visiting a poor man suffering from this complaint, found that his wife had placed the spleen of a cow on the soles of his feet, having been assured that it was an efficacious remedy. There is another story that the rector of a Norfolk parish was solicited for the loan of the church plate to lay on the stomach of a child, which was much swelled from some mesenteric disease, this being held to be an excellent remedy in such cases.

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*Warts.*—These have been regarded as prognostications of good or bad luck according to their position on the body, those on the right hand foreboding riches, whereas one on the face is believed to indicate troubles of various kinds. It would be difficult to enumerate the many methods that have been adopted to charm or drive them away, most persons disliking these ugly little excrescences, and willingly resorting to any means, however eccentric, to lose them. As in the case of so many other charms, most of those used also for this complaint are of the nature of a sacrifice, the warts being transferred to a substitute. Thus, the person is recommended to count his warts, to wrap in a piece of paper a pebble for each, and then to throw the parcel away, in the hope that its unfortunate finder will get them. Another remedy is to open the warts to the quick, and to rub them with the juice of a sour apple, which should afterwards be buried, and as it decomposes the warts will die away. Some rub the wart with eels' blood, and others believe in the efficacy of the ashen tree. After picking each wart with a pin, they stick it into the bark, and repeat this rhyme:—

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"Ashen tree, ashen tree,  
Pray buy these warts of me."

An Irish servant's formula is to pass his hand over the warts, making the sign of the cross, at the same time bidding them, in God's name, depart and trouble him no more. He then gives some one a slip of paper, on which is written "Jesus Christ, that died upon the cross, put my warts away," to drop by the roadside. It is thought that as it perishes, so, too, will the warts vanish. Another plan is to steal a piece of raw meat, rub the warts with it, and throw it away, a charm mentioned by Southey in "The Doctor." Other remedies are the juice of ants, spiders' webs, pigs' blood, while tying a horse-hair round each wart is considered efficacious. Another method is to blow on the warts nine times when the moon is full; and in some places boys take a new pin, cross the warts with it nine times, and cast it over the left shoulder. These, then, are some of the principal cures

for warts, most of them, as we have already said, belonging to the category of vicarious charms, which have at all times been one of the favourite resources of poor mortals in their difficulties—such charms being sacrifices made on the principle so widely adopted—*Qui facit per alium facit per se*. [167]

*Wen*.—The same notion of vicariousness enters into the cures recommended for wens, one of the most efficacious being the touch of a dead man's hand. And Grose informs us how, in days gone by, children were brought by their nurses to be stroked with the hands of dead criminals, even whilst they were hanging on the gallows. In Northamptonshire numbers of sufferers were in the habit of congregating round the gallows, in order to receive "the dead-stroke," the notion being that as the hand of the man mouldered away, so the wen would by degrees decrease. In Gloucestershire an ornamental necklace made of plaited hair from a horse's tail is thought to be a good remedy.

*Whooping-Cough*.—This common enemy of childhood has, from time immemorial, afforded ample opportunity to the superstitiously-inclined to devise sundry charms for its cure, of which the following are a few:—Passing the patient three times under the belly and three times over the back of a donkey; or let the parent of the afflicted child catch a spider, and hold it over the head of the child, repeating three times:—

"Spider, as you waste away,  
Whooping-cough no longer stay."

The spider must then be hung up in a bag over the mantlepiece, and when it has dried up the cough will have disappeared. There is a notion in Cheshire that this complaint can be cured by holding a toad or frog for a few moments with its head within the child's mouth, whereas in Norfolk the patient is advised either to drink some milk which a ferret has lapped, or to allow himself to be dragged three times round a gooseberry bush or bramble, and then three times again after three days' interval. In Sussex the excrescence often found on the briar-rose, and known as the "Robin Redbreast's Cushion," is worn as an amulet; and in Suffolk, if several children in a family are taken ill, some of the hair of the oldest child is cut into small pieces, put into some milk, and the mixture given to its brothers and sisters to drink. Some, again, procure hair from the dark cross on the back of a donkey, and having placed it in a bag, hang it round the child's neck. A Scotch remedy is to place a piece of red flannel round the patient's neck; the virtue residing, says Mr. Napier, not in the flannel but in the red colour, red having been a colour symbolical of triumph and victory over all enemies. [168]

As may be seen, therefore, from the extensive use of charm-remedies in household medicine, the physician's province has been assailed by the widespread belief in such imaginary remedies. Indeed, those who believe in the prevention and cure of disease by supernatural means are far more numerous than one would imagine, having their representatives even among the higher classes. However much we may ridicule the superstitious notions of our rural peasantry, or speak with compassion of the African negro who carries about him some amulet as a preservative against disease or as a safeguard against any danger that may befall him, yet we must admit that there is in England also a disposition to retain, with more or less veneration, those old-world notions which in the time of our forefathers constituted, as it were, so many articles of faith. [169]

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## CHAPTER XIII.

### MISCELLANEOUS HOUSEHOLD LORE.

Horse-shoes—Precautions against Witchcraft—The Charmer—Second Sight—Ghosts—  
Dreams—Nightmare.

The belief in witchcraft, which in years gone by was so extensively entertained, has not yet died out, and in many of our country villages it is regarded as one of those secret dangers to which every home is more or less exposed. Hence we find various devices still resorted to for the purpose of counteracting the supposed hurtful influences of this baneful power, instances of which we subjoin. Thus, according to a common idea, one of the best preservatives is a horse-shoe nailed to the threshold. The reason of this is said to be that Mars, the god of war, and the war-horse, was thought to be an enemy to Saturn, who, according to a mediæval idea, was the liege lord of witches. Thus, iron instruments of any kind have been said to keep witches at bay, a superstition which has been traced back to the time of the Romans, who drove nails into the walls of their houses as an antidote against the plague. Mr. Napier says that he has seen the horse-shoe in large beer-shops in London, and was present in the parlour of one of these when an animated discussion arose as to whether it was most effective to have the shoe nailed behind the door or upon the first step of the door. Both positions had their advocates, and instances of extraordinary luck were recounted as having attended them. [170]

In Lancashire, where there are, perhaps, more superstitions connected with this subject than in any other county of England, we find numerous traditions relating to the evil actions of the so-called witches in former years, many of which have become household stories among the peasants. At the present day the good housewife puts a hot iron into the cream during the process of churning to expel the witch from the churn; and dough in preparation for the baker is protected by being marked with the figure of a cross. In some places a "lucky stone"—a stone with a hole through it—is worn as an amulet, and crossed straws and knives laid on the floor are held in high repute. A belief, too, which was once very prevalent, and even still lingers on, was that the power of evil ceased as soon as blood was drawn from the witch. An instance of this superstition occurred some years ago in a Cornish village, when a man was summoned before the bench of magistrates and fined for having assaulted the plaintiff and scratched her with a pin. Not many years ago a young girl in delicate health living in a village near Exeter was thought to have been bewitched by an old woman of that place, and, according to the general opinion, the only chance of curing her was an application of the witch's blood. Consequently the girl's friends laid wait one day for the poor old woman, and scratching her with a nail till the blood flowed, collected the blood. This they carried home, and smeared the girl with it in the hope that it would insure recovery. Curious to say, she finally got well, an event which, it is needless to add, was attributed to this charm. It is still thought by many that witchcraft, like hydrophobia, is contagious, and that the person, if only slightly scratched by a witch, rapidly becomes one. The faculty of witchcraft is also said to be hereditary, and in some places families are pointed out as possessing this peculiarity. Again, witches are supposed to have the power of changing their shape and resuming it again at will, a notion which was very popular in past years, the cat's and the toad's being the forms they were thought to assume. Hence the appearance of a toad on the doorstep is taken as a certain sign that the house is under evil influence, and the poor reptile is often subjected to some cruel death. Cats, also, were formerly exposed to rough usage, one method being to enclose them with a quantity of soot in wooden bottles suspended on a line. The person who succeeded in beating out the bottom of the bottle as he run under it and yet escaping the contents was the hero of the sport, a practice to which Shakespeare alludes in *Much Ado about Nothing*, where Benedick says:— [171]

"Hang me in a bottle like a cat and shoot at me."

It is only natural, too, that in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare, in his description of the witches, should have associated them with the cat, their recognised agent. [172]

Another important character whose supernatural powers are still credited is the "charmer." She is generally an elderly woman of good reputation, and supposed to be gifted with extraordinary powers, by means of which she performs wonderful feats of skill. By her incantations and mysterious ceremonies she stops blood, cures all manner of diseases, and is, in short, regarded as almost a miracle-worker. At the same time, however, it must not be imagined that she exercises her power gratuitously, as oftentimes her charges are very high, and it is only by patient saving that the poor can accumulate enough to satisfy her exorbitant demands. This kind of superstition has been already incidentally alluded to in the [chapter on "Common Ailments;"](#) and it is one that still holds its ground in our country districts. These supposed charmers, however, do not always make a trade of their art; for, on the contrary, it is supposed by some of them that any offer of pecuniary remuneration would break the spell, and render the charm of no avail. [173]

Again, there is still an extensive belief in "second sight," certain persons being thought to possess the faculty of peeping into futurity, and revealing future events to their fellow-creatures. Many of the Highlanders lay claim to this power, which was called by the ancient Gaels "shadow-sight."

"Nor less availed his optic sleight,  
And Scottish gift of second-sight."

Sometimes, says Mr. Napier, the person fell into a trance, "in which state he saw visions; at other

times the visions were seen without the trance condition. Should the seer see in a vision a certain person dressed in a shroud, this betokened that the death of that person would surely take place within a year. Should such a vision be seen in the morning, the person seen would die before that evening; should such a vision be seen in the afternoon, the person seen would die before next night; but if the vision were seen late in the evening, there was no particular time of death intimated, further than that it would take place within the year. Again, if the shroud did not cover the whole body, the fulfilment of the vision was at a great distance. If the vision were that of a man with a woman standing at his left hand, then that woman would be that man's wife, although they may both at the time of the vision be married to others." The case is related of a man living near Blackpool who foretold death and evil events from his visions. Men of superior ability were credulous enough to visit him, and to give implicit faith to his marvellous stories.

[174]

A species of superstition that may be said to reign supreme in almost every home is the belief in ghosts, there being few households that do not contain those who believe in ghostly visitants. In this respect, therefore, we are not superior to our less instructed forefathers whose experiences have been transmitted to us in many of those weird and thrilling stories which are to be found recorded in many of our old county histories. Indeed, there is scarcely a village in England that does not boast of the proud distinction of having its haunted house or spot. Hence as nightfall approaches with its sombre hues of darkness, few persons can be found bold enough to visit such mysterious localities, for—

"Grey superstition's whisper dread,  
Debars the spot to vulgar tread."

Although many of these grotesque stories which have been from time to time associated with certain old houses are simply legendary and destitute of any truth, yet it cannot be denied that while occasionally causing fear even to the strong-minded they have acted most injuriously upon the credulous and superstitious. According to an old fancy, ghosts of every description vanish at cock-crow, in allusion to which Shakespeare makes the ghost of Hamlet's father vanish at this season:—

[175]

"It faded on the crowing of the cock."

One night, however, in the year has been said to be entirely free from spiritual manifestations of every kind—namely Christmas Eve—an idea to which Marcellus refers, who, speaking of the ghost, says:—

"Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes  
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,  
The bird of dawning singeth all night long,  
And then, they say, no spirit dares stir abroad;  
The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,  
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,  
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time."

But on other days of the year, every noise at night, however trivial, which cannot be satisfactorily explained by inquisitive minds, is thought by the superstitious to indicate that spirits are walking abroad; such illogical persons forgetting how in the stillness of the night sounds, which at other times would pass unnoticed, attract attention, and thus assume an exaggerated importance. In this way the whistling of the wind, the creaking of the floor, and a host of other natural noises have in the deceptive hours of midnight terrified their nervous victim, and filled the overwrought fancy with the most alarming delusions.

An amusing volume might be written showing how most of the ghost stories connected with so-called haunted houses have arisen. Thus, as Mrs. Latham points out in her "West Sussex Superstitions," there is very little doubt but that the ghosts formerly seen wandering in blue flames, near lonely houses on the coast, "were of an illicit class of spirits, raised by the smugglers in order to alarm and drive all others but their accomplices from their haunts." On one occasion, for instance, the unearthly noises heard night after night in a house at Rottingdean caused such alarm among the servants, that they all gave warning, when one night the noises ceased, and soon afterwards a gang of smugglers who had fallen into the hands of the police confessed to having made a secret passage from the beach close by the house, and said that, wishing to induce the occupiers to abandon it, they had been in the habit of rolling at the dead of night tub after tub of spirits up the passage, and so caused it to be reported that the place was haunted.

[176]

Ghosts are said to be especially fond of walking abroad on certain nights, the chief of these being St. Mark's Eve, Midsummer Eve, and Hallowe'en. Hence various methods have been resorted to for the purpose of invoking them with a view of gaining an insight into futurity, love-sick maidens, as we have said, seizing these golden opportunities for gaining information about their absent lovers. It must not be supposed, too, that apparitions are confined to the spirits of the departed, as throughout the country there are the most eccentric traditions of headless animals having been seen at sundry times rushing madly about at night-time.

[177]

Leaving, however, the subject of ghosts, we find in the next place an extensive folk-lore associated with dreams. We have already incidentally alluded to the many divinations practised for the sake of acquiring information by means of them on certain subjects, but we may further note that dreams are by some supposed occasionally to intimate not only future events, but things which are actually happening at a distance. Hence a "Dictionary of Dreams" has been framed whereby the inquirer, if he be credulously disposed, can learn the meaning and

signification of any particular dream which he may recollect. Thus, it is said that to dream of death denotes happiness and long life, but to dream of gathering a nosegay is unlucky, signifying that our best and fairest hopes shall wither away like flowers in a nosegay. Dreaming about balls, dances, &c., indicates coming good fortune; and thus we are told that those—

"Who dream of being at a ball  
No cause have they for fear;  
For soon will they united be  
To those they hold most dear."

To give one further illustration, to dream that one is walking in a garden, and that the trees are bare and fruitless, is a very bad omen, being said to indicate that one's friends will either become poor or forsake one. If the garden, on the other hand, should be in bloom, it is a propitious sign. Portents of approaching death are said to be received through dreams; and we will quote an example of this from Mr. Henderson, which happened, it is affirmed, some years ago in the family of an Irish bishop:—"A little boy came down-stairs one morning, saying, 'Oh, mamma, I have had such a nice dream. Somebody gave me such a pretty box, and I am sure it was for me, for there was my name on it. Look, it was just like this;' and, taking up a slate and pencil, the child drew the shape of a coffin. The parents gazed at one another in alarm, not lessened by the gambols of the child, who frolicked about in high health and spirits. The father was obliged to go out that morning, but he begged the mother to keep the child in her sight through the day. She did so, till, while she was dressing to go out in her carriage, the little boy slipped away to the stables, where he begged the coachman to take him by his side while he drove to the house door, a thing he had often done before. On this occasion, however, the horses were restive, the driver lost control over them, and the child was flung off and killed on the spot." Shylock, it may be remembered, in the *Merchant of Venice*, referring to his dream, says:—

"There is some ill a-brewing towards my rest,  
For I did dream of money-bags to-night."

Many curious charms are still practised to ward off that unpleasant sensation popularly known as nightmare, which both in this and other countries has given rise to a variety of superstitions. According to one old notion, this disagreeable feeling was produced by some fairy, under a disguised form, visiting the person, and worrying him while asleep by certain mischievous pranks. Thus, in Germany, the nightmare is said to appear at times in the shape of a mouse, a weasel, or a toad, and occasionally, too, in the form of a cat. One German story relates how a joiner was, night by night, much plagued with the nightmare, when he at last saw it steal into his room about midnight in the form of a cat. Having at once stopped up the hole through which the cat had entered, he lost no time in seizing the animal and nailing it by one paw to the ground. Next morning, however, much to his horror and surprise, he discovered a handsome young lady with a nail driven through her hand. He accordingly married her, but one day he uncovered the hole which he had stopped up, whereupon she instantly escaped through it in the shape of a cat, and never returned. There are numerous stories of a similar kind, in most cases the sequel being the same. Among the charms still in use as a preservative against nightmare may be mentioned a stone with a natural hole in it hung over the sleeper, or a knife laid under the foot of the bedstead, both being considered of equal efficacy. In Lancashire the peasantry believe that nightmare appears in the form of a dog, and they try to counteract its influence by placing their shoes under the bed with the toe upwards, on retiring to rest. Not very long ago, too, at the West Riding Court at Bradford, in a case of a husband and wife who had quarrelled, the woman stated that the reason why she kept a coal-rake in her bedroom was that she suffered from nightmare, and had been informed that the rake would keep it away. The best charm after all, however, for this common disorder is to be careful that one's digestive organs are not upset by incautious suppers eaten just before retiring to rest.

It only remains for us, in conclusion, to add once more that the preceding pages are not intended to be by any means exhaustive, our object having been to give a brief and general survey of that extensive folk-lore which has, in the course of years, woven itself around the affairs of home-life. However much this may be ridiculed on the plea of its being the outcome of credulous belief, yet it constitutes an important element in our social life, which the historian in years to come will doubtless use when he studies the character of the English people in this and bygone centuries.

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Transcriber's Note

Obvious typographical errors were repaired. Valid archaic spellings were retained.

The entry for "INDEX," at the bottom of the Contents page, did not appear in the original. It has been added for the convenience of the reader.

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