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SUPERSTITIONS ***

TRANSYLVANIAN SUPERSTITIONS.

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Transylvania might well be termed the land of superstition, for nowhere else does this curious crooked plant of delusion flourish as persistently and in such bewildering variety. It would almost seem as though the whole species of demons, pixies, witches, and hobgoblins, driven from the rest of Europe by the wand of science, had taken refuge within this mountain rampart, well aware that here they would find secure lurking-places, whence they might defy their persecutors yet awhile.

There are many reasons why these fabulous beings should retain an abnormally firm hold on the soil of these parts; and looking at the matter closely we find here no less than three separate sources of superstition.

First, there is what may be called the indigenous superstition of the country, the scenery of which is peculiarly adapted to serve as background to all sorts of supernatural beings and monsters. There are innumerable caverns, whose mysterious depths seem made to harbour whole legions of evil spirits: forest glades fit only for fairy folk on moonlight nights, solitary lakes which instinctively call up visions of water sprites; golden treasures lying hidden in mountain chasms, all of which have gradually insinuated themselves into the minds of the oldest inhabitants, the Roumenians, and influenced their way of thinking, so that these people, by nature imaginative and poetically inclined, have built up for themselves out of the surrounding materials a whole code of fanciful superstition, to which they adhere as closely as to their religion itself.

Secondly, there is here the imported superstition: that is to say, the old German customs and beliefs brought hither seven hundred years ago by the Saxon colonists from their native land, and like many other things, preserved here in greater perfection than in the original country.

Thirdly, there is the wandering superstition of the gypsy tribes, themselves a race of fortune-tellers and witches, whose ambulating caravans cover the country as with a network, and whose less vagrant members fill up the suburbs of towns and villages.

Of course all these various sorts of superstition have twined and intermingled, acted and reacted upon each other, until in many cases it is a difficult matter to determine the exact parentage of some particular belief or custom; but in a general way the three sources I have named may be admitted as a rough sort of classification in dealing with the principal superstitious afloat in Transylvania.

There is on this subject no truer saying than that of Grimm, to the effect that 'superstition in all its manifold varieties constitutes a sort of religion, applicable to the common household necessities of daily life,'^[1] and as such, particular forms of superstition may very well serve as guide to the characters and habits of the particular nation in which they are prevalent.

The spirit of evil (or, not to put too fine a point upon it, the devil) plays a conspicuous part in the Roumenian code of superstition, and such designations as the Gregynia Drakuluj (devil's garden), the Gania Drakuluj (devil's mountain), Yadu Drakuluj (devil's hell or abyss), &c. &c., which we frequently find attached to rocks, caverns, or heights, attest the fact that these people believe themselves to be

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surrounded on all sides by a whole legion of evil spirits.

The devils are furthermore assisted by witches and dragons, and to all of these dangerous beings are ascribed peculiar powers on particular days and at certain places. Many and curious are therefore the means by which the Roumenians endeavour to counteract these baleful influences, and a whole complicated study, about as laborious as the mastering of any unknown language, is required in order to teach an unfortunate peasant to steer clear of the dangers by which he considers himself to be beset on all sides. The bringing up of a common domestic cow is apparently as difficult a task as the rearing of any dear gazelle, and even the well-doing of a simple turnip or potato about as precarious as that of the most tender exotic plant.

Of the seven days of the week, Wednesday (*Miercuri*) and Friday (*Vinire*) are considered suspicious days, on which it is not allowed to use needle or scissors, or to bake bread; neither is it wise to sow flax on these days. Venus (called here *Paraschiva*), to whom the Friday is sacred, punishes all infractions of this rule by causing fires or other misfortunes.

Tuesday, however (*Marti*, named from Mars, the bloody god of war), is a decidedly unlucky day, on which spinning is totally prohibited, and even such seemingly harmless pursuits as washing the hands or combing the hair are not unattended by danger. On Tuesday evening about sunset, the evil spirit of that day is in its fullest force, and in many districts the people refrain from leaving their huts between sunset and midnight. 'May the *mar sara* (spirit of Tuesday evening) carry you off,' is here equivalent to saying 'May the devil take you!'

It must not, however, be supposed that Monday, Thursday, and Saturday are unconditionally lucky days, on which the Roumenian is at liberty to do as he pleases. Thus every well educated Roumenian matron knows that she may wash on Thursdays and spin on Saturdays, but that it would be a fatal mistake to reverse the order of these proceedings; and though Thursday is a lucky day for marriage,[2] and is on that account mostly chosen for weddings, it is proportionately unfavourable to agriculture. In many parishes it is considered dangerous to work in the fields on all Thursdays between Easter and Pentecost, and it is believed that if these days are not set aside as days of rest, ravaging hailstorms will be the inevitable punishment of the impiety. Many of the more enlightened Roumenian pastors have preached in vain against this belief, and some years ago the members of a parish presented an official complaint to the bishop, requesting the removal of their *curé*, on the ground that not only he gave bad example by working on the prohibited days, but had actually caused them serious material damage, by the hailstorms his sinful behaviour had provoked.

This respect of the Thursday seems to be the remains of a deeply ingrained, though now unconscious, worship of Jupiter (*Zoi*), who gives his name to the day.

To different hours of the day are likewise ascribed different influences, favourable or the reverse. Thus it is always considered unlucky to look at oneself in the glass after sunset; also it is not wise to sweep the dust over the threshold in the evening, or to give back a sieve or a whip which has been borrowed of a neighbour.

The exact hour of noon is precarious on account of the evil spirit *Pripolniza*,[3] and so is midnight because of the *miase nópte* (night spirit), and it is safer to remain within doors at these hours. If, however, some misguided peasant does happen to leave his home at midnight, and espies (as very likely he may) a flaming dragon in the sky, he need not necessarily give himself up as lost, for if he have the presence of mind to stick a fork into the ground alongside of him, the fiery monster will thereby be prevented from carrying him off.

The finger which ventures to point at a rainbow will be straightway seized by a gnawing disease, and a rainbow appearing in December is always considered to bode misfortune.

The Greek Church, to which the Roumenians exclusively belong, has an abnormal number of feast-days, to almost each of which peculiar customs and superstitious are attached. I will here only attempt to mention a few of the principal ones.

On New Year's Day it is customary for the Roumenian to interrogate his fate, by placing a leaf of evergreen on the freshly swept and heated hearthstone. If the leaf takes a gyratory movement he will be lucky, but if it shrivels up where it lies, then he may expect misfortune during the coming year. To ensure the welfare of the cattle it is advisable to place a gold or silver piece in the water-trough, out of which they drink for the first time on New Year's morning.

The feast of the Epiphany, or Three Kings (*Tre crai*) is one of the oldest festivals, and was solemnised by the Oriental Church as early as the second century, fully 200 years before it was adopted by the Latins. On this day, which popular belief regards as the coldest in the winter, the blessing of the waters, known as the feast of the Jordan, or *bobetasu* (baptism) feast, takes place. The priests, attired in their richest vestments, proceed to the shore of the nearest river or lake, and bless the waters, which have been unclosed by cutting a Greek cross some six or eight feet long in the surface of the ice. Every pious Roumenian is careful to fill a bottle with the consecrated water before the surface freezes over, and preserves it, tightly corked and sealed up, as an infallible remedy in case of illness.

Particularly lucky is considered whoever dies on that day, for he will be sure to go straight to heaven, the door of which is supposed to stand open all day, in memory of the descent of the Holy Ghost at the baptism of Christ.

The feast of St. Theodore, 11th of January (corresponding to our 23rd of January), is a day of rest for the girls, and whichever of them transgresses the rule is liable to be carried off by the saint, who sometimes appears in the shape of a beautiful youth, sometimes as a terrible monster.

The Wednesday in Holy Week is very important. The Easter cakes and breads are baked on this day, and some crumbs are mixed up with the cow's fodder; woe to the woman who indulges in a nap to-day, for the whole year she will not be able to shake off her drowsiness. In the evening the young men in each home bind as many wreaths as there are members of the family: each of these is marked with the name of an individual and thrown up upon the roof. The wreaths which fall down to the ground indicate those who will die that year.

Skin diseases are cured by taking a bath on Good Friday, in a stream or river which flows towards the east.

In the night preceding Easter Sunday witches and demons are abroad, and hidden treasures are said to betray their site by a glowing flame. No God-fearing peasant will, however, allow himself to be tempted by the hopes of such riches, which he cannot on that day appropriate without sin. On no account should he presume to absent himself from the midnight church service, and his devotion will be rewarded by the mystic qualities attached to the wax candle he has carried in his hand, and which when lighted hereafter during a thunderstorm will infallibly keep the lightning from striking his house.

The greatest luck which can befall a mortal is to be born on Easter Sunday while the bells are ringing, but it is not lucky to die on that day. The spoon with which the Easter eggs have been removed from the boiling pot is carefully treasured up, and worn in the belt by the shepherd; it gives him the power to distinguish the witches who seek to molest his flock.

Perhaps the most important day in the year is St. George's, the 23rd of April (corresponds to our 5th of May), the eve of which is still frequently kept by occult meetings taking place at night in lonely caverns or within ruined walls, and where all the ceremonies usual to the celebration of a witches' Sabbath are put into practice.

The feast itself is the great day to beware of witches, to counteract whose influence square-cut blocks of green turf are placed in front of each door and window.^[4] This is supposed effectually to bar their entrance to the house or stables, but for still greater safety it is usual here for the peasants to keep watch all night by the sleeping cattle.

This same night is the best for finding treasures, and many people spend it in wandering about the hills trying to probe the earth for the gold it contains. Vain and futile as such researches usually are, yet they have in this country a somewhat greater semblance of reason than in most other parts, for perhaps nowhere else have so many successive nations been forced to secrete their riches in flying from an enemy, to say nothing of the numerous veins of undiscovered gold and silver which must be seaming the country in all directions. Not a year passes without bringing to light some earthen jar containing old Dacian coins, or golden ornaments of Roman origin, and all such discoveries serve to feed and keep up the national superstition.

In the night of St. George's Day (so say the legends) all these treasures begin to burn, or, to speak in mystic language, to 'bloom' in the bosom of the earth, and the light they give forth, described as a bluish flame resembling the colour of lighted spirits of wine, serves to guide favoured mortals to their place of concealment. The conditions to the successful raising of such a treasure are manifold, and difficult of accomplishment. In the first place, it is by no means easy for a common mortal who has not been born on a Sunday nor at midday when the bells are ringing, to hit upon a treasure at all. If he does, however, catch sight of a flame such as I have described, he must quickly stick a knife through the swaddling rags of his right foot,^[5] and then throw the knife in the direction of the flame he has seen. If two people are together during this discovery they must not on any account break silence till the treasure is removed, neither is it allowed to fill up the hole from which anything has been taken, for that would induce a speedy death. Another important feature to be noted is that the lights seen before midnight on St. George's Day, denote treasures kept by benevolent spirits, while those which appear at a later hour are unquestionably of a pernicious nature.

For the comfort of less-favoured mortals, who happen neither to have been born on a Sunday, nor during bell-ringing, I must here mention that these deficiencies may be to some extent condoned and the mental vision sharpened by the consumption of mouldy bread; so that whoever has during the preceding year been careful to feed upon decayed loaves only, may (if he survives this trying *régime*) be likewise the fortunate discoverer of hidden treasures.

Sometimes the power of discovering a particular treasure is supposed to be possessed only by members of some particular family. A curious instance of this was lately recorded in Roumenia relating to an old ruined convent, where, according to a popular legend, a large sum of gold is concealed. A deputation of peasants, at considerable trouble and expense, found out the last surviving member of the family supposed to possess the mystic power, and offered him, unconditionally, a very handsome sum merely for his assistance in the search. The gentleman in question, being old, and probably sceptical, declined the offer, to the great disappointment of the peasant deputation.

The feast of St. George, being the day when flocks are first driven out to pasture, is in a special manner the feast of all shepherds and cowherds, and on this day only it is allowed to count the flocks and assure oneself of the exact number of sheep. In general, these numbers are but approximately guessed at, and vaguely designated. Thus the Roumenian shepherd, interrogated as to the number of his master's sheep, will probably inform you that they are as numerous as the stars of heaven, or as the daisies which dot the meadows.

The throwing up of wreaths on to the roofs, described above, is in some districts practised on the feast of St. John the Baptist, the 24th of June (July 6th), instead of on the Wednesday in Holy Week. Fires lighted on the mountains this same night are supposed to protect the flocks from evil spirits.

The feast of St. Elias, the 20th of July (August 1), is a very unlucky day, on which the lightning may be expected to strike.

If a house struck by lightning begins to burn, it is not allowed to put out the flames, because God has lit the fire and it would be presumption if man were to dare to meddle.[6] In some places it is believed that a fire lit by lightning can only be put out with milk.

An approved method for averting the danger of the dwelling being struck by lightning is to form a top by sticking a knife through a piece of bread, and spin it on the floor of the loft during the whole time the storm lasts. The ringing of bells is likewise very efficacious, provided, however, that the bell in question has been cast under a perfectly cloudless sky.

As I am on the subject of thunderstorms, I may as well here mention the *Scholomance*, or school supposed to exist somewhere in the heart of the mountains, and where all the secrets of nature, the language of animals, and all imaginable magic spells and charms are taught by the devil in person. Only ten scholars are admitted at a time, and when the course of learning has expired and nine of them are released to return to their homes, the tenth scholar is detained by the devil as payment, and mounted upon an *Ismeju* (dragon) he becomes henceforward the devil's aide-de-camp, and assists him in 'making the weather,' that is to say, preparing the thunderbolts.

A small lake, immeasurably deep, lying high up among the mountains to the south of Hermanstadt, is supposed to be the cauldron where is brewed the thunder, and in fair weather the dragon sleeps beneath the waters. Roumenian peasants anxiously warn the traveller to beware of throwing a stone into this lake lest it should wake the dragon and provoke a thunderstorm. It is, however, no mere superstition that in summer there occur almost daily thunderstorms at this spot, about the hour of midday, and numerous cairns of stones round the shores attest the fact that many people have here found their death by lightning. On this account the place is shunned, and no Roumenians will venture to rest here at the hour of noon.

Whoever turns three somersaults the first time he hears the thunder will be free from pains in the back during a twelvemonth, and the man who wishes to be ensured against headache has only to rub it against a stone or knock it with a piece of iron.

The Polish harvest custom of decking out a girl with a wreath of corn ears, and leading her in procession to the house of the landed proprietor, is likewise practised here, with the difference that instead of the songs customary in Poland, the girl is here followed with loud cries of 'Prihu! Prihu!' or else 'Priku!'[7] and that whoever meets her on the way is bound to sprinkle the wreath with water. If this detail be neglected the next year's crops will assuredly fail. It is also customary to keep the wreaths till next sowing time, when the corn is shaken out, and mingled with the grain to be sowed will ensure a rich harvest.

The feast of St. Spiridion, the 12th of December (corresponding to our 24th), is an ominous day, especially for housewives, and the saint often destroys those who desecrate his feast by manual labour.

That the cattle are endowed with speech during the Christmas night is a general belief, but it is not considered wise to pry upon them and try to overhear what they say, or the listener will rarely overhear any good.

This night is likewise favourable to the discovery of hidden treasures, and the man who has courage to conjure up the evil spirit will be sure to see him if he call upon him at midnight. Three burning coals placed upon the threshold will prevent the devil from carrying him off.

Christmas carols and dramas are also usual among the Roumenians, under the name of Kolinda, supposed to be derived from Kolinda or Lada, goddess of peace.[8] Amongst the parts enacted in these games, are those of Judas, who stands at the door and receives the money collected, and that of the bull, called Turka or Tur,[9] a sort of vague monster fantastically dressed up, half bull, half bear, with a clattering wooden bill, and a dash of Herod about his character, in so far as he is supposed to devour little children, and requires to be propitiated by a copper coin thrust into his bill.[10] In many districts the personating of these characters is supposed to entail a certain amount of odium upon the actors, who are regarded as unclean or bewitched by the devil during a period of six weeks, and may not enter a church nor approach a sacrament till this time has elapsed.

A leaf of evergreen laid into a plate of water on the last day of the year when the bells are ringing will denote health, sickness, or death, during the coming year, according as it is found to be green, spotted, or black on the following morning.

The girl whose thoughts are turned towards love and matrimony has many approved methods of testing her fate on this night.

First of all she may, by cracking the joints of her fingers, accurately ascertain the number of her admirers, also a freshly laid egg broken into a glass of water will give much clue to the events in store for her by the shape it adopts. To form a conjecture as to the shape and build of her future husband, she is recommended to throw an armful of firewood as far as she can from her; the piece which has gone furthest will be the image of her intended, according as the stick happens to be tall or short, broad or slender, straight or crooked. If these general indications do not suffice, and she wishes to see the reflection of his face in the water, she has only to step naked at midnight into the nearest lake or river. Very efficacious is it likewise to stand at midnight on the dunghill with a piece of Christmas cake in her mouth, and listen for the first sound of a dog's barking which reaches her ear. From whichever side it proceeds will also come the expected suitor.

Of the household animals, the sheep is the most highly prized by the Roumenian, who makes of it his companion, and frequently his counsellor, and by its bearing it is supposed often to give warning when danger is near.

The swallow is here, as elsewhere, a luck-bringing bird, and goes by the name of *galinele lui Dieu* (fowls of the Lord). There is always a treasure to be found near the place where the first swallow has been espied.

The crow, on the contrary, is a bird of evil omen, and is particularly ominous when it flies straight over the head of any man.[11]

The magpie perched upon a roof gives notice of the approach of guests,[12] but a shrieking magpie meeting or accompanying a traveller denotes death.

The cuckoo is an oracle to be consulted in manifold contingencies. This bird plays a great part in Roumenian poetry, and is frequently supposed to be the spirit of an unfortunate lover.

It is never permissible to kill a spider, as that would entail misfortune.

A toad taking up its residence in a cow-byre is assuredly in the service of a witch, and has been sent there to purloin the milk. It should therefore be stoned to death; but the same liberty must not be taken with the equally pernicious weasel, and if these animals be found to inhabit a barn or stable, the peasant must endeavour to render them harmless by diverting their thoughts into a safer channel. To this end a tiny threshing-flail must be prepared for the male weasel, and a distaff for his female partner, and laid at a place the animals are known to frequent.

The skull of a horse placed over the gate of the courtyard,[13] or the bones of fallen animals, buried under the doorstep, are preservatives against ghosts.

The place where a horse has rolled on the ground is unwholesome, and the man who steps upon it will be speedily attacked by eruptions, boils, or other skin diseases.

Black fowls are always viewed with suspicion, as possibly standing in the service of a witch, and the Brahmaputra fowl is curiously enough considered to be the offspring of the devil with a Jewish girl.

If a cow has gone astray it will assuredly be eaten by the wolf, unless the owner remembers to stick a pair of scissors in the centre rafter of the dwelling-room.

As a matter of course, such places as churchyards, gallow-trees, and cross-roads are to be avoided, but even the left bank of a river may under circumstances become equally dangerous.

A whirlwind always denotes that the devil is dancing with a witch, and whoever approaches too near to this dangerous circle may be carried off bodily, or at the very least will lose his head-covering.

But the Roumenian does not always endeavour to keep the evil one at arm's length; sometimes, on the contrary, he invokes the devil's assistance, and enters into a regular compact with him.

Supposing, for instance, that he wishes to ensure a flock, garden or field against thieves, wild beasts, or bad weather, the matter is very simple. He has only to repair to a cross-road, at the junction of which he takes up his stand, in the centre of a circle he has traced on the ground. Here, after depositing a copper coin as payment, he summons the demon with the following words:—

'Satan, I give thee over my flock (garden or field) to keep till—(such and such a term), that thou mayest defend and protect it for me, and be my servant till this time has expired—'

He must, however, be careful to keep within the circle he has traced, until the devil, who may very likely have chosen to appear in the shape of a goat, crow, toad, or serpent, has completely disappeared, otherwise the unfortunate wretch is irretrievably lost. He is equally sure to lose his soul if he die before the time of the contract has elapsed.

An apothecary of this town (Hermanstadt) told me that he was frequently applied to for a magic potion called *spiridusch*, which is said to have the property of disclosing hidden treasures to its lucky possessor. Only a few weeks ago he received the following letter, published in one of the local papers, and which I have here translated as literally as possible.

Worthy Sir,—I wish to ask you of something I have been told by others—that is, that you have got for sale a thing they call *spiridusch*, but which, to speak more plainly, is the devil himself. And if this be true, I beg you to tell me if it be really true, and how much it costs; for my poverty is so great and

has brought me so far that I must ask the devil to help me. Those who told me this were weak, silly fellows, and were afraid, but I have no fear and have seen many things in my life before; therefore I beg you to write me this, and to take the greeting of an unknown man.—N. N.

Here, as elsewhere, thirteen is an ominous number.

It is unfortunate to meet an old woman or a Roumenian Pope; the meeting of a Protestant or Catholic clergyman is indifferent, and brings neither good nor evil.

It is bad luck if your path be traversed by a hare, but a fox or wolf crossing your road is a good omen.

Likewise, it is lucky to meet a woman with a jug full of water, while an empty jug is unlucky; therefore, the Roumenian maiden who meets you on the way back from the well will, smiling, display her brimming pitcher as she passes, with a pleased consciousness of bringing good luck; while the girl whose pitcher is empty will slink past shamefacedly, as though she had a crime to conceal.

Every orthodox Roumenian woman is careful to do homage to the water-spirit, the *wodna zena or zona*, which resides in each spring, by spilling a few drops on the ground, after she has emptied her jug. She will never venture to draw the water against the current, for that would strike the spirit home and provoke her anger.

The Roumenian in general avoids the neighbourhood of deep pools of water, especially whirlpools, for here resides the dreadful *balaur*, or the *wodna muz*, the cruel waterman who lies in wait for human victims.

Each forest has likewise its own particular spirit, its *mama padura*,^[14] or forest mother. This fairy is in general supposed to be good-natured, especially towards children who have lost their way in the wood. Less to be trusted is *Panusch* (surely a corruption of the Greek god Pan?), who haunts the forest glades and lies in wait for helpless maidens.

Ravaging diseases, like the pest, cholera, &c., are attributed to spirit called the *dschuma*, to whom is sometimes given the shape of a fierce virgin, sometimes that of a toothless old hag. This spectre can only be driven away if a red shirt, which must be spun, woven, and sewed all in one night by seven old women, is hung out at the entrance of the afflicted village.^[15]

The body of a drowned man can only be found again by sticking a lighted candle into a hollowed-out loaf of bread and setting it afloat at night on the river or lake. There where the light comes to a standstill will the corpse be found. Until this has been done the water will continue to rise and the rain to fall.

At the birth of a child each one present takes a stone, and throws it behind him, saying, 'This into the jaws of the Strigoi,' which custom would also seem to suggest Saturn and the swaddled-up stones. As long as the child is unbaptised, it must be carefully watched over, for fear of being changed or otherwise harmed by witch. A piece of iron or a broom laid under its pillow will keep evil charms away.

Even the Roumenian's wedding day is darkened by the shade of superstition. He can never be quite sure of his affection for his bride being a natural, spontaneous feeling, since it may or will have been caused by the evil influence of a witch. Also at church, when the priest offers the blest bread to himself and his new-made wife, he will tremblingly compare the relative sizes of the two pieces, for whoever chances to get the smaller one must inevitably be the first to die.

But nowhere does the inherent superstition of the Roumenian peasant find stronger expression than in his mourning and funeral ceremonies, which are based upon a totally original conception of death.

Among the various omens of approaching death are the ungrounded barking of a dog or the crowing of a black hen. The influence of the latter may, however, be annulled and the catastrophe averted if the bird be put in a sack and carried thrice round the house.

Roots dug up from the churchyard on Good Friday are to be given to people in danger of death. If, however, this and other remedies fail to save the doomed man, then he must have a burning candle put into his hand; for it is considered to be the greatest of all misfortunes if a man die without a candle—a favour the Roumenian durst not refuse to his most deadly enemy.

The corpse must be washed immediately after death, and the dirt, if necessary, scraped off with knives, because the dead man is more likely to find favour with God if he appear before Him in a clean state. Then he is attired in his best clothes, in doing which great care must be taken not to tie anything in a knot, for that would disturb his rest; likewise, he must not be allowed to carry away any particle of iron about his dress (such as buttons, boot nails, &c.), for this would assuredly prevent him from reaching Paradise, the road to which is long, and is, moreover, divided off by several tolls or ferries. To enable the soul to pass through these a piece of money must be laid in the hand, under the pillow, or beneath the tongue of the corpse. In the neighbourhood of Fogaras, where the ferries or toll-bars are supposed to amount to twenty-five, the hair of the defunct is divided into as many plaits, and a piece of money secured in each. Likewise, a small provision of needles, pins, thread, &c., are put into the coffin to enable the pilgrim to repair any damage his clothes may receive on the way.

The mourning songs, called *Bocete*, usually performed by paid mourners, are directly addressed to the corpse and sung into his ear on either side. This is the last attempt made by the survivors to wake the dead man to life, by reminding him of all

he is leaving, and urging him to make a final effort to arouse his dormant faculties—the thought which underlies all these proceedings being, that the dead man hears and sees all that goes on around him, and that it only requires the determined effort of a strong will in order to restore elasticity to the stiffened limbs, and cause the torpid blood to flow again within the veins.

In many places two openings, corresponding to the ears of the deceased, are cut out in the wood of the coffin to enable him to hear the songs of mourning which are sung on either side of him as he is carried to the grave.

This singing into the ears has passed into a proverb, and when the Roumenian says, *i-a-cantat la wechia* (he has sung into his ears), it is tantamount to saying that prayer and admonition have been used in vain.

The *Pomana*, or funeral feast, is invariably held after the funeral, for much of the peace of the defunct depends upon the strict observance of this ceremony. At this banquet all the favourite dishes of the dead man are served, and each guest receives a cake (*colac*) and a jug (*ulcior*), also a wax candle, in his memory. Similar *Pomanas* are repeated after a fortnight, six weeks, and on each anniversary for the next seven years; also, whenever the defunct has appeared in dream to any member of the family, this likewise calls for another *Pomana*; and when these conditions are not exactly complied with, the soul thus neglected is apt to wander complaining about the earth, and cannot find rest. These restless spirits, called *Strigoii*, are not malicious, but their appearance bodes no good, and may be regarded as omens of sickness or misfortune.

More decidedly evil, however, is the vampire, or *nosferatu*, in whom every Roumenian peasant believes as firmly as he does in heaven or hell. There are two sorts of vampires—living and dead. The living vampire is in general the illegitimate offspring of two illegitimate persons, but even a flawless pedigree will not ensure anyone against the intrusion of a vampire into his family vault, since every person killed by a *nosferatu* becomes likewise a vampire after death, and will continue to suck the blood of other innocent people till the spirit has been exorcised, either by opening the grave of the person suspected and driving a stake through the corpse, or firing a pistol shot into the coffin. In very obstinate cases it is further recommended to cut off the head and replace it in the coffin with the mouth filled with garlic, or to extract the heart and burn it, strewing the ashes over the grave.

That such remedies are often resorted to, even in our enlightened days, is a well-attested fact, and there are probably few Roumenian villages where such has not taken place within the memory of the inhabitants.

First cousin to the vampire, the long exploded were-wolf of the Germans is here to be found, lingering yet under the name of the *Prikolitsch*. Sometimes it is a dog instead of a wolf, whose form a man has taken either voluntarily or as penance for his sins. In one of the villages a story is still told (and believed) of such a man, who driving home from church on Sunday with his wife, suddenly felt that the time for his transformation had come. He therefore gave over the reins to her, and stepped aside into the bushes, where, murmuring the mystic formula, he turned three somersaults over a ditch. Soon after this the woman, waiting in vain for her husband, was attacked by a furious dog, which rushed, barking, out of the bushes and succeeded in biting her severely, as well as tearing her dress. When, an hour later, this woman reached home alone she was met by her husband, who advanced smiling to meet her, but between his teeth she caught sight of the shreds of her dress which had been bitten out by the dog, and the horror of the discovery caused her to faint away.

Another man used gravely to assert that for more than five years he had gone about in the form of a wolf, leading on a troop of these animals, until a hunter, in striking off his head, restored him to his natural shape.

A French traveller relates an instance of a harmless botanist who, while collecting herbs on a hillside in a crouching attitude, was observed by some peasants at a distance and taken for a wolf. Before they had time to reach him, however, he had risen to his feet and disclosed himself in the form of a man; but this, in the minds of the Roumenians, who now regarded him as an aggravated case of wolf, was but additional motive for attacking him. They were quite sure that he must be a *Prikolitsch*, for only such could change his shape in such an unaccountable manner, and in another minute they were all in full cry after the wretched victim of science, who might have fared badly indeed, had he not happened to gain a carriage on the high road before his pursuers came up.

We do not require to go far for the explanation of the extraordinary tenacity of life of the were-wolf legend in a country like Transylvania, where real wolves still abound. Every winter here brings fresh proof of the boldness and cunning of these terrible animals, whose attacks on flocks and farms are often conducted with a skill which would do honour to a human intellect. Sometimes a whole village is kept in trepidation for weeks together by some particularly audacious leader of a flock of wolves, to whom the peasants not unnaturally attribute a more than animal nature, and one may safely prophesy that so long as the real wolf continues to haunt the Transylvanian forests, so long will his spectre brother survive in the minds of the inhabitants.

Many ancient Roumenian legends tell us that every new church or otherwise important building became a human grave, as it was thought indispensable to its stability to wall in a living man or woman, whose spirit henceforward haunts the

place. In later times people having become less cruel, or more probably, because murder is now attended with greater inconvenience to the actors, this custom underwent some modifications, and it became usual in place of a living man to wall in his shadow instead. This is done by measuring the shadow of a person with a long piece of cord, or a ribbon made of strips of reed, and interring this measure instead of the person himself, who, unconscious victim of the spell thrown upon him, will pine away and die within forty days. It is an indispensable condition to the success of this proceeding that the chosen victim be ignorant of the part he is playing, therefore careless passers-by near a building place may often hear the warning cry 'Beware, lest they take thy shadow!' So deeply engrained is this superstition that not long ago there were still professional shadow-traders, who made it their business to provide architects with the necessary victims for securing their walls. 'Of course the man whose shadow is thus interred must die,' argues the Roumenian, 'but as he is unaware of his doom he does not feel any pain or anxiety, so it is less cruel than walling in a living man.'

The superstitions afloat among the Saxon peasantry of Transylvania relate oftenest to household matters, such as the well-being of cattle and poultry and the success of the harvest or vintage. There is more of the quack, and less of the romantic element to be found here, and the invisible spiritual world plays less part in their beliefs.

Some of the most prevalent Saxon superstitions are as follows:

1. Whoever can blow back the flame into a candle which has just been extinguished will become pastor.
2. In going into a new-built house one must throw in a dog or a cat before entering, otherwise one of the family will soon die.
3. If a swallow fly under a cow straightway the milk will become bloody.
4. Whoever enters a strange house should sit down, were it only for a second, otherwise he will deprive the inhabitants of their sleep.
5. Whoever has been robbed of anything and wants to discover the thief, must select a black hen, and for nine consecutive Fridays must, as well as the hen, abstain from all food. The thief will then either die or bring back the stolen goods. (This is called taking up the black fast against a person.)
6. It is not good to point with the finger at an approaching thunderstorm; likewise, whoever stands over-long gazing at the summer lightning will go mad.
7. A person ill with the fever should be covered up with nine articles of clothing, each of a different colour and material: he will then recover.
8. Another way to get rid of the fever is to go into an inn or public-house, and after having drunk a glass of wine to go out again without speaking or paying, but leaving behind some article of clothing which is of greater value than the wine drunk.
9. Drinking out of seven different wells is likewise good for the fever.
10. Or else go into the garden when no one is looking, shake a young fruit tree and return to the house without looking back; the fever will then have passed into the tree.
11. Any article purposely dropped on the ground when out walking will convey the fever to whoever finds it. This method is, however, to be distrusted (we are told by village authorities), for the finder may avert the illness by thrice spitting on the thing in question. Spitting on all and every occasion is in general very efficacious for averting spells and other evils.
12. A hailstorm may sometimes be stopped by a knife stuck into the ground in front of the house.
13. A new servant must be allowed to eat freely the first day he or she enters service, otherwise their hunger will never be stilled.
14. It is bad luck to rock an empty cradle.
15. When someone has just died the window must be opened to let the soul escape.
16. It is not considered good to count the beehives or the loaves when they are put into the oven.
17. When the master of the house dies, one must go and tell it to the bees, and to the cattle in the stables, otherwise some new misfortune is sure to happen.
18. If the New Year's night be clear the hens will lay many eggs during the year.
19. It is not good to whitewash the house when the moon is decreasing, for that produces bugs.
20. Who eats mouldy bread will be rich and longlived.
21. Rubbing the body with garlic is a preservative against witchcraft and the pest.
22. Licking the platter clean at table will bring fine weather.
23. A funeral at which the bells are not rung brings hail.
24. When foxes and wolves meet in the market-place then prices will rise (naturally, since wolves and foxes could only be so bold during the greatest cold, when prices of eggs, butter, &c., are always at their highest).
25. To keep sparrows off a field or garden it is only necessary to sprinkle earth taken at midnight from the churchyard over the place.
26. A broom put upside down behind the door will keep away the witches.
27. It is bad luck to lay a loaf upside down on the table.
28. In carrying a child to church to be christened it is important to carry it by the broadest streets, and to avoid narrow lanes and byways, else when it is big it will become a thief.
29. If a murderer be confronted with the corpse of his victim the wounds will begin

to bleed again.[16]

30. Avoid a toad, as it may be a witch.

31. Little children's nails should be bitten off instead of cut the first time, lest they learn to steal.

32. An approved sort of love charm is to take the two hind legs of a green tree-frog, bury these in an anthill till all the flesh is removed, then tie them up securely in a linen handkerchief, and whosoever touches this linen will be seized at once with love for its owner.

33. To avert many illnesses which may occur to the pigs, it is still customary in some places for the swineherd to dispense with his clothes the first time he drives out his pigs to pasture in spring. A newly elected clergyman, regarding this practice as immoral, tried to forbid it in his parish, but was sternly asked by the village bailiff whether he was prepared to pay for all the pigs which would assuredly die that year in consequence of the omission.

34. The same absence of costume is likewise recommended to women assisting a cow to calve.

The night of St. Thomas (21st of December) is the date consecrated by Saxon superstition to the celebration of the games which elsewhere are usual on All-Halloween. Every girl puts her fate to the test on this evening, and there are various ways of so doing (too lengthy to be here described), with shoes, flowers, onions, &c. For the twelve days following it is not allowed to spin, and the young men who visit the spinning-room of the girls have the right to break and burn all the distaffs they find, so it has become usual for the maidens to appear with a stick dressed up with wool to represent the distaff instead of a real spinning-wheel.

Some of the Saxon customs are peculiarly interesting from being obviously remnants of Paganism, and are a curious proof of the force of verbal tradition, which in this case has not only borne the transplantation from a far distant country, but likewise weathered the storm of two successive changes of religion.

A very strong proof of the tenacity of Pagan habits and train of thought is, I think, the fact, that although at the time these Saxon colonists appeared in Transylvania, towards the second part of the twelfth century, they had already belonged to the Christian Church for more than three hundred years, yet many points of the landscape in their new home baptized by them have received Pagan appellations. Thus we find the *Götzenberg*,[17] or mountain of the gods, and the *wodesch* and the *wolnk* applied to woods and plains, both evidently derived from Wodan.

Many old Pagan ceremonies are still clearly to be distinguished through the flimsy shrouding of a later period, and their origin unmistakable even through the surface-varnish of Christianity which was thought necessary to adapt them to newer circumstances, and like a clumsily remodelled garment the original cut frequently asserts itself, despite the fashionable trimmings which now adorn it. In many popular rhymes and dialogues, for instance, it has been clearly proved that those parts now assigned to the Saviour and St. Peter originally belonged to the old gods Thor and Loki; while the faithless Judas has had the personification of a whole hoard of German demons thrust upon him. It is likewise strongly to be suspected that St. Elias who in some parts of Hungary, as well as in Roumania, Servia, and Croatia, is considered the proper person to be invoked in thunderstorms, is verily no other than the old thunder god Thor, under a Christian mask.

One of the most striking of the Christianised dramas just mentioned is the *Todaustragen*, or throwing out the Death, a custom still extant in several of the Transylvanian Saxon villages, and which may likewise be found still existing in some remote parts of Germany. The feast of the Ascension is the day on which this ceremony takes place in a village of this neighbourhood. It is conducted in the following manner:—

After forenoon church on that day, the school-girls of the parish repair to the house of one of their companions, and there proceed to dress up the 'Death.' This is done by tying up a threshed-out corn-sheaf into the rough semblance of a head and body, while the arms are simulated by a broomstick stuck horizontally. This done, the figure is dressed up in the Sunday clothes of a young village matron, the head adorned with the customary cap and veil fastened by silver pins; two large black beads, or black-headed pins, represent the eyes, and thus equipped the figure is displayed at the open window, in order that all people may see it, on their way to afternoon church. The conclusion of vespers[18] is the signal for the girls to seize the figure and open the procession round the village; two of the eldest girls hold the 'Death' between them, and the others follow in regular order two and two, singing a Lutheran Church hymn. The boys are excluded from the procession, and must content themselves with admiring the *Schöner Tod* (handsome Death) from a distance. When all the village streets have been traversed in this manner, the girls repair to another house, whose door is locked against the besieging troop of boys. The figure Death is here stripped of its gaudy attire, and the naked straw bundle thrown out of the window, whereupon it is seized by the boys and carried off in triumph to be thrown into the neighbouring stream or river. This is the first part of the drama, while the second consists in one of the girls being solemnly invested with the clothes and ornaments previously worn by the figure, and like it, led in procession round the village to the singing of the same hymn as before. This is to represent the arrival of summer. The ceremony terminates by a feast given by the

parents of the girl who has acted the principal part, from which the boys are again excluded.

According to popular belief it is allowed to eat fruits only after this day, as now the 'Death,' that is, the unwholesomeness, has been expelled from them. Also the river in which the Death has been drowned may now be considered fit for public bathing.

If this ceremony be ever omitted in the villages where it is customary, this neglect is supposed to entail the death of one of the youths or maidens.

This same ceremony may, as I have said, be found still lingering in many other places, everywhere with slight variations. There are villages where the figure is burnt instead of drowned, and Passion Sunday (often called the Dead Sunday), or else the 25th of March, are the days sometimes chosen for its accomplishment. In some places it was usual for the straw figure to be attired in the shirt of the last person who had died, and with the veil of the most recent bride on its head. Also the figure is occasionally pelted with stones by the youth of both sexes; whoever hits it will not die during the year.

At Nuremberg little girls dressed in white used to go in procession through the town, carrying a small open coffin, in which a doll was laid out in state, or sometimes only a stick dressed up, with an apple to represent the head.

In many of these German places, the rhymes which are sung apply to the advent of summer and the extinction of winter, such as the following:—

And now we have chased the death away
And brought in the summer so warm and so gay;
The summer and the month of May
We bring sweet flowers full many a one.
We bring the rays of the golden sun,
For the dreary death at last is gone.

or else,

Come all of you and do not tarry
The evil death away to carry;
Come, spring, once more, with us to dwell,
Welcome, O spring, in wood and dell!

And there is no doubt that similar rhymes used also to be sung here, until they were replaced by the Lutheran hymns.

Some German archæologists have attempted to prove that 'death' in these games is of more recent introduction, and has replaced the 'winter' of former times, so as to give the ceremony a more Christian colouring by the allusion of the triumph of Christ over death, on His resurrection and ascension into heaven. Without presuming to contradict the many well-known authorities who have taken this view of the case, I cannot help thinking that it hardly requires such explanation to account for the presence of death in these dramas. Nowadays, when luxury and civilisation have done so much towards equalising all seasons, so that we can never be deprived of flowers in winter, nor want for ice in summer, we can with difficulty realise the enormous gulf which in olden times separated winter from summer. Not only in winter were all means of communication cut off for a large proportion of people, but their very existence was, so to say, frozen up; and if the granaries were scantily filled, or the inclement season prolonged by some weeks, death was literally standing at the door of thousands of poor wretches. No wonder, then, that winter and death became identical in their minds, and that they hailed the advent of spring with delirious joy, dancing round the first violet, and following about the first cockchafer in solemn procession. It was the feast of Nature which they celebrated then as now—Nature mighty and eternal—which must always remain essentially the same, whether decked out in Pagan or Christian garb.

Another remnant of Paganism is the *Feurix* or *Feuriswolf*, which lingers yet in the mind of these people. According to ancient German mythology the *Feuriswolf* is a monster which, on the last day, is to open his mouth so wide that the top jaw touches the sky, and the lower one the earth; and not long ago a Saxon woman bitterly complained in a court of justice that her husband had cursed her over strongly, in saying, 'Der wärthangd saul dich frieszen;' literally, 'May the world-dog swallow thee!'

The gipsies take up a different position as regards superstition from either Roumenian or Saxon, since they may be rather considered to be direct causes and mainsprings of superstition, than victims of credulity themselves. The Tzigane, whose religion is of such an extremely superficial nature that he rarely believes in anything as complicated as the immortality of the soul, can hardly be supposed to lay much weight upon the supernatural; and if he instinctively avoids such places as churchyards, gallow-trees, &c., his feelings are rather those of a child who shirks being reminded of anything so unpleasant as death or burial.

That, however, these people exercise a considerable influence on their Saxon and Roumenian neighbours is undoubted, and it is a paradoxical fact, that the same people who regard the gipsy as an undoubted thief, liar, and cheat, in all the common transactions of daily life, do not hesitate to confide in him blindly for charmed medicines and love-potions, and are ready to attribute to him unerring power in deciphering the mysteries of the future.

The Saxon peasant will, it is true, often drive away the fortune-teller with blows and curses from his door, but his wife, as often as not, will secretly beckon to her to come in again by the back door, in order to be consulted as to the illness of the cows, or to beg from her a remedy against the fever.

Wonderful potions and salves, in which the fat of bears, dogs, snakes and snails, along with the oil of rain-worms, the bodies of spiders and midges rubbed into a paste, and many other similar ingredients, are concocted by these cunning Bohemians, who will sometimes thus make thrice as much money out of the carcass of a dead dog as another from the sale of three healthy pigs.

It has also been averred that both Roumenian and Saxon mothers, whose sickly infants are thought to be suffering from the effects of the evil eye, are frequently in the habit of giving the child to be nursed for a period of nine days to some gipsy woman, who is supposed to be able to undo the spell.

There is not a village which does not boast of one or more fortune-tellers, and living in the suburbs of each town are many old women who make an easy and comfortable livelihood only by imposing on the credulity of their fellow-creatures.

The gipsies, one of whose principal trades is the burning of bricks and tiles, are often accused of occasioning lengthy droughts to suit their own purposes. When this has occurred, and the necessary rains have not been produced by soundly beating the guilty Tziganes, the Roumenians sometimes resort to the *Papaluga*, or Rain-maiden. This is done by stripping a young gipsy girl quite naked, and dressing her up with wreaths of flowers and leaves which entirely cover her up, leaving only the head visible. Thus adorned, the *Papaluga* is conducted round the villages in procession, to the sound of music and singing, and everyone hastens to water her copiously.

If also the *Papaluga* fails to bring the desired rain, then the evil must evidently be of a deeper and more serious nature, and is to be attributed to a vampire, who must be sought out and destroyed in the manner described above.

The part of the *Papaluga* is also sometimes enacted by a Roumenian maiden, when there is no reason to suspect the gipsies of being concerned in the drought. This custom of the Rain-maiden is also to be found in Servia, and I believe in Croatia.

It would be endless were I to attempt to enumerate all the different sorts of superstition afloat in this country; for besides the three principal definitions here given, the subject comprises innumerable other side branches, and might further be divided into the folk-lore of shepherds, farmers, hunters, miners, fishermen, &c., each of these separate callings having its own peculiar set of signs, customs, charms, and traditions to go by.

Superstition is an evil which every person with a well-balanced mind should wish to die out, yet it cannot be denied that some of these fancies are graceful and suggestive. Nettles and briars, albeit mischievous plants, may yet come in picturesquely in a landscape; and although the stern agriculturist is bound to rejoice at their uprooting, the softer-hearted artist is surely free to give them a passing sigh of regret.

E. GERARD.

[1] 'Der Aberglaube in seiner Mannigfaltigkeit bildet gewissermassen eine Religion für den ganzen niederen Hausbedarf.'

[2] This would seem to suggest a German (or Celtic) origin. Donar, as god of marriages, blesses unions with his hammer.

[3] This spirit corresponds to the *Polednice* of the Bohemians and the *Poludnica* of the Poles and Russians. Grimm, in speaking of the Russians, in his *German Mythology*, quotes from Boxhorn's *Resp. Moscov.*: 'Dæmonem meridianum Moscovitæ et colunt.'

[4] This is also usual in Poland, Moldavia, and the Bukowina.

[5] The Roumenian peasant does not wear shoes or stockings, but has his feet swaddled up in linen rags, which are kept in their place by a rough sandal made of a flat piece of leather.

[6] Also believed in Poland.

[7] Archæologists have derived this word from *Pri*, which in Sanscrit means fruitful, and *Hu*, the god of the Celtic deluge tradition, also regarded as a personification of fruitful nature.

[8] The Council of Constantinople, 869 A.D., forbade the members of the Oriental Church to keep the feast of the Pagan goddess, Kolinda, occurring on the shortest day.

[9] Called Turon by the Poles, who have many similar games.

[10] This detail would seem to bear some resemblance to Saturn devouring his children, and being cheated by stones thrown into his jaws.

[11] Likewise in Bavaria.

[12] Also believed by most Slav nations.

[13] The original signification of this seems to have gone astray, but was probably based on former worship of the horse, long regarded as a sacred animal by Indians, Parsees, Arabs, and Germans.

[14] So in India the *Matris*, also known amongst the Egyptians, Chaldeans, and Mexicans. A corresponding spirit is likewise found in the Scandinavian and Lithuanian mythologies; in the latter under the name of *medziajna*.

[15] Also practised in Poland.

[16] Also believed by the Roumenians.

[17] The word *Götzen* in German signifies Pagan deities.

[18] Afternoon church is always called vespers by the Saxon villager, though I believe it has no resemblance to the chanted vespers of the Roman Catholics.

Transcriber's Notes

The original text was published in: The Nineteenth Century, Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., London, July-December 1885, pp. 130-150.

The transcriber made a very few changes to the text in order to correct obvious errors (before/after):

- ... This is also usual in Poland, Moldavia, and the [Bukowing](#). ...
... This is also usual in Poland, Moldavia, and the [Bukowina](#). ...
- ... is the [Todastragen](#), or throwing out the Death, a custom still extant ...
... is the [Todaustragen](#), or throwing out the Death, a custom still extant ...

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