

Strange Superstitions Peculiar To Americans

Perhaps You Don't Believe In Omens, But Do You Keep Your Fingers Crossed When Another Is Driving?

By Jane Archer

AMERICANS pride themselves on being civilized, yet there are probably more superstitions prevalent in the United States today than in any other civilized nation, particularly among children. This may be due to the fact that each nationality and race that came to America brought with it their superstitions, customs, folk lore and taboos. The American Indians were, and are, a very superstitious people. We outgrow many of our childish beliefs in fairies, luck charms, the efficacy of wishing, but even as normal, intelligent, clear thinking adults, many of us cling to a few superstitious beliefs. It is characteristic of the human race that, even while we don't believe, we are unwilling to take a chance with the unknown.

We are amazed when we see old drawings depicting our ancestors being cured of some ailment by the most fantastic means. Yet, it is not so many years ago that we were burning witches in America, and I have recently seen many Indian medicine men perform their rites.

The first time I encountered an Indian cure was during my grammar school days. It was in a rural school, taught by my mother. The Indian pupils outnumbered the whites about three to one. One day a lovely little half breed Indian girl, typically "white" in her dress and speech, came to school complaining of a toothache. My mother sent her home, telling her to have her father drive her to the town to the dentist. The child departed. The next day she returned to school. Mother asked her if her tooth still hurt. "Oh, no," she replied, "they shot it out." We all gathered round, amazed, thinking her father must be a deadly shot indeed to have removed a tooth with a rifle without harming our school mate in any way. And the toothache was gone! Recovering from her astonishment, mother asked how the cure was effected, and why she had not gone to the dentist. Julia then described what had happened. Her mother, father, the medicine man and a few guests had taken her up on the hillside. There they dug a small hole in the earth. Julia lay down so that the sore cheek fitted into the hollow in the earth. The medicine man shot an arrow across her head. Julia arose and they quickly filled in the hole. They had shot the evil spirit, burying it before it could recover from its wound and escape. Julia was cured.

IT WOULD be impossible to list all the superstitions we have. But remember those you believed in as a child. Check them off and see how civilized you are.

Who hasn't made a secret wish on the first star at night, making it absolutely sure to come true by reciting at the same time:

"Star light, star bright,
First star I've seen tonight
Wish I may, wish I might
Have this wish I've wished tonight."

It was also the fashion in our school to have warts. I have played with countless frogs, collected tadpoles, searched frantically for toads, and rubbed the hands of children so afflicted in order to acquire warts. I never did. But when the fashion for warts faded I can remember still the efforts made by the children to rid themselves of unattractive little lumps. One child had a frightful time removing her warts, trying the most fantastic and elaborate cures. When one failed she would try another. Every child in school knew of a cure or two. The first tried was the "stump water" cure. This involves taking the rain collected in a stump and rubbing the warts with it three times. It was ineffective. Next we advised that she rub the warts with the eye of a potato, wrap the potato eye in a bag and throw it away. The person finding the bag gets the warts. But this cure also failed and another, involving the crossing of pins over the wart and then hiding the pins where no one would find them, was equally unsuccessful. As a last resort, the following was tried: tie as many knots as you have warts in a piece of string; rub the knots on the warts, place the string in a bag and bury it at a crossroads in the dark of the moon. These are only a few of the remedies. Any child will tell you more.

THERE are superstitions attached to all domestic animals. I can remember being terrified as a child by the howling of a dog. We were all sure it meant death for the person whom the dog was facing. We escaped the curse only by quickly changing our positions when the dog showed any signs of facing us. It was bad luck to try to make the dog move. I have known Indians who shot a howling dog in order to avoid sure and sudden death. We also believed that if a dog wallowed in front of a house, some one of the household would surely die. The dog was measuring the grave. The dog is considered especially sensitive to spirits, particularly to the spirit of death, probably because of his keen eyes



The above picture is of the obverse side of the colossal Cippus of Horus which was inscribed with magical symbols. Many of our modern superstitions, it is stated, can be traced back to these ancient symbols.

and keen sense of smell. One should always keep a stray dog that follows him home. The howling of a cow about the house, particularly if continued for a long time, is a sign of death. A mole burrowing about a residence is another sign of death, as is a bird flying in or attempting to fly in the window, or an owl hooting in the vicinity. Under certain circumstances, the sight of a gray mare is a sign of death, while dreams involving horses are usually considered indicative of good luck to come. The finding of a horseshoe is a marvelously good sign, provided the person finding it spits upon it, throws it back over his left shoulder, returns and picks it up and nails it over his door.

Cats equal if not excel birds as carriers of ill luck. Some people consider black cats to be the greatest enemies of man. Everyone knows that some believe it is extremely unlucky for a black cat to cross one's path. I think more people retrace their steps upon encountering an ebony cat than those that do not. Many still believe that a cat must not be allowed in the same room with a sleeping person or a child as the cat will surely suck one's breath and bring death. It is also still believed that a cat has nine lives, that it will haunt you, that to kick a cat means to invite rheumatic pains, and the devil will surely get you if you drown a cat.

THE superstitions concerning chickens are many. If a chicken descends from the roost in the middle of the night and struts about cackling it is a sure sign of trouble in the offing. If a rooster crows three times during the night it is a sure sign of death. A woodpecker drilling on a house is another sign of death for one of the inmates, while a raven flying over and then returning to a house is one of the worst signs of all.

To counteract all these beliefs and many more, and to bring good luck, the rabbit's foot is considered the most effective charm. The bigger the rabbit from which the foot has been taken, the greater the luck. But the proper one to carry is the left hind foot of a rabbit, killed by a cross-eyed person during the full of the moon. Puckett, in his "Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro" describes the luckiest charm of all.

"In New Orleans these rabbit-foot charms, mounted in silver or gold, are conspicuously displayed in the windows of prominent jewelry shops up and down Canal street. The managers of these stores assure me that the sales are enormous. The one I purchased had with it a printed slip containing a graphic illustration of the rabbit in the act of being shot and the following inscription: 'This little luckie is the left hind foot of a graveyard rabbit, killed in the full of the moon by a red-headed, cross-eyed nigger at 12 o'clock at night, riding a white mule.' The peace of many a rustic graveyard must have been broken by the midnight roar of artillery to supply the huge numbers of rabbit's

feet these New Orleans jewelers have." In order to bring the best luck the charm must be carried in the right hip pocket.

THE moon and stars are given a place of great importance as harbingers of good and evil. It is good luck to view the moon over the left shoulder and ill luck and disappointment to view it over the right shoulder. It is also bad luck to see the moon through branches of trees. Potatoes and other crops should be planted in the dark of the moon. A falling star stands for a soul passing on, while a comet appearing is a sign of war, disaster and destruction.

Household and human omens are very prevalent. If a picture falls off a wall it is a prophecy of death. If a fork is dropped, a male visitor is coming; if a knife, a female visitor. If the fork sticks in the floor when it falls it indicates the coming of a very charming visitor. The person taking the last bite of food on a plate is doomed to single life. The breaking of a mirror brings seven years of bad luck. The spilling of salt is considered bad luck. Some of this trouble may be averted by throwing a bit of the salt spilled over the left shoulder. If a broken clock strikes it is a sign of bad luck. If a clock strikes between the hours it is a sure sign of death for someone. Three chairs accidentally placed in a row indicate that callers are coming, while to fall out of a chair means that death is approaching.

There are many charms for the prevention of sickness as well as the most fantastic cures for many diseases. The wearing of a leather strap around the neck or ankles gives strength. The wearing of a copper band around the neck or around the wrist or ankle will either cure or prevent rheumatism.

There seem to be more cures for rheumatism than for any other ailment. The carrying of a buckeye in the pocket, or an Irish potato is one of the many cures.

Other superstitions still prevalent are that lighting three cigarettes on one match will bring ill luck. Thirteen is regarded as an unlucky number, and particularly is it regarded as unlucky for thirteen to sit at table. Friday the thirteenth is, of course, regarded as the most unlucky day of all. It is bad luck to start on a journey on a Friday, or to begin any new work on that day. If one is so foolish as to start work on Friday



This drawing depicts an early Babylonian demon whose "voice was that of a storm, and whose breath was like a hurricane".

Above is depicted man's "greatest enemy"—a black cat—reposing on a broken mirror.

Every stone has its superstition attached to it. The agate quenches thirst and reduces fever, if held in the mouth. It is an emblem of health. The amber is a cure for sore throat, and is supposed to be composed of the tears of birds.

"Around thee shall glisten the loveliest amber That ever the sorrowing sea-bird hath wept."

Emerald stands for friendship and constancy. If a serpent gazes upon emerald he will become blind. The onyx contains an imprisoned devil which awakens at sunset and causes the wearer to have evil dreams and nightmares. Cupid cut the nails of Venus with his arrows during sleep and the parings fell into the Indus, sank to the bottom and became onyx. The opal is dedicated to October. It is the emblem of hope. It is bad luck for any but those whose birthdates are in October to wear an opal. It sows the seed of discord and is fatal to love. It is sure to bring ill luck if given as an engagement present to any but a person born in the month to which the opal is dedicated.

A bouquet composed of diamonds, loadstones, and sapphires will render the wearer almost invincible, and wholly irresistible. "All precious stones are purified by honey."

OF COURSE the more uneducated a person, the more primitive, the more he believes in superstition. But education doesn't entirely eliminate belief in omens. The best it does is to lessen that belief. I venture to say that there isn't a person living who does not believe in "luck" in some form or another, no matter how disciplined his mind, no matter how great his reasoning powers. Superstition is a tremendously interesting subject, and try as hard as we may, we can't quite shake away the belief. A lingering doubt always assails us and when we are tempted to light three on a match, we almost invariably decide that while we don't really believe we still don't think it wise to take any chances. Personally, I am not superstitious. I don't believe in miraculous cures, or that a toad skin dried and hung about my neck, together with a piece of red flannel and a nutmeg, will make me immune to any danger. I don't really believe any of it—but I still keep my fingers crossed when mother does the driving.