

FATAL OMENS.

There may be some advantage in believing in lucky omens, since the believer enjoys his good fortune in expectation, if not in fruition; but, unless it be good to meet trouble considerably more than half way, those who have faith in death-tokens are not to be envied. If they would not make themselves miserable with dismal guesses as to the coming vacancy in the home circle, they must keep every window close, lest some erratic bird fly in and out again; and even then a robin, intent on a friendly call, may tap thrice at the glass baring his entrance, a heedless swallow may tumble down the chimney, or a lively crow croak thrice as he flies overhead—all infallible signs of a speedy visit from the grisly king. In Northamptonshire it is sufficient to see three magpies in sociable communion, to become aware a burying is at hand, although elsewhere the sight is a welcome one, for

One is a sign of sorrow, two is a sign of mirth,
Three are a sign of wedding, and four a sign of birth.

Chaucer speaks of the "owl eke that of death the bode bringeth," and Spencer's "whistler shrill, that whose hears shall die," has but to flap his wings against an invalid's chamber-door, and the doctor may go his way. The owl's evil repute reaches even to Siam, where his perching upon a roof is held prophetic of at least one death in the house it covers. The only bird rivaling the owl in this sinister respect is the raven. "I had as lief hear the night raven, come what plague could have come after it," says Benedick. Full of her fell purpose, Lady Macbeth exclaims,

The raven himself is hoarse
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
Under my battlements;

and the victim of Iago's treacherous counsel, and his own weak credulity, cries,

It comes over my memory,
As doth the raven o'er the infected house,
Boding to all.

According to an Eastern tradition Cain, after committing the first murder, wandered about the earth with his brother's body, knowing not how to rid himself of the ghastly burden. One day he came upon two ravens in fierce conflict, and saw the victor make a hole in the ground with his talons and beak, and deposit therein the body of his foe. Taking the hint, Cain set to work with his hands, and hid Abel's corpse in a grave beneath a palm tree. When he had finished his task his instructor, who had watched the operations from a tree branch, flew to Adam with the news. From that time the raven has been a messenger of ill to mankind. The grim aspect of the raven, his sombre plumage, and his odd croak, in some measure excuse his libellers; but it is hard upon the pigeon that he cannot rest on a tree or stray into a house without being scouted as the harbinger of death. Fowls roosting at noon lie under the same imputation, and if a hen so far forgets herself as to crow, the only way of preventing a death following such an assertion of the equality of the sexes is to wring the offender's neck.

The liability of insects to play the part of death-seers seems to be limited to the bee, the butterfly, and the death-watch. The ticking of the last behind the wainscot, the appearance of three butterflies taking the air in company, or the mere entrance of a wild hummer into a house, are equally fatal. If a swarm of bees choose to settle upon a dead hedge-stake, a dead tree, or the dead bough of a living one, a death is sure to occur in the family of the owner before twelve months have gone by. It is a still more serious matter for an ox or a cow to break into a man's garden; that is a warning he will hear of three deaths in his family in the ensuing half year. Does the feminine horror of mice spring from a latent belief in the superstition that a mouse running over a person, or squealing behind a bed, is as ominous of drawn blinds as the howling of a dog outside a sick man's house?

Some shrewd old farmer, we suspect, first promulgated the notion that the missing of a drill in sowing betokened the demise of somebody employed on the farm before the season was out; but how the idea could obtain anywhere that a similar misfortune is entailed by growing parsley in a garden is beyond comprehension. Thanks to gas, colza, and rock-oil, one is pretty safe now-a-days from having one's equanimity disturbed by a tallow winding-sheet; but, unless we eschew open fires, we must remain liable to receive an unpleasant notification by a coffin-shaped cinder popping out upon us. Maternalists should look to it that nurse makes sure baby is in the cradle ere she sets about rocking it, for if the cradle be tenantless when rocked a little coffin will soon be required. Ladies who love their lords must beware of fracturing the symbol of wedlock, the breaking of a wedding-ring being a certain sign that its owner will soon wear the weeds of widowhood. We suppose the rarity of such an accident has invested it with such dire significance. Rarer still is the substitution of a mourning ring for the circle of plain gold; and no wonder Mauritia de Nassau swooned when she discovered her careless bridegroom had bound her to him with a death's-head ring. When he should have been at church the young Earl of Balcarres was quietly taking breakfast in his nightgown and slippers, oblivious of the fact that it was his wedding morning. Reminded that the fair Mauritia was waiting for him, he dressed hurriedly, and hastened to church. When the wedding-ring was wanted it was not forthcoming, and Balcarres taking a ring from a friend's hand, placed it upon the bride's finger. After the ceremony was over, the lady glancing at her hand beheld a death's head and cross-bones upon the ring, and fainted. When she recovered, she declared she was destined to die within the year—a presentiment that probably helped to bring about its own fulfilment, for before the twelvemonth expired the heedless Earl was a widower.

When the Scottish "dead-bell" tinkled in Lord Marmion's ears, the forger-hero addressing Fitz-Eustace, said:

Is it not strange, that, as ye sung,
Seemed in mine ear a death-peal rung.
Such as in nunneries they toll
For some departing sister's soul.
Say, what may this portend?

but the squire left the Palmer to answer—"The death of a true friend"—a very safe interpretation upon the eve of Flodden. Persons possessing the uncomfortable faculty of second sight, know that an individual will succumb to death within a year when they see him or her accompanied by a shadowy shroud, invisible to less-favoured eyes; the nearer the shroud rises to the doomed one's head the closer is the end at hand. Lord Beay writes to Mr. Pepys, "A gentleman who was married to

a cousin of Drynle's, living in the county of Ross, coming on a visit to him at his house, called him to the door to speak to him about some business. But when they went out he was so frightened that he fainted, and, having recovered, would in no wise stay in the house that night, but went with his wife to a farmer's hard by, where, she asking him why he left the house, he told her publicly that he knew Drynle would die that night, for when they went to the door he saw his winding-sheet about him. And accordingly the gentleman did die that night, though he went to bed in perfect health, and had had no sickness for some time before. I had this story from Drynle's own son, the farmer, his servant, and the man himself who saw it." Henry, Earl of Clarendon, son of the famous Chancellor, sets down a still stranger story for the Secretary's edification. "One day, I know by some remarkable circumstances it was towards the middle of February, 1661-2, the old Earl of Newborough came to dine with my father at Worcester House, and another Scotch gentleman with him, whose name I cannot call to mind. After dinner, as we were standing and talking together in the room, says my Lord Newborough to the other Scotch gentleman, who was looking very steadfastly upon my wife, 'What is the matter, that thou hast had thine eyes fixed upon my Lady Cornbury ever since she came into the room? Is she not a fine woman? Why dost thou not speak?' 'She's a handsome lady, indeed,' said the gentleman, 'but I see her in blood.' Whereupon my Lord Newborough laughed at him; and all the company going out of the room we parted, and I believe none of us thought more of the matter, I am sure I did not. My wife was at that time perfectly well in health, and looked as well as ever she did in her life. In the beginning of the next month she fell ill of the small-pox; she was always very apprehensive of that disease, and used to say if ever she had it she should die of it. Upon the ninth day after the small-pox appeared, in the morning, she bled at the nose, which quickly stopped; but in the afternoon the blood burst out again with great violence at her nose and mouth, and about eleven of the clock that night she died, almost weltering in her blood."

To see ourselves as others see us is sentence of death, with speedy execution. In 1793, the hostess of the Three Stags in St. George's Fields fell one day into a sort of slumber as she was sitting in the bar. When she awoke she said that she had dreamed she saw herself enter a room where she was sitting; getting up from her seat she spoke to her second self, taking the phantom, which resembled her in every particular, by the hand. Nothing her friends could say would convince her it was only a dream. "Whether it was her eidolon or not," says the newspaper chronicler of the strange vision, "we shall not pretend to say, but certain it is that the next morning, after eating her breakfast, she was taken ill, and expired in a quarter of an hour."

Were omen-mongers content with drawing dire conclusions from doleful visions, there would be something like method in their madness, but they make joy prophetic of sorrow, a light heart premonitory of heavy woe. Since prevision is happily denied mankind, it were odd, indeed, if instances could not be cited of merriment preluding misfortune. James the Second, of Scotland, held high revel, and was unusually gay, a few hours before he was murdered. Buckingham cut a caper or two upon rising from his bed the day Felton's knife split his proud heart in two. A young officer put on new regimentals "to meet Master Squit," and was full of fun on the morning of Vimiera's fight, in which he was killed. The idea that high spirits prestage impending calamity does not lack poetic authority. Romeo has only just uttered the words,

My bosom's lord sits lightly on his throne,
And, all the day, an unaccustom'd spirit,
Lifts me above the ground with cheerful thoughts,

when Balthasar comes with bad news from Verona. Hastings jests at the doubts of the boar-fearing Stanley, asking,

Think you, but that I know our state secured,
I would be so triumphant as I am?

but a little while before he hears Gloucester swear he will not dine before he sees his head. King Duncan had been in unusual pleasure before seeking the bed from which he was not to rise again. But in truth Shakespeare might be quoted as effectively to prove that low spirits forerun evil hap. Hamlet feels ill about the heart when summoned to meet Laertes with the foils "such a gain saying as would, perhaps, trouble a woman," but he defies the augury, and goes to his death.

Sunday funerals would need no official discouragement were it an article of common belief that if a grave be open on the first day of the week the sexton will have to ply his spade before another Sunday comes; but so far as we know this notion is peculiar to a solitary parish in Suffolk. Another superstition of the same sort is the belief that one death in a house will be speedily followed by another if the door is closed upon a corpse—that is, if the house door be shut before the hearse has started on its journey.

Mr. Fludd told the author of "A History of Remarkable Providences," that James the First was earnestly entreated to forego disturbing the remains of his unhappy mother, it being very well known that if a body were removed from its grave some of the family would die shortly afterwards; "as did," says Turner, "Prince Henry and, I think, Queen Anne." He was half right, half wrong. Prince Henry's death followed hard upon the removal of Mary's body from Fotheringhay to Westminster Abbey. That took place in the autumn of 1612, in September the Prince sickened, in October he took to his bed, and when, upon the twenty-ninth of the month, a lunar rainbow for seven hours seemingly spanned the palace of St. James's, the crowd of gazers accepted the unusual sight as a fatal omen, and upon the fifth of November he who might have saved his race from ruin passed away to his rest. James did not lose his consort till seven years afterwards, and we have his royal word for it that a comet appeared specially for the sad occasion. His bereaved majesty, turning poet in his grief, wrote,

Thou to invite, the great God sent a star;
His nearest friends and kin good princes are,
Who, though they run their race of men, and die,
Death serves but to refine their majesty.
So did my Queen her court from hence remove,
And left this earth to be enthroned above;
Thou is she changed, not dead. No good prince dies,
But, like the sun, doth only set to rise.

Baxter assures us that the well at Oundle "drummed" in anticipation of the decease of Charles II. When Shakespeare's Henry IV. swoons after hearing good tidings from the seat of war, Prince Humphrey deems he will soon be stressless, because

The river has thrice flowed, no ebb between;
And the old folk, Time's dotting chronolers,
Say it did so a little time before,
That our great grandsire, Edward, sick'd, and died.

The Welsh captain in Richard II. declares his countrymen cannot be longer kept together, the withering of the bay-trees, the bloody aspect of the moon, and meteors fighting the fixed stars, all assuring them the king was dead. When there were lions in the Tower the death of one of the royal beasts was supposed to herald the demise of the wearer of England's crown, as surely as any extraordinary disturbance of the elements announced a great man was dead. The Greeks, thronging Missolonghi's streets, to learn how it went with their post-leader, cried with one accord, as a violent thunderstorm broke over their heads, "The great man is gone!" and they divined rightly, for at that moment Byron died.

Not a few old families pride themselves upon inheriting certain omens, whereby they are warned of death's approach. Some are warned by a meteor's light, some by melancholy strains of music floating from the mansion to die away in the woods. A mysterious knocking, never heard at any other time, tells the lords of Bampton that one of their race is bound for the silent land. A stamping by unseen feet on the palace floor predicates a death in the family of the Ducal house of Modena. A sturgeon forcing its way up the Trent towards Clifton Hall, is a sign that the Cliftons of Nottinghamshire will have to put on mourning. For some days before the death of the heir of the Breretons, the trunk of a tree is to be seen floating on the lake near the family mansion. Two giant owls perch upon the battlements of Wardour Castle when an Arundel's last hour has come. If a Devonshire Oxenham is about to die, a white-breasted bird flutters over the doomed one's bed. A local ballad relates how on the bridal eve of Margaret, heiress of the brave and generous Sir James Oxenham, a silver-breasted bird flew over the wedding guests, just as Sir James rose to acknowledge their congratulations. The next day the bride fell dead at the altar, stabbed by a discarded lover.

"Now, marry me, proud maid," he cried,
"Thy blood with mine shall wed!"
He dashed the dagger in her side,
And at her feet fell dead.
Poor Margaret, too, grows cold with death,
And round her, hovering flies
The phantom bird for her last breath,
To bear it to the skies.

Howell saw a tombstone in a stone-cutter's shop in Fleet-street in 1632, inscribed with the names of sundry persons who thereby attested to the fact that John Oxenham, Mary, his sister, James, his son, and Elizabeth, his mother, had each and all died with a white-crested bird fluttering above their beds.

A family of Rock Bansa, Arran, know when one of their kin is about to die by an invisible piper playing a lament on the hill-side. When Death purposes visiting a McLean of Loch-lury, the unwelcome caller is heralded by the spirit of a battle-slain ancestor ringing the bells on his fairy bridle, as he gallops twice round the old homestead. As a rule, death-announcing phantoms are of the feminine gender. No Lady Holland expects to shuffle off this mortal coil until she has seen a shadowy counterfeit presentiment of herself. The Middletons of Yorkshire, as becomes an ancient Catholic house, have a Benedictine nun to apprise them of a reduction in the number of Middletons. A weeping, moaning, earthy sprite warns the Stanleys of the death of a distinguished member of the family. A hairy-armed girl, called May Moullach, bring the like sad news to the Grants of Grant; the Bodach-am-dun, otherwise the ghost of the hill, performs the office for the Grants of Rothiemurcus; and most old Highland families boast their own familiar Banshee, whose wailing, screaming, and weeping tells them the head of the house must make room for his heir. Lady Fanshawe, visiting the head of an Irish sept in his moated baronial grange, was made aware that banshees are not peculiar to Scotland. Awakened at midnight by an awful unearthly scream, she beheld, by the light of the moon, a female form at the window of her room, which was too far from the ground for any woman of mortal mould to reach. The creature owned a pretty pale face, and red dishevelled hair, and was clad in the garb of old—very old—Ireland. After exhibiting herself for some time, the interesting spectre shrieked twice and vanished. When Lady Fanshawe told her host what she had seen he was not at all surprised. "A near relation," said he, "died last night in this castle. We kept our expectations of the event from you, lest it should throw a cloud over the cheerful reception which was your due. Now, before such an event happens in the family and castle the female spectre you saw always becomes visible. She is believed to be the spirit of a woman of inferior rank whom one of my ancestors married, and whom he afterwards caused to be drowned in the moat, to expiate the dishonour done to our race." If all banshees originated in the same way the less the proprietors of such things brag of the matter the better. If we must believe in omens, rather than own a banshee, we would put our faith in warnings that are common property, like the credulous who behold

No natural exhalation in the sky,
No scope of nature, no distemper'd day,
No common wind, no custom'd event,
But they will pluck away his natural cause,
And call them meteors, prodigies, and signs,
Abortions, presages, and tongues of heaven.

ODDITIES.

Dio Lewis is the man who kept a Utica audience until 10.30, explaining to them the good results of going to bed promptly at nine.

A pack of wolves in Sherbourne County, Minnesota, chased a couple of lawyers five miles, and the New Orleans *Republican* thinks it showed a lack of professional courtesy.

An exchange says that a Michigan man dreamed recently that his aunt was dead. The dream proved true. He tried the same dream on his mother-in-law, but it didn't work.

They were going to put a man out of a San Francisco theatre for creating a disturbance, when a voice cried, "He's all right—he's killed a Chinaman!" and they let the man alone.

A well-dressed, matronly-looking lady walked into a saloon in Oswego the other day, laid her muff on the counter, and took out a pair of spectacles, when the bar-tender promptly informed her that no Bible reading would be in order there. Reaching down into her dress pocket the woman produced a flat bottle and coolly called for a pint of whiskey. She doesn't know yet what that bar-tender was alarmed about.