

About Superstitions.

Not long since one of our correspondents sent us an article on "Superstitions," in which the writer sought to draw the line of demarcation between that which is really superstitious and that which is positively supernatural. Since then we have come upon a contribution to the "Strand Magazine," from the pen of Leonard Larkin, which for delightful sarcasm surpasses anything we have read in a long time. By pure dint of poking fun at them the writer exposes some of the old-time superstitious in a manner calculated to give an eternal quietus. The reading of it will be well worth the while.

"You superstitious?" a friend will sometimes ask me. Of course I am. With so many excellent superstitions lying about to choose from; not to be superstitious would be a wicked waste of pleasant opportunities. I conform to ever superstition. I can hear of, from rising to bed-time. I always spring out of bed, for instance, on the right side, for I know quite well that if I attempted to do so on the left misfortune would follow as certainly as day follows night. I know it, I repeat, and I can speak from experience; for on the only occasion on which, being more than half asleep, I disregarded this particular superstition misfortune ensued, swift and sore. For surely nobody will deny that it is a misfortune, and a sore one, to bruise knees and knuckles and nose all together against a solid brick wall, such as my bed stands against on the left side! Very well, then, I am superstitious, and if you think I am unreasonable, go and bounce against a wall yourself, by way of asserting your convictions.

That is the sort of thing the anti-superstitious are in the habit of doing, or were some years ago. There was a "Thirteen Club," which used to meet at dinner for the absurd purpose of outraging all the superstitions that reasonable persons cherish. Instead of sitting down quietly and decently and enjoying their dinner like sensible, superstitious people, they devoted most of their attention to spilling salt, crossing knives and forks, passing the wine round the wrong way, jumping up and walking under ladders, smashing looking-glasses, and a score more of similar tricks. Of course, such conduct brought misfortune with it, and only a wild Thirteen Clubber could fail to see it. For they must have had a most uncomfortable dinner, which is one of the greatest misfortunes I can think of. And there was pecuniary misfortune as well, for all those looking-glasses must have cost a good deal. But on consideration, perhaps, the Thirteen Clubbers were not so very different from the rest of us, after all. For to meet solemnly by appointment on Friday evening, to sit punctiliously thirteen at table, to pass the wine the wrong way and spill salt wilfully, to go jumping about the room under ladders, and conscientiously and laboriously to work through all the rest of the unnatural performance, purely in defiance of ill-luck, is—well, it is superstition, isn't it? Blank, dark, bigoted superstition!

If you have spilt salt by accident you avert misfortune from yourself by throwing a little over the left shoulder. This is a process I can earnestly recommend, especially in a crowded restaurant, with people close behind you. For if anybody gets it in the eye, or even down the back, that person will have enough misfortune for the whole room, and you may consider yourself safe—if you make no delay in getting outside.

As for the ill-luck attendant on walking under a ladder, the thing is so perfectly obvious that nobody but a blind unsuperstitious (or unsuperstitious, or whatever the correct term should be) could ever fail to perceive it. Walk down the street and observe the first half-dozen ladders standing against the houses and walls. From number one an overflowing paint-pot swings gracefully in the breeze, and, standing over it, a light-hearted son of toil brandishes an equally overflowing brush in unison with the tune he is whistling. Sometimes he hits the wall, sometimes the ladder, but all the while he dispenses a refreshing shower of paint that hits everything. A little farther on ladder number two supports an ascending laborer with a hod of bricks, and holes are thoughtfully provided in the ladder for the bricklayer to spit through; while the holes are quite big enough to let a brick or two through as well, on occasions of miscalculated equilibrium. To ladder number three clings

an elevated bill-sticker, elevated beyond the capacity of any earthly ladder, and much too elevated to perceive a single hole in this one. He wields, with uncertain swoop, a vast brush dripping with thick yellow grey paste, and ever and anon he plants an unmediated kick on the pail of similar paste that hangs below. Perhaps, after heavily pasting a very large poster, he attempts to hold it up by a corner which it doesn't possess, and while it descends with an all-embracing flop gropes feebly for it with the brush, which comes after it. On ladder number four a boy is spraying windows with an indiarubber hose. If on ladder number five somebody isn't trying to get a heavy and slippery piece of furniture into a high window or out of it, it will be on ladder number six. And now, having surveyed these ladders, I defy any Thirteen Clubster to put on a new park suit and a brilliant tall hat, walk deliberately under all these ladders, and return unconverted, if alive. I have had my own streaks of ill-luck under ladders, and I know. Probation est, as they say in the old books of magic. And as for smashing a looking-glass, seven years' ill-luck is less than I have got for it. It must be more than thirty since I smashed one belonging to an aunt, with a cricket-ball that ought to have been left outside; and I have been out of her will ever since, and she has been dead for years. So that it was bad for both of us.

A properly superstitious person (like myself) is never dull. He is always playing a complicated game of—what? Spook, shall I say?—with fortune. He sees his good and bad luck coming everywhere and everywhere, and he has all sorts of expedients ready to invite the one and dodge the other. If he is absent-minded enough to put on some article of clothing inside out in the morning, and strong-minded enough to keep it so all day, he knows he is in for good fortune. Personally, I am just about absent-minded enough to have put on my socks inside out quite frequently, and then to have forgotten all about it; at any rate, I am quite sure about the forgetting. But I have never yet been quite so absent-minded as to put on my trousers or overcoat inside out, or even my hat. But absent-mindedness is an abiding characteristic of genius, and very likely I shall do it some day. When I do I shall not neglect my luck, and I expect my reward, as I walk along the Strand, in the shape of Fame and Popular acclamation.

I might feel some little diffidence in avowing myself a superstitious man were it not that I know most people are equally sensible. All about Bond street and Regent street are many ladies in expensively furnished rooms, earning noble incomes out of the sagacity of their fellow-citizens, who have the intelligence to understand that whether they are to die old or young, whether they are to come into money or stay out of it, whether they are to marry the right persons or the wrong ones, entirely depends on the shape of the wrinkles on the insides of their hands. So the ladies of the expensive rooms sit in expensive tea-gowns on large arm-chairs and tickle the palms of the wise with little ebony pointers at a guinea a tickle. There was one lady I read of who could get a guinea from each by just taking her customers by the hand and gazing ecstatically over their heads, such was the acuteness of their minds. I wish I could afford to pay a guinea for that sort of thing; because there are such a lot of other things I should like to buy—first, I think, by the way, that the information about the guinea-gazing lady came out in a police-court, or some such vulgar place.

Most of the ladies who charge a guinea for tickling your palms and gazing at the place where your hat would be if you were ill-mannered, are also ready, on equally trifling terms, to stare mightily hard at a glass ball; and the customers are equally ready to have them stare. The theory is that a properly-qualified person—and all these ladies are properly qualified, else they would be cheaper—can stare herself into a state in which she might see any mortal thing and tell anybody all about it; a result which any national creature would be glad to pay for.

Even after that you may have the about it; a result which any national creature would be glad to pay for; but this is a higher one, because you have something on paper to keep. The fee is three guineas, and the article you get is a horoscope—

surely cheap at such a price, even though it is not an optical instrument, as some might expect, but only a mysterious figure or diagram drawn on paper. It is an exact reduction, to scale, of the royal and ancient game of hopscotch, with notes of the score by a Chinese shorthand-writer who is not a teetotaler. It is based on the obvious fact that the planets must have been somewhere when you were born, and consequently were in a great state of concern about your destiny; and that you also, being now somewhere and also in a state of concern about your destiny, have so many points in common with the planets that you will easily understand their game of hopscotch, so long as you have been clever enough to give their representative her fee. I am told, however, that the astrology of these ladies is all "put out" at sweating rates to astrological "ghosts," who design the actual hopscotch; and, as a conscientiously superstitious person, I believe in those ghosts.

Also, of course, I believe in all sorts of other ghosts, though I have found it impossible to make any ghost believe in me, even so far as to show itself to me. But I love to hear—and believe—of the sound old, long established ghost of the haunted mansion, who begins by dragging a boot-jack across the floor and ends by driving head first through a brick-and-a-half wall with agonized wailings (and no wonder). I should also dearly love the acquaintance of the ghost that the Germans so disrespectfully call the "Poltergeist," which pulls away from under dignified persons, picks up thirsty people's glasses and drinks the contents—into the surrounding air—sets heavy tables dancing round the room, smashes glass, and spills salt, like some ghostly member of the Thirteen Club. There are many tales of these practical jokers among ghosts in Mrs. Crowe's "Night Side of Nature," and I read their exploits again and again, with much enjoyment. But the ghosts do not reciprocate my friendly feelings. I am tired to death of trying to keep awake in haunted houses. Even at a spiritualistic seance where I went once (charge one guinea—there is something weird about that universal talismanic guinea) I saw nothing more ghostly than the hostess, who was certainly thin, but rather hard and bony than otherwise. The ghosts sent me messages, however, not in their own voices, but through the lady, though, as they were the ghosts of my uncle John and my deceased sister, I didn't see why they should be either bashful or distant. But the messages interested me deeply, and certainly surprised me, chiefly because I had never heard of an uncle John before and my only sister was still alive and quite well when I returned home. But, as the lady explained, there's no accounting for the cheap adulterations introduced into guinea seances by irresponsible wicked spirits—an assurance which consoled me almost as much as the return of the guinea might have done. I think there was some sort of hint that a strictly high-class seance, warranted free from adulteration, would cost more; but I have to be economical, even with my little superstitions.

I am all the more regretful of never having met a real visible ghost because I am convinced that the ghost, as a well, not as a body corporate, but, let us say, as a class—has been much maligned and misunderstood. There has never been a more harmless, well-intentioned sort of creature than a ghost, and I cannot remember even having heard of one injuring any living creature. That people are frightened is surely no fault of the ghost's, but of their own. An affable, well-meaning ghost tries to make friends with somebody and amuse him, and the favored person won't have it, but goes rushing off and screaming to such an extent as to terrify the poor ghost out of sight. In just such a way you may see a nervous old lady in such fits of terror at the audible approaches of a big dog that the affectionate quadruped presently sneaks away, scared and abashed. Nothing could be kinder or more considerate than the behaviour of the ordinary ghost. Even those who come back to the world to make complaint of murder are much too kind to go and tell the police or a magistrate, like an ordinary vindictive human being. I never heard of any ghost complaining of murder to a policeman, or even applying to a magistrate for a summons. Instead, the ghost goes to some purely neutral person who never heard of the matter in his life, but who happens to sleep in some particular room, and gives a striking little performance which leaves the human being something to tell his friends about all the rest of his life. Sometimes it even reveals the existence of buried treasure. Nothing could be more amiable. A ghost doesn't even resent actual assault, although it cannot be comfortable to

have an unjustly enraged human being absolutely fall through one, which is what usually happens on these occasions. But the ghosts never hits back—it usually vanishes inoffensively, with a sigh of regret at the misunderstanding. It has come with the most benevolent intentions, probably to offer a little exhibition, perfectly free, of wall-penetrating and personal transparency, and although received with ungrateful assault, and perhaps a laceration of its inmost foggiest with a flying chair, it goes off exhaling meekness and forgiveness, to write humbly on a slate under a table, so as to enable some more appreciative human being to pocket the guinea the writing earns. No, a ghost is the kindest and friendliest thing that floats. Think of the countless occasions on which ghosts have risen from—wherever they are—and come all along to this uncomfortable world to shove up a table, just because it seemed the sort of thing that would amuse the company, or, perhaps, to bang a gentleman on the head with a tambourine, at a spiritualistic seance. I am afraid that their experiences among human beings give the ghosts a low opinion of our intelligence, to judge by the things they think likely to amuse us. But I should like an opportunity of clearing up all these misunderstandings, and of reciprocating the friendly advances of a ghost in the proper way, and I shall be glad to meet any respectable ghost with those views. I think I should prefer the sort that comes and beckons solemnly and leads the way to a spade and a pick, and then to a place where a chest of sovereigns is buried—a large one, but not buried too deep—in the garden. It would amuse me more than seeing a table heaved up; and I should consider it far more friendly than a bang on the head with a tambourine or a fire-shovel.

The vampire superstition I am not so much attracted by. I don't like it. It is rather too horrible—and I never heard even of a member of the Thirteen Club who went about to invite a vampire to suck his blood as he slept, even from the big toe, where the vampire bat operates. And I am firmly convinced that there is nothing but the vampire superstition to account for the habits of some gentlemen—not members of the Thirteen Club—who go to bed with their boots on.

Still, I like to be just in my superstitions—I like to give them each their little corner. I never pass a piece of iron lying in the road without picking it up; gold I am not quite so certain about, but I should avoid neglecting it—I like being on the safe side. I hope it will never be discovered—at any rate by the butchers—how much beef I have stolen to cure warts. It must be stolen beef, you see, and you must keep on till the warts go; so I am still persevering. And I always touch wood to avert danger of accident. Indeed, if the danger were the danger of drowning I think I should grab the wood with both hands—the largest piece in reach; such is the strange influence of superstition on a yielding mind.

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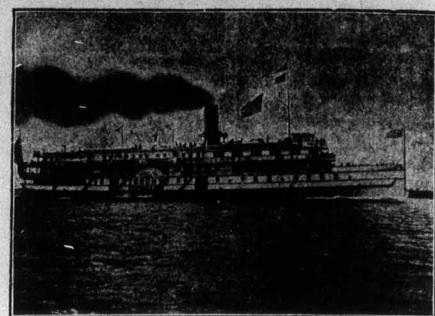
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Some fifty years ago Florentine's death, the obscure street in Ravenna which the towns in iron still in Cathedral gate fretwork around the stars in episcopal church you have not seen the faintest lingering doubt your Ruskin, and he was ashamed. These were men worked slowly conscious that work was that they were laboring, and not for bread. We cannot do toil in the workshops and neither games, no give the inspiration of art, called faith. V. ist's name was Jacopo, he had an only child, whose name was Beatrice the great poet who last home at Ravenna for he was now old, speaking to his child exile; and Bice never tioning her father al- and the wonders of heaven. Once a mon- dark shadow would fall threshold; a brother from Florence, who w- to see his niece, for but she did not love the midday meal, th- of the two brothers in- ed upon Dante and Dante and Ravenna. I- it commenced, it veer- round to the everlasting on that they held dire- tory views.

The Florentine stou- that Dante was in h- ly damned. "You say here," I- pointing his long fing- the whole of Rav- cle, "Ecco l'uomo c- Inferno! I say: Ecco sta all' Inferno!" "Corpo di Bacco!" would exclaim, "you- thither yourself for- God couldn't send s- hell. He could not g- umph to Satan!" "Dante hath sent p- ops and cardinals t- their would reply, "I- its gloomy caverns w- He was vengeful an- There is no place for- en!"

"I saw him here in Jacopo, 'when you, times, drove him out walking our streets, tary man. My father out, and say: 'Look look well! That's a will worship to the e- "A bad, gloomy fac- ness and malice to G- the Florentine would "Presence of the d- no!" cried Jacopo. solemn, marble face, with a point of fire. He used to pass our looking forward and close slung around a folded beret on his h- kneel down and kiss where he had trod, angels and his Beatric- he died."

"Fah!" would excl- "That's a pious dece- ly ten commandments and one of these the- shalt love!" Believe has read the Lascia- once since he died!" "Then where could- shouted Jacopo. "Di- other circle for him I- no! God does not 6- as Dante's! I allow- in purgatory for a s- cause we must all go- sins and imperfection damned! All heaven- against it!"

So the controversy month after month, listen with wondering But she hated her- and would refuse to- went away. And f- would not be the- swung to his work i- lent, abstracted way, he would pause and from his brow, and "Dante in hell! Yes- all know that; but he- it. He is not!" And he would bring- mer furiously upon Bice, cooking the- would tremble and cr-