

A  
DICTIONARY  
OF  
OMENS  
AND  
SUPERSTITIONS

PHILIPPA WARING

SOUVENIR  
PRESS

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# Introduction

‘No natural exhalation in the sky,  
No scape of nature, no distemper’d day,  
No common wind, no customed event,  
But they will pluck away his natural cause,  
And call them meteors, prodigies, and signs,  
Abortives, presages, and tongues of heaven,  
Plainly denouncing vengeance.’

William Shakespeare  
*King John*

Dr Johnson, that most inquisitive and urbane of men, tells us in an entry in one of his journals that he was quite sure that something unlucky would happen to him unless he touched every wooden post as he walked along a particular road. He could offer no reason why this was so – just that it was, and he had no intention of going against it.

Superstition, for such it was, plays a part in all our lives, and although many people would argue that reason should always triumph over instinct, the question is – does it? Let me

quote you an example which will certainly put you in the kind of quandary that faces anyone who takes a firm line in such discussions. Suppose, for arguments sake, you stand behind a reinforced glass partition, and ask someone on the other side to take a swing at you with their fist. What will happen when they do? You'll flinch, and even step back even though you know the glass will prevent the fist touching you. Instinct has triumphed over reason, has it not?

We may apply exactly the same argument to omens and superstitions. They form the mental instincts that for thousands of years have swayed our reason and no matter how far we advance in science and technology, they still lurk in the corners of our consciousness, often affecting our social behaviour and attitudes to life. Perhaps, the very speed of our progress has played a part in the persistence of these beliefs. With man in space, 'miracles' being worked in medicine, and fresh discoveries constantly stretching the boundaries of our knowledge, it is hardly surprising that we are anxious and doubtful about the future as were our forbears in their unsettled times, so many of whose superstitions are now in our canon.

The historian T. S. Knowlson, in his fascinating work, *The Origins of Popular Superstitions and Customs* published over half a century ago expresses the matter succinctly. 'The true origin of superstition,' he wrote, 'is to be found in early man's effort to explain Nature and his own existence; in the desire to propitiate Fate and invite Fortune; in the wish to avoid evils he could not understand; and in the unavoidable attempt to pry into the future. From these sources alone must have sprung the system of crude notions and practices still obtaining.'

By and large, superstitions take three forms which can be defined thus:

1. The idea that if a certain action is taken bad luck will result.
2. The performing of a specified ritual which will bring about desired results.
3. The reading of omens by which a definite event, good or bad, will occur.

The first two are, I think, self-explanatory, but the third relating to omens ought perhaps to be expanded a little further. According to my understanding, an omen is an event which is supposed to indicate destiny, the chief feature being the gratuitous nature of the happening. In a nutshell, it is a message about the future which we do not seek, yet find difficult to ignore. Let Knowlson again explain:

‘There is no origin for omens; they are as old as man himself. From time immemorial the changing aspects of nature have told him about the changes which might happen in his own life; the flight of birds, a rabbit crossing his path, and an infinity of other matters have been taken as “signs” of something that forbodes good or ill – generally ill – a testimony to the almost universal fear with which man has regarded the forces surrounding his life.’

But being able to define and to a degree explain both omens and superstitions, has done nothing to diminish their influence, and an old cynic like Francis Bacon can with some justification point out that ‘men mark when they hit, and never when they miss.’ Nor is he done at that. ‘It is also worthy of notice’, he writes, ‘that a genuine and solemn citation may tend to work to its own fulfilment in the minds of superstitious men who, by permitting the thing to prey upon their own spirit, enfeeble the powers of life, and perhaps at the critical date arouse thus some latent or dormant disease into deadly action.’

So we cannot win either way, and that famous English

clergyman and naturalist, Gilbert White in his classic work, *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* only underlines this state of affairs when he adds:

‘It is the hardest thing in the world to shake off superstitious prejudices; they are sucked in as it were with our mother’s milk; and, growing up with us at a time when they take the fastest hold and make the most lasting impressions, become so interwoven with our very constitutions, that the strongest sense is required to disengage ourselves from them.’

It must also be said that a number of superstitions persist because they, in some respects, concern matters of which we are still largely ignorant, and this is a good reason why those who profess to be only a little superstitious should not be too quick to criticize others who have real apprehension about such matters. It is probably one of the great myths of this scientific age that superstitions can and will be disproved of by science when the facts show (as will be seen in pages of this book) that they are either adapted or dished up again in a kind of pseudo-scientific guise.

Having said that, let me explain that what I have tried to present in this book is a wide-ranging selection of the omens and superstitions which still exist in the Western World at this moment in time. Many of them are of considerable antiquity, while others are quite recent and have evolved out of new developments in either human or scientific progress. I have collected the entries from many sources, both oral and recorded, with the major emphasis being on those found in Britain, Europe and America where I have had the chance to travel most extensively in recent years. This is not to say, however, that I have excluded examples from other distant places, just that they are less fulsome and representative than the rest.

Of course I have found that certain superstitions have

different versions in different places, and in these instances I have selected that variation which seems to have most general acceptance. Just as I have gone for those beliefs which are still repeated, at the expense of those archaic traditions which might make delightful reading but are hardly relevant to a modern audience. As far as the origins are concerned – where it is possible to establish *any* kind of origin – again I have gone for the version most widely accredited. It should perhaps also be pointed out that people in Europe and America share many omens and superstitions in common, a great number having been carried unchanged to the new world by the early immigrants, and while a single location for the belief may be given, they can equally apply in many others: I have merely listed those countries which have come to light during my research. (I should also add that I have not delved deeply into the many folk cures and remedies which could well be cited as having their origins in superstition as this is a considerable topic and requiring a book of its own: nevertheless, I have quoted certain such cures where they seemed appropriate and help an understanding of the superstition in general.)

Collecting this material has been a fascinating and rewarding task affording some revealing insights into the fabric of societies on both sides of the Atlantic. I particularly enjoyed, and was grateful for, the openness of folk in many places talking about their fears, and while noting the efforts of people like the members of the American ‘National Society of Thirteen Against Superstition, Prejudice and Fear’ (meeting on Friday the 13th) to deliberately defy superstition, found them still surrounded by countrymen with as many beliefs as a rural English backwater!

There are, in total, over 550 entries in this volume, which makes it as far as I can tell the most wide-ranging work of its kind – but this said it would be quite wrong to say it does more

than very fairly represent the major omens and superstitions. There must still be many more to be collected, just as there are new ones emerging all the time, for this is very much a living folk tradition underlining and emphasizing those lines in the tale of *Oedipus*:

‘For when we think fate hovers o’er our heads,  
Our apprehensions shoot beyond all bounds.’

PHILIPPA WARING  
*Somerset Island,*  
*Bermuda.*  
1977.

# A

## **Accident**

In Japan there is a superstition that if a cup or glass containing medicine for a sick person is accidentally upset, then it is an omen of that person's speedy recovery.

## **Acorn**

To carry an acorn on your person prevents you growing old, says an ancient British superstition. The origin of this belief probably arises from the fact that the acorn comes from the oak tree which was considered by the ancient Druids to be a sacred tree with special powers. The charm is said to work best for women, especially if they carry the acorn in their pockets or handbag.

## **Actors and Actresses**

There are probably few groups of people more prone to omens and superstitions than actors and actresses, and this no doubt is due to their artistic temperament. Very much at the mercy of the public's fickle taste, they look for any signs that may

encourage them in their art and try to avoid those which may indicate pitfalls. It would be quite impossible to list all their superstitions – particularly as many adhere to a single company or a particular individual, and change over the years – but here is a selection of some of the most widely observed and generally held. Things can go wrong for actors and actresses right from the moment they enter the dressing room – and naturally there has never yet been one numbered 13! It is said to be unlucky to have pictures hanging in the room, and no performer ever likes to be ‘overlooked’ by another member of the company as he or she is making up in front of the mirror. The lucky rabbit’s foot charm is used to bring good fortune, and of course serves the dual purpose of applying rouge. It is invariably kept in the make-up box and to lose it would presage disaster. Make-up boxes should always be kept untidy, and to knock one over is a bad omen. (An interesting variation of this is held by chorus girls who believe if they spill any powder on the floor they should quickly dance on it as this will bring them good luck!) Wigs are said to be harbingers of good luck, and many actors will wear them when there is really no need. There is an omen to be read in the simple process of kicking off a pair of shoes: if they both fall on their soles and remain upright then it is a sign of good luck, but if they fall over, misfortune will follow. And, incidentally, no actor would court disaster by putting his shoes on a chair in the dressing room. The profession believe they should always leave their dressing rooms with their left foot going out first, and should their shoes squeak as they make their first entrance on the stage, this is a sign that all will go well with the production. Apart from the embarrassment, to stumble on entering will result in missing a cue sometime during the evening, while to catch any part of a costume on a piece of scenery will also herald lines being ‘fluffed’ – unless the actor retraces his steps and makes a new entrance. In contrast,

though, if a player spontaneously falls during a performance, he can be sure of another engagement at the same theatre. As far as costumes are concerned, peacock's feathers should never be worn as they will bring disaster – indeed if these feathers appear anywhere in the theatre, even if worn by a member of the audience, it is an ill omen. (In America, even a picture of an ostrich on the stage is unlucky.) Only artificial flowers should be used as props, and the colour yellow should be avoided at all costs. (Yellow is adversely affected by the footlights.) Indeed superstition decrees that no real food, drink or jewellery should be used, only imitations, or the production will fail. On opening night, an actor should never be wished good luck so that the gods of chance are not affronted, and a typical wish is 'May you break your leg!' No play should ever open on a Friday unless the company wants a flop, and it is widely held that Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is the unluckiest play to perform mainly because it is believed the famous 'Witches' Song' has the power to raise evil and strike the cast. (And certainly, only the most foolish actor would think of humming any of the music used with the play while in rehearsal.) Interestingly enough, stage people believe *Robin Hood* and *The Babes in the Wood* are both ill-omened pantomimes, while *Cinderella* promises nothing but good. American vaudeville performers believe it is unlucky to change the style of costume in which they first achieved success – some even think that they should not change the original suit itself. If an actor or actress should happen to try the handle of the wrong door when they are seeking the manager of the theatre or an agent then this is a sure omen of failure. And just a final note for members of the acting profession in particular: an old tradition in Germany and Scandinavia says that if you wish to commit any difficult lines to memory, put the book or script in question under your pillow before you go to sleep. You'll wake up with them firmly committed to memory – so the superstition says!

## **Adder**

The adder is said to be an omen of good luck, and if you kill the first one you see in the spring this will ensure your triumph over your enemies. To allow this same reptile to escape alive is, however, to court disaster and bad luck. An adder seen by the front door is an omen of death, according to an old English belief. In many forest areas of the world it is believed that if you hang the dried skin of an adder by the chimney it will bring you good luck, while to place another skin in the rafters or the hearth will ensure that the house never catches on fire. Most of the omens associated with the adder, which is the only venomous snake in the British Isles, are said to have originated with the travelling communities who maintain that the most effective cure for its bite is to kill the creature and rub its dead body over the wound.

## **Aeroplanes**

The crews of modern aeroplanes have a strong fear of using the words 'crash' or 'prang' before a flight, and in many airlines there persists the belief that any accident or crash will be followed by two more. Many pilots and their crew carry small charms, and there is a universal dislike among all these people against taking flowers on board – particularly red and white ones. Air force crews believe that when 'touching wood' for luck, the wood should be a living tree, as wood used for tables, chairs, etc. is 'dead' and therefore not a good omen. A pilot is also said to be able to preserve his luck by emptying the contents of his pockets on the ground after landing as a kind of sacrificial offering. American airmen always cross unused seatbelts before taking off so as not to offend the spirits of the unknown.

## **Age**

Although women are not aware of the fact, the widespread practice of concealing one's real age (usually for reasons of vanity) may well have its origins in superstition. In many country districts of Britain in particular, it is said to be unlucky to disclose your age, an idea that apparently arose from the ancient prejudice against numbering things lest by doing so they became identifiable to evil spirits. There is, though, according to an English superstition, an infallible way of getting at the truth. First, you must obtain a hair from the lady's head and tie it to a small gold ring. Then hang this inside a glass tumbler and wait for it to begin oscillating. According to the belief, the ring will strike the sides as many times as the woman's age.

## **Albatross**

From the earliest days of sail, an albatross flying around a ship heralded stormy weather. The birds were also particularly revered because each was said to contain the soul of a dead seaman, and for any sailor to kill one was to bring bad luck upon himself for the rest of his life – as Samuel Taylor Coleridge immortalized in his great poem, *The Ancient Mariner*.

## **Angling**

Anglers share quite a number of the superstitions attributed to fishermen and mentioned in detail later in the book. However, angling has several peculiar to itself which deserve to be mentioned. For instance, it is believed to be unlucky to change rods during fishing; that a float which has been successful in the past should not be exchanged for a new and supposedly more efficient kind; and that because of the special powers of spit, bait should never be cast without first being spat upon. It is said to be an ill omen to place the keep net in the water before a catch has been made and it is bad luck to ask a fisherman how

many bites he has had, for this will doom the rest of his fishing. Finally no angler who sits on an upturned bucket will ever have the slightest luck!

## **Animals**

Many British farmers still believe it is very unlucky to allow anyone to express admiration or expectation for an animal entered in a show, or it will certainly fail. And only by expressing some terrible fate for the creature such as breaking its neck can he hope to lift his ill luck.

## **Ants**

There is a common belief in many countries that 'stepping on ants brings rain' and indeed ants are said to be an omen of bad weather whenever they are seen to be particularly active in carrying their eggs to new places of safety. There is also a widespread superstition that it is unlucky to destroy a colony of ants, for should they build a nest near your door you can expect security and riches in the future. Two curious beliefs which are still occasionally mentioned about ants is that they never sleep, and that if their eggs are eaten with honey it is a most effective antidote to love!

## **Apple**

The apple, according to tradition, was the fruit with which the Devil tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden, and superstition says that to eat one now without first rubbing it clean is a challenge to the Evil One. Despite this association, the apple is universally regarded as a holy tree, and since the very earliest times it has been considered very unlucky to destroy apple trees or orchards. There are a number of love omens associated with the apple, the most popular of which enables a girl to find out who her future husband might be by peeling the skin off one

in a continuous piece and flinging this over her left shoulder. If the peel stays in one strip it should fall in such a way that it makes the shape of a letter – which will indicate the initial of the man in question. If it breaks, she will not marry at all. In Austria it is believed that a girl can learn her future by cutting open an apple on St Thomas's night and counting the number of seeds. If there is an even number then she will marry shortly, but if she has carelessly cut one or more of the seeds then she will have a troubled future and end up a widow. Should a girl have several lovers, says another European superstition, and she is unable to choose between them, then an apple pip will do the job. She should take one of these and, reciting one of the men's names, drop it on the fire. If it goes off with a popping sound, then the man is 'bursting' with love for her; if it makes no noise then he is not in love. A German tradition says that if the first apple on a young tree is picked and eaten by a woman who has had many children then it too will have many fruitful seasons. Another interesting belief is that in Britain an apple tree which blossoms out of season while there is still fruit on it is an omen of death in the family, but in Europe the same thing means the owner can look forward to some good fortune. It is also said to be lucky to leave an apple or two on the ground after they have fallen to keep any wandering spirits happy. Finally, the saying 'An apple a day keeps the doctor away' is actually rooted in superstition, for the fruit was once said to be the food of the gods, but such are its health-giving qualities that science now recognizes there is more than a little truth in the saying.

### **April Fool's Day**

The origin of this practice of fooling people on the first day of April is probably lost in the mists of time, but in its modern form it seems to have come to Britain from France in the sixteenth century. In 1564 the French instigated the creation of

January 1 as the first day of the year, bringing it forward from its previous date of March 25 (now known as Lady Day). It appears that prior to this people had been in the habit of giving presents to one another to celebrate the first day of the new year, but as the old date of March 25 usually fell in Holy Week, the Church insisted that this rite be postponed until the first of April. When, therefore, the New Year was moved back to January, a custom grew up among the French of paying visits to their friends on April 1 in the hope of 'fooling' them that it was still the first day of the new year. From this modest beginning, the custom travelled throughout Europe and indeed now embraces the world.

## **Apron**

The apron has earned itself quite a significant place in superstition primarily, of course, because it was once virtually part of every woman's attire day in and day out. In England, for instance, it is lucky to inadvertently put on an apron inside out, and should you be having a day beset by small accidents this can be changed by reversing the apron. Throughout much of the British Isles it is said to be a sign of bad luck if an apron suddenly falls off, while in some places it is an omen that the wearer can expect a baby within a year! In both Britain and Europe this belief among young single girls is a sign their lover is thinking of them at that moment. The apron also features in two German traditions still very much alive today. The first is that if a man wipes his hands on a girl's apron he will fall passionately in love with her. Once a girl is engaged, though, she is best advised not to let her fiancé use her apron for this purpose for it is said this will lead to a quarrel. The explanation of this superstition is said to be that it is the smell of a person's perspiration which plays a major part in the attraction of the sexes, and naturally a man would smell a woman on her apron.

## **Ascension Day**

In certain parts of Britain, notably Wales, it is still considered very unlucky to do any kind of work on Ascension Day, as those who do lay themselves open to accidents. It was once claimed that the figure of a lamb was always seen among the clouds on this day, but nowadays it is only the weather omens that are noted. If it rains on this day, says superstition, it is a sign of a poor crop and sickness among cattle; if it is fine then there will be a long, hot summer.

## **Ashes**

Ashes are believed throughout the world to be a fertility charm, and in many places the ashes from special ritual fires like those at Midsummer have been spread over crops to ensure good harvests. In many European countries the remains from Easter bonfires have actually been mixed with seeds being prepared for the next sowing. Similarly ashes were put into the feed of cattle and other animals such as pigs and chickens to ensure that they grew strong and healthy. In some places, too, ashes were regarded as good luck charms: in France they would prevent damage by thunder and lightning if scattered over houses, while in England and America they were utilized as a protection against witches and evil spirits. Among more primitive peoples, the ashes of a human being were thought to help crops when scattered to the winds as they turned to rain and thus fertilized the land as well as protecting it. There is also a superstition still prevalent in England and Wales that if the ashes of the fire are spread smoothly over the hearth on New Year's Eve and footprints leading in the direction of the door are found in the morning, someone in the family will die during the year. If, however, the footmarks go in the opposite direction, there will be a birth.

## **Asthma**

A sixteenth century superstition still on record in rural areas of Europe claims that asthma can be cured by eating raw cat's meat or with foam from a mule's mouth. If those seem just a little too unpleasant, a fortnight's diet of boiled carrots will apparently be just as effective!

## **Astrology**

Astrology and fortune telling overlap the fields of superstition, but are such huge and diverse subjects that they need no more than passing mention here – the reader is doubtless familiar with the columns about 'The Stars' which appear in most daily papers, and there is a veritable library of books available on both topics. What began with a natural veneration for the heavenly bodies primitive man saw above him, today has become a flourishing science – but the basic belief that their movements can affect people's lives remains unchanged. The twelve star signs are, of course, instantly familiar, and although much fortune telling tries to give the impression that 'reading' these signs is easy, in fact to deduce accurate and meaningful information requires exact details and careful analysis.

## **Astronauts**

Superstition has even found its way into the realms of man's very latest technological achievement – spaceflight. The traditional ill-omened colours are carefully avoided by astronauts, and a good number of those who have taken part in space missions firmly believed it was important for there to be some small error or hitch in the rehearsal stage for a successful mission – which is surely an extension of the same belief found among actors. Many of the recent changes in weather have been put down by the superstitious to rocket launchings (or alternatively the exploding of nuclear weapons) and numerous other phenomena

have been credited to man's intruding across the frontiers of space into the unknown heavens. All the superstitions in this area have, needless to say, been somehow underlined in many people's minds by the disaster of the ill-numbered Apollo 13 mission.

### **Axe**

In all the European nations which have been troubled by witchcraft at some period in their history, there is a belief that if cattle are made to step over an axe when they are taken out to pasture for the first time in spring they will be invulnerable to evil magic and spells. To carry an axe (in some places a hoe) into the house will bring about death in the family, according to a widespread American superstition. This belief seems to have its roots in the old Scottish tradition that to take a spade indoors is very unlucky; the tool symbolizes the profession of the gravedigger, and thereby death.