

**MEMOIRS OF THE AMERICAN FOLK-
LORE SOCIETY. VOL. IV. CURRENT
SUPERSTITIONS: COLLECTED FROM
THE ORAL TRADITION OF ENGLISH
SPEAKING FOLK**

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Memoirs of the American Folk-Lore Society. Vol. IV. Current Superstitions: Collected from the Oral Tradition of English Speaking Folk by Fanny D. Bergen & William Wells Newell

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VOL. IV

1896

CURRENT SUPERSTITIONS

COLLECTED FROM THE ORAL
TRADITION OF ENGLISH
SPEAKING FOLK

EDITED BY

FANNY D. BERGEN

WITH NOTES, AND AN INTRODUCTION BY

WILLIAM WELLS NEWELL

UNIV. OF
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PREFACE.

IN the "Popular Science Monthly" for July, 1886, there was printed a somewhat miscellaneous assortment of customs and superstitions under the title: *Animal and Plant Lore of Children*. This article was in the main composed of reminiscences of my own childhood spent in Northern Ohio, though two or three friends of New England rearing contributed personal recollections. Seldom is a line cast which brings ashore such an abundant catch as did my initial folk-lore paper. A footnote had, by the advice of a friend, been appended asking readers to send similar lore to the writer. About seventy answers were received, from all sorts of localities, ranging from Halifax to New Orleans. These numerous letters convinced me that there was even then, before the foundation of the national Society, a somewhat general interest in folk-lore, —not a scientific interest, but a fondness for the subject-matter itself. Many who do not care for folk-lore as a subject of research are pleased to have recalled to them the fancies, beliefs, and customs of childhood and early youth. A single proverb, superstition, riddle, or tradition may, by association of ideas, act like a magic mirror in bringing back hundreds of long-forgotten people, pastimes, and occupations. And whatever makes one young, if only for an hour, will ever fascinate. The greater number of those who kindly responded to the request for additional notes to my animal and plant lore were naturally those of somewhat literary or scientific tastes and pursuits. Many letters were from teachers, many others from physicians, a few from professional scientists, the rest from men and women of various callings, who had been pleased by suggestions that aroused memories of the credulous and unreflecting period in their own lives. The abundant material thus brought in, which consisted of folk-lore items of the most varied kind, was read gratefully and with pleasant surprise.

The items were assorted and catalogued after some provisional

fashion of my own. Succeeding papers issued in the "Popular Science Monthly" brought in further accessions. I gradually formed the habit of asking, as opportunity offered, any one and every one for folk-lore. Nurses abound in such knowledge. Domestic help, whether housekeepers, seamstresses, or servants, whether American or foreign, all by patient questioning were induced to give of their full store.

The folk-lorist who chances to have a pet superstition or two of his own that he never fails to observe, has an open-sesame to beliefs of this sort held by any one with whom he comes in contact. The fact that I have (I blush to confess it) a preference for putting on my right shoe before the left has, I dare say, been the providential means of bringing to me hundreds of bits of folk-lore. Many times has the exposure of this weakness instantly opened up an opportunity for asking questions about kindred customs and superstitions. I once asked an Irish peasant girl from County Roscommon if she could tell me any stories about fairies. "Do ye give in to fairies then, ma'am?" she joyously asked, adding, "A good many folks don't give in to them" (believe in them, *i. e.*, the fairies). Apparently she was heartily glad to meet some one who spoke her own language. From that hour she was ever ready to tell me tales or recall old sayings and beliefs about the doings and powers of the "good people" of old Ireland.

A stewardess, properly approached, can communicate a deal of lore in her leisure hours during a three or four days' ocean trip. Oftentimes a caller has by chance let drop a morsel that was quickly picked up and preserved.

The large amount of botanical and zoological mythology that has gradually accumulated in my hands is reserved for separate treatment. Now and then some individual item of the sort appears in the following pages, but only for some special reason. A considerable proportion of my general folk-lore was orally collected from persons of foreign birth. There were among these more Irish than of any other one nationality, but Scotch and English were somewhat fully represented, and Scandinavians (including one Icelander), Italians, a Syrian, a Parsee, and several Japanese contributed to the collection.

It has been a puzzling question to decide just where to draw the line in separating foreign from what we may call current American

folk-lore. The traditions and superstitions that a mother as a child or girl heard in a foreign land, she tells her children born here, and the lore becomes, as it were, naturalized, though sometimes but little modified from the form in which it was current where the mother originally heard it. Whether to include any folk-lore collected from oral narrators or from correspondents, even if it had been very recently brought hither, was the question. At length it has been decided to print only items taken down from the narration of persons born in America, though frequent parallels and numberless variants have been obtained from persons now resident here, though reared in other countries.

It would be a most interesting task to collate the material embraced in the present collection with the few published lists of American superstitions, customs, and beliefs, and with the many dialect and other stories, the books of travel, local histories, and similar sources of information in regard to our own folk-lore. Equally valuable would be the endeavor to trace the genesis of the most important of the superstitions here set down. But the limits of the present publication make any such attempt wholly out of the question, and the brief notes which are appended refer to but a few of the matters which invite comment and discussion.

Some few repetitions have been almost unavoidable, since not infrequently a superstition might consistently be classified under more than one head; besides, it is not unusual to find that varied significations are attributed to the same act, accident, or coincidence. When localities are wanting it is sometimes because the narrator could not tell where he had become familiar with the items communicated; again, a chance correspondent failed to note the locality. In putting on paper these popular beliefs and notions, the abbreviated, often rather elliptical, vernacular in which they are passed about from mouth to mouth has to a great extent been followed.

It is impossible here to name the legion of individuals from whom the subject-matter of the various chapters of this volume has been gathered. But thanks are especially due to the following persons, who have contributed largely to the contents of the book:—

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Above all am I indebted to Mr. Newell, whose generous cooperation and advice have been invaluable to one working under peculiar hindrances.

FANNY D. BERGEN.

CAMBRIDGE, MASS., 1. 15. 1896.

¹ Deceased.

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