

MODERN SUPERSTITION

Lafcadio Hearn

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That superstitions outlive religions is a truth too palpable to require much dwelling upon, especially at this epoch of folklore studies, when modern superstitions are being traced back not only to Greek or Roman days, but beyond them through the dust of dead civilizations back to ages of primitive fetich-worship. Human nature has not very much changed since the beginning of history; the advantages of scientific progress are enjoyed by all, but the methods by which they have been obtained are mysterious to the vast majority of mankind; the average skull of the nineteenth century may be of greater capacity than the skull of the middle ages, because it has much more work to do, but the superstitions of the middle ages are by no means quite dead. With the vast widening of human knowledge, and the ever-growing necessity for specialization, it becomes more and more evident that the dream of a universally intelligent humanity is not likely ever to be realized. Men continue to write essays about the coming age of philosophy, the approaching golden era of science; even while the dismal fact prevails that the greater part of the human race is ignorant of the most simple natural laws. To expect that all civilized men should know something about all the general results of scientific discoveries is absurd enough; but it would not seem too much to expect that universal education should infiltrate some positive knowledge of natural laws into the human mind at large. Yet the peculiar tenacity of many absolutely primitive and barbaric superstitions proves that such expectation has little to justify it. Consider, for example, the prevalence of beliefs in astrology, in fortune-telling, in divination, in quackery and imposition of the grossest description! It is useless to say that those fortune-tellers and clairvoyants who make fortunes in all the capitals of the world, who swarm in all the large cities of the United States, are visited merely out of curiosity. They are believed in quite as stoutly as are the superstitions about Friday, about the bad luck attaching to presents of knives or scissors, about the howling of dogs, about ghosts, about cats washing their faces, about dreams. And those who excuse their visits to such people by the plea of curiosity, do so only because of the vulgarity attaching to all such beliefs and such acquaintanceship. Some might imagine the very fact that fortune-tellers and fortune-telling are considered despicably vulgar, to indicate a disappearance of the practice and of its professors at no very distant day. But this would be a serious mistake. Fortune-tellers were considered quite as disreputable thousands of years ago as they are to-day, indeed, even more so; and they have always made most money from those who profess not to believe in them at all.

Diviners and divineresses, astrologers, witches, wizards, daughters of the seventh daughter "born with a veil," seers, clairvoyants, humbugs of all varieties, are being constantly visited in New Orleans by otherwise intelligent men and women who would probably blush to the roots of their hair if they only took a moment's time to consider their own folly. Folly even is a mild term; for the results of such visits are far from being innocent. Some sensitive and suspicious mind may be very seriously affected by the solemn idiocy of the clairvoyant. The announcement on the turning of a card, that a lover is in danger, that a husband is unfaithful, that a well-tried friend is only an enemy in disguise, may produce the most intense unhappiness, jealous anger, unfounded suspicion. It would be scarcely estimable, the misery provoked by all this artificial excitement of passions. One unfortunate result of superstitious fear is that it actually invites the calamity dreaded; and the arrival of the calamity itself is an example that begets superstition. The evil multiplies with astonishing fecundity. If Carmen sees a priest crossing the road, and in consequence of the incident provokes her lover to kill her, the tragedy itself confirms the traditional belief of the provincials that to meet a priest is unlucky. A ship, after leaving port on Friday, encounters a storm; the superstitious sailors lose heart; fatal

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mistakes are made, and the loss of the vessel with all hands on board gives new strength to the grievous faith in lucky and unlucky days. At one time the commerce of the civilized world was seriously affected by such nonsense; and the nineteenth century offered the spectacle of a great English corporation warring upon superstition by deciding that its vessels should sail on Friday.

Education even of the most common sort has, however, affected something in another direction. Astrology is almost dead. The merest rudiments of modern astrology as taught in our public schools, and in the public schools of other countries, have sufficiently illuminated the common understanding to dispel ignorance as to the nature of the heavens. Moreover astrology has gone out of fashion; and there is fashion in all things. But the cards hold their own, and the divining glass, and tubes, and other paraphernalia of antiquated nonsense.

To the advocates of women's rights the preachers of female equality, it must be disheartening to know that the immense majority of the patrons of fortune-telling are of the gentler sex. Of course love and marriage are the motives. There is no reason in love-questions; there is always more or less illusion, and much excitement of the imagination, which the cunning person who handles the cards knows by a few adroit questions how to intensify. Bad enough these results are; but there is good ground to believe they often provoke worse ones. Charms and powers are not the only sequences; in many instances the fortune-teller's parlor should be under police surveillance. Strange discoveries have been made in other cities than this. Well may the visitors veil their faces well may they tremble lest some one who respects, or loves them, might possess a gaze keen enough to pierce through the disguise.