



The Magic of the Horse-Shoe: With Other Folk-Lore Notes

Robert Means Lawrence

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THIS unique title applies technically only to the first chapter of this well-furnished book; but as that chapter is much the longest of the seven, and occupies two fifths of a volume devoted to omens and auguries, it may appropriately represent the whole. The first chapter, and the one upon the superstitions relating to common salt, owe their origin to papers read by the author at meetings of the American Folk-Lore Society. Evidently his preparation for these papers has carried him far into the literature of the general subject, and given him the occasion for telling us many interesting things about Fortune and Luck, the Omens of Sneezing, Days of Good and Evil Omen, Dealings with Animals, and the Luck of Odd Numbers. We may congratulate ourselves that we are not living under the influence of these numerous and complicated superstitions. They have had a long life and have died hard, — if indeed we can say that any of them are yet dead. In this part of the world, at any rate, we flatter ourselves that we are delivered from a vast amount of superincumbent rubbish that still seems to oppress mankind in the older countries. To many practical minds, myths and legends have not the slightest interest. But what would Greek and Roman and mediaeval literature be without them? How could our children get on without the creations of fancy which have come down to us from Teutonic and Scandinavian tales and ballads? Notwithstanding the absurdities involved, they clearly reveal the aspirations and struggles, the traditions and beliefs, the hopes and fears, of the race. In this light, nothing that has occupied the serious thought of men for so long a time is unworthy of our attention. Science has learned to despise nothing, but rather to search, analyze, dissect, eager to get at the original, underlying meaning of things.

Dr. Lawrence does not assume to moralize about the many strange customs he has collected. He is content to classify them and let them speak for themselves. He thinks that superstition is a part of human nature, and that human nature does not change. He believes that the rusty horse-shoe found on the road will continue to be prized as a lucky token. Those who differ from him would say that human nature, when enlightened, does change in its attitude toward these relics of the past, and that the old horse-shoe is valued by most of our countrymen only as so much old iron. However, all these quaint beliefs are interesting as a study. History, indeed, has made too little of them. Although mostly of pagan origin, they have burdened Christianity, and have done much to corrupt its doctrine and to retard its progress.

... It is amazing to find what a part the horse-shoe has played among magical symbols. The author connects it with horns, the open hand, the crescent moon, the serpent, the nimbus, the arch, and with phallic emblems. He finds it on city gates, church doors, tavern signs, private houses, and even nailed to the masts of ships. He shows the attributes of the blacksmith, of the horse, of fire and of iron. He refers to St. George and St. Leonard as successors of Wodan, the ancient protector of horses. He speaks of the demon-mare, of haunted houses, of witchcraft, and other uncanny things having a close relation to his potent symbol.

In the chapter on Luck, there are references to the goddess of Fortune and her temples; and to the blending of superstition with religion among the American negroes and Indians. The place of salt in folk-lore is more significant than is commonly supposed. We are familiar with "Attic salt," and with *cum grano salis*. *Sol* and *Sal*, we know, are two things essential to life. Among the Romans, wages were sometimes paid in salt; hence our word "salary."

—*The Harvard Graduates' Magazine*, Volume 8

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