

Some Seasonable Superstitions

Origin of Ancient Beliefs that Still Persist
By Sir Charles Iggleson, Author of Those Superstitions

Christmas-tide arrives in an atmosphere of superstition for it must be remembered that the introduction of Christianity was responsible for many of the commonplace superstitions of today.

The strict line of demarcation between the priesthood and the uneducated people was very pronounced and many common superstitions of today symbolical of religious ritual, can be traced to this fact.

The origin of a vast number of other superstitions apparently absurd can be traced to the witch who carried on her trade, or nefarious practices—whichever term you like to use—by scaring the people of the countryside.

For instance, she might see a woman pass a load of hay and warn her that unless she bought an ant tidie at once, bad luck would befall her.

Holly Customs
Much superstition once surrounded the mistletoe. The head of a family considered it incumbent upon him to kiss every woman in the house, the dignified wife, his cheeky daughters and giggling maidservants.

Candles and Mince Pies
Some cottagers in Ireland live in awe of Christmas Day for it is a custom of the head of the house to light a huge candle on Christmas Eve and the manner in which it burns determines the fate of at least one member of the family.

Christmas Babies
A child born during Christmas-tide, lasting from Christmas Day until New Year's Day, will always be lucky, but it must always be pricked with a holly leaf, on the right leg if it be a boy and on the left leg if it be a girl.

Spelling Kitten
A dear little girl with her brain in a whirl. Was asked the word "kitten" to spell.

Feast of Lights
The oldest name for Christmas is "The Feast of Lights"—a reference to the glory in the heavens when angels sang their song announcing Christ's birth to the shepherds.

A Picture
A picture is a poem without words.—Horace.



It is the Christmas time, And up and down 'twixt heaven and earth In glorious grief and solemn mirth The shining angels chime.

THE KELDERCOTES HAPPENING

By VINCENT CORNIOR

First of all there was the light—a long and scintillant passage of white fire describing an arc through the air. And from the light devolved something that rang like a true and tiny bell, something that bounded along the polished floor and came to a rest in a corner with a whirring note, as of a Billupian humming-top. When and where it stopped, the light persisted in the form of a fiercely and intolerably radiant stud.

The two men who had just entered the panelled corridor stopped and exchanged startled glances. The face of the younger had become drawn and grey but the elder man was suddenly flushed with excited color.

"Now what's this," he softly challenged his host, "a manifestation of the Keldercoote's haunting, or simply a tom-fool trick?"

"It's certainly after the style of the other occurrences," Riddlehaugh, the owner of the old house and Keldercoote's, wearily sighed his answer, "that's all I can say."

Professor Cunningham robbed his chin. He did not care for the resigned and dull attitude of Riddlehaugh. His experience of mankind and its peculiar nervous ills was sufficient to make him realize Riddlehaugh was on the verge of a complete breakdown.

"No one could have played a trick." The scientist looked back from the corridor to the group of guests who were languidly enjoying themselves about the big fire in the hall. "The e's no one interested enough and no one near enough for that besides, people don't chuck diamonds through the air for a joke."

Bruce Riddlehaugh gasped and stared at Professor Cunningham, dumfounded. The little scientist shook his head and pointed to the glowing point.

"Well, can't you believe me? Pick the thing up and see if I'm not right. Go on, it won't bite you!"

Riddlehaugh stooped and retrieved the mysterious globe. His hands trembled as he touched it . . .

"By jove, Professor—you haven't made any mistake! It's a diamond! And a beauty."

"I could tell that from the ring it made when it struck the floor. There's no sound in the world quite so precise as that of diamond-tone. Let's have a look at it."

Riddlehaugh took the opportunity while Cunningham methodically examined the large stone, to scrutinize the parquetry ceiling and the linen-fold panelling of the corridor . . . He suspected a trick, for all that he had acquiesced in the scientist's denial that trickery was possible. There was no place he could define, either in ceiling or in walls, from which the thrown gem could have proceeded.

Certainly it had not come from the hall. The brilliant arc of its passage had been clearly seen—an arc which had seemingly been described from left to right across their view. Granted so much, the gem had traversed the corridor from some unknown genesis which could be deduced only as the solid fabric of old oak—which appeared absurd. The path had not been one of fall: the stone had not dropped from the decorated ceiling. There was nothing else for it . . . whatever agency was behind its movement, that agency had directed it from the left hand panels to the right.

"You know," excitement still tinged Professor Cunningham's voice, "this thing is more of a mystery than I thought at first. It's a cabochon-lapped stone which was shaped as long ago as the fifteenth century, Riddlehaugh! None of your modern workmanship here, old fellow. The art of cutting a diamond to this exact shape has not been practised for centuries."

"It's a fit match then for the silver comfit-box, the lace and all the rest of the trifles our spook leaves about the place," Riddlehaugh had lived. Cunningham was secretly pleased to hear the more robustly talking. "They're all Elizabethan, I think you said?"

"That's the devil of it." The Professor quietly gave the big diamond to the owner of Keldercoote. "That's why I suspect an agency at work, behind all this strange business, which has more than merely psychic sentience. If you notice, all the things you mention, and this stone, are absolute top-notchers of their type and class."

"That's correct so far as it goes." "But they are—" "To our valuation," Riddlehaugh smoothly argued. "But, Cunningham, don't you see my point . . .

rarity of the kind we've found here in Keldercoote during the last year or two might not be rarities among the hoard whence they are taken."

"You're at it again—at it again!" "I think I'm right in what I surmise." Riddlehaugh laughed, but still remained dogged. "There's a load of treasure secreted somewhere in this place—stuff we should dub 'treasure' today: stuff that was merely decorative and of ordinary utility to centuries ago. That silver comfit-box weighs about two Troy ounces—worth, intrinsically, five shillings."

"But worth, to a connoisseur my lad, six hundred guineas!" Professor Cunningham was suddenly testy. "Don't you go on annoying my orderly mind! I tell you I'm by way of being definitely inclined to my first theory—that something more

within her own. "Wish I hadn't mentioned it—" "Lorna's had a visit from the spirit world," Miss Magerison had not Lorna's reticence. Her drawl infuriated the quieter girl. "A dear little spook has made her a present!"

Lorna shot a glance, coldly, at the effervescent Miss Magerison . . . then outstretched her right hand. Riddlehaugh jumped. A second diamond was in that palm. "I—I found it on my dressing table," the girl said. "One of the queerest things I've ever known . . . I was just telling them all about it."

"Yes," a man's voice this: the soignée Marjorie's admirer of the moment—who had interpreted, with disapproval, Lorna's attitude, "as Marjorie says, you ought to write



The Scream Cut Through The House Like a Banshee Wail.

than a ghostly agency is having a rare old time here; designed for your especial benefit."

"But—but, in the name of all that's wonderful—why?" "That remains for proof, Riddlehaugh. Let it suffice that here's a phantom Christmas box; a specimen diamond worth much more than the comfit-box . . . destined, I suppose, to share the fate of all the rest of your ghostly treasure trove."

"I shall put it in my safe along with the other things and wait until—" "Wait, my grandmother!" Cunningham suddenly buffeted Riddlehaugh's shoulder. "You make me wild! Sell the things—sell 'em, my boy! They're planted here and there for that especial purpose."

"One can't presume a magpie or a daw responsible for this diamond," Riddlehaugh mused. "The lace and the comfit-box and the other things might have been oddments picked up by birds and dropped . . . Keldercoote is a veritable haven for both kinds of bird. My theory therefore must go phut—still, I'll not subscribe to yours."

"Then, said Professor Cunningham, "shut up and take me to somewhere quiet where I can have a long drink and a rest. You clear off and look after your other guests. I want to think."

Riddlehaugh grinned and led the way to his study. He felt happier. This blunt little scientist was thoroughly to be trusted. If anyone could solve the mystery of the haunting of Keldercoote, it was Cunningham . . .

Bruce Riddlehaugh was conscious of the seething excitement before he reached the hearthside in the hall, after composing Professor Cunningham in a deep chair with a tray of creature comforts within reach. The rather languid air of half an hour ago was gone. Faces were eager and voices were intent. A newcomer to the circle, Lorna Baynton, appeared to be the nucleus of the change.

"Ah, here's our plot-weaving Bruce," Marjorie Magerison, soignée and provocative, leaned back in her chair and extravagantly waved to Riddlehaugh. "He'll make something of it, Lorna. What a fine thing for his next thriller—"The Phantom Lady's Maid" . . . or, 'Lorna's Leap—"

There was some laughter at this, but it died when Riddlehaugh asked questions. Again that drawn air was on him. None could fall to notice it. "Oh, all rather silly, Mr. Riddlehaugh," Lorna Baynton looked straight into her host's troubled eyes, betraying the real concern

of a thriller on it, old man. A daylight glaze, a jove!"

"You never told us Keldercoote was haunted, Bruce," Guy Ponsonby, a big bluff and hard-riding fellow who lounge d back in an inglenook, took up the point. "Rather tough on us—what?"

"Haunted—rub 't! " Riddlehaugh would have gone on in reckless denial, had he not observed something more than mere concern in Lorna Baynton's beautiful eyes. The girl was afraid—afraid with that dim and creeping atrophy of all healthiness of spirit which had grown on his own sturdy nature, to make him weak. For her sake he decided to be frank.

"Perhaps," he amended, "I shouldn't be so forthright as that." Immediately he found a coherence among his guests. They each settled into a mould of purest and enthralled interest. Apparently Lorna had captured their attention to a fine degree; even the ultra-sophisticated Marjorie had lost her lazy hardness for undguised eagerness. "Something certainly is curiously at work in this place."

He slowly lit a cigarette and thought over what he was going to say . . . He decided to tell them all he knew. If any wanted to leave the party after that—they could do so.

"It all started in May of last year. I'd only been here a matter of a few months, and my sister's health was improving—" Riddlehaugh, the novelist who was their host, had an invalid sister who kept house for him—"when the first setback came. Norah, as you all know, is by manner of means a foolish type of woman, despite her various ailments . . . She told me the first story.

"She had been quietly sitting by an upstairs window watching a particularly beautiful sunset when, she told me, she became aware of someone in the room with her. She turned and saw—or thought she saw—a little old woman just making out of the door.

"Norah was quite tongue-tied for a moment but when she called out and people came, a search was made . . . Note a trace of the little old creature was found.

"What was discovered, however, was a silver comfit-box. An old-fashioned thing you know—I'll have to show it to you. Certainly it wasn't in Norah's room before the apparition—and certainly no one could lay claim to it in this house. It had the dress of centuries on it. We had it valued and examined and it turned out to be Elizabethan.

A GOOD OLD WISH

In Warwickshire Arden at Middleton Hall, When the Yuletide was nearly at prime, With ice on the waters and snow on the wall, And window-panes pattern'd in rime, The Squire stood up at the bountiful board, A hearty, old-fashion'd good soul, And quaffing a bumper the butler had pour'd, This ditty proceeded to troll—

"A good old wish in the good old way, A merry and prosperous Christmas Day, May peace and plenty and all things dear Surround our lives in the coming year!"

The words of the lit and the jovial refrain We echo'd in chorus with might, And now that the season is with us again, We'll sing it all over tonight.

May we meet as we met at this time of good-will, But should the ways force us apart, The song shall remain in our memories still, And speak to the heart from the heart.

A good old wish in the good old way, A merry and prosperous Christmas Day, May peace and plenty and all things dear Surround our lives in the coming year!

Lucky Number

(Continued from page 3)

"Then, time after time, we came across queer things. A piece of ancient lace and a child's ring—a mouldy old book and a crystal-litte pignard, a plunce-box and a silver quillutter. In every instance, these things showed a gus of great age and in every case they were put in conspicuous places . . . I had a theory that the magpies hereabouts were playing tricks. But I hold to that no longer," he shook some ash off his cigarette, "for reasons I might disclose to you later." He laughed. "Well, you've got the tale out of me—it's Christmas time—surely you also ought to get a seasonal cringing of the spine out of it, if nothing else . . ."

After a time of strained quiet, it dawned on Riddlehaugh that everyone was regarding Lorna with a new deference. The mocking air of Marjorie Magerison was dissipated. Even the bluff hunting man was scratching at his bullet head with something like rueful consternation.

"I declare," Lorna's voice was shaky but held laughter. "That's absolutely marvellous, Mr. Riddlehaugh! Oh, thank you!"

"Er—that's all right," Riddlehaugh was flustered. "But how have I earned—"

"What you've said," the hunting man grunted, "bears out all Miss Baynton had been telling us."

"Yes . . . phantom lady's maid and all," Marjorie was not to be denied. "Really, my dear, thrilling is not the word for it!" She sighed. "And a diamond thrown in—as a sort of supernatural compensation . . . world's more than thrilling, you know!"

Lorna answered Riddlehaugh's quest on ng gaze.

"Exactly my experience this afternoon," she calmly stated. "I had a feeling someone was in the room with me and started to look about me. I thought of that tall powder closet—Riddlehaugh widened his eyes—and opened its door. Nothing there . . . but, as I turned round a little old woman in the quaintest dress imaginable was just sidling through the bedroom door."

"The powder closet," Riddlehaugh echoed softly. "Then—of course, I remember now—you have the room my sister was occupying when she saw the old woman!"

"Oh, horrors!" Marjorie Magerison shrieked and made a show of artistic shudders. "Lorna darling, see how the o-hurse hath come upon thee! Ye guest in ye haunted chamber!"

"What about the diamond?" The hunting man evidently believed in keeping to main essentials. "Tell him of that Miss Baynton—what?"

"Yes," lovingly Lorna regarded the perfect stone she still held in her hand, "this magnificent thing caught my eye. Whoever, or whatever, the old woman was—she left this behind her. It was gleaming on the bed, just as though it had been carelessly flung there. And what I'm to do with it I really don't know." A sweet and chill voice made an answer.

"Consider it as your own, my dear Miss Baynton. I'm sure all these weird gifts are intended to become the property of their finders—although my very hair-splitting brother will not have it so."

"Hear-hear to that!" A second voice boomed. "That's the way to talk, Miss Riddlehaugh! Just what I've been trying to din into Bruce's thick head this afternoon."

Professor Cunningham and Miss Nora Riddlehaugh had come so quietly on the absorbed guests, they had not been heard. Now everyone turned . . . the rosy faced little scientist and the pall'd woman were dwarfed behind Riddlehaugh and the gigantic Guy Ponsonby.

"I certainly owe you an apology, Lady Helena," confessed Freddy, "but you must admit that you dragged me in to dinner the other night, and as I mentioned to George, thirteen was always my lucky number. Perhaps you would introduce me, Basil?" he added, turning to the very amused figure of Mr. Prothero.

"Lady Helena—the Honourable Freddy Toddington."

But Lady Helena was accustomed to emergencies and she did not even falter for a moment.

"How utterly stupid of me," she smiled, "but then something told me you were not Mr. Toddy."

"I object strenuously to being referred to as 'something'" complained Mr. Prothero.

The four of them laughed good humouredly and in that laughter everything was dissolved.

"And did Rosemary know, too?" asked Lady Helena.

To Freddy's amazement she nodded shyly. "I knew him the first time he came to dinner," she confessed. "He's so like the photograph I saw of him in one of the illustrated papers a few weeks ago taken at a hunt ball."

"Then that's all right," said Freddy, as they returned to the Inglenook, "but the answer will no longer be in the negative I hope."

And in due season it was as Freddy hoped.

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