

BYGONE SILEBY



SUPERSTITIONS
NO. 13

SOME SUPERSTITIONS OF BYGONE SILEBY

In Sileby, as in other places, there was formerly a great interest in popular superstitions. There were ancient beliefs and sayings relating to every aspect of life. Many of the superstitions were relics of magical or religious beliefs of past ages.

One of the best known superstitions concerned the number 13. It was associated with the Last Supper, where our Lord and the twelve apostles were assembled. Judas, as the last named, was the 13th person present. As Friday was regarded as a day of fasting, being the weekly memorial of Good Friday, when Friday was the 13th day of the month, the combination was thought to be ominous. Fear of Friday the 13th is known medically as "Triskedekaphobia". In the United States of America, there is a well established organisation called the Triskedekaphobia Society, which published its own diaries, in which any week with a Friday the 13th had two Thursdays, dated the 12th !

Walking under a ladder in the street was thought to be particularly unlucky. There were various explanations, usually supernatural in origin. There was the idea of Jacob's Ladder (see the book of Genesis, chapter 28, verses 10 to 17) which stood between earth and heaven, with angels ascending and descending. Another belief was that the ladder, the ground and the wall made a triangle, the symbol of the Holy Trinity - so it was a sacred area into which no one should trespass. In former times, few were bold enough to venture under a ladder, but if it were unavoidable, ill fortune could be prevented by crossing the fingers and spitting over the left shoulder ! Another means of escaping bad luck after walking under a ladder, was not to speak until a four-legged animal was seen.

The left was the sinister side, where Satan was said to lurk, and by spitting, or throwing salt over the left shoulder, he could be driven away.

The expression "touch wood," was in common use. In ancient times, no one boasted of doing well in life, prospering in business or enjoying good health. It was feared that if the gods heard, they would take away whatever was giving pleasure. When anyone admitted that life was treating them favourably, they protected themselves by saying "touch wood," - perhaps seeking refuge through the wood of the Cross of Calvary. Even in modern times, some people are reluctant to admit that they are in a state of good health. In reply to the question, "how are you ?" there are many replies which offer less than the full truth - "not so bad," "not too bad," "fair," "fair to middling," "could be better," "could be worse," "not so bad as I have been," "I have been better," "I have been worse," "I'm alright apart from ...". Rarely do we hear people say, "I have never felt better in my life," unless, of course, they add, "touch wood."

As the writer has no belief whatsoever in superstition, the material on the following pages is presented as an aspect of local history and folklore, for the interest and amusement of the reader.

SUPERSTITIONS ABOUT THE HOME

Things were said to happen in threes. If you broke two pots, then a third would soon be broken.

It was considered lucky to keep a white cockerel.

It was a bad omen if letters crossed in the post.

It was unlucky to pay the doctor's bill in full.

During a thunderstorm, it was unlucky to watch lightning through a mirror.

A spider dropping on someone was thought to be lucky, and predicted a legacy. Small spiders were called "money spiders."

It was unlucky to iron a handkerchief so that the fold was in the shape of a diamond in the middle of the material.

It was lucky to have red and white flowers in the same vase.

Singing when sitting at the table brought bad luck.

Boasting about anything good would cause the luck to turn, unless the person speaking knocked three times under the table.

Breaking a mirror brought seven years bad luck.

Parsley was never grown near the house, for fear of bringing sorrow or disgrace to those who lived there. In Sileby, there was a saying, "Sow parsley, sow the devil."

A house was protected from storms and lightning if fern grew in the garden.

Madonna lilies were grown near to the house to keep away ghosts. (This lily signified the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary).

It was unlucky to take May blossom into the house.

Ivy falling away from the wall of a house, predicted that the house would soon pass into other hands.

To sweep the house outwards was unlucky, good friends would be swept away.

It was unlucky to have peacock feathers in the house.

A swarm of mice in the home foretold a tragedy.

Some bad omens:

A robin singing on the doorstep. To pick up a pair of gloves from the floor.

A frog entering the house. To pick up scissors from the floor.

A pigeon on the chimney. To take willow catkins into the house.

A bird falling down the chimney. To burn holly after Christmas.

A picture falling from a wall. To pass on the stairs.

The gift of a knife might sever a friendship, so a half penny was given in return, to make it appear that the knife was being purchased.

It was said that if the mattress was turned on a Friday night, it would mean a sleepless night.

It was considered bad luck to begin a new job on a Friday.

Bay leaves were believed to keep away lightning, so a bunch was suspended by the back door.

It was thought to be lucky to have an adder skin over the fireplace.

It was unlucky to leave a white cloth on the table overnight.

Bad luck followed opening an umbrella in the house, or placing it on the table.

It was lucky to have a horse shoe over the back door, but it had to be fixed as a "U". If it was upside down, the luck would "run out"!

If a flock bed was turned on a Sunday, bad luck followed all that week.

People never entered a house by one door and left by another. In Victorian Sibley, they said, "Let's see - did ah cum in the front? Ah woont goo out the back then."

Doing housework on a Sunday brought bad luck. This was "prevented" by saying, "Better the day, the better the deed."

In the days when water had to be carried from a well or a pump by bucket, care was taken not to waste it, and more than one person would wash in the same bowl. A husband and wife using the same water was a good omen, according to an old Sibley saying:

"Wash and dry together,
Live and die together."

To bring luck to a house, a horse was led through the front door, and taken out through the back door.

It was lucky to find a bee in the house.

If a swallow built a nest on the house, it was a good omen.

To stumble when climbing the stairs was a sign of good luck.

SUPERSTITIONS ABOUT THE FIRE

It was bad luck for a visitor to poke the fire. It was said that it required a friendship of seven years before a person dared to poke another's fire, and then only by permission.

In Sileby, a clock was never placed to face the fire, as this was said to "tempt the devil."

A fire made with three lumps of coal was known as "a witch's fire." Villagers would say, "put another piece on, or it will never burn."

Sparks on the chimney back meant that good news was on its way.

It was bad luck to burn mutton bones on the fire.

If the fire did not burn well, the poker was placed across the coal. (The poker and the fire bars were then in "the sign of the Cross.")

When the fire burned on one side of the grate, it foretold a quarrel.

When sparks flew out of the fire, Sileby people said, "Ay up ! the enemy is coming!"

It was bad luck to toast bread on a knife.

Placing the fire bellows on the table brought bad luck.

SUPERSTITIONS ABOUT CANDLES

A bright spark seen on the candle wick meant a letter was on the way to the person sitting nearest to it.

It was bad luck to leave a candle burning in an empty room.

A candle burning with a blue flame was a sign of bad luck on the way.

On a birthday, a wish could be made over the candles on the cake, but to make the wish come true, all the candles had to be blown out together.

It was a bad omen if the candle guttered.

SUPERSTITIONS ABOUT FAMILY QUARRELS

Placing a pair of new shoes on the table was a sure sign of a quarrel.

Knives crossed on the table predicted a row.

A roaring fire was a warning of a quarrel in the house.

In Sileby, people said, "Theer's alus a row if yo want ter borrar a bob."

SUPERSTITIONS ABOUT VISITORS

Signs that a visitor would arrive :

A cock crowing in the daytime.

A cock crowing on the doorstep.

A bee in the window.

Dropping the dishcloth.

Dropping a spoon meant that the visitor would be a child, or a fool.

A flap of soot seen on a fire bar, brought the saying, "Look yer, their's a stranger on the bar !"

A strange dog entering the house , foretold a new friendship.

A visitor placing a chair against a wall brought bad luck.

SUPERSTITIONS ABOUT SALT

In Sileby there was a saying, "Help to salt, help to sorrow."

Villagers never handed the salt to another person after using it, without placing it on the table first.

It was bad luck to spill the salt, as there would be a tear for every grain.

If salt was spilled, sorrow was avoided by throwing a pinch over the left shoulder.

Some people carried a pinch of salt in the pocket or purse for good luck.

When a family moved from one house to another, a pinch of salt was left behind for luck.

SUPERSTITIONS ABOUT EGGS

It was unlucky to take eggs into the house after sunset.

When putting eggs under a hen for hatching, an odd number had to be used, especially thirteen. They were put under the hen when darkness fell.

Burning egg shells on the fire would cause the hens to stop-laying.

An empty egg shell was crushed to keep away bad luck. In ancient times, it was thought that an evil spirit might be hiding inside.

Duck eggs taken indoors after sunset would not hatch.

SUPERSTITIONS ABOUT CLOTHING

There was a saying in the village, "If you can stitch the clothes on your back, you will never have lies told about you."

To pick a piece of cotton from someone's back was a sign of a letter on its way.

It was an indication of good luck to put on clothing in the wrong way, particularly socks or stockings inside out, but it had to be by accident.

Clothing which belonged to a dead person did not wear long.

It was lucky to wear new clothes on Easter Sunday.

It was regarded as unlucky to fold up clothes at night, because the sins of that day were folded up with them.

If a girl got her clothing wet when washing, it was a sign that she would have a drunken husband.

When a girl's apron strings became untied, it meant that her lover was thinking of her.

"If a garter tightens, the love heightens,
If a garter slackens, the love backens."

Green was thought to be an unlucky colour, hence the saying,
"after wearing green, comes black."

To pick up a glove belonging to someone else was a sign of good luck, but only if no thanks were given.

Picking up a glove could mean a surprise was in store.

It was bad luck to mend clothing being worn.

It was considered unlucky to use dark thread on a light coloured material. There was a Sibley saying:

"Tack it in black, and it is sure to come back;
Tack it in white, and it is sure to be right."

When dressing, it was thought to be lucky to put on the right shoe first.

A piece of bread and butter falling from the table, and lying on the floor with the buttered side downwards, was a sign that the person who dropped it would have new clothes that year.

If shoes squeaked when worn, it meant that they were not paid for !

It was lucky to find a knot in a shoe lace.

It was an unlucky sign if shoe laces became untied.

SUPERSTITIONS ABOUT THE BODY

A tea leaf seen on a tooth meant that the person concerned was lying.

If a child had a tooth removed, it was placed under the hearth-rug that night. In the morning, the tooth had gone, and a half penny found in its place. Children were told that it was the work of fairies.

Ears burning meant that someone was talking about that person:

"Right for spite,
Left for love."

An itching nose indicated that a visitor was coming.

An itching foot meant a journey on strange ground.

Eating fish was believed to increase brain power.

FINGERS AND NAILS

To cross the fingers meant to ward off bad luck, or to have a wish come true. (Originally a sign of the Cross to drive away evil)

White spots on the nails had some significance:

Thumb - A gift will arrive.
First finger - A friend will visit the house.
Second finger - A fool will call at the house.
Third finger - A letter will come.
Fourth finger - A journey will be made.

Another version states that the white marks referred to gifts:

"A gift on the thumb, is sure to come;

A gift on the finger, is sure to linger."

Yet another version declares that the marks betray lies told.

It was believed that a baby would become a thief if its finger nails were cut before it was a year old. Mothers bit off the nails the first year.

Girls cut their finger nails and placed the parings under their pillow in order to dream about their future husband.

The days of the week when fingernails were cut, had the following meanings:

Monday - For good news.

Tuesday - For a pair of new shoes.

Wednesday- For a chance to travel.

Thursday - For ill luck and sickness.

Friday - For toothache, or money.

Saturday - For the hope to see a loved one on Sunday.

Sunday - For bad luck and domestic quarrels.

There was a saying, "Never cut your nails on a Sunday, or the devil will be with you for a week."

Cutting the finger nails was believed to strengthen the eyesight.

If nails were cut when the moon was waning, they were said to grow slowly.

HAIR

If hair was cut "at the dark of the moon," it soon turned grey.

Cutting hair during the month of March, brought on headaches.

Cutting her hair at night reduced a woman's reproductive powers.

Hair should be cut when a new moon was seen.

To pull out grey hairs would cause another seven to grow.

Children were told that eating bread crusts made the hair curl.

It was bad luck to save locks of hair.

An eyelash placed on the palm, then blown over the head of the darkest person present in a room, allowed every one to make a wish.

SUPERSTITIONS ABOUT SLEEP

Cats suck the breath of sleeping children.

There was an ancient belief that the soul left the body during sleep, so it was considered to be perilous to waken a person suddenly, as the soul might not be able to return in time. Similarly, it was thought to be dangerous to waken a person who was sleep walking.

There was a saying about dreams:

" A Friday night dream,
On Saturday told,
Is sure to come true,
Be it ever so old."

Some people believed that they slept better when their bed was situated north-south in the bedroom.

SUPERSTITIONS ABOUT THE STREET

It was lucky to meet a chimney sweep in the street.

It was lucky to see a black cat, but unlucky to see a white one.

When paving stones came into use, it was regarded as unlucky to step on the joints or cracks. There was a saying in Sibleby:

"Bears, bears, look at me treading in all the squares."

It was lucky to see a rainbow, but unlucky to point at it.

Stumbling when setting out on a journey was a bad omen.

It was bad luck to return to a house after just leaving it.

To part under a bridge was unlucky, it was thought that those persons would never meet again.

It was lucky to see a spotted dog in the street.

To step on ground where a donkey had rolled was unlucky.

To touch the collar of a sailor passing in the street brought good luck.

A wish could be made when walking on strange ground.

It was said to be unlucky to whistle in the street.

It brought bad luck to walk over a man's shadow in the street.

It was lucky to meet a flock of sheep coming down the street.

To see a loaded hay cart approaching was lucky, but to see one moving away in the distance was unlucky.

It was unlucky to pick up dead flowers in the street.

SUPERSTITIONS ABOUT FINDING THINGS

Findin a piece of coal in the street was lucky. If left there, then good luck was left behind with it.

It was lucky to find a horse shoe in the street.

To catch an autumn leaf as it fell from a tree was a good omen. It was kept to ward off colds and illness during the winter.

On finding a pin in the street:

" See a pin,
Pick it up,
And all day long,
You'll have good luck.
See a pin,
And let it lie,
You're sure to want
Before you die."

If the point of the pin faced the finder, it brought bad luck to pick it up.

It was lucky to find a rusty nail in the street.

To find a four-leafed clover was a sign of good luck, but if it had five leaves, it was considered to be unlucky.

SUPERSTITIONS ABOUT THE MOON AND STARS

A person who looked at a new moon through a window, would break some pots.

It was bad luck to look at the moon through glass.

It was bad luck to point at the moon.

On seeing a new moon, people turned the money in their pockets, in order that it should increase.

It was a rare and lucky thing to see a blue moon.

Women were warned never to count the stars, because the same number counted would bring wrinkles on the face.

Seeing a shooting star could mean :

A birth in the village.

Good luck was coming.

An angel was on an errand from heaven.

SUPERSTITIONS ABOUT HORSES

It was unlucky to meet a funeral in a street, - until a white horse was seen.

In Sibley there was a saying about a white horse:

" Good luck to me,
 Good luck to you,
 Good luck to the white 'oss
 That I can see. Cuckoo."

It was lucky to step on "'oss muck" accidentally !

It was lucky to see a piebald horse.

SUPERSTITIONS AND PREDICTIONS

An epidemic was foretold by violets blooming in autumn.

A large number of lambs in the flocks was an omen of hardship coming.

A red moon predicted war or civil strife.

When bees were idle and honey was scarce, it was a sign want on the way.

Two full moons in the same month brought flooding.

A ring round the moon meant storms would follow.

A ring round the moon on the thirteenth day of the month was a bad omen.

Robins deserting a garden foretold a time of need.

The withering of a bay tree predicted the death of a king.

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BYGONE SILEBY

The next issue, Number 14, tells how the church began in the village, and the way the first building was erected.

Number 15 had the title "Sports and Pastimes." There are so many subjects under this heading, several booklets will be issued with this title.