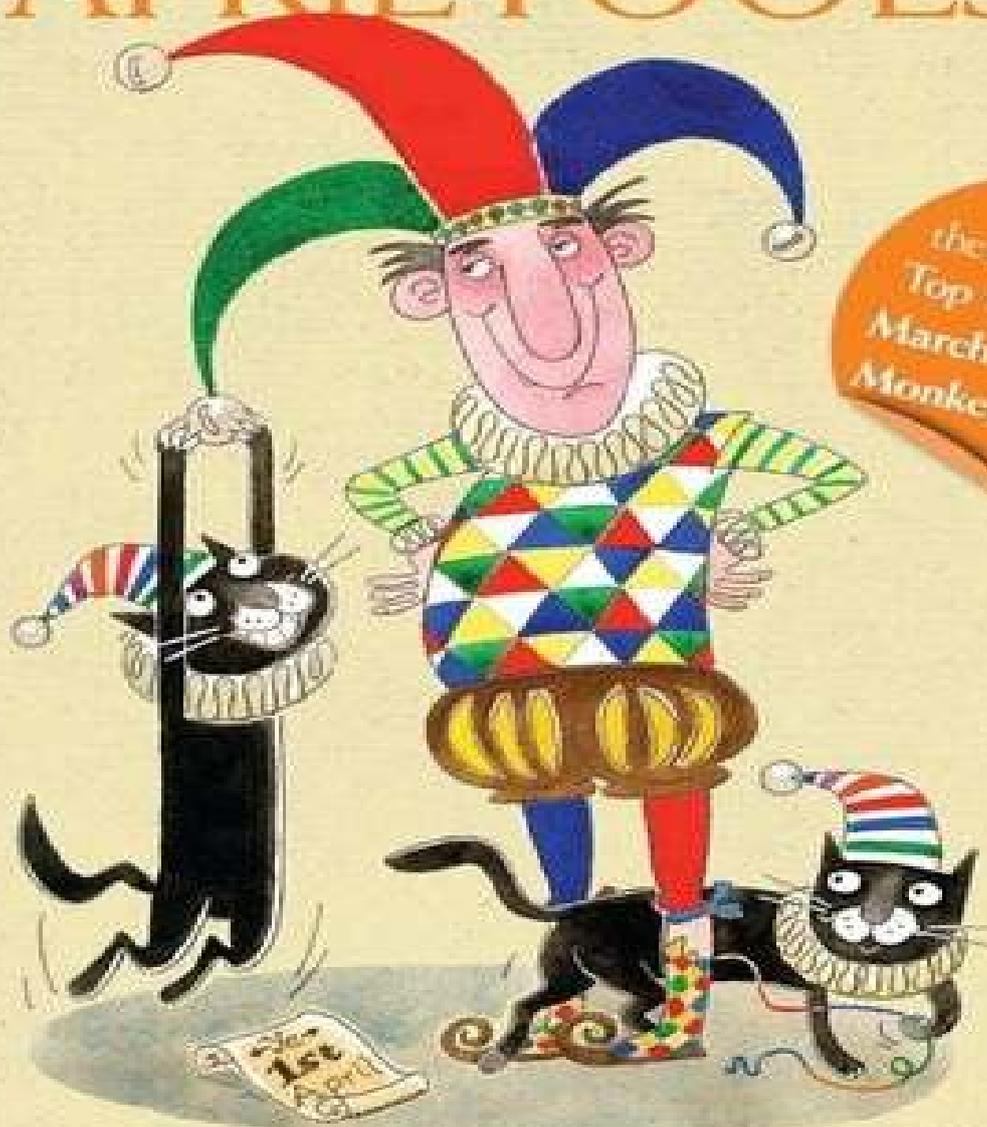


# BLACK CATS AND APRIL FOOLS



From  
the author of the  
Top 10 Bestseller  
*March Flares and  
Monkeys' Uncles*

ORIGINS OF OLD WIVES' TALES AND  
SUPERSTITIONS IN OUR DAILY LIVES

HARRY OLIVER

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY MIKE MOSEDALE

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# BLACK CATS AND APRIL FOOLS

BY  
HARRY OLIVER



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*For Mum, Dad and Claire*

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# INTRODUCTION

When I think of old wives' tales and superstitions I think of childhood, which is naturally when I first encountered them, usually as warnings from adults. Whether from parents, grandparents, other people's parents, or even teachers, the authority of whomever told me that walking under a ladder was courting disaster, or that it was unlucky to tread on cracks in the pavement, or that if I broke a mirror it would bring seven years of misfortune, was enough to make me accept this unquestioningly. The need to challenge such 'truths' was peculiarly absent in me: I did not doubt that eating carrots would improve my eyesight, even make me *see in the dark* – I merely assumed that my lack of night vision was down to a deficiency in my consumption of the vegetable! And as for the things I was told would bring me luck – coins in a fountain, seeing a black cat, owning a horseshoe, or finding a four-leaf clover for instance – well what child is going to doubt the logic of something that is going to improve their lot? Not me, anyway. But growing up and developing into a teenager with a defiant streak combined with the boredom of teenage frustration, meant that the odd transgression such as purposefully striding beneath a builder's ladder *just to see what would happen* was irresistible.

And not much did happen, so far as I am aware anyway. But how could I be aware that I didn't deprive myself of a bit of extra luck?! The interesting thing is that all but the most coldly rational of us hold on to superstitions of one sort or another, be they obscure, idiosyncratic notions that many will not have heard of, or more commonly-accepted pieces of received wisdom that we put into practice without even thinking about it. After all, in a society where religion plays an increasingly small part in our lives, 'Bless You' still crops up whenever a sneeze forces its way out of an individual.

The origins of old wives' tales and superstitions are sometimes reasonably obvious, but all too often, they are not! Many are grounded in ancient beliefs, and of course in Christian dogma, but there are again a good number have arisen in more recent times. In researching this book, I naturally aimed to provide explanations of the common beliefs we are all aware of, but also wanted to give ample space to the lesser-known, yet still fascinating, ones that may be long gone, or only known of in certain quarters. Many, whose origins remained obscure to me, are listed because they are interesting in themselves, and offer food for thought, and I would be most glad if anyone could fill in any gaps where my research proved fruitless. Do send your thoughts to [words@blake.co.uk](mailto:words@blake.co.uk).

I have tried to create a book for everyone to enjoy, for the superstitious and the cynic alike. On reading it, if you find yourself transformed into a paranoid recluse, wary of leaving the house for fear of the consequences of what may happen to you, then I am sorry. But, 'touch wood', this won't happen, and you will enjoy reading as much as I enjoyed writing. I'll 'keep my fingers crossed' that this is the outcome for most of you! Enjoy!

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT



'O.K. Frankie...break a leg !'

**Break a Leg!**

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## ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

### **Break a leg!**

It is considered unlucky to wish an actor 'good luck' before a performance; instead, it is customary to tell him or her to 'break a leg'. The origins and precise meaning of this expression are unclear, and over the years many different experts on superstitions have developed theories as to how it came about. One explanation suggests that, since 'leg' is a euphemism for 'rope' (a taboo word in the theatre as it is on board ships), to tell somebody to 'break a leg' would be equivalent to telling him or her to break the rope holding up the curtain. A particularly good performance, then, would call for the curtain to be opened many times in a row for the actor to re-emerge in front of the applauding audience, putting it at a risk of breaking.

Another explanation for the expression links it back to Ancient Greece, where audiences stamped their feet instead of clapping their hands at the end of a good performance. To tell an actor to 'break a leg' would thus not be referring to the actor's leg but to that of his or her viewers who would have stamped their feet so much watching their performance. This explanation seems unconvincing, however, since the expression seems to exist only in English and not in other Greek-inflected languages.

### **Eating and drinking food made with lemon or milk before a performance**

To eat or drink food made with lemon or milk is considered very unlucky before a performance. The explanation for this superstition is quite simple: eating both substances affects saliva production, which hinders an actor's voice and makes a performance weaker.

### ***Macbeth* is the unluckiest of plays**

Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth* is considered the unluckiest of all plays to put on stage, forecasting disaster for the company performing it and bringing misfortune to those performing in it. The records show that it is the play during which the largest number of accidents, fires and deaths have occurred, and many famous actors who performed the play are said to have had terrible misadventures following its staging. It is considered very unlucky to say the word 'Macbeth' anywhere in the theatre, but especially in the dressing rooms. The play is supposed to be referred to instead as 'that Scottish play' and there are various rituals that actors have to abide by if they accidentally say the 'M' word. According to one tradition, whoever says the forbidden word in the dressing room is to leave the dressing room, turn in a circle three times, break wind or spit and then only come back after knocking and asking permission to re-enter. Another commonly cited remedy is to say 'Angels and ministers of grace defend us!', a line spoken in Act I, sc. iv of *Hamlet* right after the appearance of the Ghost.

The play is generally considered to be unlucky on account of the appearances of the witches and the occult content of many of the scenes. At the time when *Macbeth* was first being performed, belief in witchcraft was still widespread and actors may have been afraid of accidentally unleashing demonic forces or conjuring up evil spirits – which is why the line from *Hamlet* would be spoken in protection against any such visitation. Some sources point to a more practical origin for the superstition, however. In Victorian times, theatre managers would close unsuccessful plays and replace them with *Macbeth*, as it was usually a great success due to its violent and bloody scenes and the fact that

could be learned faster than other Shakespeare pieces since it is his shortest tragedy. To hear the word 'Macbeth' spoken in the dressing room would thus be an omen of very bad luck for actors who risked finding themselves out of work very soon. It is also possible that the bad statistics for the performance of the play may be explained precisely because it was used so often as a replacement and filler for theatre seasons.

### **Whistling during a performance brings bad luck**

It is considered very unlucky to whistle anywhere near the stage during a performance as this is supposed to curse it and bring doom upon it. One simple explanation for this is that theatre technicians would sometimes be given the signal to raise a prop or send down a backdrop using some form of whistling code. Whistling backstage could inadvertently send the wrong signal and seriously ruin a play.

### **To see the ghost of Drury Lane**

It is a stroke of good fortune for an actor to see the ghost of Drury Lane before a performance as it announces a long and brilliant career. The ghost, known as 'the man in grey' (because of the long grey overcoat it is seen wearing), apparently haunts the Theatre Royal on Drury Lane, in London. The ghost is usually seen in the daytime in the auditorium of the theatre, the oldest in London after the reconstructed Globe Theatre. The man in grey also wears a powdered wig, a tricorne hat and carries a sword. Some say the apparition is the ghost of a man murdered in the theatre whose skeleton was found in 1840 in a walled-in room backstage, with a dagger stuck in its ribcage.

There are many other ghost stories surrounding theatres, and Monday night was traditionally considered 'ghost night', a time when ghosts were thought to come out to perform their own play. Apparently, this old belief lies behind the practice, still common today, of not having performances on Monday. The term 'ghost light' is also linked to superstitious beliefs about ghosts. Besides helping people find their bearings backstage and avoiding terrible accidents, this kind of backstage lighting that was originally provided by candles was there to scare off the ghosts of past performances thought to haunt the stage and interfere with existing performances.

### **Never speak a play's last line during rehearsals**

In acting circles it is considered very unlucky to say the last line of a play out loud before the night of the performance, as it tempts fate and may expose the play to evil forces. The play, in fact, is not considered 'finished' until it is performed. This superstition resembles the superstition warning a bride against wearing the completed wedding gown before her wedding day, and may be a form of protection against evil spirits or the Devil – they cannot start attacking the wedding or the performance until it is officially 'ready' and under way.

### **Wearing green, yellow or blue at the theatre**

These colours are believed to be unlucky when worn at the theatre. The bad luck associated with wearing the colour blue is apparently neutralised if silver is worn with it. The explanation for this superstition lies in the cost of producing blue textiles during the early days of theatre. Back in a time before synthetic dyes were common, the dye that was used to produce blue cloth was extremely expensive: if a company used blue costumes they could be assumed to be going over budget and endangering their finances. If silver was added to the costume, however, this was a clear sign that the

theatre company had a very wealthy patron.

~~The superstitions around wearing green and yellow at the theatre have various interpretations.~~ Some sources say that during Elizabethan times yellow and green were considered the colours of the Devil due to the destructive forces of fire and the savage forces of the forest. These same sources point out that green was also the colour of the fairies and thus a dangerous colour to wear. In fact, there is little evidence of any dislike of the colour green in Elizabethan plays and other texts, and it doesn't seem to be deemed unlucky until the seventeenth century. Other sources have argued more pragmatically that green and yellow were considered unlucky at the theatre because the lighting then used to be common in the past would make those colours virtually invisible on stage and thus an actor's performance would be hindered by his or her near invisibility.

# OUTDOOR DANGER



'Stone me!... if that isn't the third one today '

**It is unlucky to walk under a ladder**

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# OUTDOOR DANGER

## **Walking under a ladder**

This is one of the most commonly held superstitions, still believed by many people who do not think of themselves as superstitious. It is considered very unfortunate to walk under a ladder, but there are various interpretations of what is meant to befall those who ignore the custom. Most people believe that it will simply bring bad luck, a belief grounded in the possibility of objects or paint falling on the reckless pedestrian from workers on the ladder or above it. Some people believe that distracted passers-by who walk under a ladder could be sure not to get married on the year of the transgression, while other versions of the superstition predicted the gallows for the unlucky walker. The most cited origination of this superstition, however, is that the ladder is seen to form a triangle with the wall and the ground, a triangle suggesting the Holy Trinity: to walk through that triangle would be to court misfortune upon oneself by showing disrespect to the Trinity.

Other recent sources point instead to the negative symbolism of ladders in general, such as the ladder that was used to take Jesus off the cross, or the ladder used to lead inmates to the gallows (the last explanation supporting the idea that walking under a ladder is an omen pointing to a date with the hangman – not something most of us need worry about nowadays!).

## **Finding money**

Oddly, you may think, it was once considered very unlucky to find money on the ground. This belief dates as far back as the sixteenth century. In order to help ensure that they did not have to deal with the misfortune that would result from discovering a few handy coppers lying around, wily individuals took protective measures, the most common being to spit on the found money. If the coins were somehow damaged, they were considered lucky and could be picked up without any danger. The origins of this superstition are unclear but one could imagine that a poor person found in possession of coins might be accused of theft, and a broken or damaged coin would most likely have been discarded by its owner and would thus pose no threat to those who found it. It may also be that the superstition was spread as a general protective measure for the good of the community, to make it more likely that lost money would be returned to its original owner. Nowadays, it would surely take a truly superstitious individual to walk past a few coins glinting at them in the sun ...

## **Stepping on a crack in the pavement**

It is considered unlucky to step on cracks in the pavement. Today this belief is often held by children who know the rhyme ‘Step on a crack, break your mother’s back’ (assuming they’re not in a sulk with their mothers, that is). This superstition dates back to the late nineteenth century, when a racist version of today’s rhyme became popular. Although the supposed logic behind it is unclear, the original rhyme suggested that, were one to step on the cracks, one would have a black baby, which during that racist time was considered an unlucky event. A later version of the rhyme turned into ‘Step on a crack and your mother will turn black’, which then shifted again, probably sometime in the 1950s, to its non-racist modern equivalent. Another superstition surrounding stepping on cracks linked the number of cracks one stepped on and the number of dishes you would break that day, though the

origins of this version of the superstition are difficult to ascertain.

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### **Parting at bridges, crossing bridges and walking under them**

Bridges, because they are often suspended between two stretches of land or over the dangers of water, have evoked several popular superstitions. Perhaps the most common is the belief that if one says goodbye to a friend on a bridge this is a sure sign that you will never see that person again: the bridge is a symbol of separation, with each friend belonging to a different stretch of land and growing apart. There are several superstitions warning against being the first person to cross a new bridge because the Devil, called to the bridge by his envy at man's ability to build something so complex, would avenge himself by taking the soul of the first person to cross it. Sometimes animals would be sent across the bridge first as a preventive measure against such an occurrence. In Norway it was once thought that trolls lived under bridges, so it was important to have something to give them or flatter them with so they would not pester those who wanted to cross (and this myth has reached English culture in the form of the story of the Three Billy Goats Gruff). It is common for those who work on constructing bridges to leave a symbolic amount of money in the plaster or cement making up the bridge to protect it and bring it good luck in the years to come. Wine is also sometimes used for the same purpose: bottles of wine are broken against the surface of the bridge when it is opened in the same way that is done for baptising ships. In some places it is considered very unlucky to walk under a bridge while a train or other vehicle is passing above, for the perhaps obvious reason that the bridge may collapse under such weight. To counter such a superstition, people are supposed to touch the roof of their car if they are driving, or spit, or cross their fingers. Touching the roof of the car is clearly a gesture intended to hold the bridge up. But please, should you feel the need to do this while driving, only use one hand – letting go of the steering wheel altogether seems far more likely to bring disaster to the modern driver.

### **Crossroads**

In the past, crossroads were considered very dangerous places where one was likely to meet spirits, in particular the ghosts of suicides (who would often be buried there so that their soul would be confused and would not know how to find its way back to the place where it died). Crossroads marked the border between the safe world of the village and the home, and the unknown where magic, danger and adventure began. It was also common to place hanging gallows at large intersections just outside cities and villages, so crossroads were unpleasant and frightening places to walk past. When it wasn't the dead bodies left hanging and rotting for all to see, the ghosts of those who had been executed could possibly also be haunting these places. In Catholic countries, small altars to local saints or to the Virgin Mary are often found at crossroads in back streets out in the countryside, perhaps the last remnant of an archaic search for protection. In ancient times sacrifices would sometimes take place at crossroads. In Scandinavia, trolls were thought to gather at crossroads, while in the British Isles it was witches and fairies, and in India and Ancient Greece crossroads marked openings to the world of the gods and the dead.

### **Precautions for travellers, or advice for a happy holiday**

In the past, travelling could be a very frightening and dangerous activity, so it is not surprising that many superstitions evolved around the act of setting out on a journey. A traveller leaving their home would look up at the sky and at the landscape around to notice any movement of wildlife. Anything

appearing on the left side of the traveller was considered a bad omen for the journey, while anything appearing on the right was considered auspicious. To return home after setting off, for whatever reason, was considered very unlucky and likely to curse the entire trip. It was recommended, if returning home was unavoidable, that the traveller leave again the following morning, or that they perform various purification rituals before setting out again, such as lighting a candle in the local church or spitting and making the sign of the cross. It was considered bad luck to look back toward home having left, and it was also considered unlucky for those left behind to watch the traveller until they disappeared behind the horizon.

A superstition that many people still believe in today relates to St Christopher, the patron saint of travellers: to wear a silver medal or to carry around a small statue of the saint is said to protect the traveller from any misfortune. This superstition is clearly based in the Catholic tradition, where patron saints are believed to protect all aspects of daily life. The name Christopher comes from the Greek *christos* (Christ) and *phero* (to carry) and is connected to a myth about a giant to whom the baby Christ appeared in the form of a small child wanting to cross a river. The giant carried the child across. The amulets of St Christopher always depict a tall man carrying a stick and a small baby on his back or his arms. So next time you have a holiday from hell, perhaps you shouldn't just blame the holiday resort or the monstrous building site blocking your sea-view – think about how you may be partly to blame for not having paid heed to this wealth of superstitions. Or just stop going on those package deals ...

### **Having a woman on board a ship**

In the past it was considered very unlucky to have a woman on a ship, especially a prostitute, as it was thought that her presence would cause storms and possibly shipwreck. This superstition probably originated from the social tensions and problems that might arise among the crew of bachelor men if a woman was on board, and from the sense that sex would distract sailors from their duties aboard the ship. An extension of this superstition led to the practice of having scantily clad or completely naked women carved on the bow of ships, as offerings to the seas who were thought to be calmed by the sight of female nudity. These days, with some women single-handedly sailing yachts around the globe, it seems that having a woman on board a ship can actually lead to great things.

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CHAPTER THREE  
ACTIONS AND  
GESTURE



'Lottery win or not...that's just plain rude !'

**It is rude to point...**

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## ACTIONS AND GESTURE

### **Never light three cigarettes with the same match**

It is considered very unlucky to light three cigarettes with the same match, and it is especially taboo in military circles. This superstition harks back to the Boer War, although it is more often associated with the long nights in the trenches of the First World War. Snipers from enemy lines would notice the match being struck to light the first cigarette; they had time to load their gun as the second cigarette was being lit; and they could confidently aim and fire at the unlucky third smoker as the burning match reached his cigarette. Remember this the next time you find yourself in a battle situation and the nicotine cravings kick in.

### **Crossing fingers**

To cross one's fingers is a gesture used to ward off evil and bring good luck. It is thought to be an attempt at conjuring up the protection of the Christian cross and Jesus Christ. It is considered unlucky, however, to arrange objects (especially silverware) in the shape of the cross, as this is seen as an offence against God. Fingers are thus crossed on the same hand forming a slanted cross, rather than across hands in true cross shape. Crossing fingers is also a gesture used as a countermeasure when one has accidentally walked under a ladder, and it is commonly used by children when telling a lie as a way of protecting themselves in advance for the consequences of the bad deed. There is little evidence of people crossing fingers as a sign of good luck before the late nineteenth century. In the past it was much more common to cross one's legs or to wrap one's thumb with the other fingers of the hand. The practice of folding thumbs inside one's hands is still used in Switzerland in the same way crossing fingers is used in the British Isles, Ireland and North America.

### **Touching wood**

Touching wood is a gesture (or simply an invocation when the expression 'touch wood' is spoken) used to counter the threat one may incur when boasting or willing something to happen – or not happen. Today simply saying 'touch wood' is considered enough, but in the past it was always necessary actually to touch wood. The practice of touching wood may be an inheritance from the ancient understanding that speaking of one's good fortune would anger the gods and tempt fate. The practice is often associated with seeking the protection of the wood of the cross, or with ancient beliefs in benevolent wood gods and spirits that could be conjured up for protection by a knock or touch. Other sources, however, argue that the custom of touching wood is not ancient at all and is simply derived from a nineteenth-century children's game called 'tig-touch-wood', in which children would be 'safe' during a game of tag when they were touching wood. All of the explanations have their merits, but which is the definitive origin is uncertain. Americans, incidentally, say 'knock on wood' rather than 'touch wood'.

### **Throwing a shoe for luck**

It was customary, from as far back as the sixteenth century, to throw an old shoe after a person departing (on foot, by carriage or by ship) for good luck. The custom was extended to cars, and

remains today only in the disappearing practice of tying an old pair of shoes to the back of newlyweds' cars. The shoes are meant to bring good luck and fertility to the couple. The origins of this superstition are unknown and puzzling. It may be that since shoes were precious goods in the past, to throw one behind a person would suggest abundance and wealth, throwing the shoe being something equivalent to throwing a coin into a fountain, constituting a sacrifice of sorts. Another possible explanation might relate to the journey: since the shoe being thrown is old, the gesture may bring good luck in the sense of suggesting that the person departing might return with a new shoe (or hopefully a pair) for the loved one left behind.

### **Pointing a finger brings bad luck**

In the past, to point a finger at somebody was considered very unlucky. To point at somebody was seen as equivalent to cursing them because it was thought that the index finger would concentrate evil forces in the direction it was pointed; it would also bring misfortune to the person pointing the finger by causing anger and conflict. It was considered particularly unlucky to point at a funeral procession as this gesture was bound to bring a new death in the town. Similarly, it was thought to be unlucky to point at rainbows, stars or the moon – these gestures, in fact, were seen as sinful and disrespectful (this belief may be a remnant from ancient times when these natural phenomena were worshipped). At times of heightened hysteria about witchcraft, women were arrested simply for pointing their finger in the direction of someone. Today the action of pointing a finger and the expression 'to point a finger at someone' are both read as gestures of accusation and we no longer see it as a gesture that brings bad luck. It is likely, however, that the idea that it is rude and inappropriate derived from this old superstition.

### **Throwing coins into a fountain for luck**

It is considered good luck to throw coins into a fountain. The origins of this gesture are ancient, dating back to a time when all bodies of water were thought to be inhabited by gods, spirits or fairies. Originally it was customary to throw pieces of a sacrificed body into the water (only very early on would these sacrifices have been of human bodies – they soon consisted rather of animal sacrifices, even statues and figurines made out of wood, stone or bone) in order to appease the water spirit. Today the gesture is thought to bring good luck in the form of a wish come true. If one makes a wish, it is normally customary to throw the coin over one's shoulder, tossing it backwards into the fountain or well. In Rome, when one throws a coin into the famous Trevi Fountain, visitors are recommended on the way to wish to return to Rome. So when in Rome ...

### **Making the sign of the cross**

To make the sign of the cross was thought to bring luck and protection from misfortune and was often used as a gesture against evil forces. Today it is common for sportsmen to cross themselves before attempting a particularly challenging sports feat, or for gamblers to sit cross-legged in the hope of having luck on their side. In the past, the sign of the cross was more commonly seen, for example written on bread before being put in the oven or marked on doors and cribs to protect from evil spirits and witches. The sign of the cross was also thought to bring healing from very early in history, as far back as AD 1000. The gesture is a general symbol of blessing bestowed upon the congregation during Catholic ceremonies. It is still common for people to cross themselves upon seeing a funeral procession so as to bless the deceased and those dear to him or her and to ensure protection from an

ill will coming from the dead. There is also the familiar childhood saying 'crossing my heart', often followed by 'and hope to die', when making a promise, calling the power of the cross against oneself if the promise is broken. The origins of this expression are obscure but its use seems confined to the world of child play, probably only dating back to the nineteenth century.

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# RUGBY CLUB

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'Look mate...that umbrella is one action too far in this environment.'

**It is unlucky to open an umbrella indoors.**

### **Breaking a mirror**

To break a mirror is said to bring seven years of bad luck. If a mirror breaks of its own accord, this is also considered a terrible omen, foretelling the death of someone dear to the mirror's owner. The origins of this superstition may be linked to ancient beliefs surrounding reflections more generally, which were seen to have magical properties and to retain something of the soul of the person looking into them. To shatter a reflection by creating ripples in water or by breaking a mirror would thus be seen as dangerous for the soul, exposing it to witchcraft, to the working of the Devil or of evil spirits. The reasons for the bad luck being for seven years may be linked to the connection between the number seven and the fact that God created the world in seven days. There would thus be a cycle of bad or good fortune spanning seven years in parallel to the seven days of God's creation. The superstition may, however, also be linked to the even more ancient notion that the most important changes in life occur over seven-year time periods. The damaging influence of the broken mirror would thus affect people for the entire duration of a seven-year cycle unless countermeasures were taken. The two best-known remedies for the broken mirror curse are throwing the broken pieces of the mirror into a river, or burying them in sacred ground.

### **Hanging a horseshoe over a threshold**

Horseshoes are among the most celebrated symbols of good luck and they are constantly represented in cards, wedding confetti and charm bracelets. Their main purpose is to ward off evil, although finding a horseshoe or walking under a threshold over which an iron horseshoe has been hanged are both thought to be particularly lucky events. The origins of this superstition are unclear. Some associate the power of the horseshoe to the fact that it is made of iron, a metal considered powerful since ancient times, and made even more powerful by its Christian association with the nails of the cross. In the British Isles it was common to think that fairies and witches did not like iron and stood clear of it. Others associate the horseshoe to early horse-worshipping rituals or link the crescent shape of the horseshoe to the moon or rainbows, which were both considered lucky symbols and were worshipped in pre-Christian societies. Horseshoes with seven holes in them are traditionally the luckiest of all, given the number seven's association with the supernatural. There is much debate over which is the best way to hang a horseshoe over a doorway. Most people believe it should be arranged pointing upwards to ensure that good fortune does not slip away; but others hold the opposite view and say that a downward positioning of the horseshoe ensures that the good fortune will be transmitted to those walking beneath it.

### **Placing objects on the table**

Perhaps because the table is symbolic of the church's altar within the household, there are many taboos about objects being placed on the table. A more practical reason could be simply connected with issues of hygiene and protection from germs, an interpretation that would also explain why these superstitions can only be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century. It was then, in fact, that even ordinary people were becoming aware of the existence of germs and their dangerous workings with

the household. Placing one's shoes on the table is considered very unlucky. Babies, bellows, umbrellas and lanterns are also forbidden items. There is also a superstition associated with sitting on the table if you do so you will never get married. If a guest folds his napkin at the end of a meal this is supposed to be a sign that they will never return to that household, so take note of this at your next dinner party and, if you're keen to hold on to your friends, just don't provide napkins.

### **Opening an umbrella indoors**

The belief that opening an umbrella indoors brings bad luck is widespread to this day. Its origin cannot be traced back much earlier than the late nineteenth century, since umbrellas have only been in common use in Europe since the beginning of that century. The superstition has nevertheless undergone some transformation. In earlier versions it was thought to be an omen of death. The most likely explanation for the superstition is connected to the taboo concerning gestures and actions meant for one environment being made in another, so that actions meant for the outdoors must not be performed indoors.

### **Getting up 'on the wrong side of the bed'**

Implying that somebody is in a bad mood or generally unfortunate, this phrase has its roots in popular superstition. The 'right' side of the bed was normally thought to be the opposite side from the one the bed was entered into the night before. This idea that things should be done in opposites is true of many other superstitions, as for example in the importance attributed to transporting a corpse out of the house feet first – the opposite to one's position at the time of birth. These gestures were thought to 'open' and 'close' an event properly, so to get off on the same side of the bed as one entered into would be to expose oneself to evil spirits for not having given proper closure to the ritual of sleep. In later years it became common always to consider the right as the correct side to get out of bed from since it represented the side of good, the left being traditionally associated with the Devil (see the entry on left and right hands on page 90). In these times of singledom and limited living space in cities, many of us have our beds up against the walls, so there is a good chance that many always get up on the wrong side of the bed!

### **Turning a calendar page before the new month has started**

It is considered very bad luck to turn the page in a calendar before the arrival of the month depicted on the page. This superstition appears to be fairly recent, dating back no later than the early twentieth century when mass-produced paper calendars became widespread. The reason for the superstition, however, is based in the ancient fear of tempting fate. In this case the temptation would come from assuming that one will be alive and well in the future, something only God (or the gods) was to decide.

### **Dropping silverware**

To drop silverware on the floor was thought to be a sign that a visit was imminent. This superstition dates back to the early nineteenth century and its origins are unclear. If one dropped a knife then the visitor would be a man; if one dropped a fork the visitor would be a woman; and if one dropped a spoon it would be a child. Sometimes to drop a spoon would therefore also be a sign of an imminent pregnancy. The reasons for the different genders being associated with the silverware illustrate the gender stereotypes that often characterise popular superstitions, the knife being a more aggressive implement than a fork. Spoons were often smaller in size than knives and forks and that was probably

the reason they were thought to refer to children. When they were connected to pregnancy this may have been due to their rounded shape, not unlike a woman's in the later months of the pregnancy.

### **Hanging seaweed on the mantelpiece**

In the past it was thought that hanging seaweed above the mantelpiece would protect the house from fires. This belief can only be seen to date back to the middle of the nineteenth century. Its origins can probably be explained by the simple association of seaweed with water and to the idea that, since water is fire's natural opposite, seaweed would be a good talisman against fire.

### **Making sure there is always something in the oven**

An old Jewish superstition says that leaving an oven empty will cause the family to go hungry in the future. To prevent such a misfortune from befalling a household, however, it is enough to leave a baking sheet or a pan in the oven as a precaution. This superstition may be linked to very ancient rituals in which food was always left for household gods in order to ensure their protection of the family. In Rome, household gods had altars of their own and were given small portions of food to appease them.

CHAPTER FIVE  
CLOTHES AND  
APPAREL



'The kids love it...but I'm afraid  
I'd set my heart on a left fitting shoe.'

## Buttons

It is thought that doing up the buttons of one's shirt incorrectly is a clear sign of bad luck. The recommended cure is quite simple though: to take off the garment and start again! To find a button on the street is supposed to be a good omen, foretelling the beginning of a new friendship, and buttons with four holes in them are considered particularly lucky. It is also considered good luck to give buttons as a gift. These traditions only date back to the nineteenth century, though in the late seventeenth century diviners used buttons to predict the future, asking them questions and picking up a handful at random. Whether they picked up an even or odd number would determine whether the answer was a 'yes' or a 'no'. Buttons have thus been attributed magic properties for longer than the superstitions surrounding found buttons have been around. The tradition of using buttons for divination has remained in certain children's rhymes sung when counting buttons: 'This year, next year, now, never' and 'Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief'. When children recited these rhymes counting buttons, the word the last button was counted on would stand for a person's destiny or the destiny of their future husband. The rhyme 'This year, next year, now, never' was usually thought to answer the question of whether and when a person would marry.

## Shoes

Perhaps because shoes were extremely expensive items in the past, or because they were made to suit their owners (and could thus seem to be extensions of their bodies), there are many superstitions associated with them. It is considered bad luck accidentally to put shoes on the wrong feet. This superstition dates back to Roman times when the Emperor Augustus only narrowly escaped an assassination attempt after putting his sandals on backwards. If shoelaces continuously come untied it is supposed to be a sign of good news coming your way, perhaps in the form of a letter. It is bad luck to place shoes on a table (see the entry concerning objects on the table on page 38), and shoes placed on a bed are supposed to be omens of an imminent death in the family. In the past people used to say that, if you didn't give a new pair of shoes to a poor man in your lifetime, then you would go barefoot in the afterlife. The origins of this superstition can be guessed to be incentives for people to help the poor. In some areas of England and northern Europe, it was once thought that turning one's shoes with the buckles and laces closest to the bed would help prevent nightmares. This belief was probably linked to the idea that witches and fairies didn't like knots or metal and, since Anglo-Saxons and Norsemen believed that nightmares were brought about by a *mara*, an evil fairy-demon creature that would ride on the chest of sleepers at night, holding them by the hair, having the knots and metal bolts of shoes next to the sleeper's bed were probably reasonable precautions.

## New clothes at Easter

Wearing new clothes at Easter is a tradition that also contains a bit of superstition in it. It was thought that failing to wear at least one new item of clothing on Easter Sunday would bring bad luck. The belief has both a practical and a symbolic origin to it. The practical origin is connected to the fact that in many places people observed Lent by wearing the same outfit during the entire forty days (or at least it was considered sinful to buy new clothes during that period). The symbolic reason is that Easter is a time of regeneration for the Earth after the death of Christ: as a time of renewal it was the ideal moment to purchase a new outfit, for the poor perhaps the only outfit they would own until the

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