TWENTY-THREE

Superstitions and Tales

NO ONE PAID MUCH ATTENTION to the black cat superstition, but some were convinced that breaking a mirror or walking under a ladder could not fail to bring bad luck. A few were afraid of the numeral 13 and regarded the thirteenth of a month that fell on a Friday as particularly ominous. Giving a knife or other edged instrument as a present was disapproved of by some because of the danger that it would “cut friendship.” Some believed that if one cut his nails on Sunday “the devil would be with him all week”; also, that if human hair was used by birds in constructing a nest, the owner of the hair would suffer from headaches. Girls were seriously advised against whistling because “a whistling maid and a crowing hen never come to a good end.” Finding a pin portended good luck, particularly if the point happened to be toward the finder. If one had a wart, he was advised to sell it for something of value—a pin or a penny; then, if he hid the token of sale where it would never be found, the wart would disappear. In some cases it did actually fade out completely. Probably few parties to such transactions would have believed that this happens fairly often, even when the blemish has not been “sold.”
A few went to great lengths to get their garden and field crops planted in the “right sign” of the moon. If the weather or other condition prevented this, they reluctantly planted at another time, certain that results would be unsatisfactory in some important respect. They insisted that it was the height of folly to butcher pigs unless the moon was in the proper phase. If the “sign” was not right, they declared, the fat would “fry away.” Some were certain that early garden stuff, to do well, must be planted on Good Friday. No matter how unfavorable the weather or how wet and clammy the ground, they strove mightily to get their gardens started that day.

Two “witnesses” told in all seriousness of having seen about his late home the ghost of a man who had taken his own life. Other accounts, rather hazy as to time and place, were given about a man who became so wicked that the devil came one night to claim him as his own. The intended victim took to his heels and ran so fast that he finally left the panting Old Nick far behind. There was no little curiosity as to whether the chap was scared into abandoning his evil ways or the devil persisted until at last he nabbed him.

A young friend and I, both about twelve, went coon-hunting one very dark night. We had no hound, but we carried guns and a lantern. Doubtless influenced by the darkness and the novelty of the adventure, we talked of ghostly occurrences that we had heard of and dwelt at considerable length upon various weird and uncanny matters. When we got well into the woods, we somehow felt the presence of a deadly enemy, maybe lurking behind a tree or a stump. Shadows cast by the lantern’s beams took on strange forms, unearthly and menacing; a breaking twig sounded exactly like the cocking of a gun; cries of
night birds made us think of "catamounts" and bears. The sighing of the wind, the rustling of leaves, the darkness, all assumed unwonted qualities, mysterious and ghostly. We didn't see a coon or any other wild creature. As a matter of fact, our state of mind became such that we didn't want to. We had gone only a mile or two into the woods when—our hearts pounding, our hair bristling, and our nerves tense—we decided that we had had quite enough of coon-hunting. We turned about and started homeward, walking very fast and clutching our guns tightly, all the while glancing stealthily right and left over our shoulders.

Few of the people about us actually gave real credence to the supernatural; however, nearly all had an unflagging interest in everyday natural happenings, particularly if they were a little unusual or bizarre. Practically everyone had ears open for accounts of amusing or exciting goings-on. They enjoyed hearing and passing along anecdotes, especially any that might have a sparkle of humor. Some of the tales that were told and some of the incidents that aroused interest or brought laughs are recounted in the paragraphs that follow.

Our neighborhood was set agog one midsummer day by reports that a "wild man" was at large, wandering through the tall corn over the countryside. It developed that the wanderer was a poor old fellow suffering temporarily from strange delusions incident to a senile disorder. About the same time we were told that somewhere "up north," "White Caps" were about to close in on a man alleged to be a wife-beater. There was an overtone of mystery here; up to that time, no one had ever heard of White Caps. I have never heard of them since. It seems
probable that the name had been adopted by some local self-constituted vigilante-type group, perhaps a sort of small-scale Ku Klux Klan.

A wide local area was electrified one morning by grapevine reports that a horse thief from another county had passed through town and was heading north, our sheriff pressing closely behind him. In the fracas that followed, when contact was made, the lawman shot and killed the fellow. Half of the people in the county visited the undertaker's room the next day for a look at the dead man. Many felt that the sheriff, a brave man who, in his time, rounded up many a lawbreaker, possibly was a little too quick on the trigger in this instance.

Not long after that, everyone was shocked by a shooting tragedy at the home of a widely known farmer. Incensed by a series of petty thefts from his premises, he had begun a nightly vigil, determined to catch the thief. As he watched one evening, a figure dimly outlined in the darkness appeared and moved directly toward the barn door. He blazed away with his shotgun, and the supposed intruder fell lifeless to the ground. The family was horrified to find that the victim was a young nephew of the man's wife who had walked over from his farm home for an overnight visit. The law ruled that the shooting was an accident. Public opinion held the farmer guilty only of ill-advised, overly-hasty action and all in the community, though grieving for the death of the youth, were more disposed to sympathize with the farmer than to censure him. The man himself was inconsolable and never ceased his self-reproach.

An aged man with his wife and several grown sons came to live on a little farm not far from ours. The father,
kindly, neighborly, and industrious, won the respect of everyone. The boys, however—big, strong fellows, always well dressed—were never known to do any work. Their lack of any visible means of support aroused widespread suspicion and was the subject of much discussion.

After a few months there were reports of burglaries in surrounding areas. The finger of suspicion pointed directly to these young men, but officers were unable to find any ironclad evidence against them. On Christmas Eve the home of the Sunday school superintendent, half a mile from the home of the brothers, was burglarized. No one doubted that this was their handiwork, because they knew the lay of the land and could be certain that the superintendent and all members of his family would be at the church that night for the Christmas program. As tangible evidence was lacking, no action could be taken against them. Not long afterward, however, the farm was sold and the family moved away; evidently, neighborhood suspicion and resentment had become too strong.

Several generations of fun-loving pranksters had depended for a big share of their laughs upon the snipe hunt, invented far back in backwoods days. Apparently unaware that the ancient gag had become superannuated, a group singled out a young chap as a gullible tenderfoot and invited him to go with them to hunt snipes. With a well-feigned lack of sophistication, he accepted. When they had penetrated deeply into a thick woods, they handed him a bag, directed him to stand very quietly and hold the bag wide open while they worked through the brush and beat out the snipes. The birds, they assured him, would zoom in and dive straight into the bag.

He took his stance and held the bag exactly as directed.
Immediately after they were out of sight and hearing, he stole quietly from the spot and ran swiftly over a wide detour. He met them as they emerged from the woods, slapping each other smugly on the back and laughing uproariously. He never enjoyed anything so much in his life, he declared, as seeing the sheepish looks that suddenly came over the faces of the other "hunters."

A farmer told of going with a binder fresh from the factory to harvest a field of rye for a man on a neighboring farm. Noting the exceptionally heavy, badly tangled straw, he expressed concern that the machine might be damaged, if not completely ruined, trying to handle that crop. "Why worry," replied the neighbor, "the thing's quarantined, ain't it?"

A big fellow with oxlike strength, able to do with apparent ease the work of two average men, often helped us with farm work. He was heard to complain, as he spaded in a long trench for a tile drain, that the work became a little "monopolous" at times. Another chap stood several minutes watching a hog as it wallowed in a filthy mud hole. "Well, sir," he observed, "they sure named them there animals right when they called 'em hogs."

A jovial Irishman with an ever-present sense of humor and an oft-expressed musical preference for "something quick and devilish" lived on a farm near ours. "I've noticed," he said one time, apropos of March weather, "that, so far, when I've lived through March, I've lived through the whole year."

He had a story about a farming community that was suffering acutely from lack of rain. Crops were withering
and parching in the fields; wells and cisterns were going dry; farm animals were on the point of perishing. Desolation was everywhere. Finally, it was decided to get all of the people together and pray for rain. An old fellow whose crops had been hit very hard led off with, "Lord, send us rain. We don't want no cloudburst. No jimmycane. We 'druther not have no lightnin'. No thunder, neither. Just send us a nice drizzle-dazzle that'll last two or three days."

A painfully pious old chap in town was daily and hourly distressed by the sin and depravity that he saw in the world about him. He was working one day with a gang of men digging a deep trench along a prominent street when a circus was in town. As the spectacular parade approached, all of his fellow workers clambered out of the ditch to watch it. Old Mac, however, stretched himself face down in the mud at the bottom, so that his eyes would not be offended by the sinful goings on. Years later, Mac became proprietor of a grocery store. A customer one day asked for some tobacco. "You can't buy none of that there wicked stuff in here," he declared. "If you're bound to have it, go across the street; they sell it over there, at the devil's store."

A farmer kept a flock of hens that laid exceptionally well. When his son Chet, a confirmed practical joker, suggested that they might do even better if fed more tankage, a generous amount of this rich feed was added to their ration. The following morning Chet stealthily returned to the nests a dozen of the eggs collected the previous day. That evening the older man stared in wonder
at the immediate "results." Chet next morning slipped two dozen eggs back into the nests. Results this time were phenomenal—in just two days the flock's "production" had been brought very close to 100 per cent! Chet held the peak output a few days, then brought it back gradually to an honest normal.

A quaint old character was widely known for his big repertory of tall stories. He told them all as sober truth, unaware or unmindful of discrepancies or contradictions. Here is a typical yarn attributed to him:

"One day when I was a young feller, I had a keen hankerin' fer wild turkey. I loaded up my gun and walked out acrost the medder to a field of wheat. Just ready fer the cradle, that there wheat was. Big heads, tall, straight straw. As I was a-walkin' along the fence, I seen a big gobbler's head a-stickin' up above that there wheat. Well, sir, I took aim, and I bored that there turkey right through the head. I tied his legs together, and I slung him over the barrel of my rifle. That there bird was so big that as I walked along, the gun over my shoulder, his head drug in the snow."

Another yarn-spinner was given to telling what might fittingly be called transparent lies. All were simple tales that could not possibly do any harm. Although all bore on their faces the indelible imprint of falsehoods, he told them as solemn truth and evidently expected his hearers to believe them. One of these tales ran to the effect that when he was a small boy, playing with his foster mother's spectacles, he accidentally broke a lens. "I was sure scairt," he said, "for I knowed that Mother would whale me good if she found out. All at once I remembered that a lot of
glass was scattered over the ground where a winder had been broke back of the house. Well, sir, I went out there, and I hunted and scratched around till I found a round piece of glass. I pushed it into the frame, and it fit just like the one that got broke. I snuck in and put them specs back on the shelf where they belonged. Mother wore 'em a long time after that and she never knowed the difference.

A man whose veracity was everywhere regarded as above reproach came up one time with a story that doubtless could have made him a respected member of the Liars' Club. "For a long time," he said, "I had a lot of trouble with hot feet. Often, when I retired at night, they seemed fairly to sizzle. To be at all comfortable then, I had to place them in a pail of cold water on the floor beside the bed. This brought such comfort that nearly always I got a good sleep. But the arrangement had its drawbacks, especially when the weather got cold. One winter morning, for instance, when I awoke, my feet felt just right; but I had some trouble getting them out of the solid ice in that pail."

An odd, bewhiskered old fellow was in the habit of wandering more or less aimlessly over the countryside on foot. We were told that he particularly liked to come upon a farm where men were threshing. Just as all was in readiness for the customary big dinner, he would walk to the house, knock the ashes from his smelly old pipe, and maneuver himself into the dining room. Looking over the table, he would say to the women, "I believe I'll just take two or three pieces of that chicken, a few slices of that ham, a few rolls, a wedge of that pie, a coupla
bananas, some of them pickles, and a hunk or two of cake. Then I won't stay for dinner."

A minister who was fond of hunting went one day with another Nimrod from whom he heard this account: "I was a-huntin' in the old oil field over in the Evans neighborhood a coupla years back. All at onct it got dark, purt-near as black as night. I knowed a storm was a-gonna cut loose any minute so I run to an old boiler a-layin' there in the field. I no more'n got into the firebox and pulled the door to behind me than she started. The wind screeched and howled, a-blowin' a sockdollager shindy. Made that there old boiler creak and sorta tremble like, as if it was about to start a-rollin'. Rain poured down 'bout like somebody up in the sky was a-upsettin' a big lake. And the lightnin'—man, as I peeked out, it streaked and flashed everywhere. Like t'blind a feller. Reminded me of a great mess of big, red-hot snake tongues. Thunder rolled and rumbled. Sounded so loud in that there firebox I thought it was a-gonna make me deef fer sure. Never seen no such storm in all my born days."

"Were you scared?" asked the preacher.

"Was I scairt! Man, I squatted in that there sooty old firebox, a-shakin' like a leaf and a-prayin' like hell."

A man in town had been talked into taking out a policy of a few thousand dollars in a mutual life insurance company. For a long time, assessments remained reasonably low, and he had no complaints. But, as policyholders began to die off, costs to survivors increased steadily and at length became burdensome. One day the collector called for a payment, the heaviest so far asked for. The old
fellow dug up the money. As he handed it over reluctantly, he reviled himself for starting with the insurance. "Costs too much," he said. "More all the time. And, by Cripes, I'll bet a dollar it will be just my rotten luck to be the very last galoot on the list to die."

If someone claimed for himself credit for an accomplishment and it appeared that said credit might rightfully belong to another, the braggart was pretty sure to hear the retort: "Yes, Betsy and me killed the bear." This had reference to an old tale of frontier days. According to the story, a big bear invaded a settler's cabin. The frightened husband beat a swift retreat; from his hiding place under the bed, he poured forth words of encouragement and advice to his wife who, armed with a big poker, valiantly stood her ground against the intruder. Finally, the good woman, with a lusty blow, laid Old Bruin low. Thereafter, the husband took great pleasure in relating to all who would listen how "Betsy and me, we killed the b'ar."

In case someone, working at a tough, wearing job, showed symptoms of discouragement, his friends, urging him on, might remind him that it was "the makin' of the pup." This harked back to an ancient tale of the region about a man engaged, with his son, at training their young dog to fight. On all fours, he sluggèd the pup, baring his teeth and growling realistically. The husky pup, entering heartily into the spirit of the lesson, vigorously chewed and mauled his instructor. After a few minutes, the father, scratched and bleeding, was on the point of abandoning the project when the son, from a safe spot on the sidelines, yelled: "Don't give up, Pap. Don't give up—it's the makin' of the pup!"
A man in the community and his two stalwart sons all seemed to recognize in a special way the uncertainty of human life, and even to entertain some doubt as to the permanence of our planet. In proposing or promising to do something at some future date, each nearly always added the qualifying proviso: “That is, I will if I live and the world stands.”

After he started working by the month for a new employer, a local farmhand, impressed by the fact that his boss belonged to the Improved Order of Red Men, lost no time in becoming a member. After that, he always referred to himself and the other man as “Red Brothers.” This appealed to the sense of humor of neighbors who, observing the two at work, would always remark, “Well, I see the red brothers are hauling manure”—or “slopping the hogs,” as the case might be.