

SOME SUPERSTITIONS OF SOUTHERN FRANCE.*

BY LUCIEN ARRÉAT.

IT is not always easy to distinguish superstition from pure religious faith, by which I mean those observances which denote an excess of piety or credulity, which are founded neither on regular theology nor on beliefs justified by experience, and which are derived merely from ancient tradition or arbitrary interpretation of natural facts.

Many of these practices, customary in southeastern France, where I was born, are probably likewise to be found in the southwest; several even are common to all parts of France, if not to all countries of southern Europe.

It seemed to me that it would be interesting to devote a few pages to them as they are gradually disappearing, and I am sure that they are no longer of such moment in Provence as they were even half a century ago.

Whether the origin of these superstitious observances and ceremonies be Celtic or Latin, whether they arise from poetic feeling or a propensity for the marvelous, from the craving for protection or from fear, most of them have necessarily taken the imprint of the Christian faith.

Not to be one of thirteen at a meal, not to undertake anything on a Friday (in Paris even, it is said that the receipts of public vehicles are lower on that day) all these prohibitions which the Christian imposes upon himself might find their equivalent in Roman life. Ancient recollections also mingle with the usages I am going to mention.

At Christmas a lamp of antique form, the *calèn*, was lighted before the crib (*Crèche*) which was a representation of the nativity by means of little painted terra cotta figures set up in a box made like a stage; this lamp must be kept burning for forty days, otherwise a death was to be feared in the house.

*Translated from the French by Amélie Sérafon.

At Candlemas (Purification) people provided themselves with a supply of candles usually of a green color; when lighted on a stormy day they warded off thunderbolts; or when taken into the barns they defended the cattle against epidemics.

On St. John's eve (Midsummer) bonfires were lighted before the houses and shone like stars over the distant hills. The custom of jumping through those fires originated without doubt in a ceremony of purification practiced at some celebration like the Palilii, the anniversary of the founding of Rome. Embers from these fires had preservative properties against thunder, etc.

Numerous also are the beliefs and usages proceeding from apparent analogies, the supposed relation between certain acts and an unfortunate event; generally acts which represent the endangering of life, or recall the idea of death.

Meeting a priest when one goes out in the morning is an evil omen. Taking a nun on board means ill luck to seamen. To find a rosary foretells mourning, but the misfortune may be averted by refraining from touching the object. Two knives should never be crossed on the table and one must not spin a knife around, because when it stops, the direction of the point designates the victim; nor should one present a friend with a blade of any sort, which might "cut" affection, without receiving in exchange some small coin.

A broken mirror is thought to be a bad sign; compare with the custom of covering mirrors in a death-chamber.

Another bad sign is to spill salt on the table; you may avert the evil consequences by throwing some of the spilt salt over your left shoulder. It is recommended not to stick the knife into the bread or to place a loaf upside down. The children in a great many homes used to kiss their bread when they picked it up after having dropped it. These things are explained by the significance that bread and salt had in antiquity.

We should also mention here the recommendation that used to be made never to pour anything to drink by turning the wrist from left to right; a drink might be poured in that manner only for the hangman.

If three help in making a bed it is an evil omen; one of the three will be seriously ill in the course of a year. If three lights are burning in a room hasten to turn out one. This superstition of three lights is a very lingering one, and though we may find for it, as with some others, the excuse of domestic economy, it probably comes down from some ancient belief whose meaning is lost for us.

The number three has always been considered to have prophetic value.

If two persons each carrying a burning lamp meet on the stairs it is an unfavorable sign. It was a custom with the Romans to break the egg shell after having emptied it. This fashion is still preserved though with no other reason than to prevent the shell from rolling out of the plate.

Plants and animals each have their meaning according to their color, their cry, etc. The blossom of the immortelle is dedicated to the dead. The narcissus is also still considered a funeral flower.

Parsley should never be replanted; the person who does so will lose a dear friend within the year.

A superstitious fear is connected with the cock's crowing on the stroke of midnight. The black horse-fly buzzing into a room foretells some misfortune, whereas the brown one is the bearer of good news.

If a hen crows,—is not the intention satirical?—wring her neck and be sure not to eat her outside the house. A black cat brings good luck to a family.

As in Rome, I have known people in Provence to wait for the new moon to have their hair cut because they thought the operation performed during the wane of the moon might not be successful. This has followed from ancient observations, accepted too uncritically.

A loud sneeze is still a good omen just as it was with the Greeks: Telemachus sneezes loud, we are told in the *Odyssey* and fills Penelope's heart with joy. The same belief is to be found with the Romans who took all these matters seriously. But even in my childhood people mentioned the "lucky" sneeze with a smile. It is the same with that other superstition, which has come down to us from the Romans, or perhaps dates even further back, that when one's ears tingle it is a sign that some one is talking about him; a friend, if it is the right ear; an enemy, if it is the left (*Pliny XXVIII, 2*). In the latter case the victim is recommended to bite the tip of his tongue a little in order that the slanderer may bite his own severely.

We read in *Juvenal* (*Sat. F. l. 112*) that the superstitious Roman, whenever he hears magic words which he thinks are directed against him, spits three times in his bosom in order to drive away the evil charm.

In modern Athens, a young lady told me, one should never pet or stroke a child in his nurse's arms without first making a feint

of spitting at it. I have not witnessed this observance in Provence, but one was never supposed to ask a mother about the age or birthday of her child; this information being no doubt one of the conditions required that a naughty witch (a "masque," they term it) might cast a spell or curse over it. The same was the case with the cattle.

Does not a letter of Pliny inform us that the old Romans kept the real name of their city, which was *Valentia*, a secret, in order to shield its protecting deity from the religious incantations of its enemies?

It is hardly necessary to add that a great number of people both in the north and south of France have their fortunes told, with cards or by other methods. The smart professionals of occultism find in every country and at all times a good practice.

In Paris it is customary to hang up mistletoe, the mistletoe of the Gallic Druids (*Viscum album*) in the houses all the year around. In Provence and all our provinces, branches of box, blessed on Palm Sunday are kept in the house; they are hung up near the fire-place or at the head of the bed. Both mistletoe and box represent in a way the *lares* of the ancients, and are the symbols of a protecting deity. The offering has taken the place of the domestic gods to whom it was formerly offered.

Henri Barth tells of an African village where the women, believing the camels of his train to be sacred beings, passed under them to secure their good graces. Just as on the day of St. Pancras, who was the patron saint of one of our villages, the children were made to pass under the stretcher upon which the image of the saint was borne at the head of the procession.

Other customs of this order might certainly be mentioned, which would be of equal interest, and which date farther back than the Latins and Etruscans. But I shall close with a ceremony that recalls both the Jewish and Egyptian ritual,—namely that of the "Child of the ox."

At Marseilles,—I do not know whether this ceremony, long since given up, took place in other towns of Provence, for I have never witnessed it myself,—an ox was led in the Corpus Christi procession with a child clad in a lamb-skin strapped upon its richly adorned back. The mothers feared that the chosen infant might become a prey to death, and it was a good omen if he outlived the year. It seems as though the child served in this instance as a propitiatory victim, and symbolized a token of faith on the part of the believers, and a promise of blessing from Heaven.