NEW ORLEANS SUPERSTITIONS

Lafcadio Hearn

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I

The question "What is Voudooism?" could scarcely be answered to−day by any resident of New Orleans unfamiliar with the life of the African west coast, or the superstitions of Hayti, either through study or personal observation. The old generation of planters in whose day Voudooism had a recognized existence—so dangerous as a motive power for black insurrection that severe measures were adopted against it—has passed away; and the only person I ever met who had, as a child in his colored nurse's care, the rare experience of witnessing a Voudoo ceremonial, died some three years ago, at the advanced age of seventy−six. As a religion—an imported faith—Voudooism in Louisiana is really dead; the rites of its serpent worship are forgotten; the meaning of its strange and frenzied chants, whereof some fragments linger as refrains in negro song, is not now known even to those who remember the words; and the story of its former existence is only revealed to the folklorists by the multitudinous débris of African superstition which it has left behind it. These only I propose to consider now; for what is to−day called Voudooism in New Orleans means, not an African cultus, but a curious class of negro practices, some possibly derived from it, and others which bear resemblance to the magic of the Middle Ages. What could be more mediæval, for instance, than molding a waxen heart, and sticking pins in it, or melting it slowly before a fire, while charms are being repeated with the hope that as the waxen heart melts or breaks, the life of some enemy will depart? What, again, could remind us more of thirteenth−century superstition than the burning of a certain number of tapers to compel some absent person's return, with the idea that before the last taper is consumed a mysterious mesmerism will force the wanderer to cross rivers and mountains if necessary on his or her way back?

The fear of what are styled "Voudoo charms" is much more widely spread in Louisiana than any one who had conversed only with educated residents might suppose; and the most familiar superstition of this class is the belief in what I might call pillow magic, which is the supposed art of causing wasting sicknesses or even death by putting certain objects into the pillow of the bed in which the hated person sleeps. Feather pillows are supposed to be particularly well adapted to this kind of witchcraft. It is believed that by secret spells a "Voudoo" can cause some monstrous kind of bird or nondescript animal to shape itself into being out of the pillow feathers—like the tupilek of the Esquimau iliseenek (witchcraft.) It grows very slowly, and by night only; but when completely formed, the person who has been using the pillow dies. Another practice of pillow witchcraft consists in tearing a living bird asunder—usually a cock—and putting portions of the wings into the pillow. A third form of the black−art is confined to putting certain charms or fetiches—consisting of bones, hair, feathers, rags, strings, or some fantastic combination of these and other trifling objects—into any sort of a pillow used by the party whom it is desired to injure. The pure Africanism of this practice needs no comment. Any exact idea concerning the use of each particular kind of charm I have not been able to discover; and I doubt whether those who practise such fetichism know the original African beliefs connected with it. Some say that putting grains of corn into a child's pillow "prevents it from growing any more"; others declare that a bit of cloth in a grown person's pillow will cause wasting sickness; but different parties questioned by me gave each a different signification to the use of similar charms. Putting an open pair of scissors under the pillow before going to bed is supposed to insure a pleasant sleep in spite of fetiches; but the surest way to provide against being "hoodooed," as American residents call it, is to open one's pillow from time to time. If any charms are found, they must be first sprinkled with salt, then burned. A Spanish resident told me that her eldest daughter had been unable to sleep for weeks, owing to a fetich that had been put into her pillow by a spiteful colored domestic. After the object had been duly exorcised and burned, all the young lady's restlessness departed. A friend of mine living in one of the country parishes once found a tow string in his pillow, into the fibers of which a great number of feather stems had either been introduced or had introduced themselves. He wished to retain it as a curiosity, but no sooner did he exhibit it to some acquaintance than it was denounced as a Voudoo "trick," and my friend was actually compelled to burn it in the presence of witnesses. Everybody knows or ought to know that feathers in pillows have a natural tendency to cling and form clots or lumps of more or less curious form, but the discovery of these in some New Orleans households is enough to create a panic. They are viewed as incipient Voudoo tupileks. The sign of the cross is made over them by Catholics, and they are promptly committed to the flames.

Pillow magic alone, however, is far from being the only recognized form of maleficent negro witchcraft. Placing charms before the entrance of a house or room, or throwing them over a wall into a yard, is believed to be a deadly practice. When a charm is laid before a room door or hall door, oil is often poured on the floor or pavement in front of the threshold. It is supposed that whoever crosses an oil line falls into the power of the Voudoos. To break the oil charm, sand or salt should be strewn upon it. Only a few days before writing this article a very intelligent Spaniard told me that shortly after having discharged a dishonest colored servant he found before his bedroom door one evening a pool of oil with a charm Lying in the middle of it, and a candle burning near it. The charm contained some bones, feathers, hairs, and rags—all wrapped together with a string—and a dime. No superstitious person would have dared to use that dime; but my friend, not being superstitious, forthwith put it into his pocket.

The presence of that coin I can only attempt to explain by calling attention to another very interesting superstition connected with New Orleans fetichism. The negroes believe that in order to make an evil charm operate it is necessary to sacrifice something. Wine and cake are left occasionally in dark rooms, or candies are scattered over the sidewalk, by those who want to make their fetich hurt somebody. If food or sweetmeats are thus thrown away, they must be abandoned without a parting glance; the witch or wizard must not look back while engaged in the sacrifice.

Scattering dirt before a door, or making certain figures on the wall of a house with chalk, or crumbling dry leaves with the fingers and scattering the fragments before a residence, are also forms of a maleficent conjuring which sometimes cause serious annoyance. Happily the conjurers are almost as afraid of the counter−charms as the most superstitious persons are of the conjuring. An incident which occurred recently in one of the streets of the old quarter known as "Spanish Town" afforded me ocular proof of the fact. Through malice or thoughtlessness, or possibly in obedience to secret orders, a young negro girl had been tearing up some leaves and scattering them on the sidewalk in front of a cottage occupied by a French family. Just as she had dropped the last leaf the irate French woman rushed out with a broom and a handful of salt, and began to sweep away the leaves, after having flung salt both upon them and upon the little negress. The latter actually screamed with fright, and cried out, "Oh, pas jeté plis disel après moin, madame! pas bisoin jeté disel après moin; mo pas pé vini icite encore" (Oh, madam, don't throw any more salt after me; you needn't throw any more salt after me; I won't come here any more.)

Another strange belief connected with these practices was well illustrated by a gift made to my friend Professor William Henry by a negro servant for whom he had done some trifling favor. The gift consisted of a "frizzly hen"—one of those funny little fowls whose feathers all seem to curl. "Mars'r Henry, you keep dat frizzly hen, an' ef eny niggers frow eny conjure in your yard, dat frizzly hen will eat de conjure." Some say, however, that one is not safe unless he keeps two frizzly hens.

The naughty little negress at whom the salt was thrown seemed to fear the salt more than the broom pointed at her. But she was not yet fully educated, I suspect, in regard to superstitions. The negro's terror of a broom is of very ancient date—it may have an African origin. It was commented upon by Moreau de Saint−Méry in his work on San Domingo, published in 1196. "What especially irritates the negro," he wrote, "is to have a broom passed over any part of his body. He asks at once whether the person imagined that he was dead, and remains convinced that the act shortens his life." Very similar ideas concerning the broom linger in New Orleans. To point either end of a broom at a person is deemed bad luck; and many an ignorant man would instantly knock down or violently abuse the party who should point a broom at him. Moreover, the broom is supposed to have mysterious power as a means of getting rid of people. "If you are pestered by visitors whom you would wish never to see again, sprinkle salt on the floor after they go, and sweep it out by the same door through which they have gone, and they will never come back." To use a broom in the evening is bad luck: balayer le soir, on balaye sa fortune (to sweep in the evening is to sweep your good luck away), remains a well−quoted proverb.

I do not know of a more mysterious disease than muscular atrophy in certain forms, yet it is by no means uncommon either in New Orleans or in the other leading cities of the United States. But in New Orleans, among the colored people, and among many of the uneducated of other races, the victim of muscular atrophy is believed to be the victim of Voudooism. A notion is prevalent that negro witches possess knowledge of a secret poison which may terminate life instantly or cause a slow "withering away," according as the dose is administered. A Frenchman under treatment for paralysis informed me that his misfortune was certainly the work of Voudoos, and

that his wife and child had died through the secret agency of negro wizards. Mental aberration is also said to be caused by the administration of poisons whereof some few negroes are alleged to possess the secret. In short, some very superstitious persons of both races live in perpetual dread of imaginary Voudoos, and fancy that the least ailment from which they suffer is the work of sorcery. It is very doubtful whether any knowledge of those animal or vegetable poisons which leave no trace of their presence in the blood, and which may have been known to some slaves of African birth, still lingers in Louisiana, wide−spread as is the belief to the contrary. During the last decade there have been a few convictions of blacks for the crime of poisoning, but there was nothing at all mysterious or peculiar about these cases, and the toxic agent was invariably the most vulgar of all—arsenic, or some arsenious preparation in the shape of rat poison.

II

The story of the frizzly hen brings me to the subject of superstitions regarding animals. Something of the African, or at least of the San Domingan, worship of the cock seems to have been transplanted hither by the blacks, and to linger in New Orleans under various metamorphoses. A negro charm to retain the affections of a lover consists in tying up the legs of the bird to the head, and plunging the creature alive into a vessel of gin or other spirits. Tearing the live bird asunder is another cruel charm, by which some negroes believe that a sweetheart may become magically fettered to the man who performs the quartering. Here, as in other parts of the world, the crowing hen is killed, the hooting of the owl presages death or bad luck, and the crowing of the cock by day presages the arrival of company. The wren (roitelet) must not be killed: c'est zozeau bon Dié (it is the good God's bird)—a belief, I think, of European origin.

It is dangerous to throw hair−combings away instead of burning them, because birds may weave them into their nests and while the nest remains the person to whom the hair belonged will have a continual headache. It is bad luck to move a cat from one house to another; seven years' bad luck to kill a cat; and the girl who steps, accidentally or otherwise, on a cat's tail need not expect to be married the same year. The apparition of a white butterfly means good news. The neighing of a horse before one's door is bad luck. When a fly bothers one very persistently, one may expect to meet an acquaintance who has been absent many years.

There are many superstitions about marriage, which seem to have a European origin, but are not less interesting on that account. "Twice a bridesmaid, never a bride," is a proverb which needs no comment. The bride must not keep the pins which fastened her wedding dress. The husband must never take off his wedding ring: to take it off will insure him bad luck of some kind. If a girl who is engaged accidentally lets a knife fall, it is a sign that her lover is coming. Fair or foul weather upon her marriage day augurs a happy or unhappy married life.

The superstitions connected with death may be all imported, but I have never been able to find a foreign origin for some of them. It is bad luck to whistle or hum the air that a band plays at a funeral. If a funeral stops before your house, it means that the dead wants company. It is bad luck to cross a funeral procession, or to count the number of carriages in it; if you do count them, you may expect to die after the expiration of as many weeks as there were carriages at the funeral. If at the cemetery there be any unusual delay in burying the dead, caused by any unlooked for circumstances, such as the tomb proving too small to admit the coffin, it is a sign that the deceased is selecting a companion from among those present, and one of the mourners must soon die. It is bad luck to carry a spade through a house. A bed should never be placed with its foot pointing toward the street door, for corpses leave the house feet foremost. It is bad luck to travel with a priest; this idea seems to me of Spanish importation; and I am inclined to attribute a similar origin to the strange tropical superstition about the banana, which I obtained, nevertheless, from an Italian. You must not cut a banana, but simply break it with the fingers, because in cutting it you cut the cross. It does not require a very powerful imagination to discern in a severed section of the fruit the ghostly suggestion of a crucifixion.

Some other creole superstitions are equally characterized by naïve beauty. Never put out with your finger the little red spark that tries to linger on the wick of a blown−out candle: just so long as it burns, some soul in purgatory enjoys rest from torment. Shooting−stars are souls escaping from purgatory: if you can make a good wish three times before the star disappears, the wish will be granted. When there is sunshine and rain together, a colored nurse will tell the children, "Gadé! djabe apé batte so femme." (Look! the devil's beating his wife!)

I will conclude this little paper with selections from a list of superstitions which I find widely spread, not citing them as of indubitable creole origin, but simply calling attention to their prevalence in New Orleans, and leaving the comparative study of them to folklorists.

Turning the foot suddenly in walking means bad or good luck. If the right foot turns, it is bad luck; if the left, good. This superstition seems African, according to a statement made by Moreau de Saint−Méry. Some reverse the conditions, making the turning of the left foot bad luck. It is also bad luck to walk about the house with one shoe on and one shoe off. or as a creole acquaintance explained it to me "c'est appeler sa mère ou son père dans le tombeau" (It is calling one's mother or one's father into the grave). An itching in the right palm means coming gain; in the left, coming loss.

Never leave a house by a different door from that by which you entered it; it is "carrying away the good luck of the place." Never live in a house you build before it has been rented for at least a year. When an aged person repairs his or her house, he or she is soon to die. Never pass a child through a window; it stops his growth. Stepping over a child does the same; therefore, whoever takes such a step inadvertently must step back again to break the evil spell. Never tilt a rocking−chair when it is empty. Never tell a bad dream before breakfast, unless you want it "to come true"; and never pare the nails on Monday morning before taking a cup of coffee. A funny superstition about windows is given me in this note by a friend: "Il ne faut pas faire passer un enfant par la fenêtre, car avant un an il y en aura un autre" (A child must not be passed through a window, for if so passed you will have another child before the lapse of a year.) This proverb, of course, interests only those who desire small families, and as a general rule creoles are proud of large families, and show extraordinary affection toward their children.

If two marriages are celebrated simultaneously, one of the husbands will die. Marry at the time of the moon's waning and your good luck will wane also. If two persons think and express the same thought at the same time, one of them will die before the year passes. To chop up food in a pot with a knife means a dispute in the house. If you have a ringing in your ears, some person is speaking badly of you; call out the names of all whom you suspect and when the ringing stops at the utterance of a certain name, you know who the party is. If two young girls are combing the hair of a third at the same time, it may be taken for granted that the youngest of the three will soon die. If you want to make it stop raining, plant a cross in the middle of the yard and sprinkle it with salt. The red−fish has the print of St. Peter's fingers on its tail. If water won't boil in the kettle, there may be a toad or a toad's egg in it. Never kill a spider in the afternoon or evening, but always kill the spider unlucky enough to show himself early in the morning, for the old French proverb says:

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"Araignée du matin—chagrin;
Araignée du midi—plaisir;
Araignée du soir—espoir"
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(A spider seen in the morning is a sign of grief; a spider seen an noon, of joy; a spider seen in the evening, of hope).

Even from this very brief sketch of New Orleans superstitions the reader may perceive that the subject is peculiar enough to merit the attention of experienced folklorists. It might be divided by a competent classifier under three heads: I. Negro superstitions confined to the black and colored. population; II. Negro superstitions which have proved contagious, and have spread among the uneducated classes of whites; III. Superstitions of Latin origin imported from France, Spain, and Italy. I have not touched much upon superstitions inherited from English, Irish, or Scotch sources, inasmuch as they have nothing especially local in their character here. It must be remembered that the refined classes have no share in these beliefs, and that, with a few really rational exceptions, the practices of creole medicine are ignored by educated persons. The study of creole superstitions has only an ethnological value, and that of creole medicine only a botanical one, in so far as it is related to empiricism.

All this represents an under side of New Orleans life; and if anything of it manages to push up to the surface, the curious growth makes itself visible only by some really pretty blossoms of feminine superstition in regard to weddings or betrothal rings, or by some dainty sprigs of child−lore, cultivated by those colored nurses who tell us that the little chickens throw up their heads while they drink to thank the good God for giving them water.