

Swiss superstitions and legends

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SWISS SUPERSTITIONS AND LEGENDS

“Oh! the age of superstitions is dead, dead and buried long ago.” Such was the fragment of a conversation that I overheard a day or two since as I passed two Englishmen in the shopping quarter of St. Moritz. Is it? I thought to myself. And my mind was immediately carried back to an interview between my wife and her dressmaker when the *modiste* firmly declared that, though a certain costume was required in a hurry she could not possibly undertake even to begin the work on that day as it was Friday! She would willingly sit up and commence her task directly after midnight; but nothing would induce her to make a start on an unlucky day. I was very much astonished that such old-fashioned ideas should survive in our matter of fact times, even though it was in a remote valley of Switzerland; but then I bethought me of several other quaint beliefs that I knew existed and found staunch support. Some of them may perhaps interest my readers.

A good many superstitions are current among the simpler Swiss peasants. One thing that they believe very firmly in is that if a bluebottle fly gets into a bedroom in the morning and makes a buzzing or a humming noise the occupant of the room is sure to receive visitors during the day.

Another very widespread opinion is that if a person pours out wine for a friend he must perform the action by turning the wrist inwards, or towards the body. Should the service be performed in a backhanded way, that is, by turning the wrist from the body, it is a certain sign of treachery. At least one prominent native of the Engadine who I know is, or was, a strong believer in this superstition. I once had occasion to assist him to wine and committed the awful error of turning my wrist outwards in replenishing his glass. I was unceremoniously stopped and corrected, and had the terrible significance of my act explained to me. I have often wondered if my subsequent behaviour towards this gentleman has confirmed or destroyed his faith in the popular superstition. Probably but few people are aware of the extent to which

Wildmännli

or wild men of the woods are believed in by the Swiss, especially old folks. The extent to which they entered into people's thoughts in past years may be partly gathered from the number of inns and hotels throughout the country which are named from them, such as the Hotel zum Wilden Mann. Heraldic wild men also hold an important position in the coat of arms of Davos. These *Wildmännli* were regarded more as objects to be dreaded than as warnings, in the sense with which the Scots view wraiths and spectres. The old folks believe that they used to be mischievous and would even attack and, if provoked, kill people, but now that though they still exist they are quieter and rarely show themselves.

Another very general belief among even comparatively well-educated Swiss, is that certain people are privileged by being informed of the approaching decrease of their fellow villagers. This was referred to by the late John Addington Symonds in his book “Our Life in the Swiss Highlands”, and I cannot do better than quote his remarks on the subject.

People from Davos believe that certain men are born from time to time among them who have the supernatural gift for seeing the dead walk at night. Persons with this gift are called seers of the *Totenvolk*. A friend of mine here told me, not many days ago that one of his cousins in the Prättigau possesses it. A peculiar call or intimation warns the seer when the vision will be granted. He is then bound to rise from bed, or to leave the society of his friends. He must go forth alone to a certain place where the dead walk. There he beholds the inhabitants of the churchyard pass before him. Each long since buried face gazes at him full in the eyes. The face of the last walker in this dread procession is that of a living man or woman; and when the seer recognises it, he knows that so-and-so will shortly die and join the fellowship of the dead folk. But — and this is the terribly pathetic fate imposed on the seer — the last and living member of the train may avert his face and pass unrecognised. If that happens the seer knows that it is now his turn to die and join the fellowship of the dead folk. At Davos it is supposed that the dead take their departure from the churchyard, cross the Landwasser, and pace the solitary road that leads to the Waldhaus and the Dischma Valley . . . Do the foreigners who die here walk also at night? and does the seer of the *Totenvolk* discern them? This is the eerie question which I ask myself.”

These illustrations are enough to prove that the age of superstitions is not entirely dead, and I will now say a few words about legends, a subject which can hardly be separated from superstition. It is natural enough when a person believes in some ridiculous or improbable freak of nature, that they should also give credence to strange tales which, if true, would prove that such belief to have foundation in fact. Thus there is a legend of the attack of a traveller in the Landwasser Tal by one of the *Wildmännli* of whom I have already spoken. In relating this story I will once more quote from the graphic pen of J. Addington Symonds.

“Long after the hour when he had been expected, Herr Balzer knocked at the house-door, and descended in sorry plight from his horse. He was at once put to bed and cared for. But he never got up again. After a short while he died: and this is what he told about his journey on his death-bed. He had left Glaris alone, and after traversing a piece of forest, emerged upon the bleak pre-

cipitous slopes above the Zuge. When he came of one *mauvais pas*, which crossed a ravine, his horse shuddered, and a horrible uncertain creature leaped on to its crupper from the shadow of the wall. Herr Balzer succeeded in knocking the creature off; but when he came to a second place of the same sort, he saw the same dreadful creature awaiting him on the bridge. He spurred his horse forward, hoping to ride quickly past. The *Wildmännli*, for such the creature was, this time sprang upon him, and clasped him round the waist and chest. He felt the thing's arms, long as the arms of a skeleton, chill him through blood and marrow, so that he fainted from cold, and fear, and pain. It was only after he had ridden another hour unconscious, and has come in sight of Wiesen, that he recovered his senses."

Some of these old-world tales are very touching, either by reason of the grand or noble actions related therein, or because of their pathetic nature. One feels the better for having read them; and wishes they were true. Who has not heard of the Swiss hero, William Tell? And who has been free from a feeling of disappointment on learning for the first time that the story is a myth. The legend of the origin of the robin's red breast is very pretty and worthy of greater publicity than it appears to enjoy. It is related that a robin in sober brown tried to pluck the Crown of Thorns from the Saviour's brow and in the attempt was so injured by the cruel thorns that its breast became died with its own blood. In memory of this devoted self-sacrifice, God promised that for the future all robins should have red feathers on their breasts.

Few countries can boast of more of these tales than Switzerland, where almost every rock and valley forms the subject of some curious legend, and with one or two of them I propose to conclude these notes.

One scene is laid in the Rütli, near the Lake of Lucerne. On the 1st August 1291, some thirty men assembled together and swore a solemn oath not to rest until they had saved their country from its oppressors. The leaders of these men were Arnold of Melchtal in Unterwalden, Werner Stauffacher of Steinen in Schwyz, and Fürst of Attinghausen in Uri. On the spot where these three men stood three fountains which will never run dry are supposed to have sprung up.

A tale is told of the origin of the *Morteratsch Glacier*.

Unfortunately for the sentiment of the legend I believe the name is etymologically accounted for in quite a different way. The story goes that many years ago a young *Senn* or cowherd, named Aratsch lived on an *Alp* near the glacier where he attended to some of the village cows. He managed to fall in love with the daughter of a rich Pontresina burgher; the latter, however, refused to have anything to do with so humble a lover for his daughter. Aratsch joined the army, went away and years afterwards returned to Pontresina a wealthy officer. He went straight to the home of his old love and there found the girl stretched out on her bier waiting for interment.

Mad with grief, Aratsch rushed off, sprang upon his horse, rode wildly up the glacier, and there spurred his steed into a huge crevasse. Neither man nor beast was ever seen again. Soon after this, Aratsch's successor in the cowshed on the *Alp* found that his premises were haunted by the spirit of the faithful girl who had waited so long for her absent lover. Every night she was to be seen looking after the welfare of the animals of which Aratsch had been so fond, or attending to the milk pans, and all the time she mournfully murmured, "*Mort Aratsch, Mort Aratsch*" (Aratsch is dead).

But the *Senn* left the poor spirit alone for he found that the cattle did marvellously well and never before had they given milk so rich in cream. But one day another herdsman attended on the *Alp* and he, when he saw the Spirit, chased it out of the house with oaths and curses. And then while the poor girl was forced to flee a terrible voice was heard from the heights above. It was Aratsch cursing the *Alp* and its pastures forever. That night the stream of ice altered its course and overwhelmed the cowshed, burying all its inhabitants far down in the frozen current. From that day the glacier has been known as the Morteratsch, while on a quiet night people standing near the Boval Hut can hear — or ought to — the tinkling of the bells of the cattle which met with so sudden and dreadful a fate.

Many years ago the inhabitants of a certain village in the *Poschiavo valley*

were notorious for their wickedness. Three men especially were always engaged in some evil occupation and were the ringleaders of everything that was bad. A legend it now current that one day these three men were up on the hills when a "White Man" came out of a hole in the side of the mountain and rebuked them for their wickedness. But it had no effect. Some time afterwards the same apparition reproved them a second time and warned them that if they persisted in their bad habits the mountain would fall down and bury them alive. Even after this threat the conduct of these three men was as bad as ever, till one day when they were again on the same hill the "White Man" appeared once more and reminded them of his warning. Scarcely had he spoken when a huge landslide occurred which buried the unhappy trio beneath a great pile of rocks and earth, and they were never seen again. The place from which the land fell, and the hole in the rock where the "White Man" who does not appear to be looked upon as a *Wildmännli* but rather is supposed to have been something in the nature of a good spirit or a Saint, sent on the earth to punish the ringleaders as a warning to the others,

(By courtesy of "St. Moritz Courier".)

THEATRE LIFE IN ZURICH

The Municipal Theatre has, as part of its present repertory, Max Frisch's controversial play "Biography". In this new play Frisch breaks with the established rules of the theatre and replaces plot by possibility: Kürmann, the main figure, experiments with his life, retracing his steps and starting all over again, only to find that there is no valid solution. The theme is similar to that of Frisch's earlier novel, "My Name is Gantenbein", and his attempt to adapt this theme for the stage has produced a positive reaction from the general public and critics alike. No fewer than twenty-five other theatres will be showing the play in the course of the coming months, both in the original version and in translation. — Many highly original works of the *avant-garde* which otherwise might not be performed in Zurich have been presented by an indefatigable champion of modern theatre, Maria von Ostfelden. Her "Theatre an der Winkelwiese" is showing at present a modern play by Nestroy ("Quodlibet") and has again been awarded general acclaim, the play having been presented close to a hundred times.

A Student Theatre Week was held in Zurich from 3rd to 9th April. It was attended by groups from Belgium, Sweden, Italy, Germany, Poland, Yugoslavia, Turkey, India and Switzerland. [S.N.T.O.]