

Temple Bar : a London magazine for town and country
readers, Dec. 1860-Dec. 1881. Vol 43 (Feb 1875) 345-352.

The Universality of Superstitions connected with Sneezing.*

“Friend Morris, do not think yourself alone
Of all men happy. Shall not love to me,
As in the Latin song I learned at school,
Sneeze out a full ‘God bless you’ right and left?”

TENNYSON'S *Edwin Morris*.

EVERYTHING bearing on the subject of the unity of origin of our race is of peculiar importance and interest at a time like this, when science seems to be inclined to attribute the points of identity which seem to connect all the races of men together to accident or to the natural and inevitable results of the same influences and necessities upon all men in all ages.

The superstition I have selected, the habit of saying “God bless you!” when a person sneezes, is so absurd that no one can pretend that nature could have suggested it to all men at all times and in all countries, nor can it be assumed (even if such a thing were possible) that all nations, in Europe, Asia, Polynesia, and America, can have borrowed from one another a custom that has apparently so little to recommend it to the common apprehensions of men. Ridiculous as it may appear, we should remember that nothing which carries us back beyond the limits of history, and gives us a clue to the religious ideas and the social customs of prehistoric man, can be considered unimportant.

To use the words of Bunsen, “Above all we should never contemn nor overlook even the most seemingly trivial and unpromising object within the range of primitive monumental history.”

Homer carries back this superstition to Olympus and to the gods, who make the vaults of heaven ring by invoking Jupiter when one of their number indulges in the ominous act of sneezing. The Jews suppose that originally a sneeze was fatal, and that at the inter-

* This article contains the substance of a paper written in Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1863 to amuse some friends, and printed for private circulation only. A dozen copies or so were sent to England, and the paper was forgotten by the writer. On returning to England after ten years' absence, he was surprised to find that it had attracted a good deal of attention, and that it had been quoted from by Sir John Lubbock, Mr. Tyler, and others. At the request of his friends, it is now reproduced with additions, in the hope that it may prove amusing and of interest to the readers of TEMPLE BAR.

cession of Jacob the penalty of death attached to it was abolished, and that henceforth it could be indulged in without proving mortal.

The recollection, however, of the primeval terrors of a sneeze still survive, and the Jews still ejaculate "*Tobim Chaiim!*" (a long life to you!) when a friend indulges in a sneeze.

The Greeks, unable to account for the superstition, traced it to the first sign of life in the clay which Prometheus fashioned into human form. Aristotle has devoted one of his Problems to the question why the custom of invoking *Jupiter Soter* was indulged in as a safeguard against the dangers of a sneeze, and tells us that his countrymen regarded a sneeze as sacred. Pliny has included among his Problems, *Cur sternutantes salutantur*. Catullus mentions the custom. Sir Thomas Brown, in his 'Vulgar Errors,' gives numerous quotations from classical authors as to the universality among the Greeks and Romans of this singular superstition. Themistocles found in a sneeze to the right a presage of victory over Xerxes. A sneeze to the left was regarded as unlucky. Sir Thomas Brown gives a quaint version of a Greek epigram on a man who had such a long nose that he could not hear himself sneeze. This translation was evidently not written by Milton:—

"He sneezing calls not Jove, for why? He hears
Himself not sneeze, the sound's so far from's ears."

Tiberius, who, though a sceptic, was profoundly superstitious, rigidly practised and enforced the observance of this custom.

The very general belief that the custom took its rise in one of the symptoms of the Plague in Italy in the days of Gregory the Great is therefore effectually disposed of. To this day, in Ireland and in parts of Scotland, the custom prevails. My housekeeper, a Devonshire woman, tells me it is still observed by the peasantry in that county. During the past century it was considered a gross breach of propriety not to salute a person on his sneezing. A friend of mine has told me that his father, as a little boy, was presented to the Pope, and was promised on his next visit, two days subsequently, a medal blessed by his Holiness. He and his father were present when the cardinals were assembled together. He happened to sneeze, when, to his surprise and delight, their eminences rose and bowed to him. The result was so agreeable that he extemporized several sneezes which were similarly honoured. His father was so mortified at the practical joke that he refused to present his son again to the Pope, and the little fellow therefore paid dearly for his amusement, and lost the intended present from his Holiness. Not very long ago an Englishwoman, travelling in Italy, who had heard a married lady friend who sneezed saluted by those present, not understanding Italian, or the precise meaning of the phrase used, subsequently astounded a bishop who sneezed near her, by the courteous wish *Figlio maschio!* (May it be a boy!)

So universal is this superstition, that it may be questioned if there is any country in the world where traces of it cannot be found. Speke and Grant, among some of the savages of Equatorial Africa, could discover no traces of any religious ideas, except in the custom of uttering an Arabic ejaculation or prayer when a person sneezed.

Even among the isolated races of America the same superstition is to be met with. De Soto, the discoverer of Florida, noticed that when a Sachem sneezed the savages around him bowed down, and prayed to the Sun to save him. The same superstition extends also throughout the Polynesian and Melanesian Islands. In New Zealand the priest is guided by a sneeze in giving a name to an infant. He repeats name after name until the child sneezes, and the name then being pronounced is selected as that which Heaven has appointed for the young savage.

We find in the adventures of Mariner in the Tonga Islands, a group near the Fiji Islands, a second edition of what happened almost three thousand years ago to Xenophon and the "immortal ten thousand." Xenophon tells us in his 'Anabasis' that when the Greeks were about to commence their celebrated retreat after the death of Cyrus the Younger, and just as Xenophon was addressing them with these words, "We have many reasons to hope for *preservation*," a soldier unfortunately sneezed, upon which the whole army invoked Jupiter the *Preserver*; Xenophon, proceeding on, said, "Since at the mention of your preservation Jupiter has sent this omen," &c.—an ingenious turn, by which he converted an evil into a good omen.

I ought here to mention that in all ages, and in Hindostan as well as in Greece, it has been always considered an unlucky omen for any one to sneeze at the commencement of an undertaking. The existence of this belief among the Hindoos is referred to by Lutfullah in his Memoirs, p. 62, "A sneeze in an opposite direction will prevent a man from going to any place, or commencing any undertaking."

Mariner tells us that when Finow, a Chief in the Tonga Islands, was about to proceed on a warlike expedition, some one sneezed. Instead of showing the ready wit of Xenophon, the Chief, regarding it as an ill omen from the gods, defied them to do their worst.

Mariner himself almost lost his life from sneezing when Finow and his followers were about to commence a religious ceremony. "Immediately every one present threw down his club, for who would proceed on so important an expedition after so dire an omen! Finow's eyes flashed with the fire of rage. Directing them full on Mr. Mariner, he cursed him with the most bitter curse, 'Strike your God!'" In a note it is stated, "To sneeze at the moment of setting out on an expedition argues, in their opinion, the most fatal result."

The Thugs had a peculiar reverence for a sneeze. This detestable secret society is a warning to us as to the excesses to which even

among educated persons perverted religious zeal, when blinded by superstition, may carry men when they bid good-bye to reason and to their judgment, and yield an implicit obedience to blind faith. They were, in one aspect, the most religious people the world has ever seen. The bloody goddess whom they served guided them hourly by signs, omens, and miracles, which they obeyed implicitly, even at the cost of their lives. At her bidding they consecrated their whole existence to a crusade against society and against human life. They believed in infallibility, and infallibility spoke from Heaven to them in signs and omens. One of these was a sneeze. Should the unhappy victim on awaking with the fatal cord around his neck happen to sneeze, his life was safe. The victim was regarded as sacred. The goddess had spoken.

The North American Indians, the natives of the Indian Archipelago, as well as the Polynesians, believe not only in the existence of some supreme and beneficent power, but also in the existence of inferior spiritual beings, or little gods, strongly resembling the fairies of Northern Europe. They also believe that all nature had a soul as well as man, and that the soul is peculiarly liable to the agency of spiritual beings. Thus the "Medicine Man" of the North American races is always a necromancer. His patient is not affected by natural, but by supernatural causes, only to be removed by counter-charms. The "Medicine Man" works himself into a singular state, sometimes ending in convulsions; he then becomes inspired, and proceeds, with certain ceremonies, to *bring back* the patient's soul, or to expel the evil spirit.

The same belief and practice are observable among the savages of Borneo and of Central Africa. Among these simple and primitive races there is a belief that man has a double form, the one corporeal and the other spiritual, and that even in life the spirit or soul and the body are not necessarily united, but that sickness or evil spirits may deprive the body of its spiritual companion. The belief among the Jews as to idiots or insane persons being "possessed of evil spirits," may be connected with these ideas. It is remarkable that sickness and death are, in the Arctic regions, in Australia, and in Central Africa, attributed by the natives to the influence of spirits who have been employed by enemies to injure them. Thus among the Arctic Loucheux, whenever a person dies, his relatives kill some one belonging to a neighbouring tribe. In Australia exactly the same thing occurs, the natives fancying that some one has by supernatural means stolen the "kidney fat" of the deceased. They accordingly knock on the head a native of another tribe, and take from him his kidney fat while he is still alive.*

* See Sir John Richardson's 'Arctic Expedition in Search of Sir John Franklin,' chap. 12. See also 'Report on the Aborigines, by the Committee of the Legislative Council of Victoria—Session 1858-9.'

The belief in Scotland and in Equatorial Africa is found to be almost precisely identical respecting there being *ghosts even of the living*, who are exceedingly troublesome and pugnacious.

In Polynesia, not only men, but also inanimate objects, are supposed to be liable to lose their spirits, or soul.

The little gods sometimes steal the souls or shadows of those articles to which they take a fancy. (See 'Westminster Review' for April, 1862.) There is a Polynesian legend, "in which they (the little gods) carry off the shadows of Ter Kanawa's jewels, leaving the costly substances behind them, the souls of the fairies being quite contented with the shadows alone."

It is stated that there is an instance among the Irish emigrants in the City of New York of a child having been burned to death by its parents under the impression that it was only a "changeling," or a "fairy child."

Colonel Tydd, late of the 76th Regiment, tells me that when he was stationed in Ireland, many years ago, a father and mother of the name of Mahoney were tried for murder for having boiled their child under a similar impression. The poor little fellow was a delicate child, whom nothing could apparently restore to health. A fairy mother had evidently stolen their healthy infant, and had substituted her own starveling in its place. To force her to restore their property to them, they put a pot of water on the fire, and when it was boiling they immersed the unfortunate child, which was some four or five years of age, in the scalding water. In vain his screams were heard as he cried out, "I'm Johnny Mahoney! I'm the rale Johnny Mahoney! I'm not the fairy's child!" But the fairy mother did not listen to the cries of her offspring, nor come to its rescue by bringing back the real Johnny Mahoney, and the parents were therefore arrested for murder, and were tried for the crime they had unconsciously committed.

But among the Celtic race the fairies did not confine their depredations to the dairy or the cradle. Even grown-up persons were liable to be spirited away by them. It is evident that they have inherited from primeval ages a belief that not only disease, but also death itself is the effect of supernatural agency. With civilised man the immortality of the soul may sometimes be a stumbling-block. To primeval man the mortality of the body was an incredible fact. The mystery of death was too profound to be believed in.

Indignatur se mortalem esse creatum.

Hence the perishing corpse was only a worthless substitute for the living, who had been carried away by "the good people." Wyld, in his interesting little work on Irish superstitions (p. 121), says: "The fairies, or 'good people,' are looked upon as the great agents and

prime movers in the death of infants and young people; and even yet in the islands of the extreme West, except from sheer old age, or some very ostensible cause, no one is believed to *die all out*." He goes on to say that even decomposition will not convince them that the person is dead. "Sure he has got a blast, and is with the faeries!" So rooted is this belief, that food of different sorts is brought for weeks by the friends of the deceased to the rath or fort where he is supposed to be living with the fairies.

Hence we find the belief still lingering that King Arthur is not dead, but is sleeping on the Eildon Hills, from which he will yet return—a superstition still lingering respecting him in Europe. In Southern Europe, Barbarossa only sleeps, and will yet awake, and be once more the terror of the world. The tale of the 'Seven Sleepers,' and similar other superstitions, are traceable to the same source.

This being the case, we can now form some conjecture as to the peculiar dread attached to sneezing. There can be no doubt that the fairies were originally the same as the ancestral spirits whom the Kaffirs believe enter into a man when he yawns or sneezes. Among the Celtic race it seems that their influence did not extend only to inspiring the person affected. It did more; it rendered him liable to be converted into a fairy man, or into a senseless, perishing corpse. Callaway, in his interesting work on the 'Religious System of the Amazulu' (Part I. p. 64), states that as a Kaffir "believes that at the time of sneezing the spirit of his house is in some special proximity to him, he believes it to be a time peculiarly favourable to prayer, and that whatever he asks for will be given. Hence he may say, *Bakwiti in komo!* (Spirits of our people, give me cattle!) or, *Bakwiti abantwana!*" (Spirits of our people, give me children!)

Yawning or sneezing is a sign that Itongo, the ancestral spirits, are about to enter and inspire the person affected. "He shows that he is about to be a diviner by yawning again and again. And men say: 'No; truly it seems as if this man were about to be possessed of a spirit!' It seems, however, that a convenient 'aid to devotion' is employed.

"This is also apparent from his being very fond of snuff; not allowing any long time to pass without taking some. And people begin to see that he has had what is good for him."*

It is evident that the negro races of Africa regard the act of sneezing with even greater dread than the Kaffirs, and, like them, believe it to indicate the influence of "ancestral spirits." They, like the Kaffirs and other races in Ceylon, India, and other portions of the globe, believe that the spirits of the dead assume the form of snakes, the undoubted source of "serpent-worship." The abode of the dead is

* Callaway's 'Divination among the Zulus,' p. 262.

“the snake world” of the Cingalese. The Priestess of Apollo at Delphi was simply an “*obi-woman*.” She was inspired by a serpent called *Ob*. Now *Ob* means in Yoruba an *ancestor*. The temples of Central Africa are called *Oboni* (houses of the dead). An *Obi*-man is therefore literally a *necromancer* (one who prophesies by aid of the dead).

So deeply-rooted is the superstition on the subject of sneezing in negro races, that Christianity has not been able to weaken it among their descendants in the United States. A lady, who had much to do with schools for blacks, surprised at the fact that she had never heard a black child sneeze, or at least give a thorough sneeze, came to the conclusion that the blacks are physically incapable of sneezing. The readers of this article can now supply a very different solution. The negroes evidently train their children from the cradle never to indulge in the ominous act of sneezing, and probably teach them never to allude to a subject which is connected with that mysterious influence of the dreaded *Obi*, which haunts the African from his infancy to the grave. I have frequently tried to question the blacks as to the *Obi*, but the very word had a terror for them, and was sufficient to reduce a laughing, chattering group to silence.

The Scandinavian and Celtic races attributed, however, even more serious influences to the agency of the spirits. A sneeze or yawn was enough to convert a person into a fairy man. Thus the Icelandic legend quoted by Callaway makes the female troll, who had assumed the form of a beautiful queen, say,

“When I yawn, I am a neat and tiny maiden; when I yawn a half yawn, then I am as a half troll; when I yawn a whole yawn, then I am as a whole troll.”

This being, then, so wide-spread a superstition, regarding the influence of fairies or subordinate deities, can we in any way obtain from it a clue to the habit of saying “God bless you!” to a person who sneezes? Does the invocation of the Deity protect the person who sneezes from the influence of the fairies?

This I believe can be conclusively established by the traditions and superstitions of the Celtic race.

I need hardly refer to the mysterious protection which the name of the Deity is supposed to afford against the agency of evil spirits. There is, however, a well-known story, which will illustrate the belief of the Celtic race as to the effect which the habit of saying “God bless you!” has upon the fairies.

Pat once went to sleep at a place frequented by the fairies; and in his sleep was carried down to their palace. He was about to drink some of their ale, which would have for ever prevented his return, when fortunately one of the fairies happened to sneeze, upon which Pat, in a courteous mood, exclaimed very innocently, “God bless your honour!”

Wonderful was the effect of thus invoking the name of the Deity in their presence. With terrible imprecations, and in great dismay, the fairies fled away, and Pat once more woke upon earth.

I could cite many such stories to prove the fact, that the Celtic race believe that, from Satan down to the mildest form of evil spirits, the name of the Deity has the effect of rendering them, for the time, powerless to do harm.

Can we then find any clue to the question why we should wish to keep off fairies and evil spirits when a man sneezes? I have discovered the explanation in the superstitions of the Highlanders. The following tradition as to a Highland Chief's family in Perthshire, related to me by the Rev. Dr. Robertson, a native of that county, shows that when a person sneezes, he is supposed to be *liable to be stolen by the fairies*, unless protected by some one invoking the name of the Deity.

Several centuries ago, an ancestor of the present Chief was engaged to be married to a young lady in France, who, he learned, had grown fickle, and was about to be married to a rival. In great distress, the Chief applied for aid to the King of the Fairies, who offered him a fairy horse, mounted on which he accompanied his Majesty to France. When they arrived at the house of the bride, the wedding was just commencing. The King of the Fairies, unseen by the guests, entered, and seeing the bride for a moment withdraw into a room alone, he followed her. Just then she sneezed—there was no one present to say "God bless you!" and in a moment the fairy had stolen the bride, whom he carried in triumph over to the Highlands, where she married the chieftain, and became the happy mother of a long line of illustrious Macs. It is needless to add that his rival, the unhappy Frenchman, unconsciously married "*a fairy woman*."

American ethnologists point to the early monuments of Egypt for one of their strongest proofs in support of their views, as we there find the negro type represented as precisely similar to what it now is; and they endeavour to convince the world that all the varieties of man sprang from different "centres of creation," that the American man, Australian man, Arctic man, African man, all are indigenous to the countries which they now inhabit.

It would certainly be an amusing, if not a most profitable task to refute the speculations of these theorists by arguments derived from sneezing.

Before they can expect us to accept their conclusions, let them answer the question, How did all men, in all countries, arrive at the same singular conclusion as to the mysterious dangers attendant on a sneeze, if this belief was not inherited from a common source?

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