

COMMON ERRORS IN DAILY LIFE.

By JAMES MASON.

IV.—ERRORS IN FACT.

THE most careful husbandry never yet succeeded in banishing weeds altogether from country fields, and the utmost vigilance has had as limited success in driving errors from the domain of truth. Do what we may, some always remain to perplex and perhaps to annoy everyone who is desirous of seeing things as they ought to be.

To enumerate a few of these errors is the object of the following paper. Our business is with the seamy side of intellectual and practical life, but the subject is one possessing many picturesque features, and even those who are models of correctness in everything, and so have no need to be taught, may find it at least entertaining.

In many cases, no doubt, errors in fact originate in random statements which get accepted because people will not take the trouble of inquiring for themselves. Belief, you know, is a great deal easier than investigation. Other errors, again, are taken up because men and women are, as a rule, averse to having their judgment kept in suspense, and will often credit what is absurd rather than wait awhile till something certain is known. Some errors originate in a love of the marvellous, and some in nothing but fondness for mischief. Fictions are invented by way of a joke, and received as sober truth by people unsuspecting that a trick is being played off at their expense.

To keep clear of errors it is of great importance whom we put confidence in as guides, and our faith should be given only to the best books and the wisest friends. We must, of course, believe in somebody, for we cannot verify every statement for ourselves, and must often take things on trust.

And now for our collection of errors in fact. The first are of the nature of superstitions, and arise from a belief in what are supposed to be facts, but are really nothing of the sort.

Belief in lucky and unlucky days and doings has taken stronger hold on some of us than we are willing to allow. Who has not heard of the unfortunate character of Friday, the day of the week, they say, on which Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit? As if, girls, every day were not alike, either for starting on a journey, or for getting married, or for beginning a new enterprise, or for anything else. Tuesday and Wednesday have long got the credit of being lucky days, and Thursday is held by some ignorant people to have only one lucky hour—the hour before the sun gets up. But whoever accepts such superstitions as facts only makes trouble for herself, and fetters her movements to no end.

To regard some deeds as unlucky is an equally great mistake. Not long since, I sat opposite a man at dinner who by accident capsized a salt cellar. He at once, and without thinking he was observed, took a pinch between his finger and thumb, and threw it over his left shoulder, as a protection against ill-fortune. This is an old superstition: in Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper," for example, Judas Iscariot is represented as overturning the salt. But to be ancient and to be true are very different things.

Edith has made herself quite unhappy over the breaking of a looking-glass, which she has always understood betokened several years of trouble. It is all nonsense; the fact being that unless the breakage is the result of habitual carelessness, people live after it quite as comfortably as before.

Is it a fact that to walk under a ladder brings bad luck? Sometimes, if a man on the ladder is whitewashing a wall or painting the front of a house. For this reason it is best

always to take the outside of the ladder; but when Janet's heart sank the other day on walking under one before she noticed, and she thought she might after all live to be hanged, she distressed herself without reason.

Stumbling on going upstairs is held by some to be as unlucky as walking under a ladder. True, Lord Byron, when ascending the stairs at a friend's house to meet for the first time the lady he afterwards married, made a false step, and, turning to Moore, who was with him, said, "That is a bad omen!" So it was, but from one example it will never do to infer a general conclusion.

Many rhymes and traditions about days and seasons are also to be classed amongst errors in fact. The change of style which took place in this country in 1752, dropping eleven days out of the calendar, has proved a sad discomfiture to all such popular lore. "It was said, for instance," remarks Dr. Robert Chambers, "that March came in like a lion and went out like a lamb; but the end of March, of which this was said, is in reality the 12th of April. Still more absurd did it become to hold All Saints' Eve (October 31st) as a time on which the powers of the mystic world were in particular vigour and activity, seeing that we have been observing it at the wrong time for centuries. We have been continually for many centuries gliding away from the right time, and yet had not perceived any difference—a pretty good proof that the assumedly sacred character of the night was all empty delusion."

Clearly then no reliance is to be placed on any observations regarding the weather of St. Swithin's Day, as it is at present held, and the modern St. Valentine may be set down as an impostor.

These references to the calendar remind me to speak of prophetic almanacs. It shows how deeply rooted credulity is in the human mind that these are still believed in, and meet with an extensive sale. One might have expected that the days were over when people listened to the voices of the stars, paid any heed to predictions of wars, terrors, discords, and strange events in the world, and made themselves uneasy about the foretelling of vicissitudes and years of trouble. Even in regard to wind and rain, such predictions have no value whatever. When the Meteorological Office still not infrequently goes astray in its forecast of the weather of to-morrow, what can we expect from a prediction about that of this time twelve months?

There was more excuse for prophetic almanacs in the days when astrology was an article of faith, and men saw in the heavens an open book in which those who understood the language could read the fate, not only of individuals, but of nations. But the modern astrologer who—

"Deals in destiny's dark counsels
And sage opinions of the moon sells"

is only a quack making dupes of the ignorant.

Fortune-tellers of all kinds are of the same description, and have been rightly classed by law as rogues and vagabonds. "I suppose you want to know about your future husband, and I can tell you," said a woman to a girl on a country road. Do you think the girl believed her? "I thought there might be something in it," she said to me afterwards, "so I gave her half-a-crown."

In many rural districts witchcraft still meets with believers, and men and women are to be found who place full credence in persons possessing the power to cast spells over cows, sheep, and horses, and even over those people to whom the witch or wizard has an antipathy. Quite recently a case in Essex was reported in which a labourer, under the impression that a woman was a witch, wanted to put her to the test by throwing her into a pond to see whether she would sink or float.

Elves, brownies, giants, dwarfs, goblins, and almost all the other inhabitants of the supernatural and fairy world, have no longer a place amongst current errors. Ghosts, however, die hard, and we are hardly likely to hear the last of them till simple people agree to take more rational views of the unseen world, and estimate at their true value the wonders of the dark *séance* and the pretensions of spirit-mediums. Superstition is the greatest burden in the world, and it is to be hoped that mankind, instead of merely changing at intervals the contents of its pack, will at last throw it off altogether.

Those that go down to the sea in ships are responsible for many an error. Mermaids, it is true, have ceased to be accepted facts, and we are no longer asked to believe accounts of their having been espied on distant shores combing their long hair on moonlight nights, and singing songs to the accompaniment of golden harps. People see that these wonderful creatures could only have been observed by our jovial tars after having been a day or two ashore. But if the days of mermaids are over, it is not so with the sea-serpent. That famous monster reappears almost every season—there was a careful drawing of him in one of our illustrated papers a year or two ago. It is remarkable, says one writer, with what distinctness and with what confidence the observers state their notions of what they saw—not meaning, we suppose, to deceive, but in all good faith taking hasty and excited impressions for serious and exact observations. Most sensible people are of opinion that the great sea-serpent, as a serpent, is a myth with little more foundation than the Flying Dutchman. People say they have seen him, but more people assert that they have been favoured with interviews from ghosts, and do we believe in ghosts on that account?

In connection with thunderstorms, we meet with one or two errors in fact. It is an error, for example, to suppose that the beech tree is a defence against lightning; it runs quite as much chance of being struck as other trees, and one is no safer under it than under an oak or an ash or an elm. The ancients used to say the same about the bay-tree, and Pliny, the Roman historian, tells that the Emperor Tiberius always crowned himself with bay during a thunderstorm. There is also a popular belief that a house-leek grown upon a roof will shield the house from lightning, but it is a rustic safeguard which was never known to have any effect.

That a mysterious virtue resides in some precious stones is an old and curious error. During the Russo-Turkish war of 1877, turquoise rings were much worn by the Russian officers as a talisman against danger, the turquoise being supposed to preserve the wearer from a violent death. Other stones are supposed to cure diseases, and to be an antidote against poisons. The diamond was long believed to minister to a mind diseased, and to be a certain cure for insanity.

Trust in talismans has certainly not died out. It is not so long since this paragraph appeared in the will of the late Emperor Napoleon III.—"With regard to my son, let him keep as a talisman the seal I used to wear attached to my watch, and which comes from my mother."

Death has given rise to a great many superstitious errors, and it is quite an exceptional family that has not some carefully-preserved story of mysterious forewarning, for the truth of which all the members are prepared to vouch. There is the death-watch.

"The death-watch clicked the hour she died," says Day. This superstition was long current, but it is now well ascertained that the ominous sound is nothing but the tapping of

a sort of a beetle as it calls on its fellows. The howling of dogs, the continued croaking of ravens over a house, and the sight of four magpies at once, were also said to portend death, all perhaps with as little reason as the sound of the death-watch.

In natural history there are a great many errors abroad which have taken their rise either in careless observation, or in the proverbially fertile imagination of travellers. Practical humourists have also, maybe, been at the bottom of a few of them. The lion, the so-called "King of Beasts," has been found out to be an indolent, skulking animal, whose far-famed generosity and courage are very doubtful; indeed, his generosity seems to depend very much on the state of his appetite. The camel also, the "ship of the desert," has for a long time had more than his share of compliments. Stupidity seems to be its characteristic, and of all creatures not one equals it for cowardice. The elephant has had its intelligence much exaggerated, as is the way with a great many people who look wiser than they really are.

The ass, however, it appears, has not had justice done to it. "It is a great mistake," says the Rev. J. G. Wood, "to employ the name of ass or donkey as a metaphor for stupidity, for the ass is truly one of the cleverest of our domesticated animals, and will lose no opportunity of displaying his capability whenever his intelligence is allowed to expand by being freed from the crushing toil and constant pain that are too often the concomitants of a donkey's life. Everyone who has petted a favourite donkey will remember many traits of its mental capacities; for, as in the case of the domestic fool of the olden days, there is far more knavery than folly about the creature."

The sloth furnishes us with another error. His name has been given him by people who have observed his habits in places where Nature never intended that he should exhibit. "In his native trees," observes Waterton, the naturalist, "one would never think of calling him a sloth; he passes from tree to tree at a good round pace."

That "birds in their little nests agree" is an error for which Dr. Watts is responsible. If tempers in households were allowed to manifest themselves like tempers in birds' nests, domestic happiness would speedily become a thing of the past. Among birds the robin, perhaps on account of his handsome waistcoat, backed by a poetical tradition and a pretty nursery tale, has managed to sneak into our affections. But he is now unmasked, and known to be a pugnacious little rascal of positively murderous propensities.

Before nature was studied as it now is, it was believed that barnacle geese grew from barnacle shells. "It seems hardly credible, in this enlightened age," says Brand, in his "Popular Antiquities," that so gross an error in natural history should so long have prevailed as that the barnacle, a well-known kind of shell-fish which is found sticking to the bottom of ships, should, when broken off, become a species of goose. Old writers, of the first credit in other respects, have fallen into this mistaken and ridiculous notion; and we find even Holinshed gravely declaring that with his own eyes he saw the feathers of these barnacles 'hang out of the shell at least two inches.'

A natural-history error that still survives is that a mad dog invariably avoids the water. The "dread of water" which we would infer from the name hydrophobia is not always present either in the patient or in the animal inflicting the injury.

Plants and flowers may be spoken of next. There is a common error in connection with the sunflower. It is supposed that the plant is so named because it always turns to the

sun. This is not the case; the name has been given from the resemblance of the full-blown flower to the sun itself. Gerard remarks that he has seen four of these flowers upon the same stalk facing the four cardinal points.

The "sweet forget-me-nots that grow for happy lovers" have given rise to some popular misapprehension. There is little doubt that the plant really entitled to bear the fanciful appellation is the creeping scorpion grass.

There is a curious superstitious practice in which a rod of the hazel is used in searching for water or minerals. A long, forked branch or twig forms the divining rod, and the person bearing it walks very slowly over the ground where it is thought that mines or springs exist. When the rod, which is held horizontally, bends of itself, that indicates the presence of the desired metal or water. Even at the present day this species of divination is practised in some of our mining districts.

It is an oft-repeated error that plants poison the air of a room by the exhalation of carbonic acid during the night. This has been shown to be a fallacy.

Many incidents and anecdotes with which everyone is familiar are unfortunately either misrepresentations of fact or absolutely without foundation. They often keep in circulation because they are picturesque and pleasing in themselves; if not true, they are cleverly invented, and it seems almost a pity to throw doubt on what harms nobody.

A correspondent of *Notes and Queries* some years ago pointed out the little reliance to be placed on the traditions repeated by vergers and guides to wondering sight-hunters. "In spite," he says, "of Sir Samuel Meyrick's judicious arrangement of the armour in the Tower, the Beefeaters still persist in the old stories handed down. At Warwick Castle, the rib of the dun cow is ascertained to be the bone of a fossil elephant; and Guy's porridge-pot, a military cooking utensil of the time of Charles I. St. Crispin's chair, carefully preserved in Lincathgow Cathedral by insertion in the wall, is of mahogany—an American wood! The chair of Charles I. at Leicester bears a crown which, having been the fashionable ornament after the Restoration, together with the form, betrays the date.

"Queen Eleanor's crosses, it now appears, were not built by her affectionate husband, but by her own direction and with her own money. The fire-place, and other objects in Belted Will's bedroom in Naworth Castle are manifestly of later date. The bedstead treasured up near Leicester as that occupied by Richard III. immediately after the battle of Bosworth, is of the style called Elizabethan. Queen Mary's bed, at Holyrood, is of the last century; and her room at Hardwick is in a house which was not erected till after her death; the tapestry and furniture, however, may have been removed from the old hall where she was imprisoned. The tower of Carnarvon Castle, in which the first Prince of Wales is supposed to have been born, is not of so early a period."

It is as well, you see, not to believe every tale told us at show places. Interesting neighbourhoods are often not all they profess to be, and, as for relics, many of them are of the same class as the sheep bones shown to a party of sightseers, venerable curiosities, by an old woman who, when remonstrated with, said, "They are good enough for the gentlemen."

In Roslin Chapel one is told a thrilling story of an apprentice who carved a pillar in a style which his master could not approach, and, as a reward for his pains, was knocked on the head by his master's mallet. The same legend is connected with elaborately-carved pillars in many Gothic edifices of the Middle Ages, and it is clear they cannot all be true.

Then wherever there is a castle with a

monastery, or an old church in the neighbourhood, one is pretty sure to hear of an underground passage connecting the two, and that into that underground passage once went a piper the sound of whose pipes was traced as he went on and on till at last all was silent, for the poor man was eaten up by rats. Perhaps this really happened once, but why should so many places be anxious to be thought the scene of such a dismal tale?

Many errors in fact have had their origin in hoaxes. One of the most ingenious inventors of spurious facts was George Steevens, the Shakespearian commentator, whose entire life has been characterised as "displaying an unparalleled series of arch-deception, tinctured with much malicious ingenuity." One of his inventions was the description of the poisonous upastree of Java, the effluvia from which killed all things that came near. The account spread into general literature as a fact, was commented on by naturalists, furnished a subject for many a painter, and is believed in by some people to this day.

Some hoaxes, however, one would have thought that the least particle of common-sense would have seen through. It shows how ready people are to swallow things without thinking when the bottle-hoax, of which everyone has heard, met with so much success. This famous trick arose from a wager that, let a man advertise the most impossible thing in the world, he would find fools enough in London to fill a playhouse, and pay handsomely for the privilege of being there. Accordingly, a person advertised that he would, on a certain evening at the Haymarket Theatre, play on a common walking-cane the music of every instrument then in use, to surprising perfection, and that he would, on the stage, get into a tavern quart bottle, without equivocation, and while there sing several songs, and suffer any spectator to handle the bottle. The advertisement brought crowds, "bottle noodles" they were called afterwards, but, of course, there was no performance.

There once was a time when a confiding public was prepared to accept everything in print as true, and extra respect is even yet paid to the dignity of type over manuscript, or word of mouth. Authors and compilers, however, know too well how many errors in fact obtain a hold on the public in this way.

To give an example, a friend not long since read in a newspaper paragraph that the best plan to encourage hens to lay was to give them salt in their food. She had a number of almost profitless birds—it was then winter-time—so she boiled some rice, putting in plenty of salt, and fed the fowls. The consequence was that the following morning an inquest had to be held on all the occupants of the henhouse, except one whom the greed of her companions had prevented from having a fair share of the salted provisions. The moral of this incident, girls, is, Don't believe everything you read, for many a paragraph is written at random, and even the best writers will sometimes make mistakes.

Occasionally, however, blunders are not involuntary, as when a foreign historian in the battles he described, inserted the names of many persons who were not present, and this merely to confer honour on some particular families. But in most cases, no doubt, errors in print creep in, we hardly know how, and, if anyone doubts this, and wants to get a conceit of perfect accuracy taken out of her, let her only set about compiling a book, or even an article in which a large number of facts are brought together for the public benefit.

