

## Superstitions

Superstitions are beliefs that certain things or events will bring good or bad luck. Many people believe that luck plays an important part in their lives, and they wish somebody luck (= good luck in many situations, e.g. before an exam or when they get married). People learn superstitions while they are children, and though few adults will admit to being superstitious, many act on superstitions out of habit. Most superstitions are centuries old, and British and American people have many in common.

People are also interested in fate (= a power that controls everything and in knowing what will happen to them in the future). Most people know which sign of the zodiac they were born under and read their horoscope or 'stars in' magazines; though only a few take what is said seriously. People may thank their lucky stars for a piece of good fortune. When things go wrong they may say 'Just my luck!', blaming their own bad luck, or look back on an unlucky act that has, in some unexplained way, caused their current problem.

### Omens of bad luck

There are many well-known omens (= signs) of bad luck, some of which have a religious origin. The number 13 is considered unlucky because there were 13 people at the Last Supper. Tall buildings often do not have a 13th floor: instead the numbers jump from 12 to 14. Many people believe they will have a bad day when the 13th day of the month falls on a Friday (Friday the 13th). In Britain the magpie is widely considered an unlucky bird and has been associated with the Devil. The number of magpies seen is important: 'One for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl four for a boy.'

A well-known cause of bad luck is to walk under a ladder leaning against a wall. This idea may have developed out of the practice in "medieval times of hanging criminals from ladders. Treading on cracks between paving slabs is so bad luck, and it is unwise to cross on the stairs (= pass somebody going in the opposite direction). A person who breaks a mirror will have seven years' bad luck, but an old, little-known solution is to put the pieces under running water in order to wash away the bad luck. It is unlucky to spill salt but bad luck can be avoided by throwing a little of it over the left shoulder with the right hand. People should not open an umbrella indoors as this will annoy the sun. Some people think it is 'bad luck to let a black cat cross in front of them; others think black cats bring good luck and they give paper back cats as tokens at weddings.

A person, place or event that often experiences bad luck is said to be jinxed.

### Lucky charms

There are various ways in which people try to ensure good luck. Some people carry a lucky charm, such as a rabbit's foot or a special coin. Finding a four-leaf clover (= a clover plant with four leaves instead of the usual three; is so lucky. People sometimes place an old horseshoe over the front door of their house. It must be hung with both ends pointing upwards: if it is hung upside down the luck will run out through the gap. Sports teams and military regiments often have a lucky mascot, usually an animal or a model of an animal, which travels with them.

Rituals are actions that people believe are necessary in order to have good luck. When people talk about something that they hope will come true

(= happen) they may touch something made of wood and say 'touch wood' (*AmE* 'knock on wood'). If something goes badly for somebody on two occasions people may say 'third time lucky' (*AmE* 'third time's charm'). If people fear that they have tempted fate (= assumed too

confidently that everything will go well) they may cross their fingers to protect their good luck. Actors believe that wishing somebody good luck will bring them the opposite; and often say 'break a leg' instead.

### Predicting the future

There are many other ways, apart from reading a horoscope, of finding out what will happen in the future. Fortune-tellers at fairs use a crystal ball or read a palm (= look at the lines on a person's hand) to foretell the future. Other people use tarot cards (= special cards with pictures on) or read tea leaves (= look at the size and arrangement of tea leaves left after a cup of tea). Some people take all this seriously but many treat it as fun.

Children, especially girls, have games that they believe will tell them whom they will marry. In Britain on 'Hallowe'en, a girl can find out the first letter of her future husband's name by peeling an apple in one long piece and then dropping it to see what letter the peel forms. A woman can check if her lover is faithful by picking the petals one by one from a flower while saying alternately 'he loves me' and 'he loves me not' until there are no petals left.

Other superstitions apply to the weather. A well-known rhyme is 'Red sky at night, shepherd's delight; red sky in the morning, shepherd's warning'. In the US *sailor's* replaces *shepherd's*. (A red sky in the evening means good weather ahead, while a red sky in the morning means storms are coming). British people believe that if it rains on 15 July (St Swithin's Day) it will rain every day for the next 40 days. On 'Groundhog Day'; 2 February, Americans look for a groundhog coming out of its hole. If it sees its shadow (i.e. if it is sunny) then winter will last a lot longer, but if it sees no shadow, winter is almost over.

### Folk medicine

Many superstitions are related to health, though few are now taken seriously. It is still very common for people to say 'bless you' or 'gesundheit' (German for 'good health') when somebody sneezes. This was originally said in order to prevent a person's soul being sneezed out of their body.

Folk remedies have been used to cure many common problems. For hiccups (= sudden sharp sounds in the throat) remedies include dropping a cold key down the person's back or getting them to hold their breath and count to ten. To get rid of a sty (= a swelling on the eyelid) it is necessary to rub it with a gold ring. Warts will disappear if a piece of wool is tied in the same number of knots as there are warts and buried in the garden. As the wool rots, the warts will disappear.