

## **Folk-medicine / by William George Black.**

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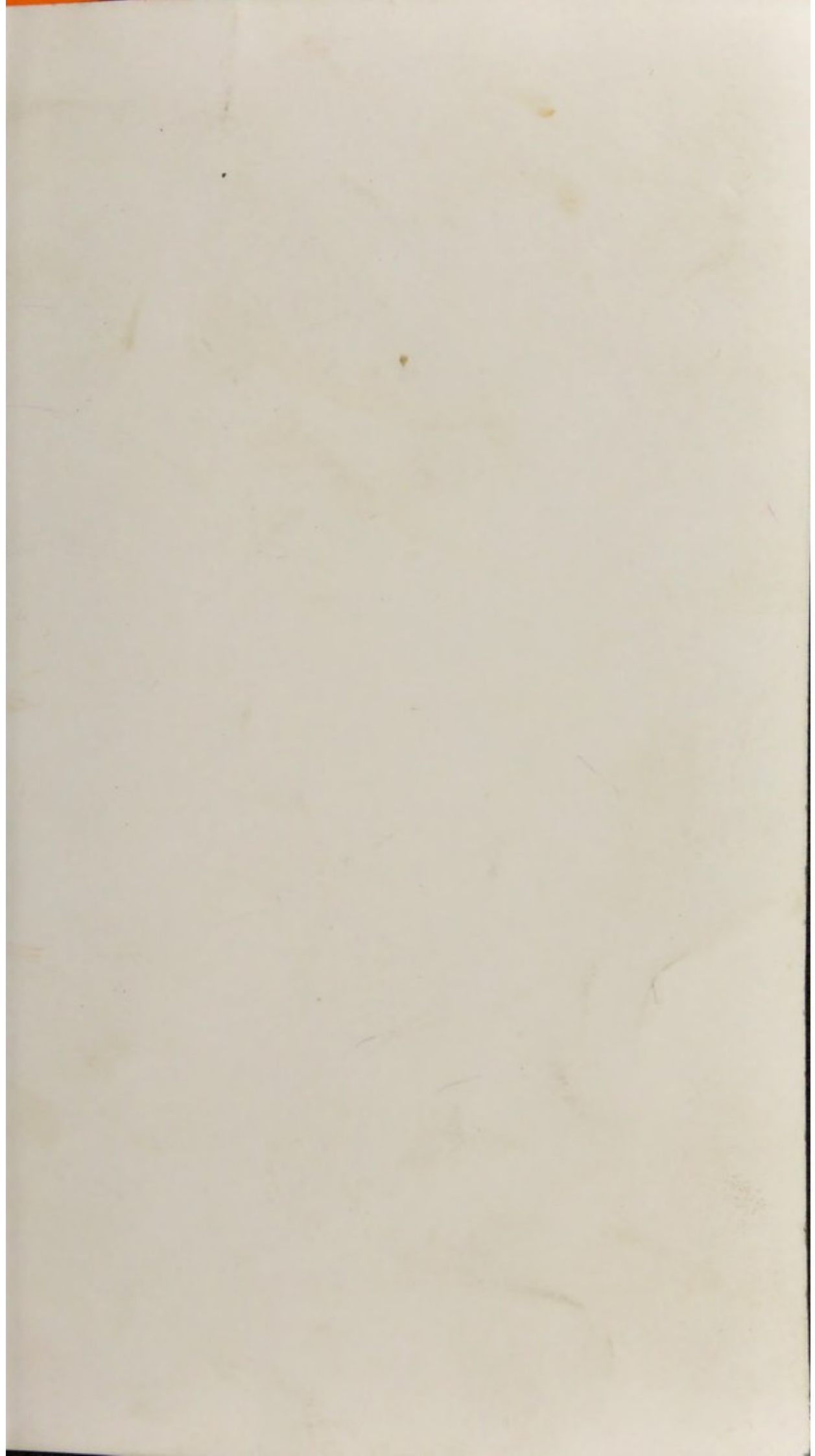
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## FOLK-MEDICINE.

BY WILLIAM GEORGE BLACK, ESQ.

SINCE Mr. W. J. Thoms gave the word "folk-lore" to our language, the study of the home-learning of the people has grown with much rapidity, owing probably to the fact that it is found to afford the best insight obtainable into the character of a nation, without considerable knowledge of which the pages of history are difficult to read. As it is mentioned in the statement of the aims of this Association, that its objects are to investigate, preserve, and illustrate, not only those subjects which are supposed more especially to fall under the name "archæological", but also the manners and customs of our forefathers, I am encouraged to bring before your notice a special branch of folk-lore which has, I think, hardly received the attention due to it. The term above, "folk-medicine", is one for which I confess myself responsible, having first (so far as I am aware) used it while writing some articles in a provincial newspaper. It is meant to comprehend the subjects of charms, incantations, and those habits relating to the preservation of health, or the cure of disease, which were and are practised by the more superstitious and old-fashioned.

Disease was early, it is probable, attributed to the malice of a spirit somehow offended. The Bornean Dyacks say to be smitten by a spirit is to be ill; and in Sameo, when a man dies, they say a spirit has eaten him. Mr. Tylor, in his *Primitive Culture*, mentions that in New Zealand each ailment is said to be caused by the spirit of an infant, or undeveloped human spirit entering the body of a man, and feeding inside. Other nations accuse the ghosts of the dead of being the plagues of the living, and are consequently anxious to be on good terms with the dying, and after death to do the spirits all proper worship. When a spirit was believed to have taken possession of a man, it was sought to be driven forth by prayers and promises and threats; but with the progress of culture this idea became incredible to long-headed inquirers. Could not disease, it was asked (we may suppose), be got rid of more thoroughly by *transference*? If a man ill of some contagious sickness could,



*without* conscious act on his part, infect his neighbours, why might he not also *of purpose* transfer his complaint to something of a lower order, which should suffer the disease in his place?—not necessarily fatal to it, although likely to have proved so to him who rid himself of it. Belief in transference lingers down to the present day. In Cheshire it is still by no means uncommon for a young frog to be held for a few moments with its head inside the mouth of a sufferer from *aptha* or thrush. The frog is supposed to become the recipient of the ailment, which has, indeed, in some districts received the folk-name of “the frog” from the association. Toads were at one time (and, indeed, may yet be) used in a similar manner in cases of hooping-cough; while in America Indians hold the head of a living fish for a moment or two in the mouth of the afflicted person. The Irish are said, in cases of fever, to be known to cut off some of the hair of the patient, and pass it down the throat of an ass, believing that thus the disease is transferred to the animal. Elias Ashmole set his confidence in transference, for under date 11 May 1613, he writes,—“I took, early in the morning, a good dose of elixir, and hung three spiders about my neck, and they drove my ague away. *Deo gratias.*” Burton (*Anatomy of Melancholy*) says he first saw the spider-cure practised by his mother. Then he derided the notion of any good being done by it; but “at length, rambling among authors, as often I do, I found this very medicine in Dioscorides, approved by Matthiolus, repeated by Alderovandus, I began to have a better opinion of it, and to give more credit to amulets, when I saw it in some parties answer to experience.” Longfellow mentions the spider as a cure for fever in *Evangeline*,—

“Only beware of the fever, my friends! Beware of the fever!  
For it is not, like that of our cold Acadian climate,  
Cured by wearing a spider hung round one’s neck in a nutshell.”

Perhaps one of the simplest methods of transferring disease is that mentioned by Dalyell,<sup>1</sup> that laving a handful of water over each shoulder was formerly reputed to transfer disease to the person first seen; with which may be compared Burder’s statement, that the Jews of Germany shake their clothes over a pond, after a meal, that their iniquity may be cast on the fishes.

<sup>1</sup> *Darker Superstitions of Scotland*, p. 127.



Often disease was supposed to be communicable to a tree, and certain oak trees near Berkhamstead, in Hertfordshire, were long resorted to by aguish patients. A lock of hair was pegged into an oak, and then by a sudden wrench transferred from the sufferer's head to the tree. Sometimes it was said the infected creature or thing transferred the disease to the next person touching it, thereby disinfecting itself. Thus in Thuringia it is said that a string of rowan-berries, for example, which has touched a sick man will impart the malady to the first person who touches it, the original patient being immediately cured. In this country, to touch each wart with a pebble, place the pebbles in a bag, and contrive to lose it on the way to church, was a plan well spoken of for the cure of warts, the unlucky person who found the bag receiving the warts. Hunt says a Cornish lady told him that when a child, out of curiosity, and in ignorance, she once took up such a bag and examined its contents, the lamentable consequence being that in a short time she had as many warts as there were stones in the bag.

Of *remedies* for diseases there are two great classes; the first comprising those the virtues of which are supposed to lie in the supernatural power of certain forms of words; and the second, those whose efficacy is looked upon as due to certain fortunate or lucky or proper actions (which we now specially term "superstitious"), the intelligent origin of which we have probably lost.

All charms relied on through some assumed connection with our Lord, the Virgin, the saints, or the evil powers, we may regard as belonging to the first class,—a very large one. The following, common in Lancashire, is worn inside the waistcoat or stays, and over the left breast, for the cure of toothache: "Ass Sant Peter sat at the geats of Jerusalem our Blessed Lord and Seavour Jesus Christ Pased by and Sead, What Eleth thee? hee sead, Lord, my teeth ecketh. Hee sead, arise and follow mee, and thy teeth shall never Eake Eney mour. Fiat+Fiat+Fiat." In Berkshire, where a similar charm is known, Bortron is substituted for Peter. The general belief of all country folks is that the above is in the Bible. Once, it is recorded in *Notes and Queries*, a clergyman said, "Well but, dame, I think I know my Bible, and I don't find any such verse in it." To which the good



woman made answer, "Yes, your Reverence, that is just the charm. It's in the Bible, *but you can't find it.*" An interesting Cornish version is preserved by Hunt. For ague, Blagrove, in his *Astrological Practice of Physick*, prescribes the following to be worn by the patient: "When Jesus went up to the cross to be crucified, the Jews asked him, saying, 'Art thou afraid, or hast thou the ague?' Jesus answered and said, 'I am not afraid, neither have I the ague. All those who bear the name of Jesus about them shall not be afraid, nor yet have the ague.'" Many were said to have been cured by this writing. Blagrove himself received the "receipt from one whose daughter was cured thereby, who had the ague upon her two years."

An anonymous correspondent sent me, some time back, a curious charm which (so he wrote) is sold in great numbers, at Queenstown, to Irish emigrants. It contains a prayer which is said to have been "found in the tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ in the year 803, and sent from the Pope to the Emperor Charles, as he was going to battle, for safety. They who shall repeat it every day, or hear it repeated, or keep it about them, shall never die a sudden death, nor be drowned in water, nor shall poison have any effect upon them", etc. Those who laugh at it will suffer, they are warned. "Believe this for certain. It is as true as if the holy Evangelists had written it." The prayer itself, which is addressed to the "holy cross of Christ", specially prays, "ward off from me all *dangerous deaths*". In the Black Country a child suffering from hooping-cough is sent to any couple bearing the happy names of Mary and Joseph. Bread which Joseph must cut, and butter which Mary must spread, are to be demanded; it being essential to the cure that there is no courtesy prefix of "please". In Wicklow, I am informed, it is often said that if the points of three smoothing-irons are pointed at a paining tooth three times, in the name of the Trinity, the toothache will cease. For blood-staunching we have, among others, the following:

"Christ was born in Bethlehem,  
Baptised in the river Jordan.  
There he digg'd a well,  
And turned the water against the hill:  
So shall thy blood stand still.

In the name," etc.

Another version is, "Our Blessed Saviour was born in Bethlehem, and baptised in the river Jordan,—



“ ‘The waters were wild and rude,  
The child Jesus was mild and good.’

He put his feet into the waters, and the waters stopped, and so shall thy blood, in the name”, etc.

Lancashire provides two monkish charms. One runs thus: “A soldier of old thrust a lance into the side of the Saviour; immediately there flowed thence blood and water,—the blood of redemption and the water of baptism. In the name of the Father+may the blood cease. In the name of the Son+may the blood remain. In the name of the Holy Ghost+may no more blood flow from the mouth, the vein, or the nose.” Orkney provides the following, to be repeated once, twice, or oftener, according to the case; not aloud, nor in presence of any save charmer and patient:

“Three virgins came over Jordan’s land,  
Each with a bloody knife in her hand.  
Stem, blood, stem! Letherly stand!  
Bloody nose [or mouth] in God’s name mend.”

Prints of the apocryphal correspondence between Our Lord and Abgar, King of Edessa, are looked upon as preservative against fever in parts of Devonshire and Shropshire.

When the evil powers are invoked, the charm is generally sealed up, and the wearer warned that should the packet be opened, the efficacy will be gone. Thus Cotta, in his *Short Discoverie*, etc. (p. 49), inserts “a merrie historie of an approved famous spell for sore eyes. By many honest testimonies it was a long time worn as a jewell about many necks, written in paper, and enclosed in silke; never failing to do soveraigne good when all other helps were helpllesse. No sight might dare to read or open. At length a curious mind, while the patient slept, by stealth ripped open the mystical cover, and found the powerful Latin characters, ‘*Diabolus effodiat tibi oculos, impleat foramina stercoribus.*’” But instances are common of the invocation being written, not in the language of the learned, but in somewhat rough Saxon.

Leaving this only touched upon, it may be noted that even in the last century (and the custom may not yet be forgotten) it was still common to go through a ceremony which, there can be little doubt, symbolised *new birth*. Dalryell tells how children under hectic fever, or consumptive patients, were often transmitted through a circular wreath of woodbine cut during the increase of the March moon.



The wreath was let down over the body, from the head to the feet. Twenty hours intervened between each transmission. Many other instances of the custom might be easily adduced. In Cornwall sick children were frequently drawn through perforated rocks; and in most parts of England it was not unusual to pass a child suffering from *hernia* through a cleft ash-tree. The holy places of the east, the narrow openings for the pious to squeeze through, will be recollected in this connexion.

Of the class of simple remedies to which it is at present somewhat difficult to assign a meaning, I shall, for obvious reasons, only give a few illustrations.

Hooping-cough will never be taken by any child that has ridden upon a bear (very common). Cramp is effectually prevented by placing the shoes under the bed, with the toes just peeping from beneath the coverlet (Lancashire). In some parts of Cornwall you are told to put the shoes at the foot of the bed, with the toes turned upward; in other parts, simply to put your slippers under the bed, with the soles upturned. An Irish belief is that the blood of any man named Keogh, put into a decayed tooth, will prevent toothache; and I lately heard, on very good authority, of a Keogh whose flesh had actually been punctured scores of times to obtain his blood.

Among other works to which all concerned in the investigation of folk-medicine must needs refer, are Brand's *Popular Antiquities*, Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, Dalyell's *Darker Superstitions of Scotland*, Hunt's *Romances and Drolls of the West of England*, Harland and Wilkinson's *Lancashire Folklore*, *Choice Notes (Folklore)*, and the valuable volumes of *Notes and Queries*. I have to thank James Earl Moreton, Esq., F.R.C.S., of Tarvin, and sundry other correspondents, for the valuable information they have courteously forwarded.

The above notes may serve to show somewhat of the scope of folk-medicine. Many points have been barely mentioned, and many, such as substitution, the efficacy of colours, the connexion of our charms with those of other people, left unnoticed; but it is my hope that even the slight illustrations of a few special parts of the subject may not be uninteresting, and that some attention may be directed to the important study which I have ventured to call Folk-Medicine.







