



Don't assume that a horoscope will bring you good luck until you have checked the files of Dr. Benjamin Cartwright, a University School science teacher, who is also an authority on superstitions.

By RICHARD DICKS

The Luck

*superstitions
an interest*

When Rogers used to toss a pinch of salt over his left shoulder to ward off bad luck, Peter the Great wouldn't cross a bridge—he felt it was a bad omen.

But even with such famous examples to encourage belief in the occult, I have never been a superstitious person, myself. When I approach an upright ladder, I pause only an instant before repeating my shoulder tag and ducking under it. The same with the Mack cats that cross my path—I may frown and call their names, but walk on undisturbed. I am not a superstitious person.

Neither is Dr. Benjamin Cartwright, who is a national authority on superstitions as well as being an associate professor of education at the University School. Silver-haired and grey at 67, Dr. Ben has collected more than 30,000 superstitions touching on every topic imaginable—from weather, crops and earth to pain, love and money, from sex and astrology to cooking and eggs, from demons, scariness and death to religion and sports.

There are some on make-beliefs (If you bite a cat's tail immediately after it bites you, its bite will not harm you) and some for the lazy (Staying in bed late on Friday the 13th will ward off potential bad luck) and, inevitably, some for sinners (A good deal of sin in a community will cause a crop failure.) There are no fewer than 75 ways to remove warts and many more for broken hearts. There are paradoxical ones (Chasing horshoes or burning a four-leaf clover will bring you bad luck). For every good superstition there is its opposite.

Dr. Ben's house isn't located in a haunted hollow. His wife doesn't pilot a broomstick to the grocery store for weekly victuals. He owns no black cat, and there is no magic pet huddling on the stove. No signs above window frames to ward off the evil eye, and on the kitchen calendar the

f the Cartwrights

olds a strange fascination for Dr. Ben— which has made him a recognized authority

Friday the 13th isn't circled in red. The approach of Halloween holds no fright for the Cartwrights.

Dr. Ben is a science teacher devoted to a full, day-to-day life among his neighbors. He and his wife live in an unpretentious quaint brick house surrounded by the trees, shrubs and flowers they both esteem. Dr. Ben might be anybody's venerated mentor in anybody's own home town, were it not for his fascination in the occult.

He was born in Wheaton, Missouri, in the heart of the Ozarks. His mother had grown up on a Mississippi plantation. She and his grandmother were both superstitious and constantly warned him against action that would bring him bad luck.

"As a boy I believed the superstitions," Dr. Ben explained, "which were actually drilled into me to teach me good manners. Even today I won't step over a grave or say anything bad about a dead person—habits developed during childhood." His eyes twinkled. "Strange things do happen, though. Why, I can remember once when a funeral procession was stopped. The saying went that if this happened, there would soon be another death in the family of the person being borne to the grave. And sure enough, there was."

His interest in superstitions was whetted, oddly enough, by his discovery that some of them were false. This interest continued through his college days. Later, when he taught courses in science and psychology, he used many of the strange beliefs he had collected to illustrate the antithesis of scientific thought and rational judgment.

"Superstitions know no geographical boundaries," Dr. Ben said. "They know neither race, color nor creed. Some date as far back as the early dynasties of China. Many were brought to America by the colonists. Generally speaking, folks of one country aren't any more superstitious than

those of another, not even the Irish. Weird beliefs are more common in rural areas than in cities. The more unlearned the people, the more they cling to their superstitions."

The educator believes that people are superstitious for a variety of reasons, but the most common one is the need for security. Superstitions are a convenient way of excusing behavior, and most people are superstitious without being conscious of it.

Dr. Ben glanced at his wife and ventured cautiously, "Women are more superstitious than men, but you won't get them to admit it." He pondered this for a moment, then said, "Beliefs are handed down from parents, neighbors, and even preachers. In America many of them come from the Ozarks and the Mississippi River region. Some eventually become widespread custom—Southerners eat black-eyed peas on New Year's Day to guarantee good luck for the coming year."

HE explained that superstitious folks don't reason from cause to effect like science teaches us to do but that the advancement of communication and scientific education is bringing us out of a superstitious age.

"Popular beliefs remain, nonetheless," Dr. Ben maintained, "—like knocking on wood. As for myself, I've gotten away from the old superstitions, but I know fellows who will turn around when they're out driving if a black cat crosses the road in front of them.

"Three friends of mine were driving home near Joplin, Missouri, when a black cat crossed the road ahead. Two of them insisted the driver turn around and take them back to the train station, and they went home on the train. The driver returned down the same road and passed the place where the cat had been seen. A minute later his car went out of control and struck a

telephone pole. He was killed instantly. The other two, when they heard of his death, were convinced that their superstition had been verified. They overlooked the fact that the man had been drinking."

Excerpts from Dr. Ben's amazing collection have been used in several major books on superstition, among them *An American Survival of Primitive Society* and *Ozark Superstitions*, by Vance Randolph. Dr. Ben has hopes of compiling his own lexicon of beliefs, when he retires from teaching.

Although superstitions are scattered throughout the length and breadth of America, there is a virtual dearth of organizations devoted to studying the subject. Long ago Dr. Ben was a member of the Tennessee Folklore Society, which made a practice of collecting and publishing superstitions. But he isn't even sure that the group is still in existence.

Our interview over, I rose and Dr. Ben walked with me to the door, remarking apropos of nothing that his grandmother had hated redheads. "Before she died I had to promise her I'd never marry one," he said, and as I bade farewell to his red-haired wife, he chuckled, "Grandma would turn over in her grave if she knew." I smiled in polite agreement, relieved to know that with all his inside information, Dr. Ben was no more superstitious than I.

But being a tall and somewhat clumsy fellow, I brushed against a small mirror in the hallway. The mirror crashed to the floor and shattered into a hundred pieces. We stood there, Dr. Ben and I, ruefully surveying the damage. "Don't worry about it," he said with a sigh. "It wasn't worth very much."

Offering my profound apologies I backed carefully out the door and, as he turned to summon his wife and her broom, I rapped on wood—but ever so lightly.