A THESIS

ON

SUPERSTITION

FOR DEGREE OF

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Superstitions

The human mind involuntarily reaches out after the immaterial. It unconsciously grasps at the weird and the fanciful. Man is wonderfully affected by mysteries. He is a superstitious being; instinctively, from childhood to old age, in Christianity and in paganism; no matter where his lot has been, superstition has been a constant factor of his being.

It is an interesting study to trace the thread of superstition from remote antiquity, down through the ages of man's history, to see it increasing and decreasing in uneven texture, but always perceptibly existing. Who can say when superstition first took root in its
abode in the human breast? That it existed in the childhood of the race is unquestionable. The builders at Babel recognized the presence of some mysterious power, and quitted the work in superstitions fear. King Saul in the hour of fear and agony forsook his God and hastened to Endor, to consult the witch, that he might know the result of the morrow's conflict. Belshazzar saw the hand, writing its mystic characters upon his palace wall, and superstitious shook every fiber of his being.

Thus did this influence exist among the early nations, even taking root in the hearts of gods chosen people. Greece rose to prominence, and Rome took up the scepter, but superstition ruled the rulers. Its slavery could
have been more object, than was that of Rome to her oracles and augurs. Hence this power may be traced unbroken down through the confused ages of European change and ignorance, transplanted to America's soil, where it brought forth the direful fruit of Salem's persecution.

The study of superstition borrows much of its interest from its intimacy with religion. Religion and superstition have in the past been inseparably welded together. Early religious grew powerful by the control they exercised over the superstitious nature of their adherents. There has been no race of men utterly devoid of religious beliefs and traditions. And why? It is but the outgrowth of the superstitious nature inborn in the
breast of humanity. The savage worships a deity. But his is not the worship of love; it is with fear that he offers his sacrifice. God is revealed to him in the lightning and in the earthquake. He sees these mighty effects, he fears their mightier cause, and prompted by superstition, bows down and worships. For him superstition and religion are coadjutants; and one is meaningless, and powerless without the other.
So has it been with all religions. The element of superstition has varied with the ignorance of the laymen; but it has never been entirely absent. Even the Protestant religion has to mourn the page of history which has been stained by its superstitions. So class of men have been more
superstition than were the Puritans. Swell- ing amid the silence of a new world, hold- ing communion in "God's first temple," the native woods, the spirit world seemed to draw near and blend with their own. The day of miracles returned. They came, disasters and sufferings, and they were attributed to the influence of evil spirits. To rid themselves of these, a persecution was inaugurated, the horrors of which are familiar in the households of all lands, and which need no description. But it is significant that modern religion has shaken off much of this unspeakably mantle. The religions of the past were fully enveloped in it. Greece, and Rome, the world's teachers, renowned for their enlightenment, were
embraces of a religion in which superstition stood out the one prominent element. The Roman Catholic religion, with its numerals and ceremonies still preserves its old superstitions cast, only by keeping its adherents blinded in ignorance.

The question, "how much of superstition is contained in the protestant religion," involves a discussion of the vexed question, "Wherein do religion and superstition differ, and where shall the line be drawn between them?"

The writer pleads inability to discuss this effectually, but undertakes to say that no religion has existed or does now exist, from which has been completely eradicated the element of superstition.

But our subject, although prominently cont-
connected with religion, has by no means been confined to its limits, but has borne also a separate existence. It has existed among all peoples, as necromancy, astrology, in divinations, apparitions, and sorceries. The old Greek would no more enter on a war-like expedition without consulting his oracle than would the modern mariner go to sea without his compass. In their elections the Romans were guided by the flight of birds. If after an election it was discovered that the oracle had been wrongly interpreted, a new election was necessitated. A swallow alighting on the rigging of a departing vessel was sufficient excuse to make the hardest sailor turn back from the intended voyage. The drawing of lots was among
the ancients, and peoples of later times, a favorite way of determining one's destiny. The star which arose at the birth hour of a person, was through life the precursor of his fate. This last belief that the great system of the heavens were subservient to the inhabitants of our comparatively insignificant sphere was a superstition almost universally believed in by the peoples of ancient and medieval times. Although opposed by Cato and Lucretius, yet there were many strong minds which believed implicitly in the doctrine. Kings and rulers consulted the astrologers. Lord Bacon advocated the principle and Napoleon looked out from the halls of Kremlic and watched his star go down.
in the blood of Austerlitz. Since the times of Endor's witch, her occupation has been a profitable one. The desire of men to penetrate the gloom in which the future has been kindly shrouded, is a strong and ever existing one; and there are as class rules today, as in the past are found visiting the withered bag, and listening to the recital of the future from her mysterious lips. Belief in witchcraft was one of the terrible superstitions of a century ago. The witch was believed to form a compact with the devil to whom she surrendered soul and body, and received in recompense, the power to exercise supernatural influences over mankind. The witch was believed to be the source of a majority of the evils which
visited a community. This belief has existed over a remarkably extensive portion of the inhabited globe. Paul du Chaillu, in his books of travel among the nations of Central Africa, describes the terrible fear of these people for witches, and the atrocious executions to which they subjected them. Reference has already been made to the hideous reign of this superstition in America.

Many of the classes of superstition which have been mentioned, have departed with the darkness of the middle ages. Few of them have much hold on the people of this century. Belief in omen and in divinations is no doubt the most generally recognized. There are many of our educated people who believe in these. The writer in a recent conversation
with a member of this University on this subject, a young man of education and of good sense—was surprised to hear the remark.

"I believe implicitly that a dog howling beneath a window by a sure sign of death in the family within one year. No argument could shake his belief. He had seen it verified and knew it to be true. There are other very similar signs believed in by a portion of the people. Such is the fatal number "thirteen"; the seven rainy sundays following a rainy Easter; the profit of placing certain vegetables in the "dark of the moon"; also the "wet and dry moon" et cetera.

But there is a higher form of superstition which yet remains as firmly rooted as did many of its less favored kindred in the
past. Our higher classes rejoicing in the light of progressive civilization are wont to ex-
claim, "Superstition has its hold on the hearts of the people of this nation." How
great an error. Our land whichlaughs at old forms, and ridicules all semblances of
antiquity is even now, cherishing in her
very centers of learning a superstition
more ancient than the walls of Rome; en-
gendered in societies crudest incaginations;
est in a new mold but of the same base
metal; a principle which taught that snow
was a helpless bumble in the hands of
some governing power. Educated men
have ceased to believe that it is given man
to foretell his own, or other's destiny.
And yet a vast multitude of the people
of this age believe that if the veil could be removed, there would stand revealed the fate of each fashioned by hands other than his own. Such is fatalism, the modern superstition of the educated.

What are the causes of superstition? Bacon has enumerated them under seven heads.

1. Pleasing and sensual rites and ceremonies.
2. Excess of outward and pharisaical holiness.
3. Over great reverence of traditions.
4. The strategems of prelates for their own gain.
5. The favoring too much of good intentions, opening the gates to conceits and novelties.
7. Barbarous times, joined with calamities and disasters.
But there are two causes, primary and underlying which stand back of all others and give to them existence. The first is inherent in the breast of the child; a natural superstition which is only lessened by education. The second is but a condition for the first—ignorance—a state of existence in which the natural tendency is permitted to thrive and where it holds sway over the thoughts, the passions, the actions. Here are the two great causes. That there may be a harvest, there must be seed for the sowing and ground for its reception. The great crop of superstition owes its existence to the natural germ planted in the ignorant and credulous breast.
From these causes are derived all those 
imnumerated by Bacon. Ignorance has 
made it possible for the priest to hoax 
the naturally superstitious layman and 
for the divinatory to impose upon the 
people: ignorance has been the cause 
of all superstitious oppression, persecution 
and bloodshed; all its evils are traceable 
to this source. And how numerous these 
evils have been? How many innocents 
have fallen victims before this red-
handed monster. It has impeded the 
advancement of a world; penetrating 
into the realms of religion and of 
philosophy: teaching that the origina-
tor of new ideas, the thinker of new 
thoughts were heretics: That he who
would ask the causes of the lightning and the motion of the heavenly bodies was an enemy of the gods; that Galileo and Gersonst, Roger Bacon, and Dr. Villa Nova would be damned to endless years for seeking to soar into new worlds of thought.

A knowledge of the causes of superstition suggests a cure. While it may be that we cannot eradicate the natural tendency in man to reach out after the weird and the mysterious, yet we may remove the only condition under which such a tendency can act harmful. Education is the battle ax which shall drive superstition from the minds of the people; only in ignorance is it possible that belief in the unseen spirits of the world should gain a footing.
sible for this monster to hold his sway. The whole history of man stands proof of the statement. The most grossly ignorant have been the most grossly superstitious; there are exceptions, but this is the rule. During the dark ages when all Europe was submerged in the black night of profound ignorance, superstition welded one undisputed scepter. But with the coming dawn these two powers of darkness fled hand in hand. Daily men are becoming more enlightened; daily man can growing less superstitions. This, looking at the rapid advances that learning in all its manifold departments is making, can doubt
that the death knell of superstition shall soon be sounded, and that this relic of barbarism shall go down to rise no more.