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Why don't we walk under a ladder?

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

SUPERSTITION is a hard thing to explain. At the end of it, none of it makes perfect sense. Taking a simple humanist approach you may say, we don't like to walk under a ladder because we prefer not to have a pot of paint up-ended over our head.

But that's what I call the 'Oor Wullie' scenario. Nine times out of ten as you approach a ladder you can see perfectly well whether danger lurks or not. So for example, in F Thompson's 'Candleford Green' of 1943 it is remarked, "As far as Laura ever heard, one might walk under a ladder with impunity, for the absence of which inhibition she had cause to be thankful in after years, when the risk of a spattering of paint on one's clothing was a trifle compared to that of stepping off the kerb and being run over by the traffic."

Exactly. Rationalism might suggest that, on balance, you *should* walk under a ladder, because it's easy enough to see what's ahead of you and above you, whereas if you change course to walk around it you may well be in danger from what's coming along behind.

So the rational explanation won't do. Is there a religious one? At first sight it seems likely, given that St Thomas Aquinas defined superstition as 'a vice contrary to religion by excess'. In my last article I pointed out that the 'Friday the Thirteenth' superstition appears to be entirely religious in origin, since beliefs about Friday and the number thirteen can be traced to the crucifixion and the Last Supper respectively. So surely there is a story that tells of the dreadful fate of someone who walked under a ladder used to place Christ on the cross?

Well, if there is, I have never heard it, and in fact the only ladder mentioned in the Bible is Jacob's — none of the accounts of the crucifixion mention one, and indeed the idea conveyed by medieval art that the cross was high enough to require the use of one is not really born out by scripture. There seems to be no reason to assume that the cross was more than six feet high.

I have only come across one reference to a possible religious origin for the belief, and (like so much else) it is to be found in Opie and Tatem's 'Dictionary of Superstitions'. They quote from a book by C Igglesden called 'Those Superstitions' (1932): "The superstition arises from the fact that when the ladder leans against the wall it forms a triangle and is thus symbolical of the Trinity. The ordinary layman of olden days would . . . consider himself debarred from passing through this sacred arch."

Mr Igglesden was very confident, wasn't he? I don't have his book, but I have a similar-sounding one by Charles Platt called 'Popular Superstitions' (1925). Platt's explanation isn't necessarily more convincing than Igglesden's, but he does have some interesting things to say, beginning with a remark about the First World War which helps confirm my own feeling about the extent to which that awful event traumatised our society and shook our beliefs at every level. "The great war has somewhat coarsened us and made us less sensitive to danger, but until a few years ago, not one person in fifty would have passed under a ladder. Reason was powerless — Superstition or Instinct warned them that it was unlucky, and that was enough."

He goes on: "If we look back a few centuries, we find that summary Justice was originally content with a handy tree for the purpose of removing a malefactor — as in the case of many recent American lynchings. But trees are not found in the streets of a town, so our resourceful ancestors used a ladder. This could be erected against any convenient wall, and in any street — the rope was slung over one of the rungs; the offender 'removed,' and all trace of the summary administration of Justice was easily cleared away."

He concludes: "As in the case of lynchings, many an innocent man was hanged before trial, and any attempt made by a passing stranger to go under the ladder was resented as an attempt at rescue. All law-abiding citizens made it a rule to keep well away from a ladder when propped against a wall."

So Platt's is a two-part theory: first, people used to be hanged from ladders; second, other folk avoided walking under ladders in case they were accused of trying to rescue such a person. It sounds shaky on both counts. For one thing, I have never heard of people being hanged from ladders, and am unconvinced that the average town could not offer a more efficient alternative. And the second part of the theory fails what may be called the daylight test. If you could see a ladder with a hanged man dangling from it you would clearly not wish to walk under it for any reason at all. And if you could see a ladder *without* a hanged man dangling from it — statistically the more likely scenario, one hopes — why should you not walk under it, unless of course for fear of the hanged man's ghost?

However, there does seem to be some substance in Platt's association of the superstition with hanging, for no less than three of Opie and Tatem's quotations make the same connection. "Usually the penalty is just bad luck but some say that you will be hanged," said a 20-year-old woman in Sheffield as recently as 1982, which is remarkable given that (I think) not one person had been judicially executed in the UK in her lifetime.

It's clearly an old idea. From 'Lancashire Legends' (1873) we have: "The caution that we must avoid passing under a ladder, lest we should come to be hanged, has probably descended to us from early practice in Lancaster." And what might that early practice have been? The answer seems to lie in the 'Gentleman's Magazine' of 1855. "As according to the then fashion of hanging at Tyburn and elsewhere, the culprit walked under the ladder, I was considerately warned ever to walk round it."

Does this get us anywhere? Frankly I'm not sure. The superstition was bound to be connected with hanging for the simple reason that anyone so condemned had to climb a ladder to get to the scaffold. Now it may well be that at Tyburn or at Lancaster there was an uphill path from the cells that passed under the ladder before curving around to reach the foot of it, and that that is the origin of the superstition. On the other hand,

perhaps the superstition came first, and the condemned man (being assumed to be superstitious) was forced to walk under the ladder in order to resign him to his fate, and so prevent any thoughts of escape.

It has to be said, however, that Opie and Tatem's earliest ladder quotation has to do not with hanging but with what we may call fertility. Francis Grose's 'Provincial Glossary' of 1787 states: "It is unlucky to walk under a ladder; it may prevent your being married that year." And this seems to have been a persistent belief. Burne's 'Shropshire' of 1883 has: "'Oh, Grace has walked under a ladder! Don't tell her, don't tell her!' 'Why not?' . . . 'What, don't you know? She'll never be married now!'"

Is there any obvious reason why the act of walking under a ladder might have been believed, through some association of ideas, to prevent marriage or conception? Does the ladder's unique shape (or the triangle it makes with the wall) have any equivalent within the human body, for example?

Another thing we can ask ourselves is whether it is what may be called an 'order-and-chaos' superstition. In other words, ladders are for climbing up and down on, so if you invade the ladder's 'space' but do not climb up or down, you are doing a thing which tends to chaos rather than to order. Another example of an 'order-and-chaos' superstition is that you should start a journey on a Monday and not on a Saturday.

To test this idea, we can look at what people do to retrieve their luck. Do they do anything which mimics climbing the ladder, such as putting their foot on the first rung, or touching one higher up? Well, here are Opie and Tatem's examples, with dates. 1831: "When you pass under a ladder you must spit through it, or three times afterwards." 1879: "If passing under it could not be avoided, then, if before doing so, you wished for anything, your wish would be fulfilled." 1882: "I saw a gentleman, walking through the streets of Carlisle, spit over his left shoulder to avert misfortune, he having inadvertently passed under a ladder." 1932: "A woman . . . unconsciously passed under a ladder. Realising what she had done she promptly crossed two of her fingers . . . 'I dare not unclasp my fingers till I see a dog,' she explained." 1953: "Walking under ladders is bad luck, unless you spit directly you have passed under the ladder." 1954: "When you walk under a ladder don't speak until you see a four-legged animal." 1982: "If you have to walk under it, cross your fingers." 1982: "Make a wish, or cross your fingers to negate the bad luck, or make a 'fig' sign, which involves closing your fist and passing your thumb between the index and middle fingers."

This is quite a collection. The first thing to say about it is that there is no sign at all of this being an 'order-and-chaos' superstition. The indications, if any, are that it is a religious one. The spitting is a way of leaving a token part of the body outside the ladder's 'space' as if to cheat the devil. The 'wish' is a prayer, the crossed fingers a blessing, the four-footed animal a scapegoat into whose body the evil is passed — a sacrifice, so to speak. The 'fig' sign is an actually an obscene gesture picked up, perhaps in all innocence, by our 20-year-old woman from Sheffield — "The figo for thee then!" said Pistol insultingly to the disguised king in Shakespeare's 'Henry V'.

So my own conclusion, for what it is worth, is that the space beneath the ladder — or its shadow, perhaps — belongs to the Devil. Jacob's ladder in Gen. 28.12 provides clear justification for such an idea. "Behold a ladder set up upon the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it." If God is at the top of the ladder, with the angels travelling up and down, then mankind surely crowds towards its foot, while the Devil lies in waiting with his false ladder underneath. If any reader better versed in art history than I am can think of a medieval religious painting that shows this, then we will at last have some good evidence for the origin of the superstition.

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