SCIENCE

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DROWNING SUPERSTITIONS.

A STRANGE antipathy once prevailed to rescuing a drowning man, the idea being that the person saved would, sooner or later, do some sort of injury to the man who preserved his life, says a writer in a recent number of the *London Standard.* Sir Walter Scott, in the "Pirate," tells how Bryce, the peddler, refused to help Mordaunt to save the shipwrecked sailor from drowning, and even remonstrated with him on the rashness of such a deed. "Are you mad?" says the peddler, "you that have lived sae lang in Zetland, to risk the saving of a drowning man? Wot ye not if ye bring him to life again, he will be sure to do you some capital injury?" This prejudice, which was deeply rooted among our sea-going community in many parts of the country, existed not very long ago in Cornwall. It is found, too, among French sailors and the boatmen of the Danube, and is widely credited in Russia. Mr. Barry, in his "Ivan at Home," gives a striking instance of the Russian repugnance to save life from drowning. One day, a drunken man got into the water and disappeared. A number of spectators stood by, and gazed on the scene with the utmost indifference, but no one tried to rescue him. A court of inquiry was held, but as, on examination, no cross was found on his neck, a verdict was quickly agreed upon by the villagers, who declared that the man was "drowned because he had no cross on his neck." The Bohemian fisherman shrinks from snatching a drowning man from the waters, fearing that the water-demon would take away his luck in fishing, and drown him at the first opportunity. This, as Dr. Tylor points out in his "Primitive Culture," is a lingering survival of the ancient significance of this superstition, the explanation being that the water spirit is naturally angry at being despoiled of his victim, and henceforth bears a special grudge against the unlucky person who has dared to frustrate him. Thus, when some one is drowned in Germany, the remark is made, "The river-spirit claims his yearly sacrifice," or "The nix has taken him." Out of Europe, also, the accidental drowning of a person is attributed to a similar seizure, and the Siamese dreads the Pnük, or water-spirit, that seizes bathers and drags them under to his dwelling. The Sioux Indians have a similar fancy, and tell how men have been drowned by Unk-tahe, the water-monster. For the same reason, it appears, the Kamtchadals, far from helping a man out of the water, would drown him by force. If rescued by any chance, no one would receive such a man into his house, or give him food, but he was reckoned for dead. The Chinese reluctance to save a drowning man arises from quite a different belief — it being supposed that the spirit of a person who has met his death in this way continues to flit along the surface of the water, until it has caused, by drowning, the death of a fellow-creature. "A person, therefore," writes Mr. Jones, in his "Credulities Past and Present," "who attempts to rescue another from drowning is considered to incur the hatred of the uneasy spirit, which is desirous, even at the expense of a man's life, to escape from its wandering."

There are many curious modes of discovering the dead body of a drowned person, a popular notion being that its whereabouts may be ascertained by floating a loaf weighted with quicksilver, which is said at once to swim towards, and stand over, the spot where the body lies. This is a very widespread belief, and instances of its occurrence are, from time to time, recorded. Some years ago, a boy fell into the stream at Sherborne, Dorsetshire, and was drowned. The body not having been recovered for some days, the mode of procedure adopted was thus: A four pound loaf of best flour was procured, and a small piece cut out of the side of it, forming a cavity, into which a little quicksilver was poured. The piece was then replaced, and tied firmly in its original position. The loaf thus prepared was thrown into the river at the spot where the body fell, and was expected to float down the stream till it came to the place where the body had lodged. But no satisfactory result occurred. In Brittany, when the body of a drowned man cannot be found, a lighted taper is fixed in a loaf of bread, which is then abandoned to the retreating current. When the loaf stops, there it is supposed the body will be recovered. Under a variety of forms, the same practice is observed elsewhere, and is found existing among the North American Indians. Sir James Alexander, in his account of Canada, says: "The Indians imagine that in the case of a drowned body, its place may be discovered by floating a chip of cedar wood, which will stop and turn round over the exact spot. An instance occurred within my own knowledge, in the case of Mr. Lavery of Kingston Mill, whose boat overset, and himself drowned near Cedar Island; nor could the body be discovered until this experiment was resorted to." In Java, a live sheep is thrown into the water, and is supposed to indicate the position of the body by sinking near it. But the objects used for this purpose vary largely in different countries. A correspondent of *Notes and Queries* tells how a corpse was discovered by means of a wisp of straw, around which was tied a strip of parchment, inscribed with certain cabalistic characters, written on it by the parish priest. Not many months ago a man was drowned at St. Louis. After search had been made for the body, but without success, the man's shirt, which he had laid aside when he went in to bathe, was spread out on the water, and allowed to float away. For a while it floated, and then sank, near which spot, it is reported, the man's body was found. A curious custom is practised in Norway, where those in search of a drowned body row to and fro with a cock in the boat, fully expecting that the bird will crow when the boat reaches the spot where the corpse lies.

It was a popular theory, in days gone by, that the body of a drowned man would float on the ninth day, a notion which Mr. Henderson informs us prevails in the County of Durham. Sir Thomas Browne alludes to it as believed in his time, and, in his "Pseudodoxia Epidemica" there is a discussion on this fanciful notion. It was also believed that the spirits of those drowned at sea were doomed to wander for a hundred years, owing to the rites of burial having never been properly

bestowed on their bodies, survivals of which belief linger on at the present day. According to Mr. Hunt, in his "Romances of the West of England," fishermen dread to walk at night near those parts of the shore where wrecks have taken place. It is affirmed that the spirits of the drowned sailors haunt such localities, and many a fisherman has declared that he has heard the voices of dead sailors "hailing their own names." This idea is not confined to this country, but is found in various parts of the world.

THE HABIT OF WASHING.

No practice, no custom, however long established, has ever been allowed a permanent right to respect, or even to existence. Sooner or later its turn will come to be weighed in the critic's balance, and its quality will have to be proved. Let us quote, as a recent illustration, the habit of daily bathing, the utility of which has, of late, though not for the first time, been seriously questioned. The reasonableness of doubt in such a matter, and under ordinary circumstances, does not, we confess, says *Lancet*, commend itself to our judgment. Whether the opponents of ablution fear the shock of cold immersion, or whether they dread the cleansing stimulation thus applied to the excreting skin surface, their objection must appear to most persons possessed of ordinary health and vigor to threaten impairment of both by fostering uncleanliness. If, on the other hand, it is too free application of heat by Turkish and other warm baths which appears objectionable, we will not deny that there is here a possible ground for complaint. Let it not be supposed that we ignore the curative influence or the cleansing property of this method when used with judgment. It has undoubtedly its fitting time and places if rightly applied. It is no less true, however, that experience has often proved the mischievous effects of its misuse — in case, for example, of cardiac weakness or general exhaustion. Cold bathing in like manner is not without its occasional risks. It is not suitable for persons enfeebled from any organic cause, though mere nervous languor is often braced and benefited by it. It has no proper place among the habits of those who are subject to chronic visceral congestions. As regards one advantage derived from bathing, i.e., its cleansing property, there is no reasonable ground for difference of opinion. Man, whether savage or civilized, appears, as a rule, to have no doubt on the subject. Wherever we find him with water accessible he is a bather. Less practiced by one people than another though it may be, there still is commonly recognizable a constant habit of ablution, and this fact in itself attests at least an almost universal belief in the necessity of ensuring cleanliness by means of washing. Nor can we find reason to doubt the general soundness of this belief. In bathing, temperature is, of course, a chief consideration. For the robust, cold immersion followed by rapid friction is a valuable tonic of nerve, skin, and heart function. For less vigorous constitutions — those, for example, which have been tried by disease, and those of young children — the addition of heat up to the temperate point is only judicious. With some persons a warm bath is a daily luxury. Notwithstanding its efficacy as a means of cleanliness, however, this custom is, or ought to be, discredited by its inevitable action as a nervous depressant, which places it in an unfavorable position compared with the more bracing practice of cold effusion. The benefit derived from bathing, therefore, is likely to assert itself in spite of all adverse criticism, and its mismanagement, which is only too common, should not be suffered to condemn it in the eyes of any judicious and cleanly person.

NOTES AND NEWS.

IN an Austrian periodical, says the *Lancet*, a regimental surgeon named Thurnwald makes an interesting comparison between the wounds caused by the new small calibre bullets and those caused by less recent forms of projectiles. His verdict is favorable. The soft parts are less bruised, and the bones less shattered. At fighting distances the bullets hardly ever remain in the body, and the wounds are smooth, clean, and of small diameter — conditions giving fair chances of recovery.

— At the end of 1890 a census was taken of the population of the Austrian capital, which showed (*British Medical Journal*, Aug. 29, 1891) that it contained 1,380,917 inhabitants, being an increase of rather more than 23 per cent as compared with the enumeration made ten years before. The proportion of the sexes was 51 63 per cent of females to 48.37 per cent of males The number of persons suffering from mental or physical infirmity was 3,964, of whom 983, or 24 7 per cent, were blind; 980, or 24.7 per cent, were deaf and dumb; 1,627, or 41.04 per cent, were idiots or insane; and 374, or 9.44 per cent were cretins. Of the whole number, 53.13 per cent were males, and 46 87 per cent were females. The excess of males as compared with females, however, holds good only as regards cases of deaf-mutism, insanity, and idiocy; the cases of blindness are equally distributed between the sexes, and as regards cretinism, the fair sex leads easily, the respective percentages being 39 3 males to 60.7 females. On comparing these figures with those of the census of 1880, it will be seen that while blindness has diminished by nearly 10 per cent, and deaf-mutism has remained stationary, insanity and cretinism have increased by 32 per cent. This increase is greater in the female sex than in the male, in the proportion of 43.02 to 23.2 per cent. Of the 983 blind persons, only 21, or 6 per cent, were born blind; the causes of the condition are said to have been blennorrhea neonatorum (in 14 cases), small-pox (in 11), other affections (in 295), and injury (in 17). Of 381 deaf-mutes not inmates of public institutions, 127, or 33.3 per cent, became deaf and dumb after birth. Of the cretins, 63.4 per cent are between ten and thirty years of age, and 31 per cent can do ordinary household work.

— At a recent meeting of the Asiatic Society of Japan in Tokio, a paper full of curious and interesting information of the condition of the blind in Japan was read by Professor Dixon. In early ages the blind were regarded as unlucky or uncanny, and their condition was one of great misery, until one of the imperial princes was born in this state. His father collected around him a number of blind to amuse him, and when, on attaining maturity, he was appointed governor of three provinces, he took with him blind men to assist him, and for about three centuries the administration of these provinces was always in the hands of the blind. This prince also introduced the practice, which prevails at the present day, of the blind shaving their heads. During the civil contests of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries between the families of Taira and Minnamoto the blind officials were everywhere ejected, and those afflicted with loss of sight fell into their early condition of distress and misery. In course of time orders were issued to the local authorities to provide for the blind in their districts, and now they receive the attention and education usual in all civi ized countries. The members of the blind guild, which has long existed, commonly followed two occupations, music or chanting and shampooing or massage, those who practised the former being of a higher grade and frequently enjoying much popular favor. To this day all towns and villages in Japan have their blind shampooers, who go about after night fall with a strange, musical cry. The less skilful among the musicians become professional story-tellers. The higher officia grades, which were at one time opened to the blind, were eagerl sought after; those who held them were provided with speci marks of their office, and during civil wars blind musicians we frequently employed as spies. The art of shampooing as pra