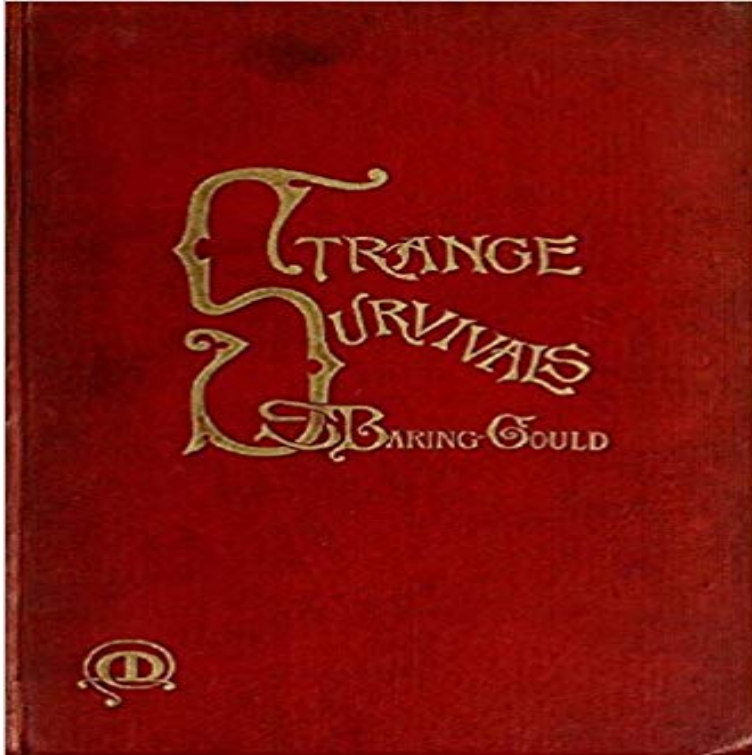


Strange Survivals: Some Chapters in the History of Man (Illustrated) (Annotated)



Excerpt: Chapter 1 When the writer was a parson in Yorkshire, he had in his parish a blacksmith blessed, or afflicted which shall we say? with seven daughters and not a son. Now the parish was a newly constituted one, and it had a temporary licensed service room; but during the week before the newly erected church was to be consecrated, the blacksmiths wife presented her husband with a boy his first boy. Then the blacksmith came to the parson, and the following conversation ensued: Blacksmith: Please, sir, Ive gotten a little lad at last, and I want to have him baptised on Sunday. Parson: Why, Joseph, put it off till Thursday, when the new church will be consecrated; then your little man will be the first child christened in the new font in the new church. Blacksmith (shuffling with his feet, hitching his shoulders, looking down): Please, sir, folks say that [2] t fust child as is baptised i a new church is bound to dee (die). T old un (the devil) claims it. Now, sir, Ive seven little lasses, and but one lad. If this were a lass again twouldnt a mattered; but as its a ladwell, sir, I wont risk it. A curious instance this of a very widespread and very ancient superstition, the origin of which we shall arrive at presently. In the first place, let us see the several forms it takes. All over the north of Europe the greatest aversion is felt to be the first to enter a new building, or to go over a newly erected bridge. If to do this is not everywhere and in all cases thought to entail death, it is considered supremely unlucky. Several German legends are connected with this superstition. The reader, if he has been to Aix-la-Chapelle, has doubtless had the rift in the great door pointed out to him, and has been told how it came there. The devil and the architect made a compact that the first should draw the plans, and the second gain the Kudos; and the devils wage was to be that he should receive the first who crossed the threshold of the church when

completed. When the building was finished, the architect's conscience smote him, and he confessed the compact to the bishop. Well do him, said the prelate; that is to say, he said something to this effect in terms more appropriate to the century in which he lived, and to his high ecclesiastical office. When the procession formed to enter the minster for the consecration, the devil lurked in ambush behind^[3] a pillar, and fixed his wicked eye on a fine fat and succulent little chorister as his destined prey. But alas for his hopes! this fat little boy had been given his instructions, and, as he neared the great door, loosed the chain of a wolf and sent it through. The evil one uttered a howl of rage, snatched up the wolf and rushed away, giving the door a kick, as he passed it, that split the solid oak. The castle of Gleichberg, near Ronskild, was erected by the devil in one night. The Baron of Gleichberg was threatened by his foes, and he promised to give the devil his daughter if he erected the castle before cockcrow. The nurse overheard the compact, and, just as the castle was finished, set fire to a stack of corn. The cock, seeing the light, thought morning had come, and crowed before the last stone was added to the walls. The devil in a rage carried off the old baron and served him right instead of the maiden. We shall see presently how this story works into our subject.

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