



13. Death and Burial

Many trivial happenings in a mountain cabin are regarded as presages of an approaching death. The falling of a window sash at night, or the spontaneous breaking of any household object when no one is touching it, is a sure sign of death in the house. When a picture falls from the wall of itself, many hillfolk believe that the person who picks it up will die within the year. Some say, however, that it is just a general sign of sickness and death for the entire household, and the individual who happens to pick up the picture is in no more danger than anybody else. But if anyone imagines that he hears the crash of glass, when no breakage actually occurs, the head of the house will meet a violent death before the year is out.

The breaking of a mirror is always a sign of seven years' bad luck, but sometimes it means a death in the family. May Stafford Hilburn tells us how the looking glass in her home was smashed and adds that "in less than seven years my father died!"¹

Hillfolk are always upset by any unusual clicking or rumbling in a clock—they think that a relative or close friend must be dying at the moment when the sound is heard. If a clock that has not run for a long time suddenly begins to strike, there will be a death in the house within the number of days, weeks, or months indicated by the chimes, but there's a wide difference of opinion about the interpretation of this material.

Any household noise of unexplained origin, if it suggests the tearing of cloth, is a death sign. An old woman near Fort Smith, Arkansas, told me that, as a girl, she heard somebody tearing

¹ *Missouri Magazine* (October, 1938), p. 14.

cloth in the kitchen. There was nobody in the room when she looked to see, but a few days later the house was full of women tearing up sheets to lay out her sister, who died suddenly and unexpectedly. Those were the days when they buried corpses in winding sheets—long strips of cloth which were torn, not cut.

Many hillfolk claim to hear another sound called the “death bones” shortly before someone dies. An old woman once said to me: “I heerd Lucy’s death bones a-rattlin’ this mornin’, so I reckon she’ll be dead afore night.” And sure enough, Lucy died that afternoon, although the local physician had expected her to live for a month or so.

If you hear raps, knocks, ticks, or bells, with no apparent cause for these noises, it is a sign that death is coming to someone near you. The famous death watch or death tick, a sharp snapping noise sometimes heard in log houses at night, is supposed to mean a death in the building within a few days. This noise is similar to the sound made by cocking a pistol and is said to be produced by a beetle with a singular gift of divination.

May Stafford Hilburn, of Jefferson City, Missouri, says that it is a very bad sign for a church bell to ring “without human hands to ring it. Calamity will certainly descend upon any community should such a supernatural event take place, for floods or fire or other dire event may be expected.”²

A ringing in the ears—the jingle of the so-called death bells—means that somebody near you is about to die. A little tinkling sound means the death of a close friend or relative. A very loud bell, so loud it makes the hearer dizzy, foretells the death of a high official or prominent citizen, someone important to many people. The Springfield (Missouri) *News & Leader* (Dec. 10, 1933) observes that “several Springfieldians said they heard the *loud death bells* at the time of Dr. A. J. Croft’s death.” The name death bells is also applied to a row of little appendages found on the heart of a hog when it is butchered; Mrs. C. P. Mahnkey, of Mincy, Missouri, knows about these and says it

² *Missouri Magazine* (September, 1933), p. 21.

is important that they be cut off at once. Some people think that if these death bells are immediately removed, the curse is somehow lifted and the expected death may not occur.

If an Ozark girl breaks a needle while making a quilt she is depressed; some say that she will die before the quilt is finished, others think it means only that she will die before the quilt is worn out, which is much less serious, since quilts sometimes last longer than an ordinary lifetime. But it's bad luck to break a needle, anyhow. Most any mountain woman knows better than to make a dress or other garment for a person who is critically ill, as to do this means that the sick person has very little chance of recovery.

If an Ozark woman is accustomed to fasten the door every night and forgets to do so, she regards it as an evil omen and is not surprised to hear of the death of a dear friend.

The woman who washes clothes on January 1 is likely to bring about the death of a relative, according to a very common belief. "Wash on New Year's, and you'll wash away your kinfolks!" said an old woman near Carthage, Missouri. I have heard many people laugh at this idea, but I have never known a real old-timer to do any washing on New Year's Day.

It is very bad luck for an Ozarker to hang his boots against a wall, and many people regard this as a sign that he will not live to wear them out. If a woman sneezes with food in her mouth, she expects to hear of a close friend's death before another sunrise. A girl near Mena, Arkansas, once showed me that the coffee grounds in her cup formed a straight line; she said this meant there would be a funeral in the house before many months had passed. The woman who throws an egg shell into the fire on May 1 and sees a drop of blood on the shell knows that she will never live to enjoy another May Day. To sweep a floor after dark or allow a lamp to burn until the last drop of oil is consumed—these things are taboo, and many people believe that they are likely to bring death into the family circle.

When you see an oil lamp in an old-timer's cabin, very often

there is a little piece of red woolen cloth, or a bit of red yarn, submerged in the oil. Some people say that this collects impurities or sediment from the kerosene and thus prevents a clogging of the wick. Others think that a lamp with a red rag in it never explodes, while oil without the rag may take fire spontaneously and burn the shanty down. But several old people in widely separated parts of the Ozarks have told me that the red wool in the oil is supposed to protect the family from death by violence or poison.

The typical hillman avoids any firewood which pops or crackles too much, in the belief that burning such wood will bring about the death of some member of his family. To burn sassafras wood is supposed to cause the death of one's mother, and although sassafras makes very fine charcoal, no decent native will burn it, or even haul it to the kiln, unless his mother is already dead. There is an old saying that the Devil sits a-straddle of the roof when sassafras pops in the fireplace; Otto Ernest Rayburn refers to this expression.³

It is very bad luck to burn peach trees, and dreadful results are almost certain to follow. I know a man and woman who cut down and burned some old peach trees, despite the warnings of their neighbors. Sure enough, their baby became sick a few days later. The neighbors helped them as best they could, but one and all refused to come into the house or have anything further to do with the family if any more peach trees were burned.

The Ozark children are told that if they defecate in a path or public road their sisters will die. If a mountain woman imagines that she sees the face of an absent friend in a mirror she expects to hear of this person's death, and if a young girl sees any coffin-shaped object reflected in water she is sure to die before the year is out. Most old-time hill women were taught that cloth contaminated with the menstrual discharge must be buried in the ground, never burned; to disregard this is to court death

³ *Ozark Country*, p. 157.

in some particularly terrifying form. For a menstruating woman to take a bath is almost equivalent to suicide, according to the granny-women. It is regarded as dangerous for anybody to bathe just before starting on a journey; the traveler who does so has good reason to fear death by drowning.

The farmer who carries a hoe into his house will cause the death of a near relative within the year. To carry an ax into the cabin is seldom permitted except in confinement cases, where the granny-woman puts an ax under the bed to ease the pains of childbirth.

I once traveled through rural Arkansas in a covered wagon with Mr. Lewis Kelley, of Cyclone, Missouri, an old-time mountain man. We camped by the roadside every night and slept in the wagon when the weather was bad. One morning I picked up the ax and started to put it in the wagon, but Mr. Kelley immediately stopped me, saying that it is bad luck to carry an ax in the wagon bed where men are accustomed to sleep; also, he added reasonably, it's likely to dull the blade. There is a place low down at the rear of the wagon, on the axle I think, where the ax fits perfectly, and that's where we carried it.

If a hillman steps over a spade lying on the ground he is seriously disturbed by the belief that it will shortly be used to dig his grave. The man who inadvertently kicks a rifle on the ground will die of a gunshot wound, according to the old-timers. To step over a person lying on the floor is very bad luck, and if done intentionally is almost akin to homicide. Some liberal thinkers claim that one can stop the curse by crossing his fingers and immediately stepping backwards over the sleeping individual, but there is considerable doubt about the efficacy of this.

A falling star is supposed to be somehow connected with the death of a human being; in 1917 I sat one night with a fellow soldier at Camp Pike, Arkansas, and as several stars fell the boy remarked gloomily that he reckoned "they must be a-killin' fellers right now, over thar." Some old folks claim to have seen a ball of fire travel across a field and down the chimney

of a house where someone lay sick; this is a sure death sign, and the patient always dies within a few hours.

When a dog under the cabin, or on the front porch, howls four times and then stops, it is said that there will be a death in the house very soon. If a dog rolls over and over in the same direction, it is said that he is measuring the ground for his master's grave. If a cat licks the door it is a sure sign that somebody in the house will die shortly. When horses take to running about and neighing without any visible cause, or mules suddenly begin to "ride" each other near the house, it means that someone is dying not far away.

If a cow has just lost her calf, everybody expects her to bawl and pays no attention; but when a cow begins to bawl without any apparent reason and keeps it up, the hillfolk become uneasy. I have seen a group of modern, educated, bridge-playing women in Joplin, Missouri, much upset by hearing some cattle bawling. I learned later that they had been reared in the wilds near Pineville, Missouri, and that a man related to most of them was very ill at the time.

It is a bad sign for a rooster to crow in the doorway; if anybody is dangerously ill in the house it usually means death. If a rooster crows seven times in front of the door without turning around, it means that someone in the family is going to die soon, whether any of them are sick now or not.

If a hen makes any sound suggestive of crowing near the door, it is a sure sign of death, and I have been told of cases in which somebody died within ten minutes. A crowing hen will excite any group of backwoods people; I have seen a man spring up and fire his revolver wildly into a flock of chickens, killing several. Some people do not hesitate to eat a crowing hen, but this man would not allow one to be cooked in his house. "Throw it to the hogs," said he, "and if they won't eat the damn' thing, we'll sell it to the tourists!"

Whippoorwills seldom alight on buildings, but if one does come to rest on the roof of a house and gives its characteristic call from this position, there will be a death in the neighborhood

within twenty-four hours. Any sort of a bird rapping on a windowpane, or trying to get into the cabin, is a very bad sign; a man from St. Paul, Arkansas, tells me that when a turtle dove flies into a house, somebody is sure to die soon.

A bat in the cabin is even worse than a songbird, but a screech owl is worst of all. One cry from this bird, even if it is only in the dog run and not in the house proper, will upset almost any backwoods family. The mother jumps instantly to throw salt on the fire, while the older children, usually crying, begin to tie knots in a string. "Owls don't often get into houses," says Mrs. May Kennedy McCord, of Springfield, Missouri, "but it's terrible when such a thing does happen." If there happens to be a sick man in the place, every effort is made to kill the owl, so that its body may be laid warm and bleeding on the patient's chest, for otherwise he will surely die. A man in Madison county, Arkansas, tells me that to throw a handful of salt or feathers on the fire will silence a screech owl outside the cabin. "Maybe it's the smell of salt a-burnin' that does the trick," he said thoughtfully.

The transplanting of cedar trees is a bad business, and the old-timers thought that the transplanter would die as soon as the cedar's shadow was big enough to cover a grave. I have heard of a case where a young fellow uprooted some little cedars that a "furriner" wanted for his lawn, dug the holes in which they were to be planted, and then hired a very old man to set them in the holes. The old codger didn't mind, knowing that he couldn't live long anyhow. One good thing is that cedars are hard to transplant successfully, and most of them die before they're big enough to shade a grave. A man told me once that the curse could be "thrown off" by putting a flat stone in the bottom of the hole where the cedar is planted, but others shook their heads at this theory. I know of some boys who hired out to transplant cedars in a nursery; these young men laughed at the old superstition, but their parents were horrified and ordered them to quit the job immediately.

Mrs. Marion B. Pickens of Jefferson City, Missouri, editor

of the *Missouri Magazine*, wrote me (Oct. 1, 1935) of her experience shortly after buying a country home on the Osage River, near Tuscumbia, Missouri. "The new place is a beautifully located farm house," she said. "We planned to move some native cedars into groupings and had great difficulty in finding someone to do the work because moving cedar trees was known to bring untoward happenings, nearly always a death to the immediate family. And these Tuscumbians cited actual cases to prove the rule. We finally found a native who was willing to risk the welfare of his family, but he had worked on the big roads out in the valley and had acquired a certain bravado or recklessness in tempting the powers that be. This is a bona fide experience."

Mrs. Frances Mathes, of Galena, Missouri, once told me that years ago she transplanted a little cedar on the Mathes farm. Her young husband just grinned when he heard of it, but her father-in-law was almost prostrated. He urged Frances to go instantly and pull the tree up. Frances refused, and always after that the old man felt that she was destined for an early death. But the cedar tree is still flourishing, big enough to cover half a dozen graves now, while Frances Mathes outlived her husband and the whole Mathes family.

The prejudice against transplanting cedars is known all through the Ozarks, and doubtless in many parts of the South. Other superstitions about trees seem to be local, or even limited to certain family groups or clans. There are people in southwest Missouri who will not under any conditions plant a willow. I once asked a hired man to "stick" some willows in a certain gravel bar, in order to turn the creek the other way and prevent it from cutting into my field. Without mentioning the matter to me, he went out and hired another man to attend to this. "It's sure death for us folks to fool with willers," he explained later, "so I just got one o' them Henson boys. The Hensons is eddicated, an' they don't believe nothin'."

When a big tree dies without any visible cause, it is a sign

that some human being will die before the year is out, exactly one mile north of the tree. If nobody lives there it doesn't matter, the old folks insist that a man, woman, or child will die at the designated spot anyhow. I once tried to point out the fallacy of this theory, since one of our big walnuts had died, and there was no record of a human death to the north of us. But an old man, a deacon in the church, told me seriously that somebody had doubtless been *made away with*—by which he meant murdered—there, and the body concealed.

For a baby's cradle to rock without any visible reason is a very bad omen, and it is generally believed that the child will not live to outgrow the cradle. Many hillfolk think, however, that the cradle-rocking has a more general significance, and that the person marked for death may not be the baby at all, but one of its parents, or some other member of the household.

If a child less than a year old is permitted to see its reflection in a mirror, it will either be cross-eyed or will die before its second birthday. If a babe's fingernails are cut with a metal blade it will die within the year, or become a thief in later life. Most backwoods mothers take no chances with this dilemma; they bite the child's fingernails off.

For a baby to lose a shoe is regarded as a very serious matter, and all the people in the house drop their other affairs to hunt for it. Sometimes men are even called in from the fields to help. If the shoe is not found, it is a sure sign that somebody in the family will die.

In the Ozarks as elsewhere, of course, there are men who think they can "smell death" many days ahead. Mr. W. H. Scott, of Bennett Springs, Missouri, once wrote to the *Springfield News* (Apr. 3, 1941): "I was born with a veil over the face, May 16, 1863. If there is going to be any death in the family I know it about two weeks beforehand. Also among close and particular friends."

To see the wraith or double of a living person is a death sign. "One bitterly cold day," writes Mrs. C. P. Mahnkey,

a father and his son were gathering corn. All at once the lad appeared directly in front of the wagon, busily husking out the ears. The father spoke to him, rather amazed at his working ahead of the team like that, and the boy replied from the other side of the wagon, tossing in corn as he spoke. The father wondered, but said nothing. Again, a moment later, the boy was in front. The father stopped work and turned, and there he was, busy at his rows, the other side of the wagon. Bewildered, puzzled, the father resumed his work, and suddenly the boy was at his side, snatching at the corn. But—there he was, across the wagon, in his place! In a sudden fright and unexplained agony of apprehension, the father made an excuse to stop work and go to the house, as he said it was getting colder. The boy never helped him again. In just a few days he was dead, of pneumonia.⁴

No matter what his ailment, a sick man must never be lifted from one bed to another. If it becomes necessary to move him to another room or another building, the bed and bedding must be transferred also. Some hillfolk take this matter very seriously, indeed, and put themselves to a great deal of trouble and expense because of it.

Never turn a bedfast person end to end, so that his head is where his feet have been. If you do, he'll die sure. A man who is dangerously ill must not be shaved in bed, since the old folks say that this is nearly always fatal.

To sweep under a sick person's bed, in some localities, is regarded as a bad thing, an admission by the sweeper that the patient is about to die. Mrs. May Kennedy McCord, of Springfield, Missouri, writes to the *Springfield News* (July 24, 1941): "I am so bound by these early superstitions that I can hardly get away from them, and to this day it makes me crawl all over when I am in a hospital and they sweep under my bed. The only comfort I get is that it isn't a broom—they just have dust-mops. And I'm still living!"

When a sick man wants to know his true condition, he touches a bit of bread to his lips and throws it to a dog; if the dog

⁴ *White River Leader*, Branson, Missouri, Jan. 4, 1934.

won't eat it, the man knows that he has a very short time to live. If cocks crow or dogs howl or foxes bark unexpectedly near a sick room, the patient may die at any moment. On this point, Mrs. May Kennedy McCord declares that "all the dogs for five miles around" howl just before an old settler breathes his last, but maybe this is taking in a little too much territory. When a sick man begins to pick at the coverlet, or to slide down toward the foot of the bed, or to emit an odor like that of crushed pumpkins, his death may be expected very soon. What is more, it is said that the last person upon whom the dying man's gaze rests will be the first among those present to follow him to the grave.

Mr. Elbert Short of Crane, Missouri, tells me that every Negro "bawls three times like a calf" just before he dies. There are no Negroes in the region about Crane, and Mr. Short has never seen a Negro die, but the old folks all repeat this bit of wisdom, so he reckons it must be true.

Those attending a dying man, particularly if he is thrashing about or struggling, are very careful to keep their fingers away from his mouth, since the bite of a dying person is said to be deadly poison. In many localities I heard the tale of the doctor who was bitten in the hand by a dying child and died two weeks later of blood poisoning.

There is a common belief that dying persons are particularly apt to take off just as the clock strikes the hour. Some say that more people die at 4 A.M. than at any other time. Mrs. Anna Bacon, of Stone county, Missouri, is an old woman who has seen many people die, and she says that "the change of the hour," meaning midnight, is the best time to go, if one has any choice in the matter.

I once sat with a man who was dying of pulmonary tuberculosis. An old woman looked at the sky and remarked that a storm was coming, adding that "as soon as it rains, he'll die." The doctor told me that rain had nothing to do with the time of the man's death and said that he would probably live for

several days longer. Three hours later it rained, and thirty minutes after the rain began the poor chap was dead.

When a death finally occurs, one of the bereaved neighbors rises immediately from the bedside and stops the clock. Everybody knows that if the clock should happen to stop of itself while a corpse is lying in the house, another member of the family would die within a year, and it is considered best to take no chances. Several families near Southwest City, Missouri, are somehow persuaded that the old custom of stopping the clock is derived from the Indians. When I pointed out that the old-time Indians had no clocks, and that some local Indians have no clocks even today, these people said no more. But they still believe that the stop-the-clock business is based upon "a old Injun idy."

The next thing to be done is to cover every mirror in the house with white cloths, which are not removed until after the funeral. This is done out of consideration for those who may come in to view the body, for if one of them should glimpse his own reflection in the house of death, it is believed that he will never live to see another summer.

In some houses, immediately after a death occurs, the chairs are all turned up so that nobody can sit in them, and people who come into the presence of the dead are forced to stand. I have never been able to find out the purpose of this. One old man in Benton county, Arkansas, told me that it is a new-fangled custom, brought into the country by some "outlanders" about 1880.

When a hillman dies all his bedding and articles of clothing are immediately hung on a line out of doors. People coming far down the road see this and know that the patient is dead. In predicting a sick man's demise, I have heard people say "Poor Jim's britches will be a-hangin' out most any day now!"

The hillfolk have a veritable mania for washing dead bodies; the moment a death occurs the neighbors strip the corpse and begin to scrub it vigorously. A man may be dirty all his life,

and in his last illness his body and bedding may be so foul that one can hardly stay in the cabin, but he goes to his grave clean, so far as soap and water can cleanse him. All of the work connected with a death—washing and dressing the body, and so on—is done by friends and neighbors. Not one of the near relatives of the deceased will have any part in these doings, except in case of the direst necessity.

Many hillfolk make a weak tea from the bark of the wahoo bush (*Euonymus*), widely used as a medicine for chills and fever. Mrs. May Kennedy McCord, of Springfield, Missouri, tells me that the old folks soak cloths in this wahoo tea and lay them over the face of the dead, in order to keep the face fresh so that it will look well at the funeral. Others wrap the head in a towel wet with soda water, believing that this will prevent the skin from turning dark. Mr. Hugh Wilder, a mortician of Fort Smith, Arkansas, says that country people in his territory often place a saucer of salt upon the abdomen of a corpse, "to keep the belly from bloatin'."

A county nurse in Arkansas recalled that when an old man she was attending died, she put little pieces of paper under his eyelids, so that the eyes would remain closed. But the family objected, saying: "We may be on relief, but we still got our corpse money!" They brought out two old silver dollars and laid them on the dead man's eyes. It appears that some families keep these same coins, set aside for this purpose only, for several generations. In one backwoods county a serious quarrel arose which finally ended in violence and arrest for several individuals; peace officers said that the whole thing began over the refusal of one family to lend their "corpse money" when a death occurred in their neighbor's home.

Whatever happens, the body must never be left alone for a single instant, for fear some animal should get at it; if a cat, for example, should so much as sniff at the corpse, some unspeakable calamity would overtake the whole family. The belief that cats will mutilate a dead body seems to be widely

accepted in the South but appears to have little foundation in fact. It is true, however, that cats sometimes show marked symptoms of excitement in the presence of the dead, and the hillman prefers to take no chances.

Several young couples are usually called in to serve as a death watch, and at least two persons are supposed to remain beside the body, while the others may be kissing in a dark corner, or eating the elaborate lunch supplied by the sorrowing family. A jug of corn whiskey is sometimes provided for the menfolks—the Ozark women seldom drink in public—but there is very little drunkenness on these occasions. If an owl hoots or a wolf howls in the vicinity the watchers are seriously disturbed, because these sounds signify that one of the group will die before the year is out.

When a backwoodsman dies, in certain sections of the Ozarks, it sometimes happens that one of his male relatives cuts a hickory stick just the length of the corpse. I have seen a hill farmer carrying one of these sticks on the day of his brother's death, and I have seen one tied to the wagon which conveyed a corpse to the graveyard, but I have never been able to find out what became of them, or what their significance was. I first thought that the stick was simply to measure the body for a coffin, but it is something more complicated than that, and there is some sort of superstition connected with it.

If the weather and other conditions permit, a body is sometimes kept for two or three days before burial. But it is usually considered bad luck to allow a corpse to lie unburied over Sunday, and some say that it means another death in the family. When a corpse is lying in the house, members of the family and near relatives generally use the back door, although other visitors come in by the front entrance as usual.

There is often a good deal of cooking in the lean-to kitchen while a dead body lies in the cabin proper, although friends and relatives bring in quantities of food already cooked. But nearly all of the old-timers believe that it is very bad luck to

cook cabbage in a house where someone is "lyin' a corpse." Some say this is merely because cabbage attracts flies, but I don't think that is the real reason.

One of my neighbors, an old fellow from West Virginia, was buried with a silver dollar in his mouth. Why this was done I don't know. I didn't have the courage to mention it at the time, but several years later I asked one of the younger members of the family. "Aw, it was just some of the old folks' notions," he said.

A man dying in McDonald county, Missouri, said that he wanted to be buried lying on his left side, because he had never been able to sleep on his back. The village undertaker complained loudly about this, but the body was "laid to rest sideways," as one of the dead man's relatives assured me.

I know personally of an old-timer in Taney county, Missouri, who was buried with his Winchester rifle, loaded and *cocked*, in the coffin with him. His Colt revolver, also loaded, was in his belt. This was according to his own directions, given to his family during his last illness.

There are stories of several other pioneers who were buried with loaded pistols in their belts, usually at their own request. Many will remember that Belle Starr, notorious Missouri-born outlaw, was buried in 1889 with a silver-mounted revolver at her waist. I remarked to one old settler that this seemed to me like "a heathen practice, probably got from the Indians." He answered that he didn't think the Indians had anything to do with it, and that it was no more "heathen" than the custom of burying bodies with valuable rings and other jewelry, which is common in all parts of the country.

Some hillfolk of Indian descent insist upon sprinkling a little cornmeal over a corpse, just before the burial. This is done unobtrusively, without any noise or ceremony, and many whites have attended funerals where the rite was carried out without ever noticing it. As the mourners shuffle past the body, here and there you see one drop a tiny pinch of meal into the coffin.

The relatives of a murdered man sometimes throw pawpaw seeds into the grave, on top of the coffin. It is said that this insures that the murderer will be punished. Other old-timers, in similar case, prefer to pull down the top of a little cedar tree and fasten it with a big stone. This somehow helps to catch the murderer. As soon as the man is punished, somebody must hurry out and move the stone; if the cedar is not released there'll be another killing in the neighborhood.

Some old people cherish a belief, said to have been borrowed from the Osages, that by burning the heart of a murdered man his relatives may make certain that the murderer will be punished for his crime. There are whispers of such things being done in the back hills even today, but the rumors cannot be verified, and it is not prudent for an amicable outsider to investigate these matters too closely.

I have heard of several families near Southwest City, Missouri, who think it is a good idea to throw chicken entrails into the grave. This is definitely an Indian idea. Christian hillfolk don't like it much, but it is still practiced. Usually the stuff is placed under the coffin, and covered with dirt so that nobody knows about it, save the bereaved family and the gravediggers.

Several methods are used in locating the bodies of persons drowned in the Ozark streams. One way is to set off charges of dynamite on the bank; this is said to bring the corpse to the surface. Some rivermen just float a loaf of light bread on the water and watch it carefully in the belief that it will stop and turn round three times at a point directly above the body. Others take a rooster in a boat and cruise about; the rooster is supposed to crow when the boat approaches the corpse. When Charles Dunlap was drowned in White River, at Elbow Shoals just below the Missouri-Arkansas line, Nov. 22, 1941, the body was not recovered for about ten days. All three of the methods noted above were suggested, and it is said that all three were tried without success.

Rube Meadows, city marshal of Branson, Missouri, claims a

peculiar ability to locate the bodies of drowned persons. He has boasted of this "sleight" since boyhood and is said to have found several corpses in White River and elsewhere. His method is comparable to water witching, but no forked stick is required. Mr. Meadows just reaches out of the boat and thrusts his bare arm into the water. There is a strange pull or attraction, he says, which indicates the location of the body. Mrs. C. P. Mahnkey, of Mincy, Missouri, first told me about this, but Mr. Meadows' claims are well known in Taney county, and many people feel that there must be something in it.

There was no embalming in the early days, and bodies must needs be buried at once. There were no automobiles or hard-surfaced roads, either, and it was impossible for relatives who lived at a distance to get together at short notice. Thus it happened that the actual "buryin'" frequently proceeded with no ceremony other than a short prayer at the grave, and the funeral was preached six months or a year later, when all the kinfolk could be present to hear the minister of their choice. These deferred funeral preachin's were held in the church house, and the mourners did not go to the graveyard at all. Such a ceremony occurred near my cabin once, when a great number of people gathered to hear a country preacher eulogize a woman who had been dead and buried for more than a year. I have heard of one case in which the funeral of a man's first wife was attended by his second spouse, who sat beside her husband and wept with him for the loss of her predecessor.

The old-timers all agree that the grave should be dug on the day of the buryin'. It is very bad luck to leave a grave open over night, as this is supposed to bring an early death to one of the dead man's relatives. A woman in Sparta, Missouri, tells how they dug a grave there for a body that was to arrive on an afternoon train; the corpse did not show up at the appointed time, so that the buryin' had to be postponed until the following day. Sure enough, as the old-timers had predicted, another member of the family died a few weeks later. This belief is taken

very seriously in some places, and I have known county officials to fail of re-election because they had callously permitted a pauper to be buried in a grave dug several days previously.

It is strange that Lucile Morris, in describing the burial of Nat N. Kinney, the notorious Bald Knobber leader, near Forsyth, Missouri, Aug. 25, 1888, says positively that it was customary for the Ozarkers to leave graves open overnight. "A handful of volunteers started digging the grave," she writes. "They worked until they were well along, then stopped until the next day, for few old-time Ozarkers will complete a grave on the day it is started. That is an invitation to some catastrophe."⁵ This statement seemed so much at variance with the Ozark practice that I went to Forsyth and tried to find out something definite about Kinney's burial. I located several persons who had attended the funeral, but the men who dug the grave are all gone now. Every one of the old-timers whom I interviewed assured me that if Kinney's grave actually was dug as Miss Morris says, it was a very exceptional case. Mrs. C. P. Mahnkey, whose father, A. S. Prather, was Kinney's chief lieutenant in the Bald Knobber organization, and who was herself well acquainted with the Kinney family, is very sure about this. "Lucile Morris is wrong, of course," she told me Dec. 12, 1943. "A grave is never started unless the burial is to be the same day."

It is bad taste and also very bad luck for a woman to wear a brand-new dress at a funeral, but just what would be the penalty for a violation of this rule I have never been able to find out.

Rainy weather is nothing short of calamitous on a wedding day, but at a funeral it is the best possible omen, since it means that the dead man's soul is at rest, and even a few drops of rain at this time go further to comfort the bereaved family than anything the "preacher man" can do or say. Every Ozarker knows the little verse:

⁵ *Bald Knobbers*, Caldwell, Idaho (Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1939), p. 216.

Happy is the bride that the sun shines on;
Blessed are the dead that the rain falls on.

One must be careful at funerals to avoid counting the vehicles, since an early death is invariably the portion of the thoughtless individual who does so. Some say that the counter will die in as many weeks as there are buggies or cars to be counted. To cross a funeral procession, or to collide with a hearse, is regarded as almost equivalent to suicide.

If a buryin' party is forced to stop on the way to the graveyard, many old-timers believe that another member of the family will be buried before the year is out. I have known interested persons to send horsemen on ahead, to see that gates are open and everything is in readiness. It is bad luck also if the grave is not ready when the corpse is brought to the buryin' ground. This sometimes happens when the gravediggers strike big rocks or encounter some other difficulty.

Many of the old-timers think that all burials should take place before noon; if a body is buried after 12 o'clock, another member of the family is likely to die soon. But this is no longer insisted upon, except among some very old-fashioned families. In pioneer times the funeral lasted most of the day, with hillfolk milling around the buryin' ground for three or four hours after the corpse was buried and the grave filled up. There was preachin' and prayin' and singin' all day long, with time out at noon to eat the "basket dinner" which each family brought with them in the wagon.

On no account must the mourners leave the cemetery until the last clod of earth is thrown into the grave—to do so evidences a lack of respect for the dead and is likely to bring death and destruction upon the family circle. Every one of the gravediggers must wait, because a man who digs a grave and does not stay to see it filled and covered is marked for an early death. Many hillfolk believe that deaths always come in threes, and it may be that two more members of the group will be "called home" within a few weeks, anyhow.

There is usually a lot of gabbling and hollering at an Ozark burial. In 1944, when Rose O'Neill was buried in the family graveyard near Day, Missouri, there was no preaching, no prayer, no religious ceremony at all. We just carried the coffin out of the house, lowered it into the grave and shoveled in the dirt, without saying a word. Some of the neighbors were horrified—it was the first non-Christian burial they had ever seen. But they all did what they could to show their respect for the dead woman, even though she *was* an unbeliever. Every man of them stood stock-still until the last shovelful of earth was thrown into the grave.

Some hillfolk become quite noisy at funerals. I have seen the immediate relatives of the deceased fling themselves on the corpse with loud yells, roll groaning and kicking on the floor, and even try to leap after the coffin when it is lowered into the grave. On the other hand, I remember one man who served his children with popcorn balls at their mother's funeral, and they all sat there eating the stuff within arm's length of the woman's body. A certain amount of noise is not regarded as bad taste at a buryin', but the old-timers do not favor long periods of mourning. Some say that protracted grieving, at least in public, is likely to interfere with the dead man's repose in the other world. "The dead caint sleep," an old woman told me, "when their kinfolks hollers too loud."

Another superstition which has to do with the welfare of the dead is the tale of the heavenly crowns, also known as feather crowns and angel wreaths. The idea is that when a very good and saintly person is dying, the feathers in the pillow form themselves into a crown, a kind of symbol of the golden crown which the dying person is soon to wear in Heaven. Variations of this tale are heard in many places, over the whole length and breadth of the Ozark country.

I have seen about twenty of these heavenly crowns. Several of them were loosely made, like inferior birds' nests. Crowns of this type may have been faked or have come together more or less accidentally. One of these loosely built crowns had a round

hole in the center, something like a bird's nest with the bottom punched out. Another was in the form of a ropelike ring, smooth and firm, about five inches in diameter, more like an undersized halo than a crown.

The most finished type of feather crown, and the most impressive to my mind, is not shaped like a cap or doughnut at all, but rather like a large bun; these are very tightly woven, solid enough to be tossed about like a ball, and surprisingly heavy. They are usually about six inches in diameter and two inches thick, slightly convex on both sides. They seem to be made in a sort of spiral like a snail shell, with the feathers all pointed the same direction and no quill ends in sight. All of the crowns I have seen, whether of the rough or the finished type, seemed very clean, and I saw no grease or glue or anything of the sort to hold the feathers together. I have pulled several of the loosely built crowns to pieces but have never been allowed to dissect one of the really fine, compactly woven kind. I do not believe that crowns of this latter type were deliberately fabricated by the horny-handed folk who showed them to me.

When the bereaved family finds one of these feather crowns in the pillow of a relative who has just died, they are quite set up about it, sure that the dear departed has gone straight to Heaven and is "doin' well thar," as one old woman told me. The crown is taken out of the pillow with great care and displayed to all the neighbors; sometimes there is a mention of it in the village paper, as a sort of postscript appended to the obituary. Some families keep such a crown in a box for many years, and I have seen two crowns sealed up in a glass-topped case of polished walnut which had been made especially for them.

May Stafford Hilburn describes the "angel wreath found in the goose-feather pillow of an old saint" of her acquaintance. She makes it plain that the wreath was regarded as a good omen, "a positive proof that the sainted old man had gone straight to Heaven."⁶

There is a farmer still living near Anderson, Missouri, who

⁶ *Missouri Magazine* (December, 1933), p. 11.

treasures the crown left by his son. The boy spent several years in prison but finally came home to die, and the old man exhibits the crown as proof that the convict's sins were forgiven, since he not only went to Heaven but went rather ostentatiously at that. The implication is that the boy wasn't as bad as he was painted and may have been altogether innocent of the crime for which he was imprisoned.

An old friend near Aurora, Missouri, tells of a widow in that neighborhood who displayed a very fine feather crown from her husband's pillow. The deceased was not at all the sort of man who would be expected to have a crown, and this particular specimen was so large and perfect that some of the neighbors suspected that the widow had woven it herself and stuck the feathers in place with molasses.

There are stories of persons who have stolen crowns, and shifted pillows from one bed to another, and otherwise claimed crowns for persons who were by no means entitled to them. But it seems to me that such happenings are rare, since most hill-folk are too superstitious to meddle in these matters.

It is difficult for an outsider to realize how seriously this heavenly-crown business is regarded by the old-time hillfolk. Here is a letter from Mrs. W. H. Haney, Dixon, Missouri, which was published in the *Springfield (Missouri) News*, Nov. 16, 1940:

I want to tell you that I know about these feather crowns that are found in pillows of the dying. I have three now that I found in the pillow of my darling daughter's bed when she passed away over ten years ago. No human hand could place those feathers like they are. So many of the old time things are true. The Bible teaches that there are "signs" for us to go by, and I believe everything the Bible teaches.

I knew an old lady in Little Rock, Arkansas, who left instructions that she was to be buried with her husband's feather crown in her bosom; the husband had died some thirty years before, but she had kept his crown in a box at her bedside.

I once took a city feller, a dealer in antique furniture and the

like, to a backwoods cabin where he saw a fine feather crown in a box. When the thing was explained to him he became much interested and insulted everybody by offering to buy it for ten dollars. The old folks became very reserved, and one of the young men advised me to "take that feller back to town. He'll be tryin' to buy the stone off'n Sally's grave next, an' Paw's a-gittin' pretty damn' mad already!"

Various theories have been advanced to explain the formation of feather crowns. Mrs. J. H. Mayes, Mountain Grove, Missouri, published a letter in the Springfield (Missouri) *News* (Jan. 15, 1942) contending that the larvae of moths live inside the quills, and "fasten the feathers together with an almost invisible thread, something like the web of a spider." She says that she has seen these larvae "emerging from the quills and dragging the feathers," and that she has found feather crowns fastened together with "almost invisible web." She adds "my pioneer mother told me that moths would get in feathers and form balls unless the feathers were periodically exposed to the sunlight." Mrs. Mayes thinks that these crowns are not found in feathers which have been scalded before storing them away.

Commenting on two feather crowns which May Kennedy McCord presented to the Missouri Historical Society, later placed on exhibition at the Jefferson Memorial, an anonymous writer in the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* (Apr. 3, 1942) offers the following theory of their origin:

A possible explanation lies in the physiological character of feathers. From the shaft above the quill are numerous vanes composed of barbs, and on the barbs are barbules with minute hooklets on the side toward the tip of the feather. These hooklets normally are caught in indentations on the side of the barbules toward the quill. In a pillow they are likely to become loose, ready to hook any other minute thing. When two feathers come into contact, they are held together by the hooklets. Other feathers join them, and a nucleus is formed. Just as feathers can be pushed through a small hole quill first with comparative ease, but tip first with difficulty, so feathers in a clump would tend to "climb" or move along each other toward the quill point. Such

movement would continue until all the quill points attained a common center and could go no farther. Since downy feathers are all curved, the tendency would be for the outward curve to fit into an inward curve, and the feather clump would assume a spherical shape.

A man in St. Louis, who used to buy and sell feathers in very large quantities, tells me that goose feathers sometimes "lump up" into firm rounded bunches, varying from the size of a biscuit to that of a washtub. These lumps have to be picked apart and broken up in order to handle the feathers. He doesn't know what causes this lumping but says that it can't be moth larvae, because feather dealers treat all their stuff with chemicals or live steam, which is certain to kill any insects that might be present.

Mrs. Eliza Polete, of Fredericktown, Missouri, reported a feather crown "in which the feathers were intertwined with a light blue silk thread." And Mrs. May Kennedy McCord, of Springfield, Missouri, mentions a crown that "appears as if it had been started around a pink thread, the like of which we do not have about the house, and never have had that I know of." Several persons have told me of crowns which contained pieces of thread from bed ticking, bits of dried chicken skin, unidentified animal matter, and long black hairs. A young widow in Greene county, Missouri, a month after her husband's death, found a crown in his pillow which contained several hairs from his head; this man's hair was dyed a peculiar color, so there was no trouble in identifying them. But how did these hairs get inside the pillow? The crowns which I have examined contained, so far as I could see with a pocket lens, nothing but feathers.

Most hillfolk seem to think that the presence of a feather crown in one's pillow means good fortune here or hereafter, but there are some who believe they are death signs, the work of the Devil. Mrs. Nelle Burger, of Springfield, Missouri, president of the Missouri State W.C.T.U., has expressed herself about this. She says that in her childhood the people regarded feather

crowns as evil omens, produced by the machinations of witches, which should be instantly destroyed wherever they are found.⁷ Mr. Rudolph Summers, of Crane, Missouri, recalls certain old settlers in his neighborhood who believe that feather wreaths are bad for everybody concerned and must be thrown into the fire immediately.

Mrs. Ruth Tyler, of Neosho, Missouri, is another who regards the heavenly crown as a sinister thing. Writing in *Rayburn's Ozark Guide* she tells her readers: "The feather-crown is a swirl of feathers that cling to a tiny thread or raveling. The feathers all turn in one direction, 'clockwise' to the right. It is very BAD luck to keep or give away one of these strange formations. Burn or destroy them at once."⁸

A lady whom I knew in Little Rock, Arkansas, never lets a month go by without examining every feather pillow in her house, to see if any suspicious lumps have appeared. Her husband is a politician, with many enemies, and she fears that some of them might employ witchcraft against the family. The idea is that these crowns grow slowly, over a period of several months, and that one can stop the whole business by searching the things out and burning them. But she thinks that if a feather crown ever comes to completion, the person who sleeps on that pillow will die immediately. That's why, according to her view, one never finds a perfect, finished crown excepting in the pillow of someone who has died.

Mrs. May Kennedy McCord, of Springfield, Missouri, published a letter from a woman living at Fordland, Missouri, on this subject:

According to what my husband tells me, as I have no knowledge myself, these crowns are definitely of evil. In fact very evil. As you say they are never found in a finished state only after the death of the user of the pillow and if you'll take a fool's advice you'll get rid of the specimens you have at once.

⁷ Springfield (Missouri) *News*, Jan. 15, 1941.

⁸ Lonsdale, Arkansas (July-August-September, 1944), p. 29.

I was taught not to believe in superstitions, and this one I never heard of until I came to Missouri. My husband's people have lived in St. Louis since the days of Laclede and Choteau, and they firmly believe in this sort of thing. But they believe that if the pillow is burned if a sick person is using it, the hex will be removed and the sick one recover. One of his nephews' wives won't have a feather pillow in the home on this account. I do not like my name in the paper but I do think people should know that these feathers are not works of art but of the Evil One, in plain English, just a way of escaping punishment for murder.—A READER.⁹

That's pretty strong language and leaves no doubt as to what the Fordland lady has in mind.

There are many miscellaneous superstitions about graveyards, and I have listed some of these in the chapters on ghost stories and witchcraft. When a man feels a sudden chill without any obvious reason, it means that someone or something—usually a rabbit, a possum, or a goose—is walking over the spot which will ultimately be his grave.

It is very generally regarded as a bad business to move a body that has once been buried, and many hillfolk absolutely refuse to have any part in such an undertaking.

Dr. W. O. Cralle, of Springfield, Missouri, met an old woman who told him that when a nearby cemetery was moved it was found that the corpses had gone to dust, but all the hearts were just as sound as the day the bodies were buried. Another version of this tale, which I heard in Washington county, Arkansas, has it that the hearts were petrified—turned into solid reddish limestone. If a long-buried body is found to be well preserved, the hillfolk seem disturbed and a little frightened. They feel that it is natural for a corpse to decay and return to dust, and that a body which does *not* decay is somehow unwholesome or bewitched. Charles J. Finger, of Fayetteville, Arkansas, was struck by this idea; he suggested to me that it might be a remnant of the European belief in vampires.

An odd notion, still quoted in many parts of Arkansas, is

⁹Springfield (Missouri) *News*, Jan. 15, 1942.

that a green brier always grows where a Yankee soldier is buried, while wild roses bloom over the graves of the Confederate dead.

It is bad luck to carry anything out of a graveyard. One may move shrubs or flowering plants from one grave to another, but the person who carries a flower outside the gate will bury some member of his family within a year. May Stafford Hilburn mentions a woman who picked a bouquet from her father-in-law's grave, and sure enough her husband died the very next summer. "To this day," writes Mrs. Hilburn, "I do not take even a leaf from a cemetery!"¹⁰ In 1936 a band of thieves carried off many tombstones from old cemeteries in southwest Missouri; it is supposed that the stones were redressed and sold elsewhere. People at Granby and Oronogo especially became very indignant about this and predicted that some supernatural calamity would overtake the criminals.

In some sections of Arkansas I have seen newly filled graves with a pick and shovel left on the mound in the shape of a cross. This was evidently the gravediggers' idea. Perhaps it is somehow related to the familiar practice of crossing the mop and broom when the house cleaning is finished, as described elsewhere in this book.

If a hillman happens to tread upon a grave, he is supposed to jump backward across it immediately, as otherwise a member of his family will die, according to the old-timers. One of my best friends, an educated Ozarker who is generally indifferent to superstition, surprised me by suddenly springing over a grave in this fashion. "It isn't a matter of what I believe," he said later, "but one must respect the prejudices of his neighbors. If I had not jumped back across that grave, it would look as if I *want* some of my relatives to die!" There are doubtless many other persons in the Ozarks who explain their observance of the old customs and taboos in similar terms.

¹⁰ *Missouri Magazine* (October, 1938), p. 14.