

On Superstitions

A.G Gardiner's 'On Superstitions' is an analysis of the prevalence of superstition, even in the modern age. In his conversational style, Gardiner starts with the superstitious belief related to number 13. Although in this advanced age, we indeed have come ahead of superstitious belief, and many of us consider it nothing more than a mere 'childish folly'. Yet, we would still like it if we have nothing to do with number 13, if possible, be it renting a flat, or a bus numbered 13. That fear of number 13 still lies somewhere in the deep recess of the mind. Gardiner argues that because of the superstitious belief attached to number 13, we barely see a house or street numbered 13 in London or any other city for that matter. To elaborate on this, the speaker goes on to describe the case of a person, as recorded by Duhamel, who recovered from his war-induced injuries and sickness yet succumbed to a small pimple on his nose. These superstitions exercise a stronghold on our life and profoundly affect our decisions.

The essayist, however, points out that many superstitions have commonplace and sensible origins. Yet, in this era of science and technology when we have already explored a lot of universe's laws and principles, superstition is 'a creed outworn'. He says it was right to be superstitious in the previous centuries, when humans knew almost nothing about scientific laws of nature, believed in the existence of beneficent and sinister forces. It was justified back then if they "saw their fate in clouds... and referred every phenomenon of life to the soothsayers and oracles."

Gardiner cites an episode from Roman civilisation in which an election got postponed because Cato heard thunder. Even Alexander surrounded himself with fortune-tellers and took their counsel. The great intellectual Cicero believed in augurs and omens that eventually led to his death. Gardiner says, “sometimes the omens were right, and sometimes they were wrong, but whether right or wrong, they were equally meaningless.” The essayist makes a case for how scientific attitude is essential in our daily lives to overcome superstitious beliefs that we still pay heed to sometimes.

Gardiner happily sums up the essay by saying that we have ‘escaped the grotesque shadows’ of superstitions which our forefathers were surrounded with. “We do not look for divine guidance in the entrails of animals or the flight of crows, and the House of Commons does not adjourn at a clap of thunder.”