



ŠTĚPÁNKA SEKANINOVÁ & LUKÁŠ FIGEL

Superstitions



MIRRORS,
LADDERS,
BLACK CATS,
RABBITS'
FEET,
& MORE

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INTRODUCTION

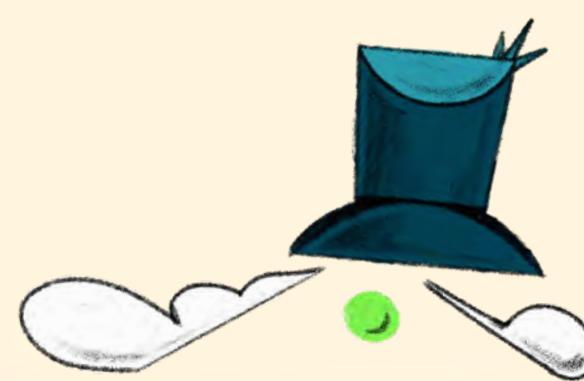
For some, thirteen, *brrrr*, is a number with bad luck written all over it. And what about a black cat? I can already see you squirming, hoping that a black cat won't run across your path and bring misfortune.

If things seem to be going really well, maybe it's because you found a four-leafed clover in the meadow. Maybe you'll want to knock your happy feelings into some wood so that they last as long as possible!

Why? Why do you do all of that? Because of superstitions—strange, magical connections to things, events, and dates that our grandmothers, great-grandmothers, and great-great-grandfathers were guided by, and which our parents also mention.

Long ago, we didn't have science to explain the world around us. Superstitions helped us believe we could control things that were scary or that we didn't understand. Today, we know much more, but often, we believe the superstitions, just a little bit, and follow them just in case. People who are in danger or feeling stress rely on superstitions more than those who aren't.

Let's look at where these superstitions came from, whether there's any truth in them, and whether everyone knocks on wood for luck the day before Friday the 13th. Good luck to us, or, er, break a leg!



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BLACK CATS

Black cats bring bad luck, which is why we give them a wide berth. Actually, don't listen to me. Black cats don't bring bad luck, it's just something some people, especially in Europe, have attributed to them since the thirteenth century. On June 13, 1233, Pope Gregory IX issued a document called *Vox in Rama*, stating that black cats were the incarnation of Satan, the bringer of evil. Add to that the belief in Europe that every witch had a black cat on her (yes, in most cases women) shoulder, and the superstition was born.

WHITE EVIL

Interestingly, in Great Britain, white cats rather than black cats have been thought to be bad luck, possibly because they are the color of ghosts. The bad luck is supposed to be related to money, so protect your piggy bank! A negative connection between cats and witches didn't develop in Britain until the sixteenth century. And when the Puritans in Colonial Massachusetts began persecuting people accused of witchcraft, the idea of a black cat being evil was carried to England.



A CAT AGAINST A SEA STORM

British sailors used to take black cats with them to sea as helpers to ward off storms. A big cat, whether black or multicolored, also helped them with the pesky rodents below deck.

LEFT OR RIGHT?

It's certainly not easy with these black cats. In Germany the superstition is that if one crosses your path from right to left it will bring you success! But if it goes the other way it means bad luck.

THE TRUE STORY OF THE GOOD AND BAD LUCK OF KING CHARLES STUART I

Charles I, who was the King of England from 1625 to 1649, loved his black cat very much. He wept bitterly when it died, and declared that his luck had left him along with his black kitty. And it probably had. Judge for yourself: Shortly after his loss he was arrested, locked up, and . . . executed. (Then it was an unlucky future for black cats.)



PITCH-BLACK HEALERS

In Japan, black cats are treated well as they are said to heal body and soul. Have an upset stomach? Put a black cat on it! Multi-talented, black cats also supposedly help single women attract good partners. But Maneki-neko, the beckoning cat figurines of Japan, are lucky for everyone. Each color symbolizes a different kind of good fortune, with black ones warding off evil spirits.

Meow



WAITING FOR A MIRACLE

A black cat across your path? All is good. Expect some magical moments in your life. At least that's what the French believe.

GET OFF THE BED

In Italy there's panic if a black cat jumps onto a bed with a sick person lying in it. This pitch-black creature is then signalling that death is near.

WHO IS AFRAID OF BLACK CATS?

Superstitions may lead to fewer adoptions of black cats from shelters than other cats. To combat this, England (October 27) and the US (August 17) both have days that celebrate these sable-furred kitties.



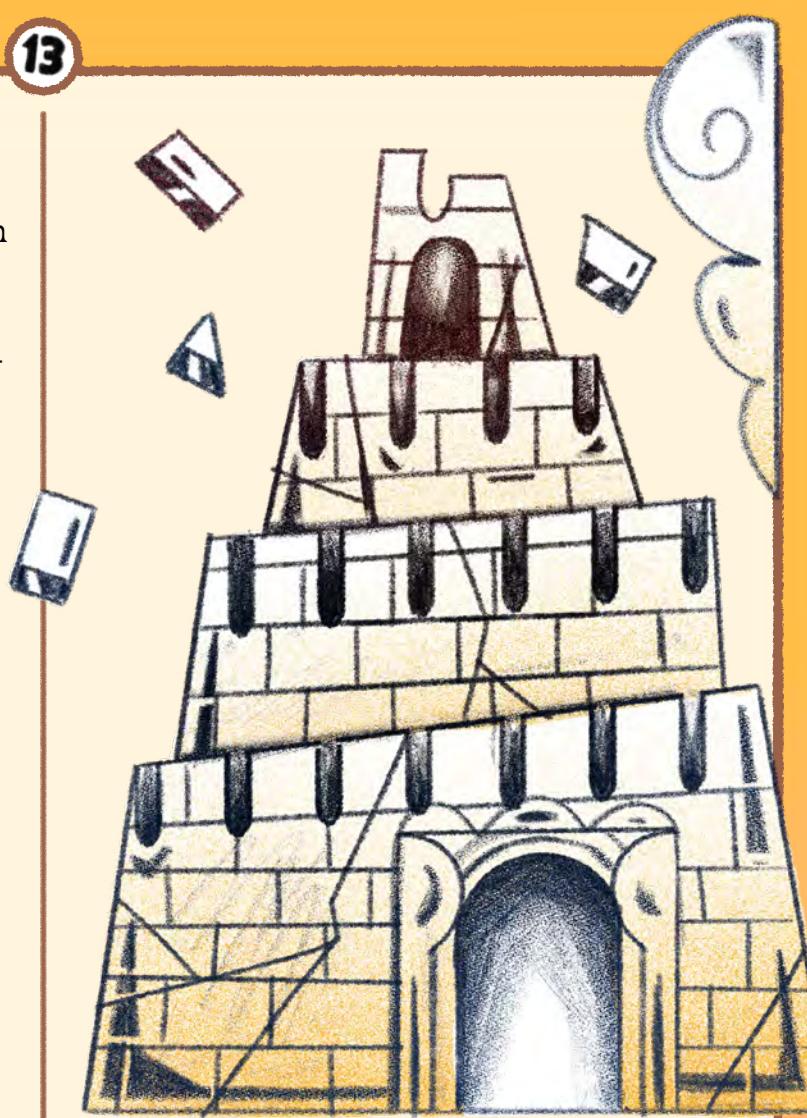
What do you think of black cats? Are you afraid of them or do you welcome them into your life?

SO FRIDAY OR TUESDAY?

Let's not be unfair to Fridays. Spaniards, Greeks, and people from Latin American countries always get fidgety on Tuesday the 13th. That's because the name of this day—such as the Spanish word *martes*—is derived from Mars, the god of war and destruction. Additionally, it is said that the biblical story of God imposing a confusion of languages during the building of the Tower of Babel occurred on a Tuesday the 13th. So what do you think? Are you against Fridays or Tuesdays?

THE CURSED NUMBER 4

In some Asian countries, there is a superstition about the number 4 because in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, the word for four sounds similar to the word for death. Further, in Japanese the word for nine sounds like *suffering*, so 49 is also avoided—because no one wants a painful death.

**LUCKY NUMBERS, TOO!**

Thinking about numbers as good or evil is called numerology. According to Chinese numerology, the luckiest number is 8, because it sounds similar to the word for prosperity and wealth. The 2008 Summer Olympics in China began at 8:08 PM on 8/8/08, and an airline paid \$280,000 for the phone number 888 888—a lucky number and easy to remember!



MIRRORS

Oh, no! The mirror shattered into a thousand pieces! Next come seven years of bad luck. But why? Where did this superstition that is so unfair to mirrors come from? Why is it that other shards—such as porcelain in Germany—bring luck? Why not those from mirrors?

A PEEK AT THE EARTHLINGS

The gods themselves can observe our souls using mirrors! That's what the ancient Romans used to believe. It's clear,

then, that breaking a mirror will anger the gods, and they'll take revenge. How? Through bad luck, naturally.

NOT YOU, YOUR SOUL

The ancient Greeks and Romans believed that if you looked at your reflection in the water, you could see deep into your soul. But if the surface stirred and your image became blurred, people were terrified. They expected illness or even death. A fractured mirror then came to mean a fractured soul.



BUT WHY SEVEN YEARS?

Roman lore also suggested that the body and soul renewed in seven-year cycles. You have to admit that seven years of bad luck and misfortune would seem to be endless. So keep a close eye on your mirror and don't break it.



PRECAUTIONS AGAINST BAD LUCK

Seven years' bad luck is really quite a lot and so ancient Roman thinkers came up with some protective measures. If you bury the shards of the broken mirror deep in the ground, presto, you've outdone the gods and the superstitions! As this superstition has its roots in the very cradle of European culture, we come across it mainly in Europe and North America. Mysterious mirrors appear in many other cultures as well.

BLESS YOU!

Whenever anyone sneezes, other people will bless them. Where did this custom come from? Where did this sneezing superstition originate? In the Middle Ages, of course. During the plague epidemic, people noticed that sneezing was quickly followed by death.

BE WARY OF SNEEZING

No sneezing, please! Let us all survive this in good health! This is what the people and Pope Gregory I wished. Not only did he pray regularly for everyone, he also called on them to increase divine protection. As soon as a sick person sneezed, you were to immediately say, "God bless you!" By doing so, you might avoid the dreaded disease.

ACHOO!

The custom to bless sneezers continued and spread, but after the plague ended, many people chose to wish good health, instead. In Latin America, it depends how many times you sneeze. Once? "¡Salud!" (health). Twice? "¡Dinero!" (money). Three times? "¡Amor!" (love).

DON'T SNEEZE OUT YOUR SOUL

Sneezing was even more complicated than that. Long before the plague epidemic, people believed that when you sneezed, you could sneeze out your soul... and so they said "Bless you" so their souls wouldn't want to leave.



AND WE'RE BACK AT BLACK CATS

There's a theory that the superstitious fear of black cats in medieval Europe led to a mass extermination of cats. Then, supposedly, with few cats, the rat population increased. More rats carried more plague fleas and infected more people, resulting in the 1346 pandemic known as the "Black Death."

However, there is no evidence of a mass killing of cats, or that cats, which are also susceptible to plague fleas and plague, would have kept the disease from spreading. This modern myth seems to have originated in the 1990s, in a couple of books, and then spread—where else?—on the internet.



GOOD LUCK



Luck is extremely fickle—sometimes good, sometimes bad. Who wouldn't want to influence it, to summon good luck and enjoy its benefits?

FOUR-LEAFED CLOVER

The challenge: Find an inconspicuous clover with four leaves growing in a meadow of sprig after sprig of three leaves—or more accurately, leaflets. What are the chances? It's about one in five thousand, but if every set of four offers something positive in life—happiness, love, hope, or wealth, would you look? And would you press your four-leafleted clover to save it forever?

The ancient Celts used to carry four-leaved clovers around believing that the green sprig protected them from evil. Giving a four-leaved clover as a gift guaranteed double the amount of good luck.

A NEEDLE IN A HAYSTACK

Look in the spring before the meadow has been mowed, on a cloudy day when the four-leaved shape is easier to see. If you find one, keep looking. Four-leaved clovers are a genetic anomaly and often grow in bunches.

Are you lucky? Can you find the four-leaved clover on this page to bring you luck?



MONEY

"Find a penny, pick it up, all day long you'll have good luck!" Why? How often do you find money lying on the pavement? It's probably easier to find a four-leafed clover! If you happen to find a penny, a quarter, or even a dollar, you are definitely lucky. And since the USA has stopped making pennies, in the future, finding one will be even luckier.

THE FAVOR OF THE GODS

Coins have been used for more than 2700 years, and before that people valued the metals they are made of. So it makes sense that no one wants to lose their precious coins. Tossing a coin into a fountain is a sacrifice that cultures across the world believe brings good luck.

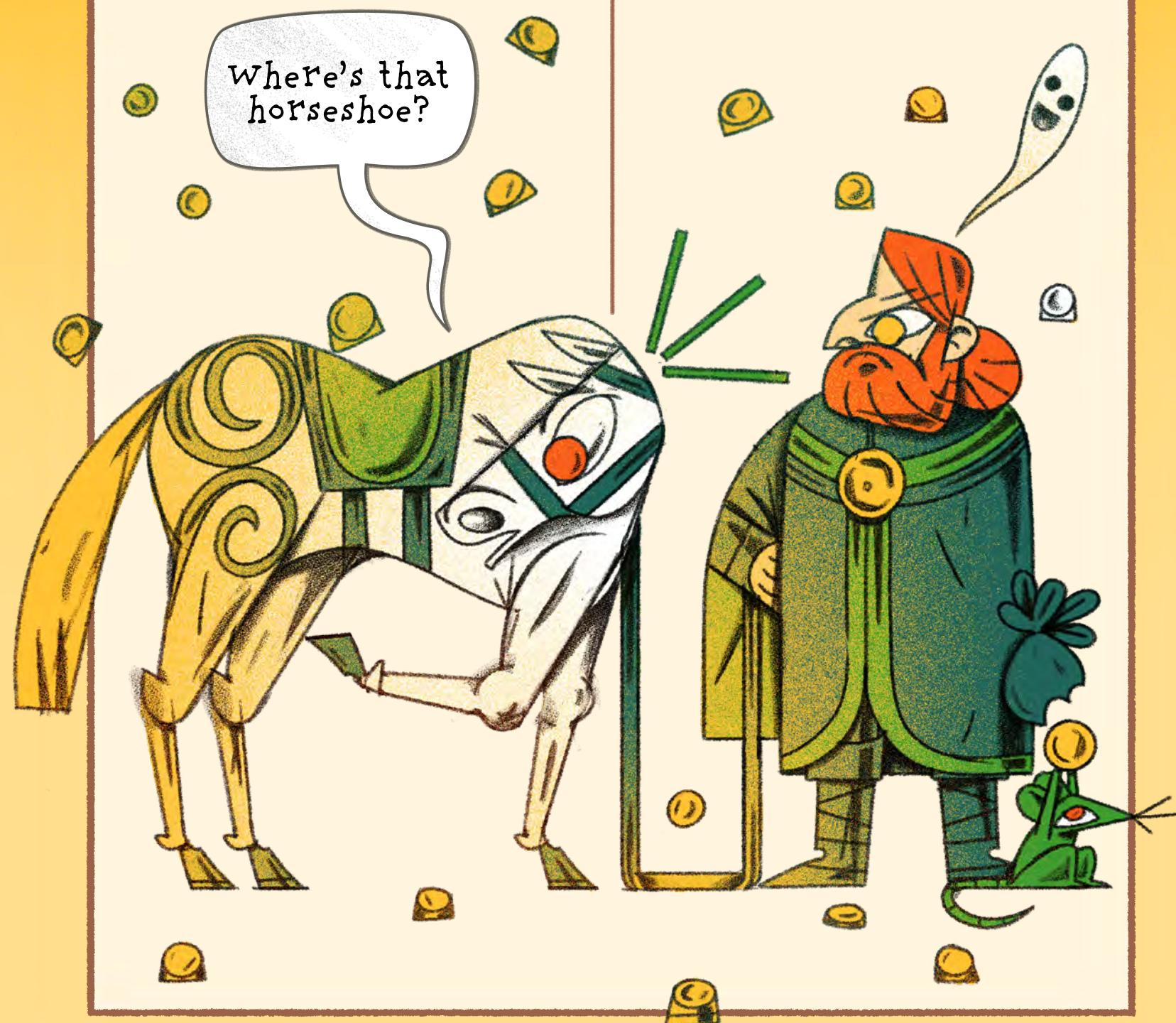


HORSESHOES

Joy and an abundance of good luck awaits anyone who stumbles across a horseshoe on their travels. Are you skeptical? Read on and find out how this superstition came to be.

IRON AGAINST EVIL DEMONS

Since time immemorial horseshoes have been made with iron, and our ancestors believed iron gave people protection against ghosts, demons, and fairies. And because there used to be whole herds of horses, their iron horseshoes were usually close at hand and became regarded as protective.



FINDERS KEEPERS, LOSERS WEEPERS

To own a horse and also have it shod regularly was expensive, so it was bad luck if you lost one, and a joyful day if you found one.

HOW TO HANG A HORSESHOE?

The shape of the horseshoe plays an important role. In some countries such as the USA, Russia, Ireland, and the UK, hanging it like a u kept the luck inside. In the Middle East and parts of Europe, hanging it down like an n would allow luck to flow into the household. If you got it mixed-up in your region, sadly, the luck would be lost.

BAD LUCK

No one wants bad luck, right? So it makes sense that there are things we avoid doing just in case. Would we blame ourselves if something bad happened after we walked under a ladder or opened an umbrella indoors?

SHOES ON THE TABLE?

For goodness' sake, don't put your shoes on a table in England! Not even brand-new ones still in the box, as though you're showing off. You'll immediately terrify everyone in the house. Your—let's be frank—rude behavior (since when do shoes belong on a table?) will bring bad luck and death to the household.

DEATH IN THE HOME

It used to be a custom in England that when a person departed from this world, their relatives would place their shoes on the table to signal a death in the home. This evidently became the basis for the whole superstition. So don't put

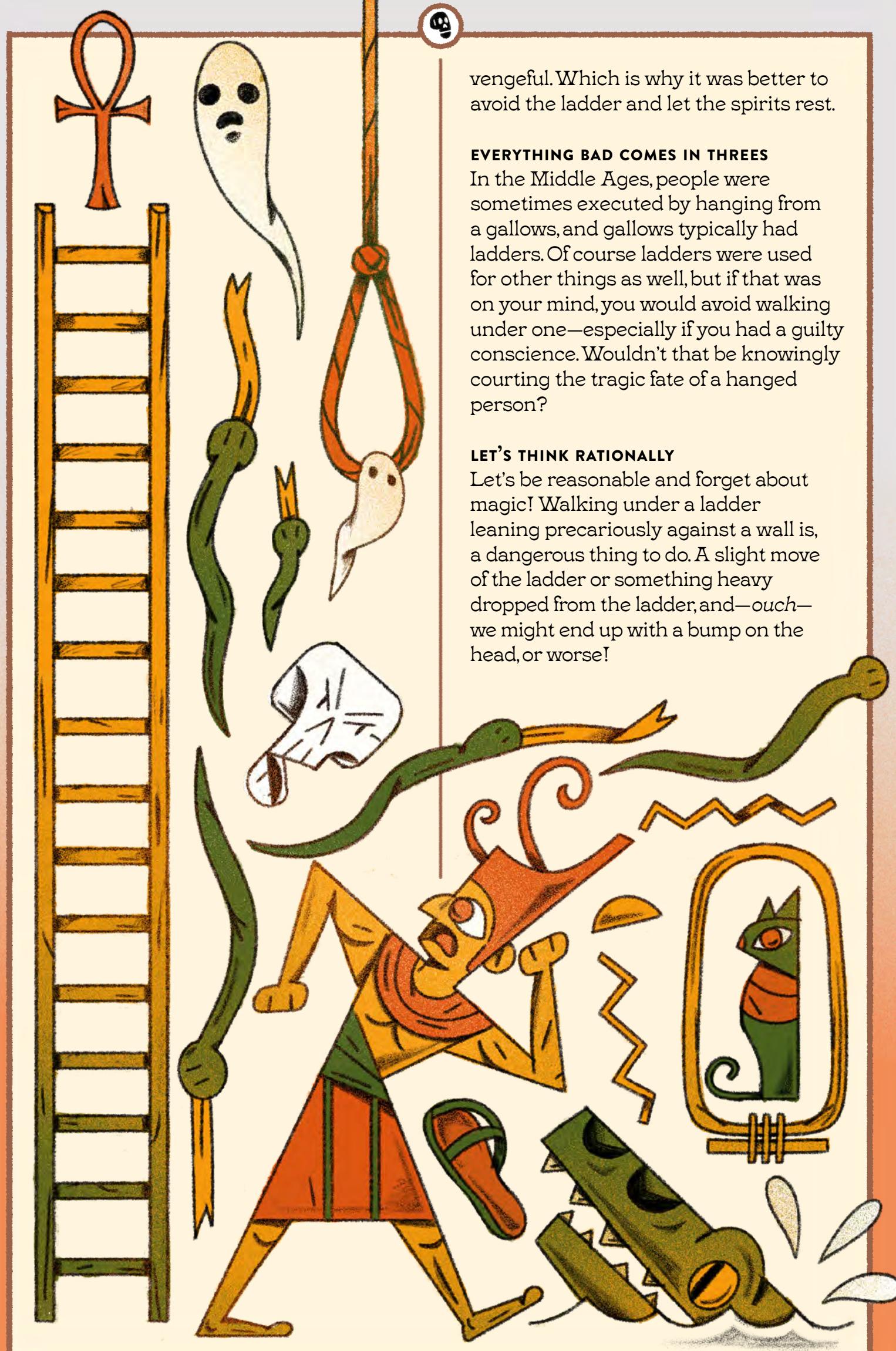
your shoes on the table in England—or anywhere else!

DON'T WALK UNDER A LADDER!

Not that it'd fall on you, but who knows? The point is, when someone walks under a ladder resting against a wall, they're inviting bad luck. With its three points, a ladder placed against a wall looks like a triangle. In Christianity, the number three represents the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Walking under a ladder might be seen as "breaking" the trinity and attracting the devil.

A LADDER TO ANOTHER WORLD

The fear of walking under a ladder allegedly has its roots in ancient Egypt. Traditionally, relatives left a ladder near the grave of a deceased family member so that the loved one's soul could rise to the heavens. Good as well as bad spirits were said to inhabit the triangle between the ladder and the wall. If you disturbed them, they could become angry and



vengeful. Which is why it was better to avoid the ladder and let the spirits rest.

EVERYTHING BAD COMES IN THREES

In the Middle Ages, people were sometimes executed by hanging from a gallows, and gallows typically had ladders. Of course ladders were used for other things as well, but if that was on your mind, you would avoid walking under one—especially if you had a guilty conscience. Wouldn't that be knowingly courting the tragic fate of a hanged person?

LET'S THINK RATIONALLY

Let's be reasonable and forget about magic! Walking under a ladder leaning precariously against a wall is, a dangerous thing to do. A slight move of the ladder or something heavy dropped from the ladder, and—ouch—we might end up with a bump on the head, or worse!



Do you cross your fingers or knock on wood for luck? Do you worry when a black cat crosses your path? Do you think some numbers are lucky and others are unlucky? Then you are not alone. People across time and cultures have had superstitions about all manner of things—shooting stars, crows, ladders, broken mirrors, horseshoes, whistling, and coins. These beliefs existed to try to control the world long before we had scientific explanations to help us understand, but they persist, even today. Find out the stories behind some of these beliefs. It may not stop you from worrying if you break a mirror or open an umbrella in the house, but it will help you better understand your concerns.



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