

**T**he 1914/18 war was on. My father was a naval officer and my mother always followed the fleet. He was in the Dardanelles so she got herself out to Malta. So the little boy was dumped around with aunts and uncles in between sessions at beastly preparatory schools.

So it happened that one summer holiday I was with an uncle, who was the Reverend William Russell-Fox, Vicar of North Bovey (on the edge of Dartmoor) and I was all of seven years old.

#### *The child and the witches*

Summer's afternoon and we had had lunch, so I thought I would go into the kitchen garden to see if I could scrimp some of uncle's beautiful dessert gooseberries. But I never got to the gooseberry bushes because I heard an extraordinary uproar going on, just the other side of the high stone walls, on the Green in the centre of North Bovey, which is there to this day.

Being an inquisitive little boy, I opened the garden gate and saw people running around and shouting and there was obviously a wrestling match going on in the middle. I ran across and to my surprise I saw a dear old soul who I knew as 'Aunty' on the ground and they were stripping her completely naked! I say 'they', being four or five agricultural workers. And here was this poor old woman that I knew, who lived in a cottage just by the entrance to the Vicarage, with her clothes pulled up over her head. So I ran up to her as a kiddy might do, because she had always been kind to me, and I threw myself upon her.

Next thing, I was being kicked and pulled and punched and then, all of a sudden, everything went dead quiet. When I stood on my feet, there was my uncle. I was told to go back to the house but I found later that these agricultural workers had been to the pub and got themselves tanked up and they felt they had a grievance because they thought this little old dear, who would have been in her 70's, had put a curse or something on their cattle. They were saying she was a witch and they were looking for the devil's teat.

It was about a week later, I went down to a favourite place, which was an island in a river where wild raspberries used to grow. I was playing about when suddenly a voice came out of the sky "Hello little master. It was you who came to see me." I looked around and I saw, by a willow tree overhanging the river, this same little old lady and she came down to the riverside and she showed me how to tickle trout.

I questioned her why the people were being beastly to her. And I got to know this little soul and she told me quite a lot of things which you might put down as being folklore. So I ended up knowing

## *A conversation with* **CECIL WILLIAMSON**

*Cecil Williamson is the owner of the Museum of Witchcraft in Boscastle. Now in his 80's, he has amassed, over the years, an encyclopaedic knowledge of traditional witchcraft practice and lore which, today, he shares with people through his "Witchcraft Research Centre". He knew many of the important British occultists of the last 50 years, including Aleister Crowley and Gerald Gardner. Nowadays this gentle and private man lives quietly in a small village in North Devon. He invited us down to visit him and we spent an enthralled day while he reminisced about his life and his beliefs. The following is Part 1 of a four part series of pieces extracted from the day's conversation. In this part, he talks about Witchcraft and Wise Women....*

a little bit about witches.

She taught me a lot of things which were sensible: like if you hold a stone in your hand and let it drop, it will fall to the ground. And you can do the same thing thousands and thousands of times and nothing will ever make the stone do anything else. And wet is wet, and hot is hot and cold is cold. Take the facts of life, she told me, and do not listen to all the theories.

One of my jobs as a youngster of 12 to 13 years old (in the 1920's) was to ride shotgun for Kennedy Cox with the Docklands cabbies and drop off bread to a mission in Canning Town. The poverty in that area in those days was absolutely unbelievable, with small lice-ridden houses. There was no medical service as we know now and there were squads of children with illness - exczema and hacking coughs. And of course there was the abortion side. And there I came face to face with the ancient medieval wise woman who knew all the cures even in the Docklands. And so, in the middle of the city, you had this back-street cult of wise women and people who told fortunes and this and that.

#### *Above and below....*

From the earliest times, the upper classes have exploited and treated abominably the lower classes and paid them as little as possible or no wages at all. You have two-thirds of the World's population getting a pretty raw deal. It makes me smile that in the Bible you have this lovely word ADAM. To me, Adam stands for Agressive Dominant Arrogant Male and they have completely taken over the world and the females are treated abominably. Consequently, what can you do? So this is where the Aunty Mays or the witches come in. But how could they fight back? Because Planet Earth has a lot of injustice and if you did strike back, you might just get the wrong end of the stick again and perhaps get killed. But are there subtle ways?

The wise woman woke up to the fact that goodness - this extraordinary force

of goodness - in the end wins and hence they worked out this basic policy of giving back to the wrongdoers the wrong that they give. This reflective magic is basically what all wise women do. It is not they who do it: they do it through their spirit force, the familiar spirit.

But many magicians summon the spirits with "I charge you in the name of..." and then you have the business of discharging them and banishing them. Well, god bless us, that is exactly like the upper classes talking to the servants! Ringing a bell. Well, there is one thing and that is that in the spirit world the last thing a human does is to tell a spirit what to do. If you are fortunate enough to have a familiar spirit or to be able to cultivate one, you learn very quickly that a spirit is a very beneficial thing for you and takes charge of things and is kinder than your mother would ever be. But the last thing to do is summon it!

#### *Familiar spirits*

I tried to get Gerald Gardner interested in this idea of the familiar spirit. And, similarly, today it is very hard to find a vicar that you can go to and have a reasonably sensible conversation about angels and yet you walk through their churches and see them all over. At one time, in christian church design, all of the churches were covered in cherubs and angels and things like that. But now if you ask them about their angels, they just think you are a nutcase.

As every woman knows, you can regard your body as a structure in which a living force can grow. This is so easy for a woman as, after all, they carry a child for quite a length of time. If you have a mental picture of your body being a temple, or B&B if you like, and you want a familiar spirit, this is what you have to do. You do not want to have the place like a rat's nest. You have to be very good and really rather dull.

There is great enthusiasm to join a coven and go through with it all but boredom sets in after awhile because, you see, you have not got what the

countryside witch has got: and that is the familiar spirit. Whether she is deluding herself or not.

But in my case I find that incredible things happen where you literally have to stop in your tracks and turn round and say to your familiar "Thank you darling, I just don't know what to say to thank you". Then you begin to think that you must be on the right lines because it is quite incredible the things which do happen, not just once but all the time.

### ***Black witch and white witch***

Auntie Mays do not work in groups. But you usually find that there are two associated together, somebody perhaps living in the same house. The old-fashioned form of witchcraft is if someone is behaving badly and you want to correct that person's behaviour you get the mess planted on the doorstep: the signal. Then either the person covers it up or they admit it.

But there is always a kind person who comes along (who is what you might term the white witch) and then she has a look and says "Oh, yes, I think you must have upset somebody" and then she will tell you that she knows somebody who is better at this sort of thing than she is. And this person is what you might call the black witch. And so she brings the other opinion in. So, from that point of view, it is beneficial to have two people working together because one person becomes the mouthpiece of the other and the victim does not realise the relationship between the two. So the wrongdoer has their awareness aroused and then the picture is filled in for them. It is a rather gentle, subtle way of doing.

In the olden days, when there was no transport and people really lived within an area of about 25 miles, one wise woman would get in touch with another for a whole variety of reasons. If in a particular area there was a certain type of moss or herb which that person knew how to gather, she would gather more than she needed. Then the wise women would swap herbs.

### ***About boilings...***

In the West Country, I would go so far as to say there is hardly a village where there is not an auntie who is not called in to resolve inter-family or domestic squabbles. Cornish people and Devonians keep things very close to their chests. The last thing they want is publicity in a personal matter. But the sort of thing you get is (say) a domestic set-up where a husband starts to treat his wife and his children poorly and there is a lot of misery going on. So the sort of thing that might happen - and I have been privileged to have been invited to one - is what is known as a 'boiling'.

A boiling is where herbs or weeds (and I have seen groundsel, dandelion,

verbena and cabbage used) are put into a cast-iron pot and stewed, so it usually takes place these days in a kitchen. Various people are invited, usually being those closely involved in the affair, and when the people are assembled the doors and windows and any openings are sealed with tape. Rather unromantically, the pot is usually on an electric cooker, but all the people are interested in is the boiling of it. The trick thing is that a bottle is produced and that bottle contains the victim's urine, obtained I know not how. It is tightly corked and it is put into this heavy iron pot which has the herbs in it, bubbling away. And you all sit or stand in that kitchen while this boiling process goes on. And the steam comes off, the room gets hotter and hotter, perspiration starts running down. It really is quite an ordeal, not a pleasant undertaking. Then, thank god, there suddenly comes the explosion, which can be quite devastating, where the bottle simply blows up.

That is the end of it so the doors of the kitchen are opened and everybody breathes afresh and you go into the rest room to eat sandwiches and drink lager.

Then the extraordinary thing is that the victim suffers stomach pains a few days later and wonders what it is all about. Then you have the part of what they call the white witch or the 'runner', who comes and sees the victim. She will chat and sympathise with the person and say something like "For my money, I would think that you have had the finger put on you." She will then give him a little talk and suggest he alter his ways. The white witch does not do the operation. The black witch, the Auntie May, does it.

### ***...and neighbour trouble...***

And say if you have a simple thing like neighbour trouble. And someone opens the door in the morning to bring in the welcome pinta and she finds on her doorstep the entrails of something in a circle of red string which has been plaited. In most cases, they do a double-take and it registers. It takes a very stupid person to say "Oh, blessed children!!" and sweep it away. But even if she does just sweep it away, the white witch - she is the jack in the pack - will drift along for something, even pretending to collect for the church bazaar or whatever. And she will say to this good lady, who is a bit of a toughie: "I hear you had this unpleasant something left on your doorstep the other day."

So that comes as a bit of a shaker to madam. She says "How do you know?" So this other one will start giving her bell, book and chapter of these things and tell her she must have really upset somebody for that to happen. So the woman might ask "What will I do?" If she is a very dim or tough person, well then she will get a repeat dose and then she will sit up and take notice.

But if not then you move into a totally different category and you bring into play the familiar spirit and say to it "Well, look, there is a situation down here and may I draw your attention to it". And you consult the out-of-this-world force and if it decides yes, this is outrageous, then all you are doing (and you must always explain this to your client) is you are giving back to the sender the evil that they are putting out.

This world is not all that complicated. This ritual magic of which there are pages and pages written by well-educated people: it does not mean a thing. You can go on singing hymns all night long, you can go on giving commands and at the end of the day there is not a thing that happens. But if you take a very simple thing and if there is a person who is really genuinely evil and you do this business of putting the mirrors up and reflecting it back, the results are really quite incredible.

And another thing too. If you have got a person who is suffering and you know who is causing the suffering, there is another means you can work: and that is the wind. So few people pay any attention to the atmosphere or the wind or ever give it any thought. If, shall we say, there is a person in Exeter who is causing you or your client trouble and you want to use the wind, well you wait for a day when there is a good sharp South-Westerly wind blowing and you know you can feel it all around you and that later on the victim in Exeter will be enwrapped by the same wind and there is nothing they can do to stop that wind from touching them. And the wind will be your servant because it is an actual force. A lot of people call the wind 'the breath of the gods'.

Witches depend on information received. If you want to set up in witchery and you are in an area, you limit that area to 25 miles. Then you go to the libraries and get yourself copies of the voting lists. Then you get the largest scale maps of the area and on your maps you mark every house so you know who is living in every house, man, woman and child, in the whole of your area. And that is how you start.

I have been fortunate in the West Country because I go along quite quietly and don't set up like so many of these people that you know from your magazine who are high priests and high priestesses. You would not get anywhere if you did that sort of thing round here. Another thing too is that the West Country has been very much a classless county. If you are hail and well-met with the road-sweeper and the man who takes the garbage away in the morning, you will find you get on and you will find they will sum *you* up and you will get the highest honour I reckon you can get, which is the invitation.