GRANNIE'S GRIMOIRE:
A HEDGE WITCH HANDBOOK

By Nigel Suckling and Wayne Anderson

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Disclaimer:
Nigel Suckling wishes to make clear that he takes no responsibility for any of the folk remedies recommended in these pages. They have been taken on trust from the various sources who provided them. We have avoided including many of the more outlandish and possibly dangerous medications suggested by some informants but are unqualified to spot possible hazards in those that are included. They are posted here as a matter of record and entertainment.

PREFACE

THIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED and ready to be packed off to the designers for the words and pictures to be blended seamlessly together when our publishers, Pavilion Books, hit some serious rocks on the highway and *Granny's Grimoire* got kind of left folornly by the wayside.

This was a great disappointment for Wayne and me. We weren't out of pocket because we'd received modest advances for our time spent on the project. That was some compensation at least, but that wasn't the main point. You don't work on an idea like this for the sake of a publisher's advance, you have an audience in mind and fun ideas you want to share. Still, publishers going bust is a regular hazard we've both met often in our publishing careers; it's a far more cut-throat business than you might imagine when browsing the shelves in the calm of your local bookshop with Vivaldi playing in the background. After the first couple of collapses you learn to shrug and carry regardless. Something else almost always pops up, or the publishers get reborn under new ownership.

While clearing out cupboards recently I came across the battered package of abandoned material for this book. Well, my side of it anyway which was a lot scrappier than what you see following, consisting of a pile of the hasty black and white photocopies Wayne used to send me as we went along and my own much scribbled on bits of text that I sent back and forth to him – which is how we used to work on projects like this, posting passing ideas to each other to see what stuck. It was always a wonderful pleasure to see his pictures in colour at last when we handed over to the publishers.

But I did also have a completed text – with notes for roughly where the pictures should go – and some colour scans of Wayne's illustrations, so I decided it would be interesting to get an idea of how the book might have looked. You'll have to imagine how the pictures and text would have been artfully blended together in Pavilion's inimitable house style; the layouts here are pretty basic. It was a whole art in itself, the way Pavilion used to put together illustrated books. The sum was greater than the parts, as they say. Still there's much to be said for simple layouts as well, especially when compared to no book at all. So here you go – this is the bare bones of what could have been another gorgeous Pavilion imagination-fest.

Nigel Suckling February 2024

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INTRODUCTION

ONCE UPON A TIME when doctors were dear and priests were proud, the counsellor most villagers turned to in times of trouble was the local wise-woman. Usually also a midwife and undertaker, she was the keeper of the community's herbal lore and much else besides – spells and stories and secrets of the soul that most people had no time to explore.

Traditionally this wisdom passed from mother to daughter or granddaughter, growing and being distilled from generation to generation, but with the scattering of families and the diversions of the modern world much of it is now being forgotten.

Much was never written down in the first place of course, being part of an ancient peasant oral tradition. Even when writing became common, many wise women preferred to keep their secrets to themselves anyway, maintaining the oral tradition and keeping only the sketchiest of notes. When they have kept grimoires of their potions and spells they have tended to be battered and chaotic journals that get thrown out in the house clearance along with similarly jumbled and cryptic cooking recipe books.

Some such journals do survive though. At the heart of this collection is one such relict – a collection of folk remedies left by an old wise woman on the Ashdown Forest in Sussex, England, famed for being the home of Winnie the Pooh. It came to me by chance through my mother, who used to run a village shop on the forest and got to know many of the primordial characters whose families had lived on the land there for generations. One such used to ride his horse to the Foresters Arms into the 1980s so he could drink as much as he liked and have the beast patiently and safely carry him back home across the forest. All he had to do was try not to fall out of the saddle.

WHEN MOST PEOPLE LIVED in villages and farmed the land, wise women (also known as hedge, kitchen, cottage, village or green witches) tended to live slightly apart from their communities, close to the woods and fields where they gathered their herbs. Besides this, living on the edge helped preserve the mystique and awe that is always helpful when casting spells or giving advice. It also meant that people thought twice before calling on their services, unlike if they lived next door. For common ailments and troubles each family had its own store of women's lore anyway, also passed from mother to daughter – useful remedies and balms for the daily scrapes of family life. The wise-women were and still are there to step in when these are not enough for the situation in hand.

They may not be as common or noticeable as they once were, but such wise women do still exist and carry on much as they ever have done with their herbs and spells and potions. In fact it seems to be a reviving tradition. It's true that not many wear pointy hats any more, like the traditional witches in our illustrations. In fact these days it's quite easy to pass one in the street without noticing, and often it takes getting to know them quite well before realizing that you are talking to a modern witch. There are usually giveaway signs though – moon and star earrings perhaps, or a discreet pentacle or Brigid's Cross somewhere about their person.

Many of these women happily call themselves witches, but they are not the Halloween hags of popular imagination – dancing naked in covens and flying broomsticks across the moon. (Well, not very often anyway, though everyone needs to let off steam occasionally.) In particular they have little to do with black magic. The worst curse in their arsenal is likely to be for boils on the most inconvenient part of a foe's anatomy. Even that is unlikely to have been dusted off and put into action very often. But there are times when even the mildest-mannered witch is entitled to rage, so most keep a few curses on hand, just in case. It is generally best not to rile or insult them.

The usual trade of wise-women however is in things like herbal remedies, good luck charms, fortune-telling and love potions – things that spread a little cheer, inspiration, honesty and meaning in the world, which is the true purpose of white magic, as with art. As to the basic difference between White and Black magic, in case you are in any doubt – well basically it all comes down to intent, just as in non-magical dealings. Any aim that is tainted with greed, coercion or malice is not white magic.

THERE IS ALSO A DISTINCTION to be drawn between the witches who have informed this book and the wiccans and others who call themselves witches, but have covens and structured rituals. Wiccans share many of the same ideals and ideas as hedge witches and can equally be on the side of white magic, but their approach is basically collective and sociable. 'Green' or 'hedge' witches by contrast tend to be solitary, individualistic souls who enjoy their own company and like to make their own rules. Their magic is normally practised by individuals or in small, unstructured groups of equals. They respect the enhanced energy that large groups can generate, but by temperament are averse to hierarchies and defined rituals. The Grannies who have inspired and filled this book are independent souls who do not have leaders as such. Wise elders are given the respect they are due as keepers of the flame, but it's notable that they never assume grand titles. Their rituals also tend to be very spontaneous, flexible and improvised to fit the current circumstances.

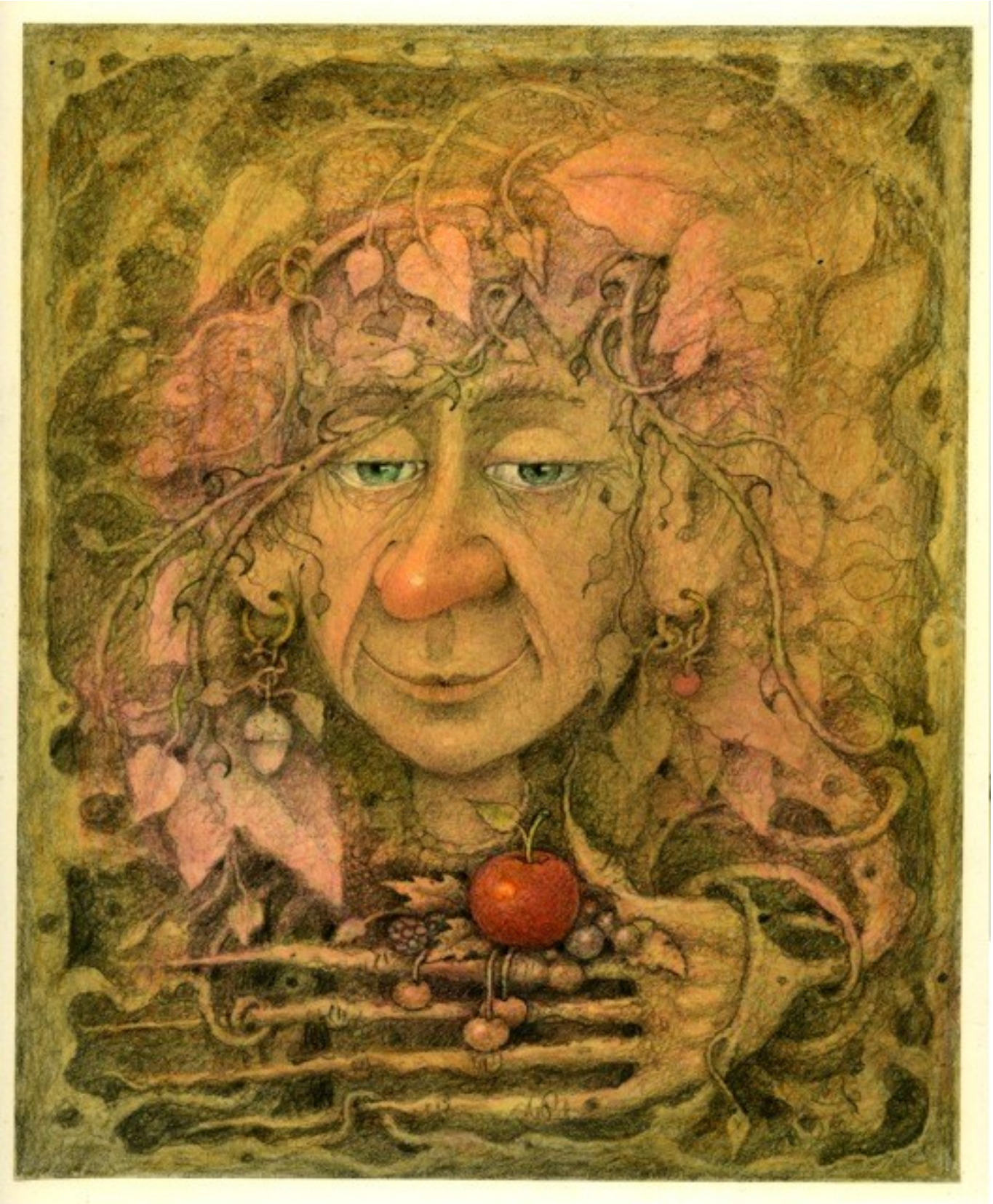
These wise women have been called a variety of names at different times (not all of them polite of course, especially during the grim days of their persecution). 'Hedge witch' is a quite new term that has quickly entered the language and is the one we'll mostly use because it beautifully captures the feel of their profession. 'Green' or 'cottage' witch would do just as well but there's a freshness to 'hedge witch' that fits the reborn enthusiasm for this ancient profession.

Also, it's worth noting here that much of this hedge witch lore was (and is) shared by their male counterparts – the 'cunning men'. In the old days they were often the local blacksmiths, the mystique of whose profession gave them a similar authority. There was no intrinsic rivalry between these groups and many of the cunning men also called themselves witches (as opposed to wizards or warlocks which are something quite different). If midwife and blacksmith, their professions would naturally tend to give their lore a particular slant, but unless there was some personal animosity there was no natural conflict between them.

So, many thanks to the witches who shared their treasures of wisdom so generously in the compiling of this grimoire. It has been a pleasure getting to know such a warm, wise and wonderfully imaginative group of people. Their beliefs have much to offer a world in need of reconnection with nature, and their general philosophy leads to this. One of the most profound and widespread hedge witch teachings is that everyday life is full of mystery and wonder, if only you open your eyes to it. This is why they are so often content with what seem quite humble circumstances in the eyes of the world. They see fairyland all around them, what need have they of palaces or worldly applause?

Wizards and witches have much in common, including crystal balls, pentacles and much of the other colourful paraphernalia of magic. Often it is purely a question of personal taste which title they choose. With the modern resurgence of Wicca more and more males prefer to be called witches rather than wizards or warlocks, but traditionally wizards tended to be male and witches female, and generally speaking their approaches to magic and life have echoed this gender divide.

CHAPTER ONE: POTIONS AND CHARMS



A NOTABLE THING ABOUT hedge witch lore is how little was written down in the old days, and then rarely by the practitioners themselves. Old Mother Shipton of Knaresborough may seem an exception but she never wrote anything herself. All that survives of her lore is a number of prophecies that were recorded well after her death. Some probably are genuine because in her day they were famous enough to come to the notice of King Henry VIII; but from the start many were fabricated to fit events that had already taken place and some of the most famous (iron ships etc.) were concocted in the late nineteenth century. There's no record at all of her potions and spells, for which she was equally famous in her lifetime and for which people were prepared to travel days to her cave near Knaresborough to consult her. The sad fact is that most of what was written about witches in bygone centuries was by their enemies.

The reason for this lack of records is that for most of history this kind of magic was a mainly oral tradition. Hedge witches simply remembered everything they knew, often with the help of ingenious rhymes. Even after writing caught on, their journals of spells and potions and incantations rarely survived much longer than themselves. Unlike wizards who delight in writing absolutely everything down and then filing it away systematically, witches traditionally tended to treat their magical journals just like any other recipe book. That is to say, they knocked loosely around the place getting steadily more battered and torn until they were either buried with the witch or passed on to a successor in tatters, from which she salvaged the beginnings of her own journal. This attitude is changing fast, which can only be a good thing, but still far more wise-women's lore passes by word of mouth than will be found in any library.

Unless clearly stated otherwise, all the potions and spells presented in this book have been tried and tested and vouched for by the obliging hedge witches who passed them along. Wherever possible we have also tried them out, but offer no guarantees because their effectiveness often depends a great deal on the circumstances and the talent with which they are applied. Hedge witchery is as much an art as it is a science. It is also an adventure of the soul that luckily calls for qualities that include honesty and compassion so you can be sure that what you read is all given in good faith. Someone of good intention somewhere has sworn by every item. The purely herbal tonics also work better on some people than others, though no one should find any that we mention toxic. The more magical potions we'll leave to the next chapter. Here you'll find a few of the more practical everyday tonics and remedies hedge witches employ.

ARTHRITIS
Rub the affected area thoroughly with fresh stinging nettles. Also eat raw garlic.

ASTHMA
In the absence of prescribed medication, drink two cups of very strong black coffee.

ATHLETE'S FOOT
Chop up the flower, stem and leaves of a pot marigold (Calendula officinalis) and steep in hot water. Immerse foot when water has cooled.

BOILS
Make a poultice of fresh cow dung.

BRUISES
As the nursery rhyme says – soak brown paper in vinegar and bandage to the bruise.

BURNS
Cover with honey or egg white. If the skin is not broken, try grated potato.

CHESTY COUGHS
Boil 1 oz (25gm) of peeled and crushed liquorice root in water for five minutes and drink as hot as possible.

COLDS
Boil a half pint of cider with a sprig of rosemary in it for fifteen minutes and drink as hot as possible just before going to sleep. Alternatively, hot lemon or orange juice with honey and a drop of whisky; or hot chicken soup with onions, garlic, parsnips, turnips, salt and pepper.

CUTS AND GRAZES
If you are nowhere near any bandages, wrap the wound in spider web. Or, failing that, cover in honey.

CYSTITIS
Drink several cups a day of parsley or elder-leaf tea. Either fresh or dried leaves will do. Brew a couple of teaspoons in boiling water for five or ten minutes and sweeten to taste with brown sugar or honey.

DIARRHOEA
Fresh blackberry juice with nutmeg, cloves, honey and brandy added to taste; or if blackberries are not in season, several cups of raspberry leaf tea.

FLATULENCE
Crush two teaspoons of fennel seeds and stir into a mug of just-boiled milk. Drink when cool enough. Alternatively use four teaspoons of soot.

FRECKLES
Chop up plenty of horseradish and mix with sour milk before applying to the skin.

HICCUPS
Add a teaspoon of sugar to a cup of vinegar and down in one gulp.

INSECT STINGS
Slice a fresh onion in half and apply to the sting. With bee stings make sure the sting is fully removed first. Alternatively make a thick paste of baking soda and water and smear onto the sting. When the pain has gone, apply some lavender oil.

LOSING WEIGHT
Chew fennel leaves.

PREGNANCY
Raspberry leaf tea drunk regularly during the final weeks makes for an easy birth.

POOR MEMORY
Spanish Sage (salvia lavandulaefolia) oil extract ingested in any palatable form sharpens the mind and fends off confusion in old age. English Sage (salvia officinalis) has long been recommended for the same purpose but some people react badly to it. If unable to get oil extract, use generously in cooking along with thyme, lavender and mint

SEX
Sprinkle Thyme in your bathwater to increase your sex drive. Chop finely into bath oil as a gift to your lover.

TRAVEL SICKNESS
Honey in hot water.

Discovering the rarity of old spell books was disappointing at the start of this investigation, but turned out to be less of a drawback than it first seemed. From those that do survive we see that some remedies stay remarkably constant over time without being written down. And why not, because if they work who would want to meddle with them? But often things seem to have worked in the past but no longer, which is a bit of a mystery.

And then there are many remedies which are perhaps best forgotten anyway. Not because they don't work (because they might well do) but simply because most people are too squeamish these days to try them and there are simpler modern alternatives. For example, a baby's wet nappy wiped over the face apparently does wonders for the complexion. Similarly a good old hedge witch remedy for cuts, grazes, eczema and a multitude of stings is to pee on them. Another remedy likely to earn you strange looks from friends (and possibly even a suspicious ring on the doorbell from a health visitor) is to treat nappy rash by packing your baby's nappy with Fuller's Earth, better known as cat litter . . .

You can see the midwives' influence in these remedies and apparently the one for nappy rash is very effective, but you just can't see it catching on nowadays. There are also many cures that use parts of dead animals we'd rather not think about even if we're not actually vegetarian or vegan, which is increasingly the norm for hedge witches. So although it is a shame not to have many old books to open windows onto the lore of the past, perhaps it is not altogether a tragedy.

WITCH'S KITCHEN

WELCOME TO THE WITCH'S KITCHEN. This one is a bit more exotic than you'll usually find these days because, as with their fashion sense, witches' kitchens now often look much the same as anyone else's. You are quite likely to find stainless steel sinks, fitted cupboards, waste-disposal units, blenders, food-mixers and possibly even a microwave (though there is a common hedge witch prejudice against these). It's only when you look closer at the contents of the cupboards and jars that you may begin to suspect that more than ordinary cooking goes on.

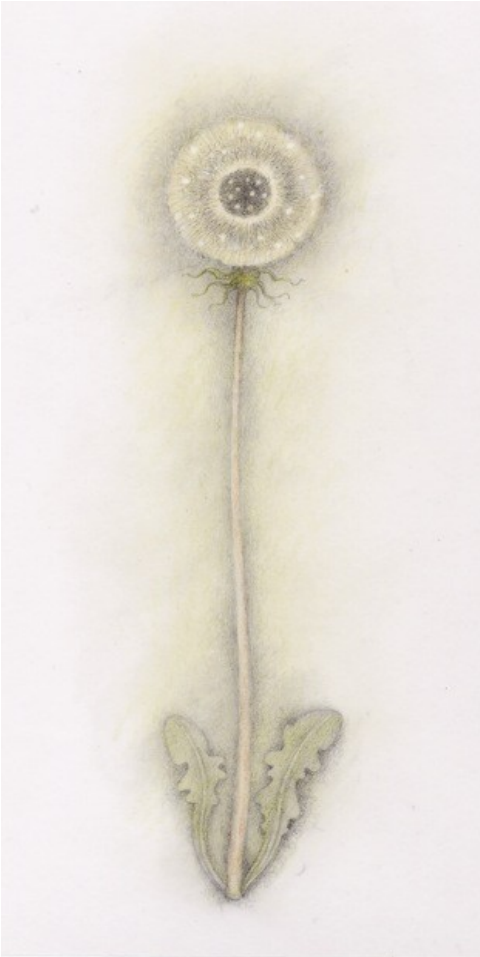
This blending of the ordinary with the magical is very much to be encouraged. It's perfectly feasible to brew magical potions in shiny modern kitchens and this has the benefit of feeding magic back into ordinary cooking and the everyday environment. The kitchen does need to be friendly and welcoming though, and not have the clinical air of an operating theatre. Also most

hedge witches carefully store their more exotic herbs out of immediate reach, to save guests turning themselves into toads at breakfast.

There's no space here to go into great detail but for the curious here are a few simple potions such as a novice hedge witch (or witchlet as some call themselves) would start out with. These are tonics to enhance anyone's life

Dandelion tea for instance is a great general tonic that refreshes the pancreas and digestive system generally, improves the secretion of bile and provides lots of useful minerals such as calcium, potassium and iron. It cleanses the blood and reduces skin complaints such as eczema. Dandelion tea can help reduce swollen joints and lower salt levels in the body, and helps lower blood pressure. All this from a daily cuppa or two that actually taste very pleasant, especially if you add honey or brown sugar.

You can with a bit of searching find proprietary brands of dandelion tea made from organically cultivated and dried leaves. But for most of the year anyone with dandelions growing in the garden can make their own simply by picking fresh leaves and chopping up a couple of teaspoonfuls per cup of boiling water. Stew for five or ten minutes, strain and serve. Be sure the leaves are not likely to have been chemically sprayed and rinse well anyway before chopping, just to be on the safe side. Many hedge witches cultivate a patch of dandelions in their herb gardens just for making tea, as was common in Medieval and Tudor times. Pinching off the flowers both stops them spreading and produces more leaves.



Vervain (*verbena officinalis*) tea is said to be very soothing for people prone to 'nerves'. So if you tend to get stressed and anxious for no good reason, brew 2 to 3 teaspoons of the dried herb in a cup and just feel your troubles melt away. Plus it's a tonic for the digestion, stimulating bile secretion, and it helps prevent the formation of kidney stones.

Also soothing and particularly good for insomnia is cowslip tea (made from the dried petals).

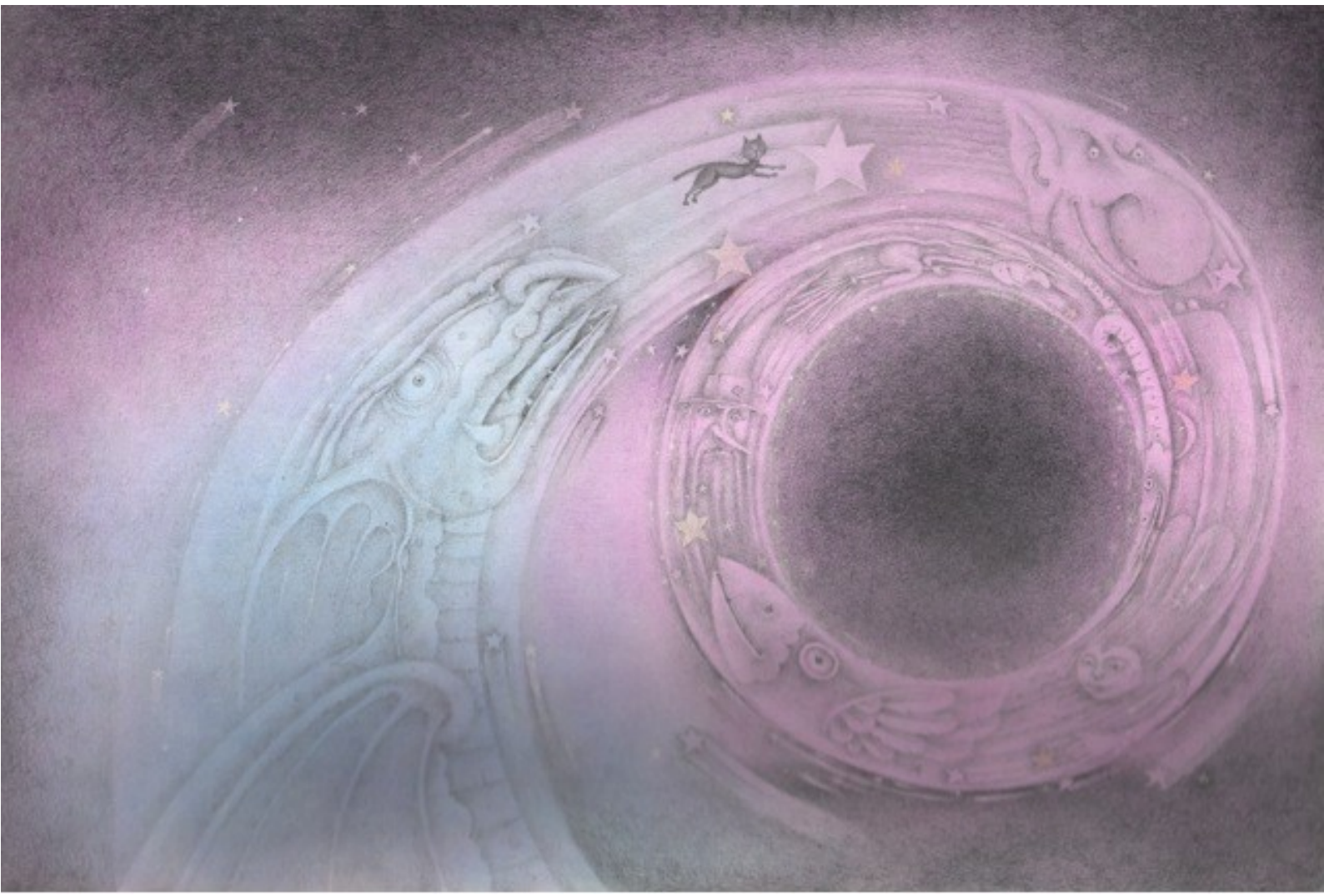
GENERAL TONICS

HERE'S AN OLD RECIPE for a general pick-me-up: soak two free-range eggs in the juice of two lemons till the shells have dissolved. Beat well and strain into one pint (500 ml) of rum. Add a half pound (225 gm) of honey or brown sugar and mix the lot thoroughly until consistent. Then bottle and have a small glassful whenever you feel drained of energy. Not recommended for people who feel tired all the time however, as the rum will get to you in the end . . .

A general tonic for your psychic abilities is to keep plenty of bay leaves around the home or, better still, worn on your person or hung by your bed to stimulate dreams. Bay leaves from the laurel tree are supposed to have been chewed by Apollo's oracle at Delphi and witches have commonly chewed it ever since to enhance their second sight. They are quite bitter though and are more palatable when used as a herb in cooking, preferably while still fresh and green. They can last for up to a year if stored in a dry, cool place, but once they go brown they become increasingly bitter and worthless.

Bay tea is made by infusing a small leaf in boiled water for ten minutes or so, then adding a slice of lemon and honey or brown sugar to taste. Apart from enhancing your psychic talents, bay is a general tonic to the system and a great pick-me-up when recovering from flu. Thyme tea is also very good for this, especially if the fever went to your chest, and has the added bonus of boosting your libido.

In Greek mythology the nymph Daphne turned into a laurel tree to escape Apollo's amorous advances because like Diana, the witches' friend, she had vowed to remain a virgin. Apollo was heartbroken at losing her this way and so adopted the plant as his totem. This is why laurel crowns were awarded to winners at the Pythian Games dedicated to Apollo, and later the Olympic Games too.



Certain mushrooms and toadstools can open human eyes to the invisible presences around them – elves, gnomes, leprechauns and a host of other faery folk – but they are often poisonous in one way or another and it would be reckless to recommend that anyone should experiment with them although, admittedly, hedge witches often tend to be quite adventurous this way. Much safer is to find a stone with a natural hole in it, which many witches find perfectly adequate for viewing the faery world, though it takes more natural psychic talent than most of us possess.

Midwifery is not one of hedge witches' traditional skills much called upon today (unless she has joined the mainstream medical profession, of course) but the stork retains a special place in their affections because of its ancient connection with childbirth, back in the days when mothers very often did go down, in a very real sense, to the gates of death to receive their charge of new life.

THE ABOVE ARE PURELY HERBAL remedies and tonics but of course no self-respecting witch relies just on these because, as they all say, most afflictions of both body and soul are susceptible to magic. Some aren't, and true wisdom is knowing when this is so, but most illnesses can at least be alleviated and helped on their way by magic. Some herbs seem to act on both the physical and psychic planes. Bay leaves for example, besides their medicinal value, are said to remove curses and drive away evil spirits when burned with sandalwood. And then some charms are purely magical, such as the next one.

HEALTH CHARM

HERE'S A CHARM contained within a traditional prayer to St Brigid of Kildare in Ireland, patroness of fire, healing and inspiration among other things.

For if you have a cough, cold or other minor ailment that stubbornly refuses to go away: light a fire and sprinkle some incense or sweet-smelling dried herbs on it to establish a mood. Light a candle of your favourite colour to signify that you are tapping into your spiritual side, then on a piece of paper write this verse:

Bright Brigid's flame, take this malaise
Bring health anew to brighten my days

Then spit as vigorously as you can onto the paper, screw it up and throw it into the flames. Watch closely till it has burned to ashes, repeating the verse all the while either silently or aloud, depending how you feel. If you get the urge to sneeze, it's a healthy sign. Sneeze

vigorously into the flames (though obviously with a degree of caution so as not to set your place on fire) and visualize your germs being drawn away by the smoke. Unless it is a peculiarly stubborn bug you should soon feel that you have a handle on it (rather than it having a handle on you) and it should begin to work its way out of your system.

This charm can also prevent colds if you can catch them early enough, but if you miss that moment there's nothing much that can be done with colds apart from alleviate the symptoms. A popular Scottish hedge witch tonic for colds is whisky with honey and fresh lemon juice in hot water. Just repeat the dose until you either feel better or no longer care about having a cold (though obviously not while driving or looking after children).

Raw garlic is a great general preventative for colds if your social life can bear it. A sweeter-smelling alternative is to take garlic capsules, particularly at the onset of winter when germs come out to play and everyone around you starts to cough and sneeze.

Incidentally, flames come into a lot of hedge witch spells so budding witches should prepare themselves. If you don't have an open fireplace a large flameproof bowl will do, preferably with a slab of non-inflammable material to rest on. Junk shops occasionally have large old ashtrays dating from when smoking was still wildly fashionable, which are ideal; and a kitchen sink is a safe enough place to put it if you want to be absolutely safe. Most hedge witches without a fireplace, though, prepare a corner hung with charms and such a bowl for cremating small things.

POTENCY

A TONIC FOR YOUR LOVE LIFE taken from a collection of folk remedies gathered by Lady Wilde in Ireland and very popular to this day with hedge witches who swear to its potency from personal experience. Unless you very much know what you're doing we suggest buying proprietary brands of the ingredients and sticking to the suggested measures:

In 40 fluid oz (1 litre) of brandy steep:

2 oz (56 gm) cochineal
1 oz (28 gm) gentian root
¼ oz (7 gm) saffron
¼ oz (7 gm) snakeroot (*Aristolochia clematitis* or Birthwort)
¼ oz (7 gm) 'salt of wormwood' (*Artemisia absinthium*)
the rind of 10 oranges

Take a small glass or two as required.

With many hedge witch potions it is hard to be sure how much of the effect is medicinal and how much depends on magic. Many are purely pharmaceutical in their effect and have formed the basis of modern scientific medicines. In fact researchers are increasingly looking to folk remedies for inspiration and it's amusing to see some once much-derided treatments making a comeback, such as leeches. Even maggots have found new favour as a very practical means of cleaning out potentially gangrenous wounds that would otherwise require painful and tricky surgery, though we are not suggesting that amateurs try it. With the next few suggestions it is hard to know whether their effectiveness is more physical or magical.

WARTS AND VERRUCAS

WART CHARMS HAVE TRADITIONALLY been one of the staple demands on hedge witches because warts are strangely susceptible to mood and magic, especially during the hormonally turbulent years of adolescence. Here's one that's been proven to work even on sceptics:

Soak a piece of raw steak or unsmoked bacon in vinegar for a day or so, then rub your warts very thoroughly with it. Run round the outside of your house with the bacon three times at midnight, preferably under a full moon. If this is not physically possible because you live in a terrace or skyscraper, trail the hand holding the bacon completely around the limits of your apartment, it has the same effect. Then bury the meat in your garden or window box, and in the time it takes to decompose your warts will disappear. Most probably.

Another popular witch remedy for warts is to rub the white juice from a dandelion stem into them regularly until they have gone. You could combine this with the steak charm if you are really keen to get rid of them, only you won't then know which cure did the trick.

As for verrucas, while writing this book I had the luck to try a very simple cure that was astonishingly successful. They had plagued our adolescent daughter for years and the soles and sides of her feet were almost completely covered in verrucas that had resisted all the standard treatments short of surgery. The remedy suggested by a helpful witch in the neighbourhood was simply this – bandage a piece of banana skin to the affected area and leave for as long as possible. In this case it usually meant overnight, by which time the banana skins had turned delightfully black and squidgy. Within a couple of weeks the verrucas had started to clear and within a couple of months they vanished completely and afterwards showed no sign of returning.

The interesting thing about both these personal wart and verruca experiments was that the subjects approached the test with what can best be described as curious scepticism. They were

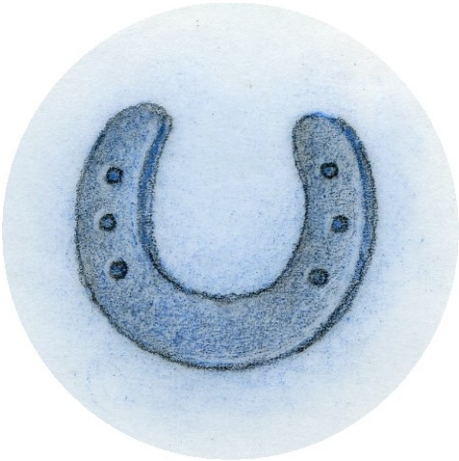
mildly enthusiastic but did not seriously expect results, and certainly not the sudden and complete disappearance of their long-standing problems, as did happen.

Hedge witches are largely responsible for the popular belief that touching toads gives you warts. It's totally untrue of course and was a rumour spread simply to protect the gentle creatures. It has been very successful too because even today many people shrink from picking up toads, even if they don't really believe the bit about the warts.

TALISMANS

ANOTHER POPULAR KIND of charm is an object believed to attract good fortune, or else keep bad luck at bay – a talisman in fact. As with spells, there are no end of these and we're not even going to attempt a comprehensive list, but here is what hedge witches have to say about a few of the most popular.

HORSESHOES



MUCH OF THE MYSTIQUE of horseshoes stems from their crescent shape, reminiscent of the moon and hence Diana, or more properly Hecate, and enchantment. They're also lucky because horses are sacred to the Celtic witch goddess Epona, and because they are made of iron, which has magical properties. For related reasons horseshoe nails are also lucky to carry on your person or have fashioned into jewellery.

Horseshoes are obviously much less common than they were a century and more ago, but rarity has apparently increased their magical properties, so here are a few of the traditional superstitions concerning horseshoes. None of these apply to mule shoes, however, which are considered very unlucky by hedge witches because of the poor creatures' infertility.

When you come across a horseshoe by chance, it means good luck if the points are facing towards you and bad luck if they are facing away. The bad luck can be averted by spitting on the horseshoe and throwing it away over your head (checking first to make sure there's no-one behind you, of course). The good luck can be reinforced by picking the horseshoe up by a prong and throwing it away over your left shoulder, unless you want to take it home. If you do, hang it with the points facing up, to stop your good luck draining away. Some say you should also carry the shoe upright all the way home, but that is possibly going too far. Though to be on the safe side . . .

The luckiest place to hang a horseshoe is usually considered to be above or beside an outside door, but anywhere else will still bring good fortune. Hanging it by your bed will ward off nightmares and reflect any curses or plain bad-will being directed towards you back at the sender. As you nail up the shoe you could try reciting this verse contributed by a North American witch:

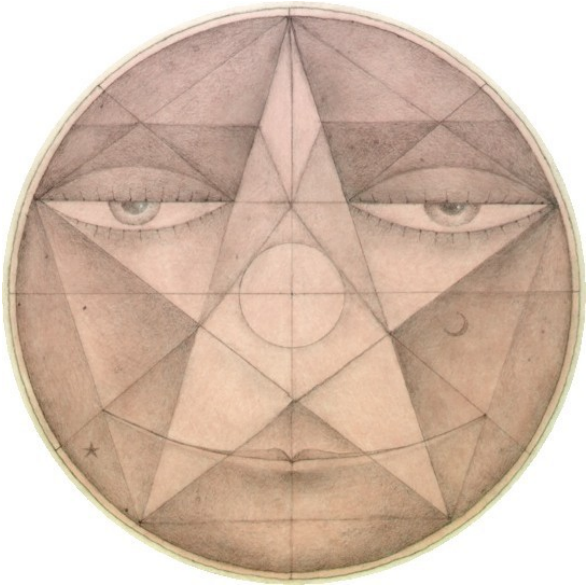
Spring, winter, summer, fall
Pin good fortune to this wall.
Summer, autumn, winter, spring
Bad luck to its sender bring.

PENTAGRAMS AND PENTACLES

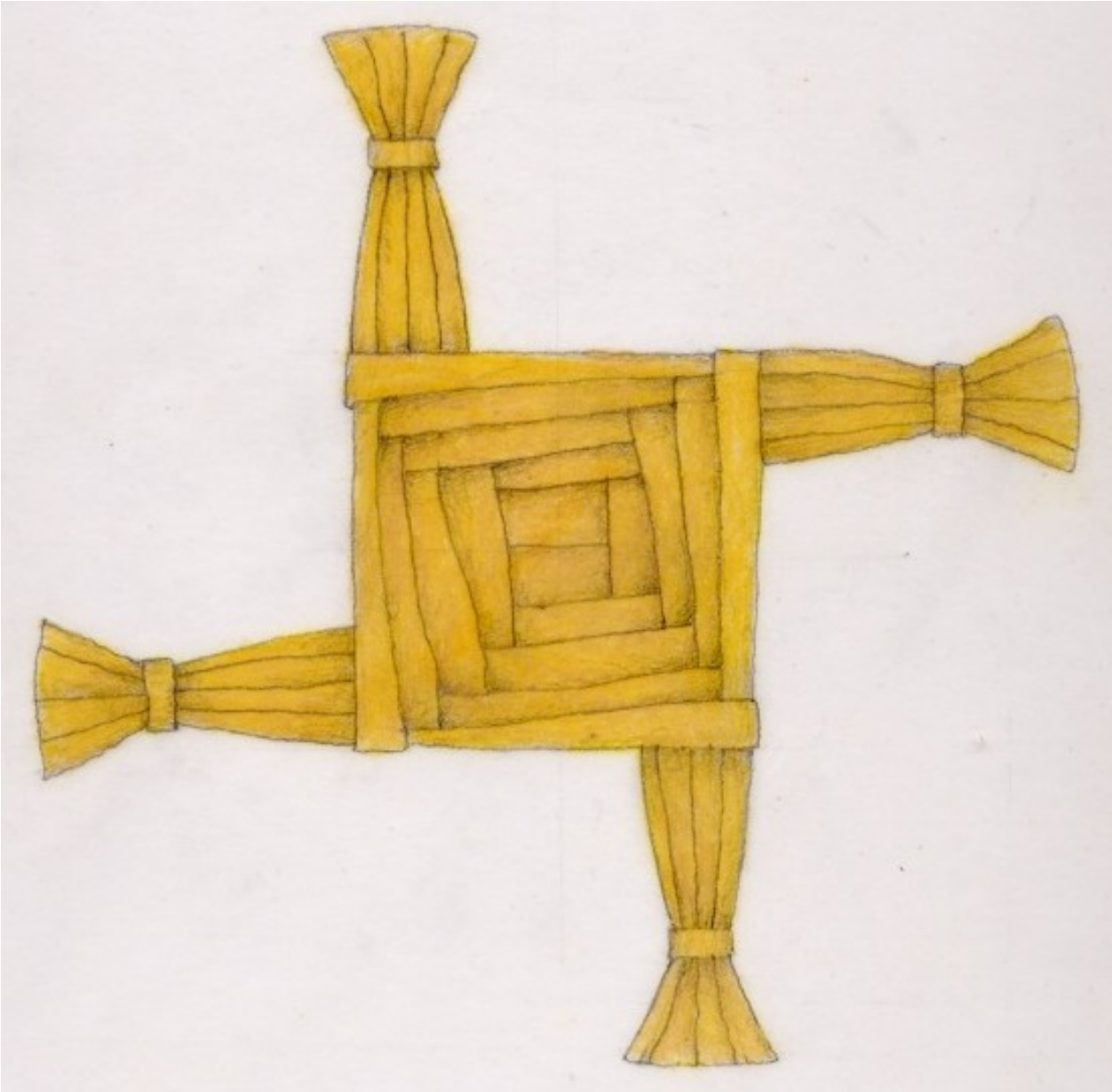
Pentagrams are five-pointed stars while pentacles are the same but with a circle enclosing the points. Both are among the most ancient amulets used to conjure magic and fend off evil, and are as popular as ever with witches today. Strangely, they are popularly linked more with black than white magic, but there is no reason for this. It only comes from a general hostility towards all forms of magic.

The pentacle is a magic symbol for many reasons. Firstly it represents the human form with its five extremities. It also represents human curiosity, forever pushing at the boundaries of the unknown. The five points represent the four usual elements plus spirit or the Quintessence, so it is an assertion that there is a spiritual dimension to life i.e. magic. In witch lore it is equally linked with the earth because when the apple of Eden was sliced through, there was a five-pointed star at its heart, just as in most apples today. Some witches say the five points also represent the four stages of life plus death, and are linked by the circle to show that this is a cycle that is endlessly repeated, as in nature's seasons.

A simple witch charm to help the success of any written proposal is to wet your finger with your tongue and trace a pentacle on the page.



BRIGID'S CROSS



Another popular witch talisman is Brigid's Cross. Brigid's distinction is to be both a Christian saint and a pagan goddess. Before St Patrick in Ireland she was the triple goddess of fire, healing and fertility. Then after the country's adoption of Christianity there arose a great saint of the same name and talents. At her convent in Kildare, one of the old goddess's sacred places, she assumed the ancient goddess's place in the people's affections and was probably seen by them as a fresh incarnation to give her blessing to the new faith. Along with Patrick and Columba, she became one of the three patron saints of Ireland, and is still much loved there. The usual story of St Brigid's cross is that she wove it from rushes as an aid to converting her pagan chieftain father to the faith, but the chances are it was the goddess's symbol long before that.

CHAPTER TWO: SPELLS AND ENCHANTMENTS

‘Fillet of a fenny snake,
In the cauldron boil and bake;
Eye of newt, and toe of frog,
Wool of bat, and tongue of dog
And now about the cauldron sing,
Like elves and fairies in a ring’

MACBETH Act 4

MACBETH IS A FAMOUSLY UNLUCKY PLAY in theatre land and even the least superstitious actors are still wary of mentioning it by name. Tradition says the reason is that Shakespeare upset the witches of his day by his portrayal of them in his play, so they put a curse on it. The play certainly didn’t help their cause in Scotland at the time, where people were all too eager anyway to accuse lonely old women of raising storms, curdling milk and all kinds of other mischief and send them to a horrible end.

Most spells that white witches cast today however are much less colourful than those in Shakespeare, and much easier on animals. Probably this is due to an evolution in hedge witchery away from the use of animal parts anyway, in line with the general trend towards vegetarianism. Well over half those we spoke to were vegetarian or vegan and it looks like becoming the norm in future, though not essential for the practice of white magic.

What is essential is the belief that there is more going on in the world than meets the eye, that life is not just a sequence of accidents and purely material causes and effects. There is a danger of self-deception in this. Some people are prone to seeing causes and connections where there are none, but learning to tell the difference between illusion and magic is part of becoming a good witch. Magic sometimes happens, and sometimes things happen purely by chance and for no good reason at all. Learning to spot the difference lies at the heart of mature witchcraft.

This doesn’t necessarily mean belonging to a religion. Most witches we spoke to are broadly speaking pagans in that they honour a wide range of ancient goddesses and gods. But there are some who are basically Christian and others who have no faith at all in a personal afterlife, while still believing in magic and the importance of having a spiritual agenda. That is the one thing they all have in common – a belief that the most important things in life are non-material and that paying attention to them is the key to fulfilment and happiness.

THE CHARMS MENTIONED SO FAR can be tried by anyone and, as with the wart and verruca charms, you don't necessarily even have to believe in them first for success. The spells that follow do require more conviction though. With them we are venturing into true white (or green) witch magic.

Hedge witches generally love the outdoors but most also have a personal sanctuary at home where they can perform spells and divination, a room or corner of their home where they feel particularly calm and able to slip easily into the required mood. As with the discreet way most modern witches dress, it may not be obvious to a casual visitor. There is unlikely to be an elaborate altar or anything like that, but their sanctuaries will nevertheless be staked out carefully with potent combinations of talismans that pass for fanciful decorations. Cats have an unerring instinct for such quiet corners and, given half a chance, will often be found curled up there.

This accords with the general hedge witch attitude that what goes on inside is more important than outward show. In building a sanctuary the ingredients and their relationship with each other are important, but they need not shout it out to the casual observer. All you need to create a sanctuary are a few sketchy reminders of what is important. A tiny silver pentacle is as potent as a large one to a hedge witch, and things of purely personal significance often contain as much magic as the better-known occult symbols. The hedge witch's true sanctuary is an inner space that they can go to at any time simply by closing their eyes wherever they happen to be. It just helps to also have a physical place set aside in the home for communing with magic.

To create such a space there is no need to work to a plan. In fact this is probably counter-productive. The first step is simply to choose a spot that feels comfortable and quiet. Then it can be marked out as the mood takes you with tokens of what is personally magical to you. The whole point of hedge witch magic is to get in tune with your own instinct for it, so everyone's sanctuary will be different. But almost certainly magical symbols will play a part, so a good starting point is to choose a personal favourite, hang it up in the quiet spot and just let your imagination point the way from there.

Besides having a quiet place in which to do magic, it is also important to know your own moods because they will colour whatever you do. One of the characteristics of a good witch is good self-knowledge and they are fond of the saying: 'know yourself and you will know your enemy'.

Poisonous moods taint whatever you do and can lead to spells backfiring. Magic seems to work best when there is least self-interest, which is why hedge witches tend to be better at helping other people than themselves. Reasonable self-interest seems permitted – keeping a roof over your head and arriving at satisfactory love and home lives – but greed, envy, vengefulness and

all the other human vices cloud a witch's perceptions as much as anyone else's and only lead to trouble when allowed to infect the magic. Good hedge witches are also good people.

Having got all the conditions and disclaimers out of the way, let's have a look at some spells. Again, we're not aiming for a comprehensive selection because there are plenty of spell books in the shops and reams to be found on the internet. These are just a few particularly interesting or highly recommended ones that happened to come our way from first or second hand contacts. We've gone into some detail with witch bottles because they are both fascinating and a rather neglected area of witch lore. But first we'll start with a look at moneymaking spells that, human nature being what it is, are one of the first things people ask about in magic.

MONEYMAKING SPELLS

THERE ARE COUNTLESS MONEYMAKING SPELLS in circulation – ancient, modern and somewhere in between – but sadly we were unable to find a single one that gave real evidence of working. In fact, while trying a few out we came to wonder if there is not in fact a basic contradiction between white magic and even trying to get easy riches. This is not to say there are no wealthy white witches, because there certainly are, but their riches seem to be incidental to their magic and certainly not the result of deliberately conjuring up winning lottery numbers with a spell.

So sadly, hedge witches seem to be no luckier than anyone else when it comes to gambling. In fact the general opinion of the witches who informed this book is that there is almost a contradiction between even wanting to be very rich and white magic, whose main aim is to tune in to the natural currents of life. Wealth, they say, is almost always a barrier to this. The genuinely poor of course gain in every way from suddenly being able to make ends meet, but beyond that money is often just an increasing barrier against both normal life and fellow humans.

In white magic the best that can be done is to open yourself to the possibilities that arise in your life, which may include that of great wealth, but probably not. Wealth to a white witch usually means being rich enough to pursue their chosen life and interests without too many distractions. The benefits of white magic are mostly non-material – happiness, serenity and a sense of purpose. So rather than try one of the many moneymaking spells in circulation and getting into all kinds of personal contradictions, you'd be better off with a more general good luck charm. These open one's eyes to the possibilities for happiness and fulfilment that constantly present themselves in life. This one came highly recommended.

GOOD LUCK CHARM

FOR GENERAL GOOD LUCK and a happy home, especially if you've just moved into it, here's what you do on the first Tuesday night of a new moon – lay out on the carpet around you four small pieces of yellow cloth, either plain or with some pretty floral pattern. Onto each cloth place sprigs of basil or vervain (*verbena officinalis*), a silver coin, some ears of corn, and some pink or red rose petals. These stand for health, wealth (in moderation), imagination and love.

Tie each cloth into a bag with crimson thread and bury one at each corner of your home. If burying is impossible, then hide them in some other way. You can even 'hide' them quite openly by sewing them into sweet-smelling pomanders.

As you position each bag, say three times this old British rhyme:

Growing moon please bless this home
Drive away all ill and harm

LOVE SPELLS

LOVE POTIONS, CHARMS AND SPELLS have always been among the most popular requests of wise-women and there are countless different ones in existence, many dating back to ancient times. Here are just a few of the most popular. A curious fact that many hedge witches have noticed is that partners later almost never complain when they learn about having first been snared with a love spell. They usually take it as some kind of compliment.

We have not included any of the more commanding spells that are in circulation though, because if they do work, it is debatable that they are truly white magic. Forcing people to do anything against their natural inclination is very questionable and will backfire in all kinds of

unpleasant ways – especially in affairs of the heart. It is also worth bearing in mind the old adage 'beware of what you wish for because it just might come true'. A healthy love spell just opens a person's eyes to the potentials that exist.

Most love potions are more than simple herbal or chemical mixtures and depend to a great extent on the right mood being conjured first. Some are even pure spells and depend upon it completely. But here are a few simple tricks anyone can try because the only magical mood required is that of being in love.

If you are in love with someone who seems unaware of your existence, or only sees you as a casual friend, here are a few things you can try:

GETTING THEIR ATTENTION

THE SIMPLEST LOVE CHARM of all is to write your name on a piece of rice paper, kiss it moistly and dissolve it in your loved one's food or drink. Food is safer but coffee and tea work well enough. Better still, write a poem on the paper as well expressing your deepest feelings for

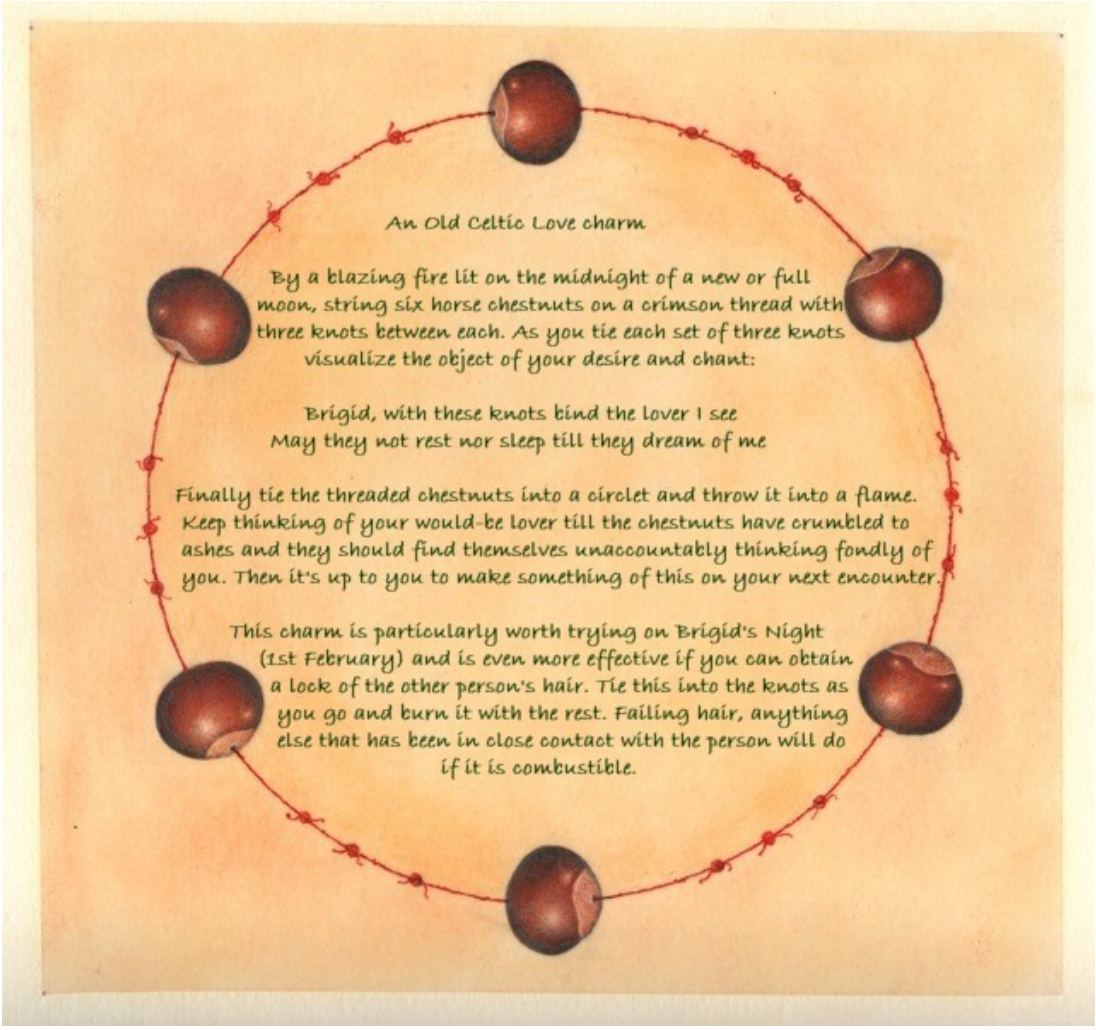
the person, or a conjuring spell like the one below. And if you really want to make sure, write it in your own blood.

In the name of the sweetest joy of all
I conjure you . . . (name) . . . to hear my call
Come cast your eyes on me this day
And feel the love I send your way

This is a variation on one of the most ancient of all love charms, which is to introduce some of your own bodily fluids into the desired one's food or drink. Alternatively, keep a piece of meat in your underwear for at least a day and then introduce it into your loved one's food.

LAYING A TRAIL

TAKE A RELAXED BATH with aromatic bath oil and pink candles burning. Bottle some of the water and after you next meet the person, lay a trail of droplets from that place to your home. When you get home, light a pink candle and meditate on the person for a while. If at all possible, slip three laurel leaves into their pocket first and apparently the power of this spell is doubled.



If you have no particular person in mind but just feel lonely, do the chant anyway and then keep your eyes open for strangers (or possibly even friends that you have not previously taken very seriously) who have a fresh sparkle about them.

The point of the once popular custom of giving a lock of hair to a lover was that it was not just a keepsake but also an expression of trust, because hair can be used in a number of potentially harmful spells that everyone once knew. It showed not only that you trusted them not to harm you, but that they could also trust you not to do anything that might make them regret their choice.

INCIDENTALLY, IF YOUR SPELLS WORK it is worth remembering that, according to many hedge witches, Friday is the least lucky day of the week for a first date. It may be dedicated to Venus (or Freya, her Germanic counterpart) and is a good day or night for casting love spells, but not for exploring a possible new love. Choose any other weekday for a first date and save Fridays and weekends for later.

Finally, if it all goes wrong and you end up with a broken heart, collect some bittersweet herb (*Solanum dolcamara*) and keep it under your pillow or hanging by the bed. You can also sew some into a small bag and wear it around your neck. The effects are apparently more herbal than magical and many witches swear by it to at least numb the pain till time has worked its healing magic. Handle it with care though because it is toxic when swallowed.

WITCH BOTTLES

ANYONE WISHING TO BECOME a witch would be well advised to first lay in some protection against jealous rivals and ill-wishers in general. No matter how kind your own intentions, you are quite likely to attract the attention of other witches with fewer scruples. Magic attracts some strange characters. Many are drawn to it for the worst possible reasons and might see you as trespassing on their territory. Other people are just hostile to any hint of magic and their plain ill-will can be as bad as a curse. So some kind of protection is advised.

Luckily there is an ancient and well-tested method of deflecting all kinds of malice and bad will that a good witch can attract – the witch bottle! Witch bottles are strangely neglected these days but for hundreds of years they were very popular across rural Europe, particularly two or three centuries ago. In England particularly, most country households had at least one buried somewhere and they still regularly turn up during the demolition or renovation of old buildings. Over two hundred are in known museum collections and these probably represent just a tiny fraction of those that have been found over the years and tossed away as rubbish; and an even smaller fraction of those that still lie waiting to be discovered.

The most popular places to hide witch bottles used to be under the hearthstone or doorstep. Not only were these spots least likely to be disturbed in a peasant cottage, but they were also the main openings by which hostility might enter. Bottles were also often plastered into the walls, hidden in attics and buried in gardens or lonely, far distant places to mislead anyone on your trail.

So if you are a new witch just finding your way, before you start gathering and trying out any more advanced spells than those we've mentioned so far, try this one next. Or even if you are experienced but have never heard of witch bottles before, give it a try and test the benefits for yourself.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witch jars often had faces stamped in the glass or stoneware. In Germany and the Low Countries they were called Bellarmine jars after the unpopular 16th century Cardinal who first appeared on them in the Netherlands, but equivalents were made all over Europe. The attraction of having a face on the bottle was that it would help trick a hostile spell or wish into thinking it has found its target and then getting trapped inside as in a rat-trap. These bottles were also popularly used for burying money, with spells cast on them to deflect treasure-hunters.

The first step in making a witch bottle is to find a suitable container. There's no need for it to be particularly special, it could be any bottle or jar that comes to hand, it should however be made of a natural substance like glass or clay. If you can find something special though, it will add potency to the charm so maybe it's worth taking the time to scour some junk shops for something old and quaint. It also helps if it has a wide opening, but the main requirements are that it is sturdy and can be firmly sealed. Having found your container, the next step is to decide what to put in it, and when and where you are going to hide it.

The idea of a witch bottle is that it will attract and trap hostile enchantments by tricking them into believing they have found their target i.e. you. The principle is almost the same as with voodoo dolls, but with the reverse intent. The bottle is meant to represent you so some of your personal fluids have to go into it. Most commonly in the old days this was urine, with which the bottle is half filled. Next add some hair and maybe nail-clippings or even blood if you feel seriously threatened. Blood is of course the most potent substance of all that you could use for this kind of magic (which is why vampires are so keen on it) but, judging by the old witch bottles that have been scientifically analysed, our forbears do not seem to have considered it essential. However, if you happen to cut yourself while preparing your bottle, well, it would be silly not to take advantage of it for some added potency.

Between them your ingredients will create a potent decoy or simulacrum of you on the magical plane. These days you are unlikely to find a jar with a face on it, but you could maybe draw a simple face on a piece of wood and add it to the mix. Opinions are mixed over whether you should include a photograph of yourself. Some say it adds strength, others that it makes no difference and a few warn that it is positively dangerous in case the bottle falls into the wrong hands. You'll have to make up your own mind on this.

The next ingredients you need are some snares to trap the hostility being directed against you. These can be thorns, bent pins or nails, barbed wire, fish-hooks, anything sharp and snagging in fact. Plus you can add a tangled ball of sewing thread, which is apparently very effective too. Also, add a handful of rice or plant seeds of any kind. For reasons that would take far too long to explain, hostile spells and spirits can't resist seeds because they each represent a possible blossoming of life.

This is all you need to make your witch bottle. Some witches also add Deadly Nightshade and other potentially lethal herbs, and these are supposed to help if you know how to handle them safely, but they are not essential.

When you have all the materials to hand, choose a time to make the bottle and a place to bury it. The best time is at midnight on a night between the new and full moons. As to the best place to hide or bury the bottle, well, the first requirement is that it should be undisturbed for as long as possible, so if it can be plastered into the walls or hidden under the floor as in the old days that would be perfect, though modern buildings don't usually lend themselves to this. The bottle is best buried in the garden, or some similar place important to you.

Some witches prefer to bury bottles away from their homes anyway, saying that the act of burying it creates enough of a link for magical purposes and has the advantage of distracting curses well away from where they live. But trust your own feelings on this. As to the rituals required, again trust your own feelings. The point about hedge witchery is that it is more about getting in tune with your own natural instincts than following rigid prescriptions (except of course when dealing with potentially dangerous herbs).

Bottles are used by witches for many purposes. Walt Disney's Little Mermaid is pure fiction but when Ursula the sea witch traps lost souls in jars she is drawing on an ancient tradition that includes genies trapped in brass lamps. In the Balkans a century or two ago, vampire hunters (a perfectly respectable profession in those days and one that often passed down through families that claimed descent from vampires themselves) often used to trap and seal vampires in bottles that they then buried in remote places they were sure would not be disturbed. Thorns and tangles of thread were among the means they used to trap the vampires. Also seeds like grains of rice because apparently vampires cannot resist stopping to count them.

REMOVING ENEMIES FROM YOUR LIFE

WITCHES ALSO USE BOTTLES and jars for a variety of other purposes. Here is how a witch bottle can be used to encourage bad neighbours to move away. You should first make sure though that your problems with them are more than at least half their fault, because otherwise it is a misuse of white magic. But assuming that is the case, here is what you do:

On a night of the waning moon, write the name of your enemy on a piece of paper along with their birth date and/or astrological sign if you know these. Also write down some of the grievances you have against them, weighing each one in your conscience to be sure they are justified. Place the paper in a bottle along with some vinegar and as many as possible of the following: a photo of the person, a lock of hair, anything personal that they have touched or, failing this, some dirt from outside their front door or gate. Take the bottle to the nearest river and throw it in, and they should soon unaccountably find themselves daydreaming of living somewhere else.

GOSSIP

BESIDES CURSES AND EVIL SPELLS, witch bottles are also useful for warding off the effects of malicious gossip, something witches have always attracted. These days they are less likely to end up on a ducking stool or blazing stake, but hostile neighbours can still make life very uncomfortable if they choose, and gossip can be a vicious weapon.

True gossip is the nectar of life and the oil of its complex mechanism. Natural gossip is what binds a community and creates its unique identity, but it can easily turn sour. Some people are artists at manipulating gossip to their own ends and they can become a real menace if you get onto their wrong side. Curiously enough it takes a certain natural witchy talent to do this even if the practitioners themselves deny it. Sometimes a witch bottle is not enough to counter this kind of malice, in which case here's another spell that is popularly said to do the trick.

If you know the person leading the gossip, see if you can obtain a photograph of them. Failing this, take a black piece of paper on a night of the waning moon, draw a stylised face on it in pencil and inscribe their initials below it. Then light a black candle and meditate for a while on the person and all you know of the bad talk that has been circulating. When you feel ready, carefully drip wax from the candle on the mouth of the image, while repeating three times:

Let this talk be silenced
Let this chatter cease
A hex on those who spread it
Until I get some peace

Then screw up the paper and bury it in damp ground. As the paper decays, so will the effects of the gossip. Many witches swear to the effectiveness of this spell and other similar ones, and say there is no need to do anything else about the gossip, least of all try to counter directly. Ignore what is being said and carry on about your business as usual. Bear no malice against any who believed the unkind rumours and you will find the whole affair drifts into the past and is forgotten.

If you don't know who is spreading the gossip, carry out the same ritual but draw several faces on the paper without initials. This is always recommended anyway if you are in any doubt at all about who is trying to do you harm.

FLYING AND SHAPE-SHIFTING

WHILE ON THE SUBJECT OF pure magic, let's take a look at the fascinating topics of flying and shape shifting since they are inextricably linked with witchery. We are not about to recommend either activity, or spell out how they are achieved, because these activities can be genuinely dangerous, but there's no harm in glancing at how witches in the past have claimed to do them.

There are a variety of means that witches use to fly. Broomsticks are of course by far their most famous form of transport, and are the way most witches travel in fiction; but real witches more usually claim to fly by leaving their bodies in a form of astral travelling. Or else they enter into,

or take the shape of, birds. Some can apparently do this spontaneously but more often they employ potent herbs like henbane, aconite, hemlock or belladonna (Deadly Nightshade).

Henbane is the main ingredient of some of the most potent flying potions, mixed with oil and applied as an ointment under the arms or between the legs. As few as four leaves or a dozen seeds can, however, be fatal or send the user into a permanent coma so we're not recommending anyone try it without expert supervision.

THESE HERBS WERE also used to enter the bodies of cats, hares and other creatures for travelling abroad at night and medical evidence suggests that some can induce at least the illusion of flight and travel. In the case of aconite this is often by inducing a near (and slightly too near in some cases, of course) death experience. Sharp flints steeped in aconite were once called 'elf darts' or 'witch darts' and were a popular defence against werewolves, hence the plant's other name of Wolfbane.

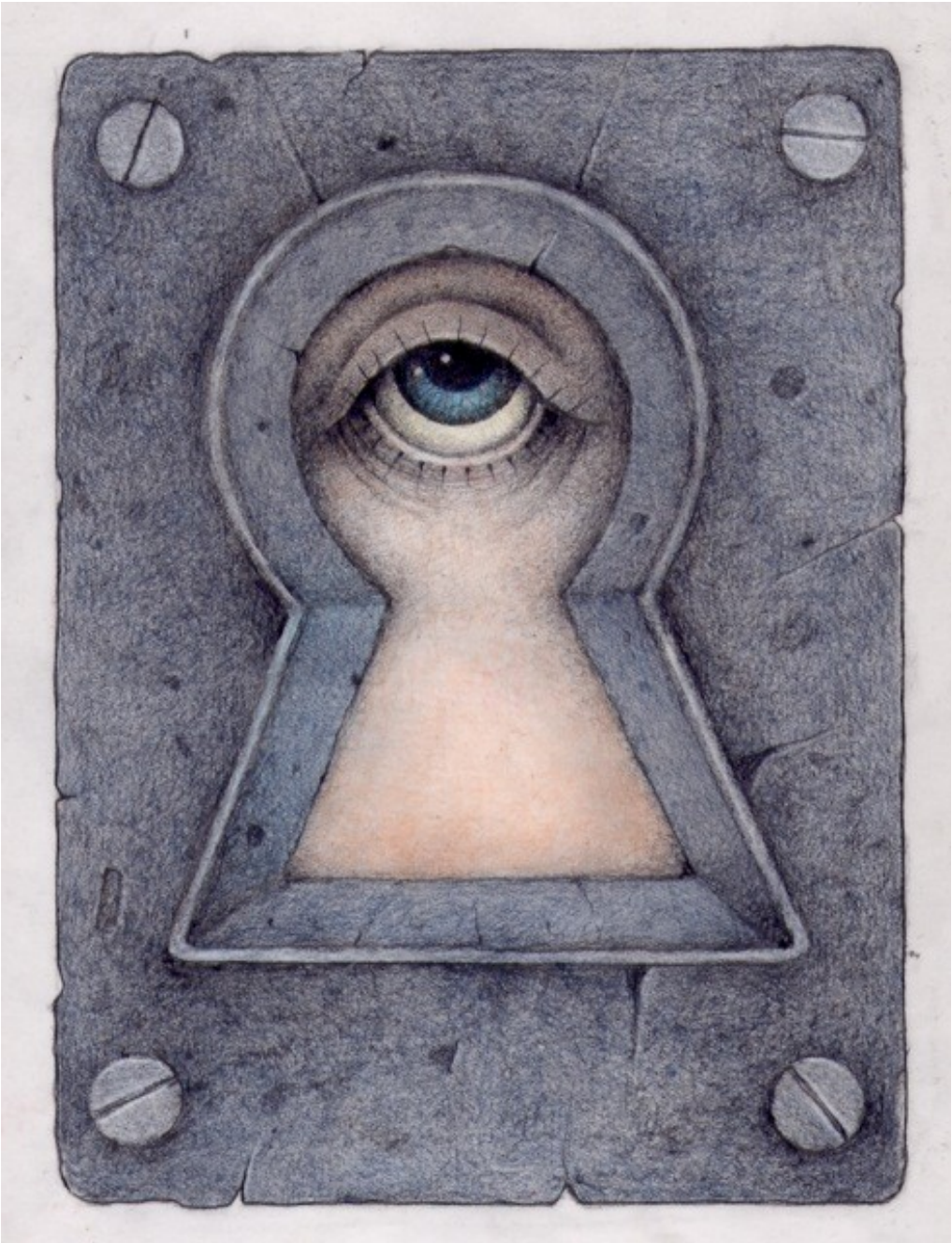
Belladonna is less dangerous and is even useful in modern medicine but is still not even to be handled by amateurs because it can get into your system just through touching it. Flying potions are often made from these herbs by mixing them with fat and rubbing this into the skin, though the popular notion in the bad old days that baby fat was used was just a calumny spread by witch-hunters.

The Harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*) has often been called the witches' flower, especially in Scotland where it is supposed to have been an ingredient of a shape-shifting potion that transformed them into hares.

ALTHOUGH IT ALL SOUNDS very reckless now, such spirit journeys have always been a vital part of shamanic initiation and experience worldwide, and hedge witches are of course the shamans' direct descendants.

CHAPTER THREE: FORTUNE TELLING

HEDGE WITCHES ENJOY A GOOD GOSSIP as much as anyone but tend to find heated, drawn-out arguments a tedious waste of time. Most of them anyway, there are exceptions but the majority of witches seem to prefer to make their point with a direct example or pithy saying, of which they have a vast stock to suit every occasion. In fact that is one of their talents – coining witty phrases that make the point without need of further argument. So they are responsible for many country proverbs that have passed into general use, but they also have some that are peculiar to them, or certainly some we've not heard anywhere else, such as: 'Choose a safe place to free the caged bird'.



Or: 'the young rush round every corner to see what comes next. The old look carefully first'.

Or: 'Every car on the scrap heap was once someone's pride and joy'.

Or: 'Not saying a thing is better than saying it badly.'

Or: 'You know you've had a good holiday when you're glad to be home again.'

Often when they use such sayings, hedge witches are simply repeating what they have heard from others. Their minds are full of sayings and stories appropriate to almost any occasion, but they also invent new ones as necessary and without drawing attention to the fact. So what may sound like an ancient proverb might have been coined on the spot. And what does it matter as long as the saying fits the circumstances? Witches tend not to share the urge of wizards to quote authorities; they prefer to be their own best authority.

But on the whole hedge witches are not much given to preaching and telling others what to do. Being averse to taking orders themselves, they don't particularly like dispensing them to others. They prefer to point people in the direction of finding their own solutions through fortune-telling or dream interpretation, the beauty of dreams being that they are direct messages from the dreamer's own inner self.

DREAMS

THE PROBLEM WITH DREAMS is that most people find them incomprehensible, a jumble of images and events whose internal logic collapses upon awaking, however dramatic and significant they seem at the time. This is normal. There is an art to understanding the symbolism of dreams which can take a lifetime to master, but it's not completely necessary. Dreams can still be enormously helpful guides to life even if you don't quite understand their language.

The first thing to realize is that you don't need to understand every single dream you have, which is why they mostly get forgotten. If you tried to remember and understand all your dreams you'd never have time to do anything else, which would make life pretty pointless. Dreams do perform a necessary function of mental hygiene each night, but then so does your digestive system. You don't particularly want to be aware of it; you just want it to get on with its job.

Recurring dreams though, do need attention. If you keep dreaming a particular situation it means your subconscious is trying to tell you something. You have some underlying issue that needs addressing. Some knowledge of symbols can help unravel what it is but the main point is that you should try to keep the memory of that dream fresh in your mind. Just doing this will give it a chance to do its work. It will shape the choices you make as you go along and bring the matter to the surface.

It's not just recurring dreams though. Any time you wake from a powerful dream and it lingers in the mind it's worth holding onto. It might provide the key to your day. It's no good trying to talk to anyone else about it though, that is a famous conversation killer and anyway the

language of the dream is personal to you. You may not quite understand it but it will be nagging at the edges of your understanding and getting some of its message across.

It is not necessary to be an expert to unravel the meaning of dreams. Simple common sense will often do. For instance in the above case if you know the term 'one-eyed' meaning having a lack of perspective, you will know that this represents a witch who is too focussed on some goal. Also she is walking on clouds without wings or a broomstick or any other means of staying aloft, which means that she is detached from the earth and reality. So a witch dreaming of this apparition needs to slow down, get in touch with her roots and pay attention to the people around her.

THE KEY THING TO REMEMBER about dreams, say the witches, is that they try and compensate for whatever is lacking in your normal waking attitude to life. So if you are generally overconfident, you are quite likely to dream of disaster. If you are under-confident, you will have dreams of shining success and popularity. If you are complacent about your love life when really your partner is carrying on (or thinking about it) with someone else – well, your instincts will definitely try and warn you with worrying dreams. The same is true of life in general. Our instincts pick up far more than we are aware of and often the only way they can pass the information on is through dreams. Even if you can't work out exactly what the warning is about, the proper reaction to a worrying dream is to be on the alert for trouble, then whatever shape it takes you will at least be on your guard.

Dreams use a blend of universal and purely personal symbols. The personal ones only have meaning for the individual. For instance if you dream of a neighbour or family member, only you know exactly what they mean in relation to you. Just by bringing that character to mind in a certain scenario, no matter how fantastic it is, your dream muse will have helped correct your attitude towards that person. For example, if you dream of an old friend with whom you have lost touch, simply drop them a line and you will almost certainly learn something useful. If you dream of finding a hidden doorway or staircase in your home, it is a sign of unexplored possibilities in your life.

A helpful general guide is that the more coherent your dream story is, the closer the message is to the surface and the more you should pay attention.. Nightmares exaggerate dangers because that's the only way to get their message across. They shouldn't be taken at face value but you ignore them at your peril. Anyone who is having nightmares needs to sort out something in their life. Dismissing them as 'just dreams' can be disastrous. They need to be carried in mind and thought about.

To understand the symbolism of dreams it helps to have a grasp of mythology and folklore because many symbols are surprisingly persistent and universal. Modern dreams are full of modern things but with a bit of scratching one finds that they are not so different after all to the things that filled our ancestors' dreams. Take keys for example. In a dream they stand for the answers to problems, the things that will unlock the next stage of life. But whereas your great grandmother will have dreamed of great big keys out of a fairytale, you might dream instead of a swipe card. It means the same.

Dream Dictionaries can be helpful for unravelling common images that appear in everyone's dreams but they are usually far too confident and limited in their suggestions. Some symbols are universal. The sun, moon and stars; kings, queens and princesses – these and many more symbols mean pretty much the same to people everywhere and a good dream dictionary can set you on the path to understanding those dreams in which they appear. Fantasy and mythology are also helpful because they employ the vocabulary of dreams to spin their tales. You just have to remember that dreams often disguise ancient symbols in modern dress, as with the keys.

Keys are a universal symbol representing the moving from one condition to another, with the key being the choice or solution needed to bring it about. Keys can also represent power, especially if you dream of a bunch of them, because the person who holds a bunch of keys is in charge of other people's choices. Keys can also represent the keeping of secrets, which can be either good or bad depending on the circumstances.

Moths and butterflies usually signify dramatic life changes because they spend the first stage of their lives humbly crawling about on plants, then spin a cocoon from which they emerge winged and glorious and take to the air.

UNDERSTANDING DREAMS is much like learning a new language. Once you are over the initial hurdles and begin to grasp what a few dreams have said, the rest begins to follow naturally. When you dream of an animal, say, it will mean much the same as it did to our ancestors. Foxes are clever but sly; cats, hares and owls are slightly magical while snakes usually represent renewal through shedding one's outer layer, though they can also be hinting of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Even if they have little to do with nature in their daily lives, most people absorb the significance of animals through the fairytales of their childhood, along with much else that makes sense in dreams.

The snake or serpent is a symbol that still occurs in the dreams of city dwellers who have never seen one outside of a cage or picture. Snakes represent danger on both the physical and psychic planes, being associated with the underworld with its shining treasures and hidden terrors. The snake is also a symbol of immortality through rebirth, because it sheds its skin to renew itself. Combining fear with rebirth like this is no accident because death and rebirth (whether literal or metaphorical) usually demand stepping into the unknown.

Dreaming of a snake sometimes is actually a warning of death, but like the Death card in Tarot it far more often just means that you are facing a transformation in your life - that it is time to reassess all your commitments and maybe shed a few that have become self-defeating. It shows a transition that must be faced up to even though it may seem dangerous. In such situations putting off the inevitable only ever makes the situation worse. It may be time to move house, for example, or ditch your lover. It may mean starting a new career or other life adventure, this is the level at which dreaming of a snake is usually pitched. It tells you that you are facing an important, life-defining moment, but the degree of actual danger involved depends on the precariousness of your position. In old country superstition, meeting a snake by chance was considered as much an omen as dreaming of one.

With dreams it helps to have a background knowledge of symbols, but far more important is to learn the particular language of your own dreams, which comes simply with practice. Dreams usually respond to attention by naturally becoming clearer, so getting to know the language of your dreams will feel like a two-way exchange.

FORTUNE TELLING

DREAMS ARE A VERY DIRECT line of communication with your inner self, but many find them too vague and complicated. Luckily there are many other ways of delving below the surface which have been developed and honed over centuries or even millennia, which may loosely be called fortune telling. All of them still demand some degree of intuition and wisdom of the user, but they have the advantage over dreams of having their own symbolism and well-established guidelines for interpretation.

Fortune telling lies as much at the heart of white magic as herbalism, midwifery and all the other skills that were traditionally part of a hedge witch's repertoire. Reading the stars, cards or the palms of people's hands; consulting the I Ching, casting runes, dowsing and scrying crystals or tea-leaves – there are countless different methods of fortune telling in existence,

each of which has its own particular virtues and flaws. People have to find the ones that best suit them.

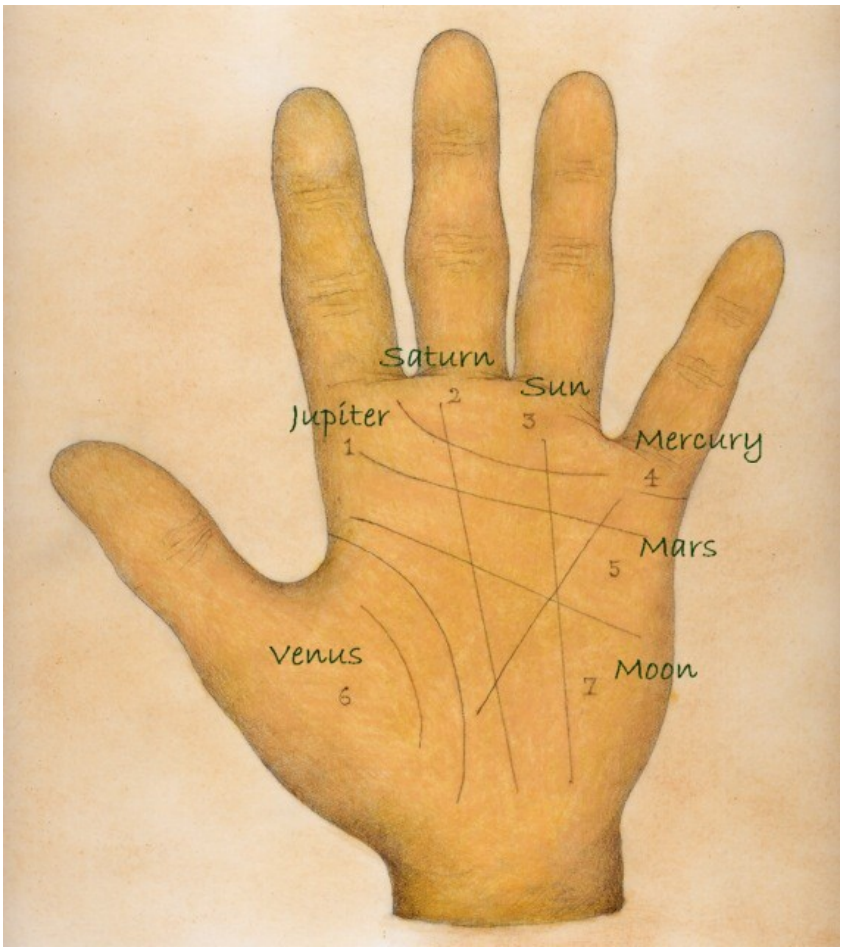
Crystal balls have always been favourites with hedge witches, for example, but not many people can see anything enlightening in them. Astrology is also very popular but not to everyone's taste; as are Tarot, reading tea-leaves or a hundred other exotic forms of divination.

To find the media best suited to you simply follow your instincts and you will soon find those that work, your imagination will point the way easily enough. If a spread of Tarot cards draws you in and begins to conjure hazy fairy tales, well, follow the fascination, that is the thread through the labyrinth.

A USEFUL TIP FOR NEWCOMERS is that whatever method of fortune telling you choose, it's a good idea to keep a record of results and your reading of them, so you can later compare these with how events turned out. Every good witch should keep such a journal, at least to begin with, because memory is not always reliable in this respect. Comparing your predictions with

the actual outcomes is the best way of honing your fortune-telling skills and establishing a dialogue with the medium you are using. With experience though, the need to write things down grows less.

The thing about fortune telling is that as much depends on the skill of the diviner as on the method used. That is why it takes a while to get the feel of any system, you have to get used to its symbols and also learn how to frame your questions so that the answer can be expressed through them. As with dreams, it's like learning a new language and getting to know someone through it at the same time. Also, it's worth remembering that all fortune telling media are just stepping-stones. They are no substitute for wisdom but they are designed to point the way.



Palm reading or cheiromancy is one of the most ancient witch arts but there is more to it than simply following the directions in a manual of palmistry. Any quick guide will tell you the basics, the healthy length of a life line, whether your head line indicates you are intellectual or not, and so on. It's interesting to compare these predictions with how your life is actually working out, but the best palm-readers use this just as a stepping stone into the person's destiny, seeing through the pattern of lines on a hand into much deeper realms. This is what makes palm-reading more of an art than a science; it is not something that just anyone can do properly by reading the instructions in a book.

FORTUNE-TELLING WITH ORDINARY PLAYING CARDS

STANDARD PLAYING CARDS are closely related to Tarot and are perfectly able to be used for telling fortunes. They lack the Major Trumps of Tarot and also, apart from three of the Aces, are vertically symmetrical, so they don't have a 'reversed' meaning; but this still leaves a wealth of symbolism through which the undercurrents of life can express themselves. There are countless methods that people have devised over the centuries but here's one recommended by one of our informants.

Its particular virtue is that it requires no knowledge at all of the cards' relation to Tarot beyond awareness that in general Hearts relate to matters of the heart and happiness, Clubs to effort, Diamonds relate to wealth, and Spades to tricky decisions. Also, because in most card games Aces can be either the highest or lowest cards in their suit, the same goes for their interpretation. They represent the possibility of either extreme – a climax or beginning.

Begin by shuffling the cards thoroughly while focussing your mind on the question in hand. If you are doing a reading for someone else, let them shuffle. When they feel ready, the enquirer touches the pack first to their forehead and then their heart before handing it to the dealer, who fans them out on a table. The enquirer then selects nine cards at random and lays them out in the following pattern and order:

1

2 3

4 5 6

7 8

9

The first card is the Key Card because its suit decides what interpretation is to be put on the rest and its ranking indicates the scale of the challenge. If it is a Heart it indicates how happy you will feel about the outcome. If a Club it predicts the amount of effort required. If a Diamond it predicts the financial stake. If it is a Spade it predicts the difficulty of the choices needed to resolve the situation.

Cards 2 and 3 predict the time needed to resolve the situation. The lower the numbers, the quicker it will be. If they are court cards they indicate a fruitful outcome, but only in the long term. A high and low card together indicates mixed or partial progress.

Cards 4, 5 and 6 show the station to which the resolution of the situation will elevate the enquirer in the eyes of the world in the short, medium and long term. Court cards show very high rank and the rest are in proportion. An Ace can mean either disaster or outrageous success beyond anyone's expectation.

Cards 7 and 8 show the health of the enquirer's life partnerships during the situation. The higher the numbers the better, and Hearts are particularly auspicious. Again, a high and low card together show mixed fortunes.

Card 9 indicates the health of the enquirer during the situation; the higher the card, the better. An Ace warns that serious care needs to be taken.

If you have included jokers in your pack they represent completely unpredictable factors in the situation.

This shows the reverse aspect of the Ace of Spades. Right way up, the card stands for abundance, success and the coming to fruition of your plans through strength, determination and clear thinking. A reversed card predicts the exact opposite and can be quite alarming when it presents itself as a picture of what is coming next. But remember that as with the turning seasons, sometimes things have to end for there to be a new beginning. Collapse, death and decay are followed by regeneration, growth, fruition and harvest. Spring follows winter, and rebirth is only possible after some kind of death.

SHORT TAROT

TAROT CARDS ARE A TRADITIONAL witchy medium for fortune telling and one that will repay years of study. But besides normal Tarot, there is a short version that we picked up on our travels that can be done using a standard pack of playing cards. Just as you can happily play poker using the four suits of Tarot, so you can read fortunes with normal playing cards whose suits are exactly equivalent to those of Tarot. The only difference is that Tarot has an additional court card in each suit – the Page.

Apart from its simplicity, Short or Quick Tarot is a great introduction to the real thing. Using just twenty cards makes it much easier to get a feel for how they work and allows users to familiarize themselves with important cards normally overshadowed by the major trumps of full Tarot – Death, the World, Lovers and so on.

For Short Tarot you need just the Ace, King, Queen, Jack and Ten from each suit of a normal pack of cards.

HEARTS – (Cups)

ACE

The Ace of Hearts shows the beginning of a period of joy, abundance, friendship, fertility, love and just about every other emotionally good thing you can think of. It stands for the promise of being able to act out your dreams in a period of happy creativity while enjoying yourself along the way and being appreciated by those around you. Nonetheless, it will call on all your finest qualities.

Reversed, it represents the exact opposite – emotional upheaval, sterility, the breaking-up of relationships, the collapse of hopes, betrayal, insecurity and gloom, especially in personal relationships.

KING

The King of Hearts is generous, honest, level-headed, prosperous, kind and cultured. He takes his responsibilities seriously and is a champion of peace and the arts of civilization. He can be a formidable opponent in war but only as last resort. He is a great patron of the arts and sciences, and when appearing in a favourable position in a spread should be taken as encouragement to make plans on a grand scale.

QUEEN

The Queen of Hearts is warm, loving, sensitive, maternal and eager to heal all the world's wounds. She is also practical, honest and imaginative. Her imagination can be expressed

through art but more commonly through helping others relate to each other. She is warm, playful and the ideal lover or parent because of her generosity and talent for putting ideas into practice, and people at ease.

JACK
The Jack of Hearts is romantic, loyal, generous, friendly, thoughtful and idealistic. He inspires new ventures in both the romantic and practical fields without expecting much in return. This Jack is happiest when off hunting the Holy Grail. He signals the possibility of an idealistic new venture coming your way, possibly from an old friend.

TEN
This card represents a happy home life, contentment at work and good standing in your community, all of which are the result of diligent application and energy. You have established a stable and honoured place for yourself and your loved ones in the world. Traditionally this is the luckiest card in the pack for newlyweds.

SPADES – (Swords)

ACE
Standing the right way up, the Ace of Spades signifies triumph through strength and determination, particularly in the intellectual or inventive spheres. It marks the beginning of a fresh era, a promotion perhaps or some other kind of advancement. A danger of the intellectualism symbolized by Spades is that it can be applied equally to right and wrong causes, so you need to examine your true motives with care.

Reversed, the Ace of Spades represents danger, and the possible collapse of your dreams through arrogance and insensitivity. But it must be remembered that often grim endings are needed before fresh beginnings. Plan for the long term.

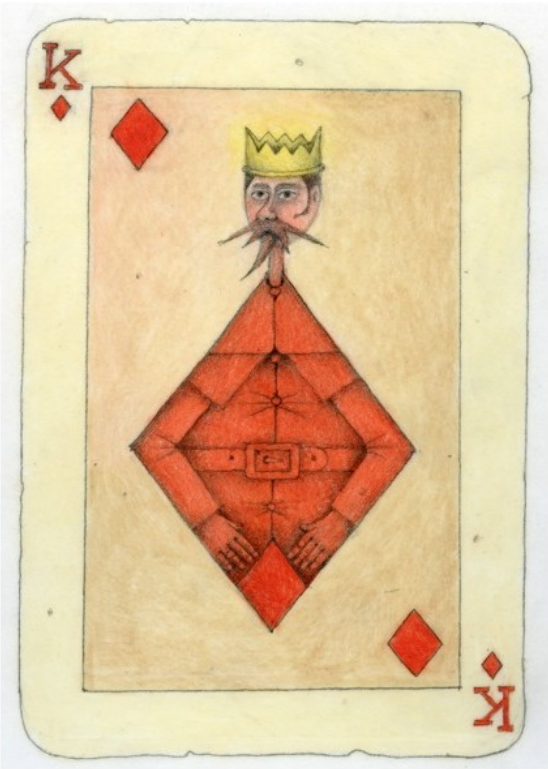
KING
In astrology the character of Saturn in his benign aspect comes close to that of the King of Spades. He represents power, authority and the law, splitting complex arguments with the edge of his sword. His judgements can sometimes seem harsh, but are never unfair. The card usually represents an authority figure that the enquirer can look to for justice.

QUEEN
Mystical, proud, mysterious and sad, the Queen of Spades is the guardian of the secret wisdom of age. She signals it's time to trust your intuition and act decisively. Put aside all minor quarrels because this is no time for pettiness. She is also queen of winter, night and the moon. She is often linked with mourning, but bears herself with serenity, having distilled sorrow into wisdom.

JACK
The Jack of Spades is bold and enthusiastic, but also imaginative and clever like his Queen. He is a great champion of good causes and inspires others by his idealism and dedication to any cause he adopts. He is decisive and while others dither over a course of action, he will just plunge headlong into it and generally win the day. He's a symbol of creative upheaval, usually leading to success.

TEN
Ruin and misery! Traditionally this is the unluckiest card in Tarot (Ten of Swords), being the ruling number of the unluckiest suit. As such it signals calamity on almost any front – health, finances or romance – but it can also mean the ending of pointless commitments and the beginning of a fresh and wonderful stage of your life. Tread carefully.

DIAMONDS – (Pentacles)



ACE
The Ace of Diamonds represents perfect contentment and is the only ace that hasn't a reverse side so possibly is the luckiest card you can hope for. The benefits of this card are mainly material but should promote a general sense of well-being that spills over into the emotional and spiritual spheres. This marks a good time for beginning a new business venture or career. It can mean an unexpected windfall that will enable you to realise long-cherished dreams.

KING
The King of Diamonds is wealthy, confident, commanding, inspiring, intelligent, mathematical, straightforward and determined. He is conservative, hardworking and leads by example. He is equivalent to Jupiter in astrology, the jovial ruler of the other planets and generous dispenser of wealth, which he naturally attracts. He is a loyal friend; a wise counsellor and a reliable if cautious partner.

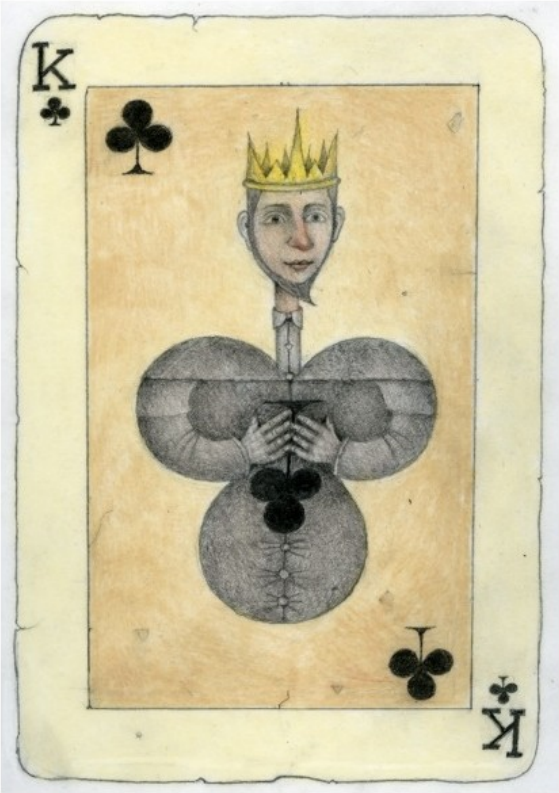
QUEEN
The Queen of Diamonds is regal, generous and diplomatic, ruling her suit in close partnership with her King and in much the same manner, though with perhaps a touch more warmth and understanding of human frailty. She has a canny grasp of finances as well as being a generous and welcoming hostess. The card represents either someone you should turn to, or the qualities you need to cultivate.

JACK
The Jack of Diamonds is useful, reliable, patient, persistent and loyal. He is cautious by nature, preferring evolution to revolution, but has courage enough when it is called for. He is not a great one for spiritual quests, preferring prizes you can hold in the hand over those of the

heart and soul. The card often signifies that a happy measure of wealth is coming your way but warns against recklessness in spending it.

TEN
This card signifies success, completion and an invitation to rest (though not for too long) on your laurels. You have worked hard to gain your present position and you are entitled to enjoy the benefits, not least being the space to enjoy family life; though nothing lasts forever so you should also start making fresh plans for the future.

CLUBS – (Wands)



ACE
The Ace of Clubs represents the beginning of some great new practical venture or career. The time is right for putting your boldest ideas into action; of pushing back the boundaries of possibility and sharing your enthusiasms with the world. Now when everything is flowing your way is the time to exercise your talents, stake out your territory and show the world what you can do.

Reversed, it warns of the danger of getting too attached to new beginnings that haven't been thought through properly, of being unrealistic and not fully committed to your undertakings. There is a slim chance of success here, but only if you work at it.

KING
The King of Clubs is a charming leader who is energetic, honest, diplomatic and generous. His fatherliness can tend towards being too trusting. Being naturally loyal and conscientious, he is a great friend in times of trouble, being unafraid to take up arms in a good cause. In a spread he can represent either the attitude needed to address the situation, or the person you should turn to for help.

QUEEN
The Queen of Clubs is a mature, practical person with a great down to earth wisdom. Charming, sympathetic and graceful, she is less outgoing than her bold king but has very strong character and self-possession. She gets things done by talking to individuals rather than groups, and thus getting below the surface of events. Often she is the real leader of a group without others noticing.

JACK
The Jack of Clubs is a versatile warrior armed and fearlessly ready for action. The card signifies departures, change and adventures into the unknown. It's a warning to keep your eyes and ears open because you are surrounded by challenges and possible danger. But if, like the Jack (or with his help), you face it with courage, flexibility and imagination there's every reason you should triumph in the end.

TEN
Exhaustion threatens as you try to juggle the conflicting demands of work and family. Try to step back and reorganize your life in a more practical and realistic way rather than just struggling on hopelessly against the tide of demands. Something has to give and it need not necessarily be you.

READING THE CARDS

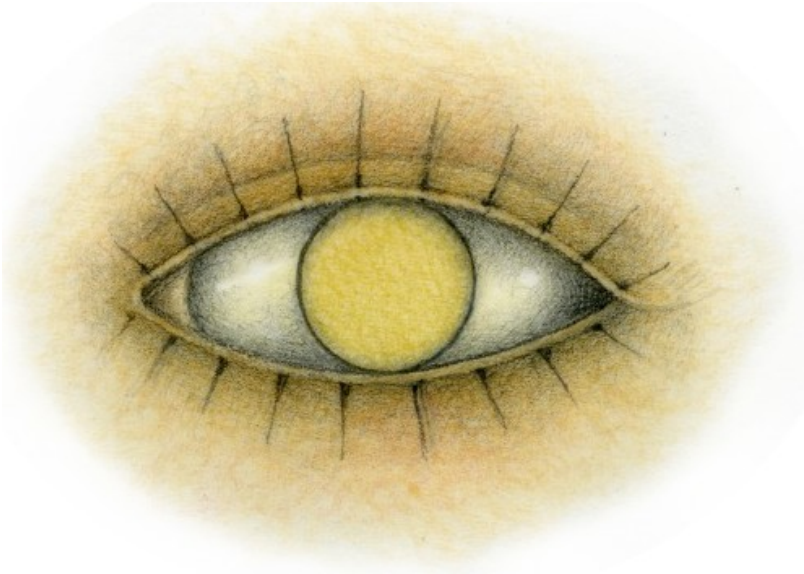
SHUFFLE THE CARDS WELL, bearing in mind your question and, when you feel ready, lay them out in the order shown below

2
5 1 3
4

Here the first card in the centre represents the overall nature of the situation about which you are enquiring.

The card to the south (4) shows the recent past, the immediate triggers of the situation about which you are enquiring. The card to the north (2) stands for the likely outcome or destiny of the situation on the immediate, practical level.

The card to the east (3) represents the subtle, spiritual influences behind the situation, the psychological climate that has brought it about. The card to the west (5) stands for the spiritual outcome – how you will feel about what happens.



CHAPTER FOUR: FESTIVALS

THE FIRST THING TO REALISE about hedge witches and their annual festivals is that they do not observe them 'religiously', in the sense of feeling obliged to do anything about them in order to prove that they are true witches. It is a purely natural thing; they celebrate as much as they want to, or not at all if circumstances are against it. Not outwardly anyway, though most are as aware of these festivals or sabbats as they are of their own birthdays. If they happen to be in congenial company they may mention that 'oh, today's Brigid's Night', or whatever, but otherwise they will be content to let it pass. This follows from hedge witches' general lack of need for show. Their beliefs are private and they feel no great need to justify or demonstrate them to others. Wiccans tend to be more open and organized in this respect (as in most other aspects of witchery of course) while for hedge witches it is often enough just to light a candle

and celebrate the feast with a glass of wine and light meditation, either alone or with a few select friends. If the friends all happen to be witches too, they may well let themselves go a bit, but they do not go to enormous lengths to arrange such gatherings.

Witches are most strongly associated with the crescent and full moons, and it's true that they generally feel more at home out in the countryside under either of those than taking an all-over tan on some tropical beach. But the annual cycle of the sun through the seasons is also fundamental to their thinking, and the eight festivals or sabbats that mark its progress are like the spokes of their Wheel of the Year. The main ones are Halloween and Mayday, closely followed by Brigid's Night at the beginning of February and Lugh's Day at the beginning of August, using the popular Celtic names for these two feasts. Lugh was the Celtic sun god whose festival is rather better known by its Anglo Saxon name of Lammas.

THESE FOUR FEASTS are spaced three months apart, marking the four seasons of the year for those who live far enough away from the equator to enjoy them. Each is divided in half by a solstice or equinox to give the eight divisions of the year. To city dwellers this can all sound a bit complicated but only if they are so removed from nature that they barely notice the seasons. Hedge witches are so attuned to nature that even in the heart of great cities they are aware of the natural rotation of the Wheel. Following its eightfold division is as natural to them as breathing.

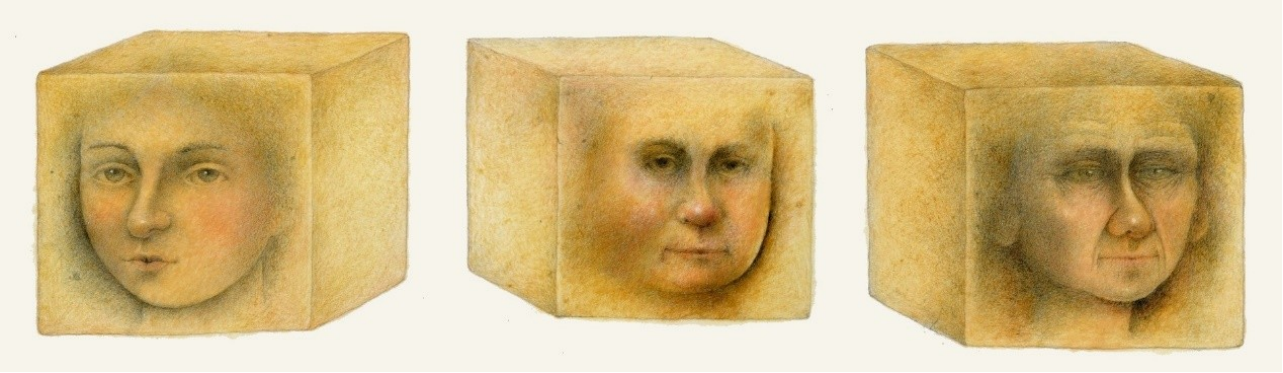
So witches and wise-women are far more in love with the sun than people generally imagine, but of course they are linked much more with the moon so we'll look at that in more detail first.

CELEBRATING THE MOON

TO A HEDGE WITCH the moon is of course the mistress of magic and fertility because both these are governed by its waxing and waning. To banish anything you cast your spell when the moon is shrinking into darkness. To make it grow you do it when the moon is growing too. When the moon is full it's time for the boldest magic and when it is dark is the time to be cautious, thinking twice before leaping to conclusions or making bold decisions.

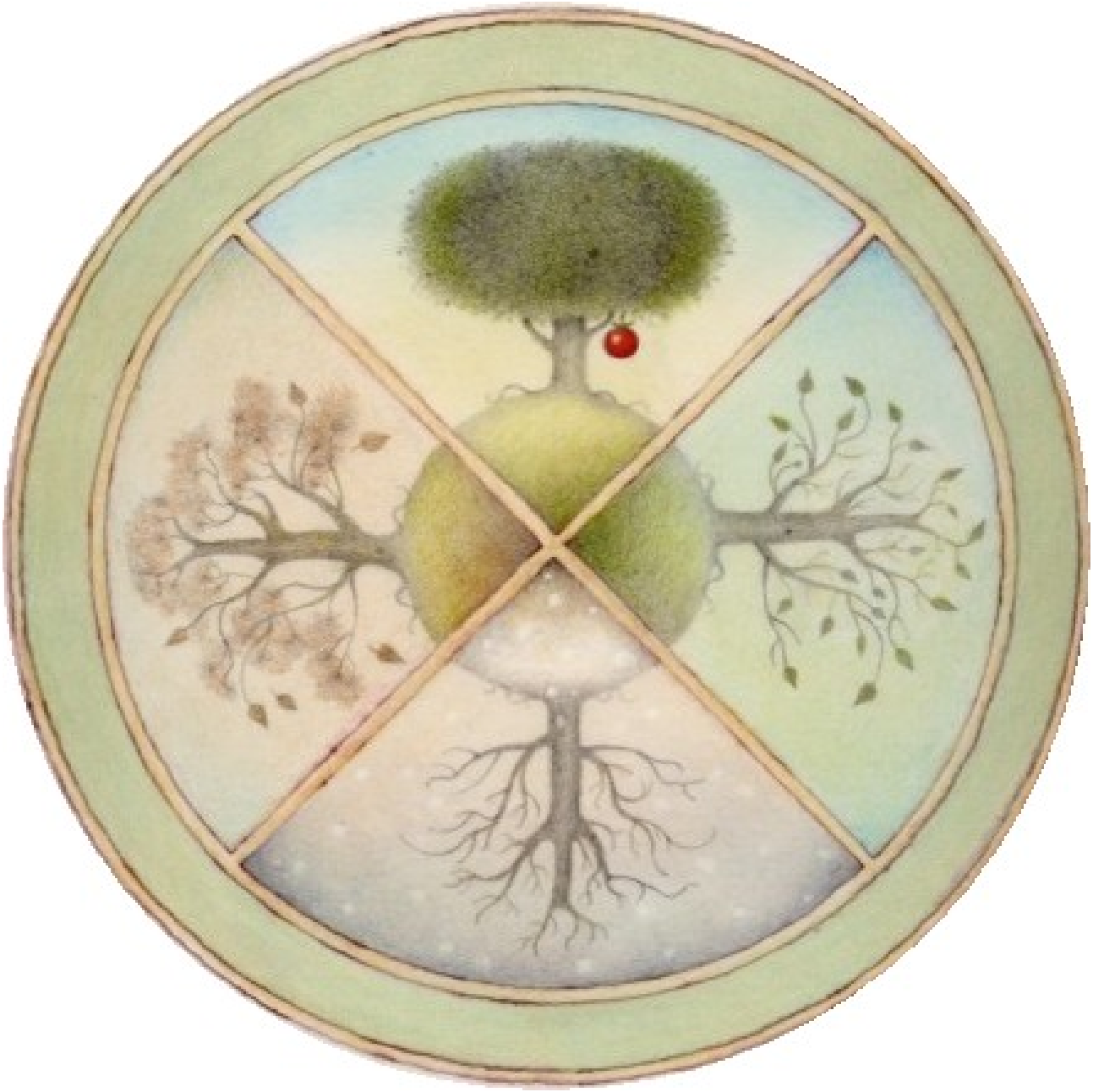
This is the monthly cycle witches go through, feeling the tides of the moon even when it is obscured by clouds or concrete. Again, there is no obligation or duty involved – it is just what witches of all shades do, or aim to do. The cycles of the moon and sun build the spiral trellis around which they wrap their lives like a creeper, throwing out shoots and exotic flowers along the way.

To tune into the phases of the moon, they say, all you need is to be aware of its phases and instinct will do the rest. In fact, witches say, the moon governs all people's moods and energies, only most are not aware of it. So they get pulled this way and that, not realising how their mood is affecting their choices and decisions. By being conscious of the moon's phases as they go about their lives, witches learn to be aware of their own changing moods and make allowances.



The three bright phases of the moon – waxing, full and waning – are often likened to the three ages of woman, travelling into and out of life in an endless cycle. Witches are much more relaxed about old age than most people because for them it is the pinnacle of life. Only age can teach some things and also in old age the boundaries between the worlds begin to blur again as in infancy, so it becomes easier to see into the Otherworld, which is what all witches are interested in.

SEASONAL CELEBRATIONS



SO THERE ARE EIGHT main festivals or sabbats, beginning with Halloween on November Eve. This is the witches' New Year celebration as it was for many people in ancient times, particularly the Celts. Moving on in roughly six week stages we come first to the Winter Solstice around 21 December followed by Brigid's Night at the start of February, reputedly the best night of the year for single people to examine their romantic prospects through divination. Then comes the Spring Equinox around March 21 followed by May Day, the opening of summer. Around June 21 comes the Summer Solstice, the longest day. This is followed in six weeks by Lugh's Day (or Lammas) on 1 August, the celebration of the year's first bread baked

from freshly harvested corn. Finally comes the Autumn Equinox leading back again to Halloween.

This is how the cycle works in the temperate zones of the northern hemisphere. In the southern hemisphere the seasons are of course reversed. In theory the festivals should all be reversed too, with Halloween on 1 May and Brigid's Night at the start of August, and this is exactly what many witches of European extraction do in places like Australia. At Yule and Halloween they feel out of step with the popular celebrations going on all around them, which carry on as if they were still in the chilly north, but otherwise the wheel of the seasons works in exactly the same way.

The ways that hedge witches celebrate these sabbats are as individual as the witches themselves but ingredients common to almost all of them are candles, incense, wine, music and good company, even if that company is purely their own. One of the hallmarks of good hedge witches is that they are very happy with their own company. In fact you could almost say it is a precondition for being a hedge witch.

HALLOWEEN

Other common names: Samhain, All Hallows Eve, Martinmas

HALLOWEEN IS THE OPENING celebration of the year for good and bad witches alike. It is the season when the gates between the worlds are briefly thrown open and for a while it is easy to cross from one side to the other. All kinds of spirits walk abroad on this night, but it is not just ghosts, hobgoblins, banshees and the like that enter our world – so too do faeries, gnomes leprechauns and all the other sprites of the Otherworld. This can be a very good time to get acquainted with them if you know what you are doing, but for beginners that is really best left to the opposite pole of the year, May Eve, which is on the whole less dangerous because it is when the brighter sprites of summer come back into the world – though even this too is not without its perils.

At Halloween it's best to be a bit cautious when dealing with the Otherworld, so it's not advisable to go visiting haunted spots on your own just to investigate the truth of their legends. But it is also a good thing to go a bit wild on this night and let your own demons out to play. Doing this, curiously enough, makes them much easier to manage the rest of the time than if they are always kept tightly bottled up.

All kinds of fortune telling are especially potent during Halloween, so in the build up it is well worth listing a few big questions in your life and using the still of this night to try the cards, or whatever form of divination you have chosen. Do this on your own or with just the closest of friends in a quiet place where you feel relaxed. Make a note of your questions and the responses; and your own response to those, so you can judge how they work out later.

WINTER SOLSTICE

Other common names: Yule, Midwinter, Christmas

ALTHOUGH CHRISTMAS FALLS a few days after the actual solstice it is of course a solstice celebration, and one that everyone can join whatever their spiritual persuasions. It is a celebration of both spirituality and physical excess. Amid a season of potential hardship and want, everyone is allowed to suspend their cares and simply live for the moment. And although the festival began in agricultural days when families were shuttered against the winter with only last year's harvest to get them through to spring, it still performs that function today. Christmas is a breathing space to allow us to rise above our daily concerns and take a broad view of our lives and our friends and families, and just what it all means in the long term.

Hedge witches say that if you burn a Yule log it will bring you even more good luck if you toss in handfuls of Ash keys, the plant's winged seeds.

BRIGID'S NIGHT

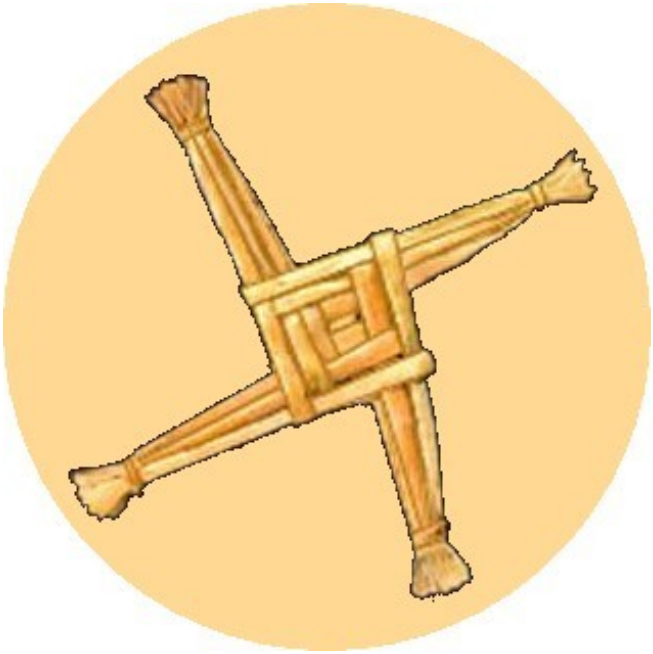
Other common names: Imbolc, Candlemas, Oimelc, Groundhog Day

BRIGID'S NIGHT (1 February) is particularly special for witches because most other people are completely unaware of it. Everyone knows about Christmas, Halloween and Mayday, but very few non-witches have even heard of this feast. Often this is how fellow witches recognize each other. Mention Brigid's Night in any random group and most responses will be blank, but there will come a spark of acknowledgement from fellow pilgrims.

Brigid's Night should be celebrated with fire and candles. These stand for the light of life buried invisibly in the cold earth. Nature appears dead but now the seeds of new life are about to stir and reach out for the light. Its Celtic name Imbolc means 'in the womb' meaning the womb of Mother Earth where this is taking place. Its largely forgotten name Oimelc means 'ewe's milk' because this is the traditional lambing time.

This is the best night for asking questions about your love life. A traditional way of determining the name of your destined lover is to peel an apple in one piece and toss it over your right shoulder. It will land as roughly the initial letter of their name.

Alternatively, if you have to choose between several candidates, write their names on sweet chestnuts and place them around the edge of a fire. The first to explode indicates your destined lover.



SPRING EQUINOX

Other popular names: Eostre, Lady Day

MANY OF THE OLD PAGAN traditions of the spring equinox have been absorbed into the movable Christian festival of Easter. The Easter Bunny is a survival of the spring goddess's sacred hare representing the waking of nature from its winter sloth, because this is the month hares traditionally go mad with joy and lust. Easter eggs have a similar long pedigree as symbols of fertility. The only problem is that Easter moves back and forth in the calendar by several weeks according to the moon and tends to overshadow the equinox. Still, most witches like to celebrate the arrival of longer days than nights in some way.

Falling around March 21st, the spring equinox is commonly called the first day of spring, but in the witches' calendar it comes halfway through that season. The point of this is that for them spring really begins on Brigid's Night, but invisibly below the cold earth, sheltered from what is usually the worst weather of the year above ground. The equinox marks the point at which new

growth finally begins to burst into show in buds and early flowers like the daffodil and narcissus.

This day marks the point at which in the old days people could afford to stop worrying so much about their rationed stores and start to look forward to the bounty of the approaching summer. Most of us live in more cushioned circumstances today but it still is a good time for those blessed with cold winters to begin turning their attention outwards to the burgeoning world of summer.

MAY EVE

Other popular names: Beltane, Mayday, Walpurgis Night

JUST AS HALLOWEEN ushers in the dark and cold half of the year in northern climes, so May Eve marks the onset of brightness and warmth. Once again the boundaries between the visible and invisible worlds become porous and it is possible to cross either way, but it is distinctly less threatening because the general mood of the world is uplifted and moving out of the shadows.

May Eve is the best time for visiting hills, springs, hollows and any other places associated with faeries, because there is usually substance to such rumours and this is your best chance to meet

them. Some places simply attract them just as others attract all the creepy bogles and boggarts, and both acquire reputations for very good reasons. Especially If there is a clear sky and a bright moon, this is the night to go out and feel the wonder of the world reawakening. But even if it is pouring with rain, this is still a night for lighting fires and candles in honour of the light and toasting the warm, fruitful times to come.

In the old days Mayday was celebrated with maypoles and bonfires and dancing, and there was much wandering in the woods and on the hills that night. It was an occasion for romance and trysts between lovers, with a blind eye being turned to the usual proprieties in honour of the wedding feast of summer and winter.

SUMMER SOLSTICE

Other popular names: Midsummer, The Longest Day

IN ENGLAND THIS IS the occasion since time immemorial when people say 'Gosh it's Midsummer Day and we haven't had any summer at all yet!' forgetting that the warmest weeks of the year have followed the longest day for even longer than they've been saying it, except in particularly strange years. Most importantly in England it's become famous for being the day when druids celebrate the solstice at Stonehenge, something that's become as much a fixture in the news year as Bonfire night or Easter, dimly reminding Britons of their ancient mystical roots going back to the time when their island was the Tibet of Europe, home of the druids and all things mystical.

Hedge witches at Midsummer tend to venture abroad to seek out their own kind more than usual, though these gatherings could still hardly be called covens. They are far too informal for that, but witches tend to gather at the same fairs and camps where the fire smoke mingles with incense and the atmosphere is full of music and inspiration. There are notable exceptions because some wise-women are seriously private individuals who hate large gatherings, but as a general rule this is a time when good witches gather to enjoy the feeling that for once they are not the odd ones out, and to look for fresh inspiration.

LAMMAS

Other popular names: Lugh's Day, August Eve, Feast of First Fruits

THE FIRST OF AUGUST has no great significance to most non-witches except perhaps for being the start of their summer holiday month in northern climes. But without realizing it they are exactly feeling the mood of this feast, which is one of celebration, joy and adventure. Lugh was the Celtic sun god and his great festival was Christianised as Lammas or Loaf Mass and was celebrated with the first bread from the new harvest. But a great labour still lay ahead to bring the rest safely in so this was like the feast ancient warriors used to have before going into battle.

It is the exact counterpoint of Brigid's Night. That marks the germination of spring despite the appearance of death in the landscape. Lugh's Day marks the germination of autumn despite the impression the weather usually gives of just getting warmer and warmer. Awareness of the inevitable turning of the circle is what spurs everyone into action while the conditions permit – making hay while the sun shines.

This is the day for making corn dollies to bring luck from now till Christmas.

AUTUMN EQUINOX

Other popular names: Harvest Home, John Barleycorn's Day, St Michael's Day

TRADITIONALLY THIS IS the time for celebrating that the harvest is in and no longer at the mercy of the elements. The best and worst of the year's weather has happened and the result is known. Now all that remains is to pack nature's bounty safely into storage and start to batten down for the winter.

Modern witches are rarely so dependent on the land, but being close to nature they will allow its mood to possess them and use it to assess their recent lives measuring the results against the dream and contemplating why things did or did not work out. It is an occasion for tying up loose ends and settling affairs so you will be able to relax into the more contemplative mood of winter without too many distractions.

Six weeks or so after the equinox brings us back to Halloween and a fresh round of the Wheel of the Year which, in its guise of the Celtic Cross, is a popular piece of jewellery among witches.

SO THAT, BRIEFLY, IS the year's cycle as hedge witches see it, and there we'll leave them to pursue their fascinating vocation. Our thanks go to the many witches who contributed to this book, often without realising it because they have either died or we only heard of them at second hand ('My grandmother told me . . .).

In places we have probably made generalisations that some witches will disagree with, but that is inevitable when trying to describe such an individualistic group of people. Often it seemed almost easier to say what hedge witches aren't rather than what they are, but patterns of common belief and attitude did emerge and that is what we have attempted to describe, along with anything else fresh and interesting that cropped up.

The research was conducted by starting with the witches closest to hand and then branching out simply by following the leads that they provided. This may seem a rather haphazard and subjective approach but it turned out to be exactly the right one to take with our subjects, who seemed to appreciate its organic method. One contact led to another and so on till a picture emerged of a shared hedge witch attitude. Which, at heart, simply aims to enhance the magic in everyday life that most of us only taste in brief moments of exaltation.

END