



12. Ozark Witchcraft

(The Ozark hillfolk will talk about crop failures and weather signs with any tourist who happens along, but let him mention witches and they all shut up like clams. If they say anything at all on the subject, it will be that they do not believe any such foolishness. Some of them will even deny that they ever heard of witches or witch masters.

The truth is, however, that a great many Ozarkers do believe these things. I meet people every day who are firm believers in witchcraft, and I have been personally acquainted with more than a score of so-called witches myself.

A solid citizen of Little Rock, Arkansas, contends that every good Christian must believe in witchcraft. "It's just like John Wesley said," he told me, "if you give up witches you might as well throw away your Bible!" The Bible, he went on, not only requires a belief in witches but also demands that they be persecuted. He quoted from memory at great length, but the only one of his quotations that I have been able to verify is in Exodus 22, where it says plainly "thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."

This man assured me that "witches are thicker than seed ticks" in Pulaski county, even today. "Them things are goin' on same as they always did," said he, "but it's all under cover nowadays. The young folks lives too fast an' heedless. More than half of 'em are bewitched anyhow, so they don't care what happens. It looks like the Devil's got the country by the tail, on a downhill pull!"

A witch, according to my informants, is a woman who has

had dealings with the Devil and thereby acquired some supernatural powers, and who uses these powers to bring evil upon her neighbors. This definition excludes such estimable characters as Mrs. Josie Forbes of Taskee, Missouri, Mrs. Angie Paxton of Green Forest, Arkansas, Miss Jean Wallace of Roaring River, Missouri, and others of the same type. Newspaper writers call these women witches, and the tourists naturally follow suit, but no real old-time Ozarker would make such a mistake. They may be clairvoyants, fortunetellers, seers, mystics, purveyors of medical advice, seekers of lost property—but they are certainly not witches.

Although I have known and interviewed twenty-four persons who were regarded by their neighbors as witches, only three admitted that they had sold themselves to the Devil. These three women were quite mad, of course; the point is that their neighbors did not regard them as lunatics, but as witches. The other twenty-one claim that their efforts are directed *against* the forces of evil, and that their main business is the removal of spells and curses put upon their clients by supernatural means. These practitioners are variously known as witch masters, white witches, witch doctors, faith doctors, goomer doctors and conjure folks, and it is from them that I have obtained much of my information on the subject.

Some hillfolk believe that a woman may become a witch by some comparatively simple hocus-pocus. Professor A. W. Bree-don, of Manhattan, Kansas, who was reared near Galena, Missouri, in the nineties, tells me his neighbors thought that a woman had only to fire a silver bullet at the moon and mutter two or three obscene old sayin's. A lady in Barry county, Missouri, says that any woman who repeats the Lord's Prayer backward and fires seven silver bullets at the moon is transformed into a witch instanter. But most of the genuine old-timers are agreed that to become a witch is a rather complicated matter.

Anybody is free to discuss the general principles of witch-

craft, but the conjure words and old sayin's must be learned from a member of the opposite sex. Another thing to be remembered is that the secret doctrines must pass only between blood relatives, or between persons who have been united in sexual intercourse. Thus it is that every witch obtains her unholy wisdom either from a lover or from a male relative.

Not every woman who receives this information becomes a witch. A mother can transmit the secret work to her son, and he could pass it on to his wife, and she might tell one of her male cousins, and so on. All of these people may be regarded as "carriers," but not until someone actually uses the deadly formulae does a genuine witch appear. And thus, while a knowledge of witchcraft is admitted to exist in certain families and clans, it sometimes lies dormant for a long time.

A woman who was regarded as a witch by her neighbors died some years ago, in Greene county, Missouri. I never met the old lady but am acquainted with her daughter—a college graduate, very citified and sophisticated, who has not visited Missouri for a long time. I asked this girl if she had ever heard anything about witchcraft in the Ozarks. To my surprise she did not laugh it off. She said that she believed her own mother had possessed some measure of supernatural power, and that this power was definitely evil. She had never discussed the matter with her mother ("I always thought mamma would tell me about that some day," the daughter said, "but she never did.")

Some parts of the witches' routine are well known, even to people who deny all acquaintance with such matters. The trick of reversing the Lord's Prayer is a case in point. A pious Baptist lady in McDonald county, Missouri, once denounced a schoolmarm because the children were taught to shout their multiplication tables backward as well as forward. ("It's plumb risky, an' there ought to be a law ag'in it," growled the old woman. "Learn them gals to say their 'rithmetic back'ards to-day, an' they'll be a-sayin' *some thin' else* back'ards tomorrow!")

A virgin may possess some of the secrets of "bedevilment,"

imparted by her father or her uncle, but she cannot be a genuine witch, for good and sufficient reasons. Most of the Ozark witches seem to be widows, or elderly spinsters who are obviously not virgins. I knew one sprightly grass widder who was said to "talk the Devil's language," but most people doubted this because of her youth—she was only seventeen. (A woman can "do the Devil's work") and practice the infernal arts in a small way without any ceremony, but to attain her full powers she must be formally initiated into the sinister sisterhood.)

When a woman decides to become a witch, according to the fireside legends, she repairs to the family buryin' ground at midnight, in the dark of the moon. Beginning with a verbal renunciation of the Christian religion, she swears to give herself body and soul to the Devil. She removes every stitch of clothing, which she hangs on an infidel's tombstone, and delivers her body immediately to the Devil's representative—that is, to the man who is inducting her into the "mystery." (The sexual act completed, both parties repeat certain old sayin's—terrible words which assemble devils, and the spirits of the evil dead—and end by reciting the Lord's Prayer backward.) This ceremony is supposed to be witnessed by at least two initiates, also nude, and must be repeated on three consecutive nights. (After the first and second vows the candidate is still free to change her mind, but the third pledge is final. Henceforth the woman is a witch and must serve her new master through all eternity.

(The dedication of a witch is a solemn affair, not to be confused with the so-called "Witches' Sabbath" which occasioned so much talk in northwestern Arkansas, when a group of drunken young people suddenly decided to dance naked by the roadside. It was a mere accident that this lewd frolic was staged at the entrance to a cemetery. The incident had no connection with witchcraft. The term "Witches' Sabbath" was applied to it, not by the natives, but by an imaginative newspaperman from Illinois.

The vagaries of some nude Holy Rollers near Forsyth, Mis-

souri, have also been connected in the public mind with the initiation of a witch. I have examined the Rutledge photographs which were given so much publicity by the late Lou Beardon and others, but have never been able to find out just what happened at the Roller camp when these pictures were made. My opinion is that the White River nudists were merely religious fanatics, together with a few thrill-seeking young men from the nearby villages. There is no evidence that they had anything to do with witchcraft.

I am told, by women who claim to have experienced both, that the witch's initiation is a much more moving spiritual crisis than that which the Christians call conversion. The primary reaction is profoundly depressing, however, because it inevitably results in the death of some person near and dear to the witch.

I once attended the funeral of a woman whose death was attributed to her daughter's participation in one of these graveyard ceremonies. The accused girl sat apart from the other members of the family and was ignored by the minister and the congregation alike. Witchcraft is very real to these people. A friend of the dead woman told me that the person who dies as a "witch's sixpence" generally goes to hell, and therefore such a crime is infinitely more horrible than an ordinary murder. It is not until after the first victim's death that the witch comes into full possession of her supernatural powers, but from that time forward she is able to do many things which are impossible to ordinary mortals.

A witch can assume the form of any bird or animal, but cats and wolves seem to be her favorite disguises. In many a backwoods village you may hear some gossip about a woman who visits her lover in the guise of a house cat. Once inside his cabin, she resumes her natural form and spends the night with him. Shortly before daybreak she becomes a cat again, returns to her home, and is transformed into a woman at her husband's bedside.

A big yellow cat once walked into a cabin where I was sitting with an aged tie hacker and his wife. The woman began to shout "Witch! Witch!" at the top of her voice. The old man sprang up, crossed the fingers of both hands, and chanted something that sounded like "Pulley-bone holy-ghost double-yoke! Pulley-bone holy-ghost double-yoke!" The cat walked in a wide circle past the hearth, stared fixedly at the old gentleman for a moment, and then strolled out across the threshold. We followed a moment later, but the animal was nowhere in sight. It may have crawled under the cabin, or under a corncrib which stood only a few yards away, but the old couple insisted that it had vanished by reason of some supernatural dispensation.

There is an old story of a drunken bravo in northwestern Arkansas who was bantered to sleep all night in a shack where witches were known to be "usin' round." He said that if they gave him a jug of whiskey he'd sleep anywhere. He lit a candle, and drank heavily, and felt very well until midnight, when suddenly there appeared an enormous cat. The creature yowled and spit at him, and the man fired his great horse-pistol—a muzzle-loading weapon loaded with buckshot. Somewhere a woman screamed, and the hillman always swore that just as the candle went out he saw a woman's bare foot, covered with blood, wriggling around on the table. Next day it was learned that a woman who lived nearby had shot her foot off accidentally and died from loss of blood. Some say that she died a-yowlin' and a-spittin' like a cat!

Another well-known tale is concerned with a witch who assumed the form of a swamp rabbit and lived on milk. A farmer saw this big rabbit sucking his cow and fired at it with a load of turkey shot; the animal was only about thirty feet off but seemed quite unharmed. The man rushed home and molded several slugs of silver, obtained by melting half dollars. Charging his shotgun with these, he fired again and killed the rabbit. A few hours later came the news that an old woman in the next holler had been shot to death; the doctor couldn't find the

bullet, but everybody knew that it must have been a silver slug that killed her.

Once I was riding through the woods with two hillmen, when a timber wolf suddenly appeared in a little clearing. One of my companions fired several times with his revolver, but the wolf trotted unhurriedly away, looking back over its left shoulder. "Damn it, I don't see how I missed th' critter!" cried the pistol shooter. "You didn't miss it," the other answered quietly. Nothing more was said, but I noticed that both men rode with their fingers crossed. I crossed mine, too, not wishing to be mistaken for an ignorant "furriner."

A schoolmaster from Pea Ridge, Arkansas, used to tell the story of two young women who lived alone in a nearby farm. They owned no cattle and were never seen to do any milking but always had plenty of butter and homemade cheese. Finally a farmhand peeked in at their window and later swore that he saw these girls hang a dishcloth on the pot rack and squeeze several gallons of milk out of it. Turning about, he looked at the cows in a neighbor's pasture and saw that their udders were gradually decreasing in size.

The teacher mentioned above is an exceptionally intelligent man, not at all credulous in ordinary matters, but he seemed inclined to accept this dishrag-milking tale as true. He suggested that the phenomena which we associate with hypnosis may be identical with those formerly attributed to witchcraft. Some high-powered salesman's exploits may be of this type, he thought, and referred with feeling to a chap who sold him some worthless magazines at an exorbitant figure. "That fellow certainly got control of my mind somehow," he said ruefully. "We call it hypnotism now, but the old folks would probably say I was bewitched."

An old lady near Chadwick, Missouri, flew into a rage one Sunday morning because other members of the family insisted on going to church. Suddenly one of the horses became sick and fell right down in the harness. The women and children

began to cry, and the whole expedition was thrown into confusion. Finally the menfolks managed to tail the animal up, and dragged it through a stream of running water. This broke the witch spell and cured the horse instantly, but it was too late for anybody to attend church.

I remember a poor silly old woman who tried to buy some of my neighbor's ducks. The price she offered was very low, and Aunt Rosie decided to wait for a better market. "You'll be mighty sorry," the old woman shouted. "Them ducks is all a-goin' to die Monday." My neighbor paid no heed to this prediction, but the ducks *did* die on Monday, and it was generally believed that the old witch had cast a spell on them. The possibility of poisoning, or some other material cause of death, apparently did not occur to any of the parties concerned. This unquestioning acceptance of supernatural explanations is not uncommon in the Ozark country.

Mrs. Isabel Spradley, Van Buren, Arkansas, tells me of an old woman in her neighborhood who "threwed a spell" upon a neighbor's tomato patch just by drawing a circle in the dust, marking a cross in the center of the circle, and spitting in the center of the cross. No buyer in this region, once he heard the news, would give a plugged nickel for that man's tomato crop.

Aunt Sarah Wilson, who lives on Bear Creek near Day, Missouri, was worried about one of her nephews, who had wrecked four automobiles. She believed, and told several of her friends, that some witch was throwin' spells on the boy's cars. One day she was standing in her own backyard, when something fell right beside her foot. It was a witch ball about the size of an ordinary marble, made of black horse-hair. She knew immediately that the witches were workin' on her nephew again. And sure enough, he had an accident that same afternoon.

I have been told of another Ozark witch who killed several of her enemies by means of a "hair ball"—just a little bunch of black hair mixed with beeswax and rolled into a hard pellet. The old woman tossed this thing at the persons whom she wished to

eliminate, and they fell dead a few hours later. It is said that the fatal hair ball is always found somewhere in the body of a person killed in this manner. In one case, according to my informant, the little ball of combings was taken from the dead girl's mouth.

There are men and women in the Ozarks who believe that the strange feather balls known as "crowns," which sometimes form in pillows, are the work of witches and if not destroyed will inevitably cause the death of the person whose head rests upon the pillow. For a detailed account of these feather crowns see Chapter 13.

Some witches are said to kill people with graveyard dirt, which is dust scraped from a grave with the left forefinger at midnight. This is mixed with the blood of a black bird; a raven or crow is best, but a black chicken will do in a pinch. The witch ties this mixture up in a rag which has touched a corpse and buries it under the doorstep of the person who is to be liquidated. The practice of burying conjure stuff under houses and doorsteps is well known. I have heard it said of a sick woman that she "must have stepped on somethin'"—meaning that she was bewitched.

Occasionally the "bad thing" is concealed in the saddle or wagon or automobile of the person upon whom the curse is intended to fall. One often hears of such objects being sewn into clothing, especially wedding garments. The witch's desire is to put the bad-luck charm into the victim's possession without his knowledge, or in such a manner that he does not recognize it for what it is. Sometimes a pet animal or an adopted child is made to serve the witch's purpose—a sort of left-handed mascot, as it were.

A witch is delighted if she gets a chance to walk three times clockwise around a sick man, as this is supposed to kill the patient immediately. It can seldom be managed inside a house, since beds are usually placed in contact with at least one wall. So the witch comes in the dead of night and walks in a wide

circle outside the cabin. Certain nondescript marks in the dirt are alleged to be witch's tracks, and some people think that by burning dry grass in these tracks they can somehow discomfit the witch and break the spell cast upon the sick person.

One old woman in my neighborhood was unable to walk without crutches, but whenever a chicken was to be killed she insisted on doing the job herself. One of the boys would catch the chicken and bring it to granny as she sat in her chair under a tree. As she wrung the chicken's neck she spoke the name of an ancient enemy of hers. I asked once what effect this would have on the woman whose name she muttered. "Well, it won't do her no good," said granny with satisfaction. Both my neighbor and the woman she hated were supposed to have dabbled in witchcraft, and each denounced the other as a witch.

Near Clinton, Missouri, only a few years ago, there were people who showed marks on their legs as evidence that a certain old woman in the neighborhood was a witch. Their story was that when they undressed to go to bed, they felt pain as if they were being beaten with switches. One girl claimed to have been whipped so severely that the blood ran down to her heels. It is not clear to me how these people knew that a particular old woman was responsible for all this, but there seemed to be no doubt in anybody's mind on that point.

A little boy near Pineville, Missouri, failed to catch any rabbits in his clumsily built traps. "Them gums is *spell*t, that's what's the matter," he told me. I thought he meant spoiled, which the local people pronounce with a long *i* sound, and asked for further information. "They aint sp'ilt" he said disgustedly, "they're *spell*t! Some old woman done it." That was the first time I ever heard *spelled* used to mean bewitched.

Here is one of the old fireside witch tales, still told at Sparta, Missouri. A young boy worked on a farm for a widow and her two daughters. They all slept in a big one-room cabin. Several times the boy woke up in the night and found all three women gone, but the door bolted inside. In the morning he awoke to

find them all in their beds as usual. Finally one night he just pretended to be asleep. About midnight he saw all three women get up and place a pan of water on the hearth. They washed their faces in the water, then each one said "Out I go and touch nowhere!"—and flicked up the chimney like a swallow! When the women were gone the boy got up, washed his face in the water and cried: "Out I go and touch nowhere!" Before you could bat an eye he was up the chimney and flyin' through the air. His hat blowed off. Pretty soon he lit in a big pasture, where all kinds of people was fiddlin' and dancin' and havin' a regular picnic. Some of them gals didn't have enough clothes on to wad a shotgun! . . . the next thing he knowed he was back at the house in bed, and the women was in their beds, and the door still bolted. It wasn't no dream though, because there was soot on his nightshirt, and his hat was gone. He never did find the hat. But he quit the job before the moon changed and went to live with his kinfolks.

A woman in Springfield, Missouri, told me that her own mother was an innocent sort of witch, who never did any serious harm, but interfered with household tasks and the like. Some strangers waxed loud in praise of the daughter's light bread; this irritated the old lady, who fancied that her own bread was much better, and she threw a spell on the girl's baking. This all happened forty years ago, and the witch has been in her grave for a quarter of a century, but the spell still holds, and the daughter has never once since that fatal day succeeded in making a really good batch of light bread.

There is a common belief that if a witch stirs soft soap, it won't be any good. A farmer's wife in Christian county, Missouri, was making soap in the back yard when an alleged witch came along. Immediately the woman raked the fire out from under the kettle and invited the witch into the house. When the witch had gone, the housewife found that every bit of the soap had boiled away, although *there wasn't any fire under it.*

Mr. A. W. Breedon, of Manhattan, Kansas, told me a tale

he heard as a boy in Taney county, Missouri, in the nineties. There was a very wicked man living there—a man who opposed all religion and refused to help build the meetinghouse. His family had drifted away, and the fellow was dying all alone, cursing at every breath. Some neighbors came over to take care of him, and while they were there a bolt of lightning fell out of a clear sky and set the house on fire. Two big men tried to carry the dying infidel out but couldn't lift him off the bed. Then they tried to move the bed, but even their great strength could not budge it an inch. Soon the house became intolerably hot, and the neighbors left just before the roof fell in. A strange black dog slipped out at the same time, apparently from under the sick man's bed. When the ashes cooled, there was no sign of the infidel's body—"nary a bone!"

Mrs. C. P. Mahnkey, of Mincy, Missouri, who still lives in the neighborhood where Breedon heard this tale, tells an almost identical story, booger dog and all. And even today there are folks who say that a strange black dog is seen about that region, wherever a fatal accident, fire, cyclone, or other calamity occurs.

Some old people in the neighborhood have hinted that the infidel was really a "he witch," and that the neighbors killed him and the black dog by shooting them with silver bullets. Then they burned the house with the bodies inside, and called it a good day's work. This variant of the legend also records the detail that no bones, either human or canine, were found in the ashes of the cabin.

There are people in northeastern Arkansas who believe that the Devil appeared near the end of the eighteenth century, at a pioneer settlement called Kentertown, some say as a warning of the great earthquake that occurred there in 1812. Several versions of the tale are still in oral circulation, and they differ as to the town, the date, and the names of the witnesses. But all the stories agree that two young Arkansas boys actually met the Devil in the brush, in broad daylight, and that he first

appeared as a headless man with a cloven hoof. Later on he assumed other frightful shapes, roared like a lion, belched out great quantities of smoke, and so on. Finally the Devil snatched up one of the youths, tore out most of his hair, and handled him so roughly that he was unable to walk. Upon this the other young man fell upon his knees and cried out to God, asking help in Jesus' name. Instantly the Devil vanished in a cloud of stinking smoke, and the young man carried his injured companion back to town.

Some skeptics said that the two young men had been drinking heavily and must have dreamed all this business of demons roaring and blowing smoke. But many thought that the boys really had seen the Devil, and there are people in Arkansas who believe the story to this day. The *Golden Book Magazine* for March, 1926, reprinted a pamphlet entitled *Surprising Account of the Devil's Appearing to John Chesseldon and James Arkins, at a Town near the Mississippi, on the 24th of May, 1784*. This document was written by the two men named in the title and printed in 1792, according to the *Golden Book*. Fred W. Allsopp, in his *Folklore of Romantic Arkansas*, discusses the whole matter under the caption "The Devil in Arkansas."¹

An old man near Caverna, Missouri, told me that he once met the Devil walking along in the snow just south of the Missouri-Arkansas line. When I questioned him about the Devil's appearance he described an ordinary countryman—blue overalls, slouch hat, skinny face, long hair, shotgun on shoulder, and so on. "He just looked like any common ordinary feller," said the old man wonderingly. I pondered this for awhile. "But how did you know it was the Devil?" I asked. The old man looked fearfully around, then leaned toward me and whispered: "He didn't throw no shadder! He didn't leave no tracks!"

In various parts of Missouri and Arkansas one hears the story of a great hole in the ground, surrounded by rugged cliffs, where hunters have heard strange sounds and smelled

¹ 1931, I, 234-238.

unusual odors. Some say that the Devil lives in that hole, imprisoned under a heavy fall of rock. There are stories of old men who claim to have visited the place as children. Some of these men swear that they heard the Devil's groans and curses and smelled burning flesh and brimstone. Strange people live on the escarpments, it is said, and throw odd things into the pit at night, particularly when the moon is full. There are tales of dark-visaged "furriners" traveling at night, who make regular pilgrimages to the place from distant parts of the country.

I have made some effort to locate this legendary spot, without success. There is a deep canyon with high rugged walls near Mena, Arkansas, which is known as "Devil's Half Acre," but the story of the Devil's imprisonment is not known to the people who live there. Some old-timers connect the story with Hot Springs, Arkansas, but I have never found anybody in that vicinity able to show me the bottomless pit, where I could hear the Devil yell and smell brimstone a-burnin'.

The student of these matters must remember that the word *witch* and its derivatives are not always to be taken literally. Tangles in a horse's mane are called *witches' stirrups*, but I don't think the people who use this term really believe that witches have been riding their horses. I have heard snarls in a woman's hair called *witches' cradles*, but am not sure just what is meant by this. The great horned owl is often called a *witch chicken*, perhaps because of the belief that owls can charm a chicken off its roost. *Witch ball* is a common name for a big puffball, known also as the Devil's snuffbox; this fungus will "hold fire" for a long time, like punk, and it is said that the Indians used it to carry fire from one camp to another. Occasionally a pullet lays a very small egg, and this the housewife usually throws on the roof of the cabin, remarking humorously that it isn't big enough to cook, so she may as well "feed it to the *witches*." I know a little boy who fell down and bloodied his nose and scratched his face and tore his clothes; when he

came home blubbering, his mother cried: "My God, Tommy! You're a sight to skeer the *witches*!" When everything suddenly seems to go wrong, or a series of minor accidents disorganizes her kitchen, many an exasperated housewife exclaims that "the *witches* must be a-ridin' tonight!" But this is just an old backwoods expression, and she doesn't mean it literally.

Mrs. Mabel E. Mueller, Rolla, Missouri, tells of an old man who was much alarmed when his clock suddenly began to strike at random. On one occasion it struck fifteen or twenty times before he could get it stopped. Mrs. Mueller made some humorous remark about this, but the old man was deadly serious, declaring that a witch was responsible. He carried the clock out of the house at once and sold it for a very low price. Later on a friend showed him that a part of the clock's mechanism was broken, but the old man still believed that a witch had somehow caused the trouble.

A young man in Phelps county, Missouri, had an old gasoline-power woodsaw; it was always breaking down, and he didn't know much about machinery or gasoline motors, although he regarded himself as a mechanical genius. He always spoke of the saw "taking a spell," and insisted that it was "witched" by his enemies. Once he brought the machine to a farm where he expected to saw up a big pile of wood. He had cut about one-half a rick when the saw broke down. After tinkering with it awhile he flew into a rage and told the woman who had hired him: "My saw is witched! You and your whole family are witches! To hell with you all!" And no more wood was sawed that day.

Here is another old fireside tale, current in the late eighties. I got this particular version from Clarence Sharp, who heard it near Dutch Mills, Arkansas. The story goes that a hillman was just falling asleep when a pretty girl appeared with a bridle in her hand. In a twinkling she turned the poor fellow into a pony, leaped on his back, and rode him wildly through the woods. Later on she hitched him to a tree at the mouth of a

cave, and he saw a group of "furriners" carrying big sacks of money into the cavern. Finally she rode him back home, and he woke up next morning all tired out and brier-scratched. This happened night after night, and the hillman consulted a famous witch master. The witch master advised him to mark the tree to which he was tied at night, so that he could find it again in the daytime. Then, said the witch master, it would be an easy matter to waylay the witch and kill her with a silver bullet, and afterwards they could get the treasure in the cave. So the next night, being transformed into a horse, the hillman "drapped as many drappin's" as he could to mark the place and started in to chaw a big blaze on the sapling to which he was tied. "I chawed an' I chawed," he said, "an' all of a sudden come a hell of a noise an' a big flash o' light. Then I heerd a lot o' hollerin', an' it sounded like my old woman was a-doin' the hollerin'. Quick as a wink I seen I was home again, an' it seemed like"—here the hillman stole a furtive glance at his wife, who sat stolidly smoking by the fireplace—"it seemed like I'd went an' benastied the bed-blankets, an' dang near bit the old woman's leg off!"

Many people believe that a witch can ruin a man's health by placing a lock of his hair, a fingernail clipping, or even a photograph of him, under the eaves of a house where the rain from the roof will fall upon it. I have heard of a woman in Newton county, Missouri, who hung the framed pictures of her husband's parents under the eaves during a hard rain. Just for the record—both of the old persons died a few weeks later. A man in Joplin, Missouri, told me that his disease, which the doctors called neuritis, had been wished on him—wished is a common euphemism for witched. "I can lay here in bed any night when it's a-rainin'," he said, "an' just *feel* the water a-pourin' on my head an' shoulders!"

To curse any particular part of a victim's body, the witch takes the corresponding part of an animal, *names* it for him, and then buries it in the ground or suspends it in a pool of

water. There was a man near Neosho, Missouri, who said publicly that his prostatitis was "wished on him" in this manner by a former mistress. Many people think that witches can, by some hocus-pocus with the sex organs of a sheep, render a man impotent or a woman sterile. A girl in McDonald county, Missouri, named sheep's testicles for a boy who had mistreated her and put them into an anthill; this was supposed to destroy the young man's virility but was apparently without effect, as he was still going strong the last I heard of him.

Just across the river from Sylamore, Arkansas, I met several persons who told me that there was a witch in the neighborhood, adding that everyone was frightened but nobody could figure out who the witch was. According to the story, a local man was stricken by some mysterious disease, and a "power doctor" decided to bleed him. When a vein in the man's arm was opened, the blood which rushed out was jet black. The horrified healer hurried away saying that the man was witched, and that no earthly power could save his life. When the poor fellow died a few days later, the relatives were all convinced that some woman in the vicinity had sold her soul to the Devil.

A physician at Ozark, Missouri, tells me that some people in that town became convinced that a man with an aortic aneurysm was "goomered" by a witch who had died some time before. They called a goomer doctor down from Springfield; he decided that there were live lizards and frogs inside the patient—said he could feel 'em wriggling about under the swelling in the poor fellow's chest! The ceremony which was supposed to remove these creatures lasted several days and nights, but the patient died.

It is surprising how seriously many people, apparently intelligent and enlightened on other subjects, take this witchcraft business. I have even been accused of dabbling in sorcery myself; there is an old woman still living near Farmington, Arkansas, who tells people that I "threwed a curse" which ruined her whole family. A neighbor of mine, by no means an ignorant

man, seemed delighted when the doctor told him that his illness was caused by a bad appendix, and that it could be cured by an operation. His reaction puzzled the physician, who asked what he was so happy about. The man answered that he had feared the pain was "wished on him" and could not be relieved by any natural means!

Nancy Clemens, of Springfield, Missouri, told me an old story about a man who was shot by a witch's bullet, a ball which leaves no mark but causes the victim to lose consciousness. This poor chap was picking apples in a high tree at the time, and the fall injured him so badly that he was confined to his bed for several weeks. An outsider would have thought that the old man just fainted and fell out of the tree, but the fellow himself insisted that he had been shot by a witch, and his friends and relatives agreed with him.

It is generally believed that a witch acquires extraordinary merit by burning the body of a newborn babe. Many a granny-woman has been suspected of selling stillborn children to the witches. My father-in-law, a physician at Pineville, Missouri, claims that there are no witches in the Ozarks nowadays. But he once told me that a certain old woman was trying to obtain the body of an infant. "I think she wants to burn it," he admitted reluctantly, "and make some kind of luck charms out of the ashes."

It is said that a mirror framed on three sides only gives a witch telescopic and X-ray vision, so that she can watch her enemies no matter how far off they may be, or how well concealed. I have seen two of these mirrors, one of which was said to have been brought from England in colonial days and used by several generations of women who could "do things." The present owners can't work the mirrors, I was told, because they don't know the magic words.

There are many ways of detecting a witch, such as hiding a Bible in her mattress, placing a broomstick in her path, scratching a little cross under the seat of her chair, or adding

a bit of pawpaw bark to her tobacco. Any of these measures will make a witch deathly sick, while an innocent woman is not affected. Another method is to take a new awl and fix it in the seat of a chair, so that only a very little of the point sticks through. Then get the suspected woman to sit down in the chair. If she jumps and cries out, it means that she is not a witch, since a witch doesn't feel the sharp point at all.

Many people believe that witches eat very little salt. If a woman complains that food is too salty, when it does not seem so to others, she is regarded with suspicion. "The Devil hates salt" is a very old saying. Farmers have told me that bewitched cattle will not touch salt. Some hillfolk say that one can detect witchcraft by placing a little salt in the suspect's chair; if she is really a witch the salt melts like glue, and her dress sticks to the chair seat.

There is an old story that if a man kisses or embraces a witch, the silver coins in his pocket will all turn black, but I do not believe that this is taken very seriously by the real witch masters.

When a witch comes into the house, raw onions that have been cut up and peeled are supposed to sour instantly and become poisonous. I have seen a housewife, when another woman entered the room, ostentatiously remove some raw onions from the table and throw them out into the yard. In this case the housewife did not really believe that the visitor was a witch, but she wanted to *behave* as if she believed it.

The backwoods witch hunters have little confidence in the old notion that a witch must be aged, or stooped, or hatchet-faced, or hook-nosed, or swarthy according to the storybook pattern. There is no obvious physical characteristic that is relied upon to identify a witch. However, I did meet one old man, a basketmaker near Eureka Springs, Arkansas, who said that a witch always has a "shifty" eye, and "don't never look straight at nobody, unless she's got 'em cunjured."

If several persons are seated about a fire, and the sparks

which pop out seem to be directed toward one particular individual, it is said that this person is somehow connected with the powers of evil. I have often heard this notion dismissed lightly, as when a great burst of sparks flew directly at a very ugly old woman, who showed her toothless gums in a grin. "Fire follers beauty," she said. We all laughed, but some of the old-timers looked distinctly uncomfortable.

Witches can make themselves invisible, as everybody knows, but there is one method by which anybody can see them. All you have to do is throw a pinch of dust from a certain kind of puffball, known as the Devil's snuffbox, into a little whirlwind. Whirlwinds are common on the dusty roads every summer, but they are nearly always seen at a little distance. It is like the story often told children, that in order to catch wild birds, one has only to put a little salt on their tails.

A friend of mine went out to photograph an alleged witch, not far from Neosho, Missouri. The old crone posed willingly enough beside her little cabin, in the bright sunlight. When the film was developed, the building showed sharp and clear in every detail, but there was no human figure in the picture at all. "It gave me quite a turn," said the amateur photographer. "For a moment I almost believed that there *was* something supernatural about that old woman!" But I reckon the lady must have shifted the camera somehow, thus cutting the witch out of the negative.

Probably the commonest way to keep witches out of the house is to nail a horseshoe over the door; this is regarded as a sort of general prophylactic against witches, bad luck, contagious disease, and other evil influences. Many hillmen insist that it doesn't work unless the open end of the horseshoe is upward, but the reason for this has never been explained to me.

Some of the old-timers drive three nails into the outside of a door, in the form of a triangle, to keep witches away from the cabin; one man told me that the three nails represent the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost and were particularly efficacious

in protecting an expectant mother from the powers of evil. Painting the outside of a door blue is said to be a sensible precaution also, and some people make doubly sure by driving several tiny pegs of pawpaw wood into the doorsill.

A man in Fort Smith, Arkansas, told me that his father placed the entrails of a big horned owl over the door, to keep witches away. And Otto Ernest Rayburn tells of a man on trial for hog-stealing who wore "the dried gizzard of a hoot-owl tied round his neck for good luck."² A hunter who lived in the woods on Spring River, near Waco, Missouri, nailed the genitals of a male fox squirrel above the door of his shanty. When I asked the purpose of this he said that it brought good luck. "It skeers the witches, too," he added, "just like deer horns."

Some of the old-timers used to make a net of horsehair—a horsehair sieve, they called it—and fasten it over a hole in the door or window. In order to reach the people in the house, it was said, a witch must go *in and out* at each of the holes in the sieve, which would slow up her activity to a very considerable extent. I have seen what was left of one of these sieves, but the woman who showed it to me explained that it had been used nearly a hundred years ago, and that she kept it only as a relic.

Some people say that, in order to protect a building against witches, one need only fasten two little hazel sticks on the wall in the form of a cross. I have never seen this in a cabin occupied by human beings but have often found such crosses nailed up in barns, where they are said to protect cattle and horses against disease.

A new house, which has not yet been occupied, is sometimes protected from evil spirits by placing an old broom across the threshold. Mrs. May Kennedy McCord, of Springfield, Missouri, says that the old folks used to set up the mop and broom so as to form a cross, in the belief that it would keep witches out of the house. Mrs. C. P. Mahnkey, of Mincy, Missouri, writes me that the woman who cleaned house for her always

² *Ozark Country*, p. 11.

did this, when the sweeping and mopping were finished. I have seen the crossing of the mop and broom several times in my own house near Pineville, Missouri, but the woman who crossed them would not admit any connection with superstition. "It just shows I'm all done cleanin'," she said.

May Stafford Hilburn tells of an old woman who "kept the witches away by running three times around the cabin, just at dusk-dark, shaking a white rag above her head as she ran."³

Some hillfolk plant a cedar peg, with three short prongs, in the pathway to keep witches away from a backwoods cabin. It is said that this device is particularly favored by certain primitive Christians, who regard it as representative of the Trinity. It is very bad luck to disturb such a symbol, whether one believes in witchcraft or not. Enlightened hill people may laugh at these outworn superstitions, but they are nevertheless very careful not to step on a "witch peg."

By all odds the most striking barrier against witches is the so-called egg tree. Usually it is just a little dead bush with the branches closely trimmed, and literally covered with carefully blown egg shells. There are hundreds of egg shells on a really fine egg tree, which often requires years to perfect. It is set firmly in the ground near the cabin, a favorite place being under a big cedar in the front yard. Just how the egg tree is supposed to drive off witches I was never able to learn. Egg trees are rare nowadays, and many people have spent years in the Ozarks without seeing or even hearing of such a thing. As recently as 1921 there were two or three near Pineville, Missouri, and Southwest City, Missouri, and I saw one in 1924 not far from Sulphur Springs, Arkansas. There used to be a very fine egg tree at the old Jim Cummins place, on Bear Creek, in Taney county, Missouri. Mrs. C. P. Mahnkey tells me that she saw egg trees "now and then" when she was a child, and that the last one in her neighborhood stood in Granny Howe's yard, near Kirbyville, Missouri.

³ *Missouri Magazine* (December, 1933), p. 10.

Many hillfolk believe that witches are discomfited by hearing the name of the Deity. A woman at Sparta, Missouri, complained that a local witch turned her into a calf and rode her all over the country. Many a morning she would awake all tired out and brier-scratched, with burs and beggars'-lice in her hair. Finally one night the witch forced her into a particularly painful brier patch, and as the thorns tore her flesh she cried out "Oh God!" Instantly the witch and the brier patch disappeared, and she found herself out in a field, sitting on a bundle of fodder.

An old woman near Conway, Arkansas, told me the following "charm," guaranteed to drive off witches, which she learned from her grandfather:

Dullix, ix, ux,
You caint fly over Pontio,
Pontio is above Pilato!

A man in Hot Springs, Arkansas, claimed that he could stop any sort of supernatural evil-doing, temporarily at least, by repeating aloud:

Old Tom Walker under your hat,
Bound in the name of God the Father,
God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Here is a rhyme from a manuscript book which Miss Miriam Lynch, Notch, Missouri, obtained from one of her neighbors. It is supposed to be repeated by one who is about to enter a struggle or contest and fears that his adversary may be assisted by the Powers of Evil:

God the Father is with me,
God the Son may be with thee,
The Holy Ghost is with us all
But I will rise and you will fall.

In pronouncing any of these magic words against witches, it is well to clasp one's hands together, in such a manner, that the thumbs cross. Some think a better move against witches

is to hold the right thumb in the left hand, and the left thumb in the right hand; this can be done inconspicuously, with the hands in one's lap. Either of these positions is supposed to be more effective than the ordinary crossing of the first and second fingers of the same hand, in the "King's X" fashion affected by school children.

Another ancient method of discouraging witches is to take a buckeye and stand facing the rising sun. Then, while repeating a certain old sayin', you bore a hole in the buckeye with a sharp pointed flint-rock. The old sayin' is a secret, of course. "I wouldn't be allowed to tell," one woman said to me, "and there's some dirty words in it, anyhow."

In a really serious situation the old-time Ozarker does not rely upon his own efforts to rout a witch but obtains the services of a professional witch master. If the witch master knows the identity of the woman who is causing the trouble, he draws her picture on a board and fires a silver bullet into it. This is supposed to kill the witch, or at least to cause her great bodily and mental anguish. I interviewed one renowned witch killer who cuts a silhouette out of paper and writes the witch's name on it. Then he very slowly tears the paper doll to pieces—pulls off a hand one day, a foot the next, and so on. Finally he snips off the head, whereupon the witch is expected to die, or suffer a paralytic stroke, or become violently insane.

Some operators prefer to make a little image of mud or beeswax to represent the witch. This "poppet" is covered with cloth once worn by the guilty woman. Then the witch doctor drives nails into the poppet, or beats it with a hammer, or burns it.

Years ago in Arkansas I knew a jealous woman who tried to "witch" the girl who had stolen her man. She set a human skull on a Bible, and before it placed two dolls, representing the erring husband and his light-o'-love. The poppet dressed as a girl had four big nails driven into its back. The whole thing was a failure, apparently; I saw the girl several years later, and

she seemed in good health and spirits. In 1938 Mr. D. F. Fox, a photographer of Galena, Missouri, wanted to make some pictures illustrating Ozark superstition; I fixed a skull-and-Bible altar for him, with two dolls posed exactly like those used by the jealous wife in Arkansas. The picture was later published in *Life*, June 19, 1939. William Seabrook describes Fox's photographs at some length, adding that he had helped to destroy similar hellish devices in France, in 1932. "I don't know what Messrs. Fox and Randolph think they are playing with," he writes. "They may have merely persuaded some old woman to show them how such things are set up, but the pictures intrinsically stink of murder."⁴

Mr. G. H. Pipes told me a witch story, which he had from Grandmaw Bryant of Reeds Spring, Missouri, in the early 1920's. It seems that some carpenters were building a house, and the work was going very well until a certain old woman walked slowly past. From that moment everything went wrong. The workmen couldn't hit nails but hammered their thumbs instead. They dropped their tools repeatedly, and one narrowly missed falling off the ridgepole. After two or three days of this, they called in a witch doctor. He found the old woman's trail in the dirt and drove a big nail into one of her heel prints. As soon as this was done, the carpenters went to work again, and the building was completed with no further difficulty. The old witch had a very sore foot and limped around with a bandage on her heel nearly all winter.

A witch killer near Steelville, Missouri, says that it is only necessary to draw a rude picture of the witch on the north side of a black-oak tree, then drive a nail through the heart of the picture and leave it there. All this is done secretly, in the deep woods; unless the witch can find the black oak and pull out the nail, she'll die very soon.

I once knew a man who spent half-an-hour or so every evening

⁴ *Witchcraft, Its Power in the World Today* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1940), pp. 18-19.

playing with a wooden spite doll, which was dressed to resemble a local woman who could "do things." Time after time he would thrust the little image into the fireplace, until the feet touched the glowing embers, and then snatch it out again. The expression on his face was most unpleasant. I am quite indifferent to the ordinary superstitions of the hillfolk. I visit graveyards at night, shoot cats on occasion, and burn sassafras wood without a tremor. And yet, something akin to horror gripped me, as I watched the witch master's sadistic foolery. I should not care to have that man burning a poppet wrapped in *my* undershirt.

Some witch masters go into the woods and pile grass and twigs around in a big circle, perhaps fifty feet in diameter. Then they mutter their magic phrases, and one minute before midnight they set the ring of brush on fire. The idea is that this somehow forces the witch to appear within the circle, and anybody who does show up there is likely to get a silver bullet through the guts. There are several stories of travelers, usually doctors on late calls, blundering into these witch rings at midnight. Sometimes the doctor talks his way out, while in other variants of the tale the unfortunate physician is shot to death.

If it is possible to obtain any part of the witch's body—such as fingernail parings, a lock of hair, a tooth, or even a cloth with some of her blood upon it—the witch doctor has recourse to another method. Out in the woods at midnight he bores a hole in the fork of a pawpaw tree, and drives a wooden peg into the hole. Once, despite the protests of a superstitious hillman who was with me, I pulled out one of these pegs and examined it. The end was covered with beeswax, in which several long hairs were imbedded. There was a circle of what appeared to be dried blood higher up on the peg, and the auger hole contained a quantity of fine sand. A similar "pawpaw conjure" is sometimes employed by cuckold husbands, but it is primarily intended to deal with women who "talk the Devil's language."

In case the material for the pawpaw trick cannot be obtained from a witch, some hillfolk try to conjure her with any object

that she has ever touched, or even a bit of wood or metal from the house in which she lives. I know a man who, as a child in McDonald county, Missouri, was sent by his parents to steal a shingle from a witch's roof. His grandmother burned the shingle and buried the ashes in the graveyard. But the little boy never understood the purpose of this business, and nobody ever explained it to him. He told me about the incident, and a few years later I met his mother, in a neighboring state, and asked her if she remembered it. "Yes," she said slowly, "I reckon Tommy got the shingle, all right. But it didn't mean nothin'. Just some of Granny Fitzhugh's foolishness. She was awful old, an' kind of weak in her mind."

The discomfort caused by the witch master's spells finally forces the witch to show her hand, and she comes to the bewitched person's home. Usually she offers some apparently innocent gift or attempts to borrow some trifle. If the witch's gift is accepted, or her request for a loan granted, the witch master's charm is broken and the witch instantly regains control of the situation. The safest plan is never to lend anything under such conditions unless the borrower speaks the words "for God's sake"—it is said that a witch cannot pronounce these words.

The witch master's immediate purpose is to check the particular "bewitchment" which is injuring his client, but his ultimate intention is to kill or permanently disable the witch. When a witch dies, every jackleg witch doctor in the country claims credit for causing her death. When old Gram French was killed by falling off a bluff, an amateur conjurer in our neighborhood stalked solemnly about with rabbit blood on his forehead for several days. "But ever'body knows," a village loafer said scornfully, "that the pore half-wit never even *seen* Gram!"

Mrs. Mabel E. Mueller, Rolla, Missouri, told me of an alleged witch in her neighborhood and repeated several stories she had heard about this woman. "A certain young man," she said, "was trying to court the old witch's pretty daughter. The old woman

did not approve of the match, so she cast a spell on the boy and made him very sick. The boy's folks called the witch master, who drew a picture of the witch and pierced the head with a pegging-awl. 'I reckon that'll give the ol' devil a headache, anyhow,' he said. Next day the boy was much improved, and the old woman was in bed, with a bag of hot sand on her forehead.

"On another occasion," Mrs. Mueller added, "this same old witch put a spell on a neighbor's daughter, so that she was stricken with some kind of lumbago and couldn't walk. The witch doctor didn't tell anybody just what he did this time, but in a few days the girl was feeling much better. And for weeks after that the old witch was seen walking aimlessly about in a rocky field, so crippled that she moved very slowly and leaned upon a cane.

"These stories were told me by people who believe every word of them," said Mrs. Mueller with a smile. "There was a time when nearly all of the backwoods people believed in witchcraft and sorcery, and such beliefs are not at all uncommon today, even among the more or less enlightened younger generation."

A basketmaker at Eureka Springs, Arkansas, told me that children are best protected against witches by wearing a necklace of dried burdock roots, cut into small pieces and strung like beads. Some say that if a child is bewitched despite this precaution, it is only necessary to stand him on his head while you count forty-nine backwards to take the curse off. Another remedy is to strip the child and leave him naked while you boil his clothes in a kettle out of doors. Rap three times on the kettle with a stick, calling out the name of the woman whom you believe to have bewitched the child. If the woman is guilty, the spell will be broken instantly.

A family named Criger, in Greene county, Missouri, had an infant bewitched; the baby cried constantly, but the doctors could find nothing wrong with it. The mother was advised to carry the child to the front door every morning, and to lick its face "in a clean sweep from the nose to the hairline." This was to

continue for nine mornings, and on the ninth day the witch would appear and try to borrow something. Her request must be refused, and the refusal would break the spell forever. Sure enough, on the ninth morning an old woman appeared and wanted to borrow a cup of sugar. Mrs. Criger refused to lend any sugar, and the baby was perfectly normal thereafter. Otto Ernest Rayburn tells a very similar story,⁵ but in his version the mother was told to "repeat the three highest names in the Bible" each time she licked the child's face "from nose to hair-line." In Rayburn's story, too, it was a *man* who had bewitched the infant. When this man was unable to borrow anything on the ninth day the child recovered, but the woman who told the mother how to break the spell "had a nice heifer to die the following day."

The following story came to me from Phelps county, Missouri, but variants of it are heard all through the Ozark region. An infant suddenly became very ill, and the parents suspected witchcraft, so they called in the local goomer doctor. He muttered some incantations, burned a little powder in the fireplace, and boiled all the baby's clothing in a kettle outside the cabin. "Don't take no gifts from nobody," he cautioned the parents, "an' don't lend nobody nothin'." The only callers next day were two women, one of whom carried a child in her arms. Just as they were leaving a little shower came up, and the sick baby's mother handed the other woman a shawl to protect the visiting child from the rain. Later that same day the baby died. "You must have took a gift," said the witch master, "or else loaned somethin'." Forgetting the shawl, the sorrowing mother denied this but later recalled the incident and admitted her mistake. "You ought to have done like I told ye," the goomer doctor said sadly as he took his leave.

Clothing that has been bewitched is treated by burying it in the ground, "jest like if it had been stunk up by a polecat." Other hillfolk prefer to wash such clothing in milk and hang

⁵ *Ozark Country*, p. 164.

it out of doors over night in freezing weather; this is supposed to take the curse off somehow, so that the garments may be worn without danger.

The rifle is still an essential part of the hillman's equipment, and in pioneer days it was even more important. There are many stories of witches who could utterly ruin a hunter by putting a spell on his rifle. One way of witching a man's weapon is to steal a bullet from his pouch and fasten it with string to a willow, so that it remains suspended in swift water. The poor fellow's rifle shakes from that time forward, just as the bullet shakes in the current, and he can never shoot accurately until the spell is removed.

Mrs. Mabel E. Mueller, of Rolla, Missouri, told me about a farmer whose wife was reputed to have supernatural powers. One day the men of the neighborhood were engaged in a shooting match, while the witch woman was working near the house. After awhile she called her husband. "John," she said, "come help me frame this here flax." John paid no attention, for he was an exceptionally good shot and didn't want to leave the shooting match. The next shot he fired went wild. His rifle was in perfect condition, but the witch had tied a little knot in the corner of her apron. After three more shots, all of which missed the target, John prepared to leave the match. "I'll have to go, boys," he said. "The old woman's done put a spell on my gun, an' she won't take it off till I 'tend to that damn' flax."

A man in Christian county, Missouri, complained that his brand-new rifle was witched. The witch doctor advised him to put it in the spring branch so that the water would run through the barrel, and not to lend anything. Pretty soon a woman who lived nearby came to borrow some medicine, but he told her no. She must have been the witch, said my informant, because she had a turrible runnin' off at the bowels, and he figgered it made the old devil sick when the spell was took off'n the gun.

There is an old story of a famous hunter whose rifle suddenly lost its accuracy. He believed that the weapon was witched by

an old woman who lived near his cabin. All smiles, the hunter went to see this woman and borrowed a nail to fasten the heel of his boot, which he said was loose. Returning home, he drove the nail into the stock of his rifle; instantly the spell was broken, and the hunter could shoot as well as ever.

It is said that a bewitched firearm can somehow be disenchanted with asafetida, but I have never been able to find out anything definite about this method.

An old man at Berryville, Arkansas, claims that witch doctors can write something on paper and place it under the metal butt plate of a rifle; this is supposed to fix a gun so that it can't be witched. Some gunsmiths used to *make* all their weapons that way; it is said that many of the earlier Hawkins rifles, for example, were warranted witch proof. A sort of built-in witch stopper, as it were.

When the new moon comes on Friday, it is said to usher in a favorable period for molding bullets; many old folks insist that bullets made at this time are luckier and deadlier than those cast at any other season. It is said also that rifle balls kept in a human skull for awhile become more lethal than ordinary bullets. Some old-timers believe—or at least pretend to believe—that the man who drives a coffin nail into the butt of his gun will never fail to kill an enemy. The coffin nail must be one which has been used and buried in the ground, of course.

If a man threatens you with a firearm, cry out "Poxxy soxy sorrox" and the gun will miss fire; if it does go off, the bullet won't hit you; if the bullet does hit you, it won't kill you. In the old days, many a pioneer carried a bat's heart, dried and powdered. Some said that it would turn bullets, others that it would keep a wounded man from bleeding to death. A bullet which has killed a man can be used in some kind of hocus-pocus against witches and is carefully preserved for this purpose.

Many Ozark housewives think, when the butter doesn't come promptly, that it must be due to witches in the churn. I have seen these women wash a silver coin and drop it into the cream

—this is supposed to drive the witches out. Some people put a horseshoe into the churn, instead of a coin. Most of them say simply a horseshoe, but sometimes one hears that it should be a hot horseshoe. It may be that a *hot* horseshoe really would make the butter come, and not by any supernatural spells, either.

A woman near Springfield, Missouri, tells the following tale which she had from her pioneer mother. One day they churned and churned with no result, so the housewife took a hot horseshoe out of the oven, where it was kept to drive hawks away from the chickens, and dropped it into the churn. The butter came instantly, and a moment later they heard loud screams from a shanty across the road. They rushed over there and found an old woman badly burned. She said she had fallen into the fireplace, but the burn *looked* as if it had been made by a hot horseshoe.

A lady in Christian county, Missouri, was annoyed by a series of minor inconveniences, which she attributed to a neighbor who could “do things.” One afternoon somebody remarked that if she shouted out the witch’s name the spell would be dissipated. That very night she was sitting before the fire when she sensed the witch’s approach. “I just drew a good deep breath,” she said later, “an’ then I hollered ‘Peggy McGee’ as loud as I could! The whole thing stopped right there, an’ I aint had no trouble with witches since.”

Some witches seem to specialize in throwing spells on horses, cattle, and other livestock. One of my old neighbors told me that his hogs had been witched only a few years ago. When he went to feed ’em they wouldn’t come to the trough at all but “jest lent back on their tails an’ squole!”

When a cow gives bloody milk, it is generally due to some natural cause, but there is always the possibility of witchcraft. Put the morning’s milk in a kettle, boil it over an open fire outdoors, and stir it with a forked thorny stick. If the cow *has* been witched, this procedure will send the witch into convulsions, and she will not bother your cows any more.

Old Granny Bryant, of Reeds Spring, Missouri, used to tell of a family whose cow suddenly began to give bloody milk. They talked the matter over and called in a witch doctor. "Put some of that bloody milk in a fryin' pan," said he, "an' bile it over a slow fire. While the milk's a-bilin', beat on the bottom of the pan with a hickory stick." These instructions were carried out, and people who went to the local witch's cabin said that her back and buttocks were a mass of bruises, so sore that she could not walk for several days. The spell was dissipated, and the cow gave no more bloody milk.

A lady named Barnes, at Galena, Missouri, sold her cow to a doctor. Later on she said that the physician had cheated her somehow and demanded the return of the cow, but the new owner refused to give it up. This angered Mrs. Barnes, and she "wished a sickness" on the cow, so that it took to throwing fits every day and was never of much use to the doctor or his family. "I never wished anything on anybody yet," said Mrs. Barnes in my hearing, "that it didn't happen!"

Many farmers treat witched cattle with a mixture of burnt cornbread, soot, and salt. The soot is the important ingredient, I think—the bread and salt are just added to make the stuff palatable. The water in which a blacksmith cools his irons is supposed to be good for witched cattle and is sometimes given to human beings also, particularly children. Some witch masters cure a witched horse or cow by snipping off a bit of hair from its head and burning the hair, the idea being that this will make a sore place on the witch's head and thus cause her to remove the spell.

Mrs. Mabel E. Mueller, Rolla, Missouri, told me of a neighbor whose cow was "on the lift"; the animal's eyes bulged, and it had a peculiar frightened look said to be characteristic of witched cattle. The witch master came and cut off a little curl from the cow's forelock. Next day the cow was well, and the witch came to borrow some soda, but the family refused to lend. They noticed that a lock of hair had been cut from the front

of the witch's forehead. The hired man asked her about this, and the woman said she had cut it off because it "bothered" her.

Mrs. Mueller unearthed another witch tale, well known to some of the old-timers in Phelps County, Missouri. A young man wanted to marry the traditional farmer's daughter, but the match was opposed by his mother, who was able to "do things." He married the girl anyhow, and they had a baby. One day the young folks were picking blackberries, and the baby was sleeping under a tree only a few yards away. The husband heard a noise, and found that an old sow had mangled the infant so badly that it died. The boy looked at the sow and saw that it had eyes exactly like his mother's. He accused the old woman and threatened her life, but she denied everything. Their next baby was also attacked by a sow, but the father got there before it was much hurt. He looked at the sow, and the animal trotted away. The boy went home, loaded a rifle with a silver ball, and pointed it at his mother. She screamed and begged and confessed on her knees that she had killed his baby. Then in the presence of all the kinfolk she swore that she would not molest his family again, and he was persuaded by his sisters to spare her life. The old witch kept her promise, and the young couple raised their other children without any supernatural interference.

I am indebted to Mrs. Mueller also for an account of a conjure man she knew in Rolla about 1910. He was a mind reader, clairvoyant, fortuneteller, power doctor, witch master—an old fellow with strange red eyes. This man told Mrs. Mueller how he learned the art of conjuring. He said that even as a small boy he always felt that he could "do things," and one day he saw what looked like a snake or an eel at the water's edge, in a small creek. He approached, and the thing crawled out on a gravel bar. A strange animal, black all over, about a foot long, shaped exactly like a coffin, with two red eyes like balls of fire. A voice told him to kill this creature, and he smashed it with a club.

From that day forward he could conjure. There are people in Rolla today who remember the old man with the strange red eyes, like balls of fire.

I have met elderly folk near Marionville, Missouri, who remember the doings of Granny Whittaker. On one occasion she asked a neighbor's daughter to hold the Whittaker baby for a few moments, but the little girl refused to touch the infant. "It stinks," she said bluntly. "All right, young lady," cried the Whittaker woman, "you'll suffer for them remarks!" From that day forward the girl had fits, sometimes three or four fits in a single day. The poor child always cried out that she saw "old Granny Whittaker, in the shape of a turkey" just before the attacks came on. The girl's father could see nothing, but he often fired his pistol in the direction of the phantom turkey pointed out by the "fitified" girl. Once old Granny Whittaker lost a finger in some mysterious accident, and the neighbors thought that one of this man's bullets might have somehow struck her hand. The local conjurers and power doctors "sot up spells" against Granny Whittaker for years, but without any visible results. It is said that one famous witch master came all the way from Little Rock, Arkansas, to match magic with the Whittaker witch but accomplished nothing.

There is one case reported from the Cookson Hill country of Oklahoma, just across the Arkansas line, where a prominent citizen died in rather strange circumstances. Some of his backwoods relatives got the idea that a witch was the cause of this man's death and decided to avenge him in the real old-time tradition. The first step was to secure three nails from the dead man's coffin; these may be drawn before the coffin is buried in the ground, but not until after the body has been placed in the coffin. The nails must not be replaced by other nails, and the three holes in the wood should be left open. After the funeral the old-timers killed a goat, removed the heart, and thrust the three coffin nails into it. The goat's heart with the nails in it was then enclosed in a little basket-like cage of wire and sus-

pended out of sight in the big chimney of the dead man's house. The theory is that, as the goat's heart shrivels and decays, the witch will sicken and die. If she does not sicken and die, it is regarded as evidence that she was not responsible for the man's death, after all.

The preceding paragraph seems rather fantastic, but I believe that the goat's-heart and coffin-nail business was carried out exactly as I have described it. I saw nothing of it myself, though I am intimately acquainted with some of the persons involved; I once sat within a few feet of the big fireplace above which the nailed goat's heart is suspended but did not peer up the chimney to see if the little wire cage was really there. I was told about this by two young, educated members of the family, who gave me permission to publish the story on condition that no names or identifying data were included. The man who sold the coffin refused to discuss this particular case, but admitted that "more than once" people had come to his place of business and wanted to pull nails out of coffins in which bodies were lying at the time. The nails, or screws, he thought, were to be used in "some Indian ceremony." Well, the clan in question boasts a "smidgin" of Cherokee blood—so does my own family, for that matter. But the persons concerned in this goat's-heart affair have had little contact with Indians; they know nothing of tribal religions or ceremonials, and many of them never even spoke with a fullblood in their lives.

Many of the unsolved murders, and many of the outrages attributed to masked night riders, are directly or indirectly connected with the hillman's belief in witchcraft. The Henley-Barnett feud at Marshall, Arkansas, which killed so many people that the governor sent troops to prevent further bloodshed, is said to have been fanned into flame by an old woman who could "do things." This was common talk when I interviewed members of both factions at Marshall in 1934, although vigorously denied by those in authority.

Less than a year ago I heard a man threaten an old woman's

life, because he believed that she had bewitched his son. The boy had lived quietly at home until he reached the age of seventeen, when he suddenly took to robbing tourist camps and filling-stations along the highway. "My boy was brought up honest," the old man said, "an' there aint no *natural* reason for this here trouble. He's witched, an' I know who done it!"

Most of the Ozark superstitions are harmless enough, but this belief in witchcraft frequently leads to violent crime. When primitive people imagine that their troubles are caused by supernatural "spells," and that these spells are cast upon them by their neighbors, tragedy often results. Things happen in these hills which are never mentioned in the newspapers, never reported to the sheriff at the county seat. The casual tourist sees nothing to suggest the current of savage hatred that flows beneath the genial hospitality of our Ozark villages. "Still waters run deep," as Grandmaw Tolliver used to say, "an' the Devil lays at the bottom."

