

GEDNEY DYKE

Old Mother Nightshade

IN the Middle Ages there was a popular belief in lycanthropy or the power of turning oneself into an animal at will.

Old Mother Nightshade was a lycanthropic witch who supposedly lived at Gedney Dyke in the mid 18th century. The villagers were very scared of her, especially at night and when the moon was full. At that time strange barking came from her hovel, but they knew she did not keep animals, except for two cats which spat at the caged Jackdaw moulting in her front window. All feared the woman, except for a simple youth called John Culpepper who loved Rose Taylor, the most popular girl in the village.

Rose spurned and teased him until eventually his love turned to hatred. He consulted the witch to see if she would punish the girl and was received with pleasure. Mother Nightshade studied her tea leaves and said his troublesome flower could be easily blighted. She gave him a box of sweetmeats with instructions to give them to Rose in two days time when the moon was full. He was then to report back to her when he would learn something to his advantage.

The youth did as he was told and all went to plan. Rose took the sweets without question and being greedy, ate

the lot as she walked away. Culpepper raced back to the old woman and begged to know what would happen. She explained that before she told him he had to sit in her chair and keep his eyes closed until told to open them.

John sat down, watched by the two savage cats. First his arms and then his legs were fastened tight and he saw nothing. He waited patiently until a strange voice told him to open his eyes, when all bound tight he had to watch as the hag slowly transformed herself. Her hands, her arms, her legs and torso and finally her face, with gnashing teeth in a drooling mouth, all covered in thick brown hair.

That night the villagers stayed locked in their homes, trembling at the sound of savage growls and cries for help coming from Mother Nightshade's cottage. A group of brave men called on the woman at dawn, but she was not at home. However, there was a large pile of John Culpepper's blood-stained clothes thrown into a dark corner, together with a heap of bones. The boy was never seen again, but the beautiful Rose flourished with never a thought for the gullible boy who had loved her.

The parson was summoned to the scene of the crime but refused his assistance. So they set fire to the hovel and although the witch was never seen again, the eerie barking continued under the full moon. The people from Gedney Dyke never left their homes then.