

I SEE THE MAKING OF A WITCH

It takes 40 minutes to initiate a witch. It has taken thousands of years to evolve the ritual by which it is done.

The candlelit ceremony I watched recently in a West London flat, when a young half-Indian bookshop assistant was admitted to the coven of the most powerful witch in Europe, was in a sense old and new.

Throughout the centuries of persecution, some families have handed down the ancient secrets of Wicca—meaning "wisdom", the witches' own name for the cult. Alex Sanders's family was one; his grandmother initiated him when he was seven.

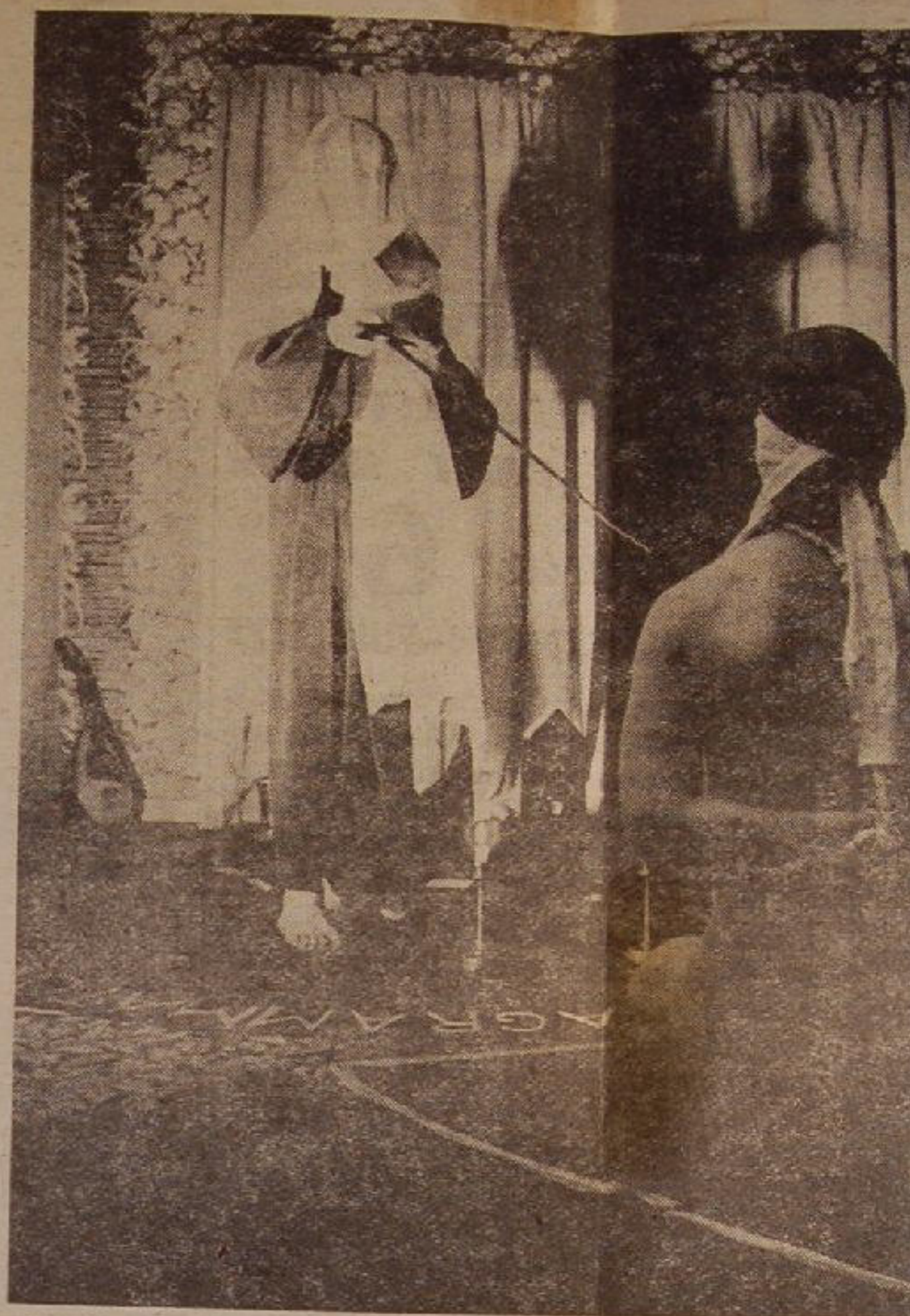
Today, at 43, Alex is recognised as "King" by most of Europe's white witches. "We're not living in the past," he told me.

"We're standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before, and we're trying to look ahead a little bit more. We had to go through the Dark Ages, and we're coming into our own right again."

Alex admits that many turn to witchcraft for cranky or sensationalist motives; but those who treat it reverently, as he unquestionably does, combine the hereditary knowledge with a study of the ancient texts.

Their aim is to recapture and develop the pure essence of this religion which is far older

Are witches really just cranks? Are initiation ceremonies orgies in disguise? **STEWART FARRAR** concludes his behind the scenes examination of witchcraft in Britain today



In the robe of a High Priest, Alex Sanders reads a legend to the young blindfolded and with wrists and ankles bound, who is being initiated.

than Christianity, Judaism, Islam or Buddhism, but is (so Alex believes) compatible with them all.

The High Altar of the magic circle in which I saw Indra initiated bore witness to this belief. Before an oil painting of a nude Earth Mother stood a statuette of the Virgin Mary.

"She is just another personification of the female principle of divinity," Alex told me. "Even her blue and white robes, and her out-turned hands, copy the traditional portrayals of Diana."

Four lit candles marked the north, east, south and west of the magic circle. At the north-east point, waiting admission, stood Indra, in a blue cloak.

ALEX wore the deep purple robe of a High Priest. The rest of the coven present—a girl and two young men—were traditionally naked.

The girl, Pat (18, dark-haired, and Welsh) acted as High Priestess; for only a woman may initiate a man, or a man a woman.

She blindfolded Indra and removed his cloak, under which he, too, was naked. From the High Altar, Alex read a solemn warning of the seriousness of the oath Indra was to take.

Pat and the men bound Indra's wrists and ankles with red and white cords, and Pat held the point of the "athame"—the black-handled witch's knife—to his chest.

"Something of the divinity of the god is within every living thing," Alex read. "Use this force constructively and you will grow strong. Use it for destruction, and it will destroy you."

After more readings, Alex stood before each of the four candles, summoning "the Lords

of the Watchtowers" of east, south, west and north "to witness the rites and to guard the circle".

Representing the god, or male divine principle, Alex now knelt before Pat, representing the goddess. Beginning with her feet, he gave her body the Five-fold Kiss, murmuring as he did:

"Blessed be thy feet, that have brought thee in these ways. Blessed be thy knees, that shall kneel at the sacred altar.

"Blessed be thy womb, without which we would not be. Blessed be thy breasts, formed in beauty and in strength.

"Blessed be thy lips, that shall utter the sacred names."

The coven then led the blindfolded Indra to the centre of the circle, and helped him to kneel facing north. Alex returned to the altar to read the legend of how the goddess descended into the Underworld, was scourged, loved and instructed by Death, and returned to the earth.

During this, Pat gave Indra his ritual "scourging" of 40 lashes, gently using a whip of embroidery silk.

SO the ceremony went on—with the chanting of the "Witches Rune", the taking of the oath, and the unbinding of Indra's eyes and limbs.

Pat anointed him "with oil, with wine, and with my lips" in an inverted triangle on each breast and his pelvis; and from that moment Indra was an initiated witch.

To an open-minded watcher—unless he regarded all ritual Christian or otherwise, as mumbo-jumbo—the ceremony has its own dignity and beauty. Ritual apart, does witchcraft

"work"? Alex Sanders, and his wife and regular High Priestess Maxine, have no doubts about that at all. To them, Wicca means clairvoyance, healing, and the power to influence.

At the simplest level they claim often to have opened locked doors and windows.

As for healing—Maxine's adopted niece was badly epileptic four or five years ago. Alex treated her and, he says, she has not had a fit since.

Folk singers Toni and David Arthur have a small son, Jonathan, who lost the top of one finger playing with a lawnmower. Toni asked Alex to help; he had his doubts, but tried.

Within weeks, Alex reports, Jonathan was growing a new fingertip, complete with nail—although the nail-root had been

destroyed. Do Alex and his friends use the wax images, of sinister repute? "Never to do harm," Alex assured me.

"A journalist friend was facing a lot of obstruction from the secretary of a man she was writing a book about. I made a 'fith-fath' (image) of the secretary for her, and ceremonially bound it.

"From then on, the secretary was friendly and co-operative in every way."

FOR all this, of course, I have only Alex's word; but he told me some things about myself and my future which struck me as shrewd, to say the least.

This time next year, I shall know whether they were accurate, as well.

Witches are divided into 10 grades. Study, rituals and "ordeals" (mainly secret) lead to each grade in turn. The first three grades, for "initiates", are called Neophyte, Zelator and Practicus. Grades 4, 5 and 6, for "adepts", are Dominus Liminus, Adeptus Inferior and Adeptus Practicus. Grades for the "masters" are Magister Templi, Adeptus Superior, and Magus. Grade 10, at the top, is Ipsissimus. Alex Sanders is one of the few to hold this rank.