

THE



"Lady Olwen" and her husband

WITCHES



THE horned skull of a long-dead impala leered from the rough stone wall above the altar. Four candles, arranged round the edge of a circle drawn on the floor, flung the grotesque shadows of leaping figures on the heavily curtained windows.

Then, as incense drifted in sluggish puffs, the figures stopped dancing and a dark-haired woman, naked except for a silver girdle and bracelets, held aloft a sword and led a strange chant. "Blessed be the Great Goddess," she intoned.

Then she knelt by the altar clutching a crystal ball and a black-handled dagger . . .

One of Britain's most secret of secret societies, a coven of witches, was in session.

The bizarre ritual I watched by the flickering light of the candles stems, so the witches claim, from the Dark Ages when primitive man worshipped a Moon Goddess. And the cult has grown enormously in recent years in Britain.

Supreme
The Moon Goddess is . . .

The chant droned on . . . 'Without beginning, without end . . . everlasting to eternity.' Then the Dance of the Wheel began . . .

she had used to begin the ritual.

The latter is called the Magic Sword. Every coven has one but only the High Priestess can use it.

Also on the altar was a wand, said to be a ritual source of power, and a statuette representing the Moon Goddess.

On a stand nearby lay the Book of Shadows, the witches' "bible."

The chant droned on. "Without beginning, without end . . . everlasting to eternity"



The remarkable . . . above were taken . . . while Lady Olwen . . . coven was in . . . session. She is . . . on the left in . . . cat-suit and . . . outside the W

in what is . . . nam, that . . . French, and . . . father m

Supreme

The Moon Goddess is represented in each coven by a High Priestess. She is the supreme chief over six men and six women, for a full coven consists of 13 people.

If she rules over more than one coven she assumes the title of Witch Queen.

The dark-haired woman I watched kneeling by the altar has been a Witch Queen for several years. She is known to her followers as the Lady Olwen.

Laid out before her as she peered into her crystal were the essential implements of a witch ceremony. A black handled dagger called an athame, traditional weapon of the witch; and the long sword with the ornamental handle

The chant droned on. "Without beginning, without end . . . everlasting to eternity . . . Blessed Be."

Then the Dance of the Wheel began around the circle. Sweat glistened on the naked bodies of the dancers as the rhythm became wilder.

More incense was added to the silver burners and the High Priest, a husky weather-bronzed man, donned what looked like a horned Viking helmet.

Outside, in the darkening street, a car hooted and someone called, "Goodnight." The witches were oblivious.

The dance was the culminating event of two days I spent with Lady Olwen discussing her beliefs and the subject of witchcraft.

In private life she is Mrs. Monique Mauricette Marie Wilson, housewife and mother. She and her husband, 43-year-old ex-pilot Campbell Wilson, are probably the only professional witches in Europe.

Burned

A few hundred years ago both would have been burned at the stake before a jeering mob. Today they are accepted in the little grey-stoned port of Castletown, in the Isle of Man, as the natural successors to the island's most celebrated witch, the late Dr. Gerald Gardner.

In fact when the islanders decided to erect a plaque commemorating the spot where a witch was burned during the great purges of the Middle Ages, Mrs. Wilson was asked to unveil it.

She and her husband live in an old raftered cottage left them by Dr. Gardner when he died a few years ago.

It is an eerie place, packed with books on the occult, swords, strange fertility symbols, old guns, dolls, and a thousand and one items associated with what was once known and dreaded as the Black Art.

From Gardner the Wilsons also inherited the 17th Century Witches Mill, and a museum devoted exclusively to witchcraft and magic. These constitute the commer-



cial side of the Wilsons' witch business.

They attract something like 50,000 tourists every year. Visitors can buy weird trinkets and enjoy tea and scones in the raftered cafe of the museum.

Like the Little People and the Fairy Bridge, the museum and mill are part of the island's folklore. Manxmen are notoriously superstitious and few will cross the Fairy Bridge without a whispered word of goodwill for the Little People. Many believe the Wilsons have supernatural powers.

They are certainly an extraordinary couple. They believe that the age-old incantations of witchcraft can make crops flourish and cure illnesses that defy medical science.

They believe that the weather can be influenced by sorcery and spells.

Few of the curious holiday-makers who peer at the museum exhibits realise what happens when the last coach has left Castletown for the night-spots of Douglas.

Discreetly the members of the Isle of Man coven begin to arrive at the Wilsons' home in Malew-street. One by one they climb the stairs to the Magic Room, focal point of all ceremonies.

They include civil servants, doctors, teachers, professional singers, a TV producer, and a psychiatrist.

Many make the trip from the mainland to attend the most important ceremonies: February Eve, the Spring Festival, May Eve, the Summer Solstice, August Eve, the Autumn Equinox, Hallowe'en and the Yule Festival. Apart from these the coven meets regularly every month.

"Our kind of witchcraft is

a remnant of the pre-Christian church," Campbell Wilson told me. "Our magic is white, not black. We are forbidden by our oaths to harm anyone."

We were talking at the time in the secluded back garden of the cottage, where the Wilsons have a small altar for outdoor ceremonies.

"What kind of magic can you do?" I asked.

"My wife can whistle up the wind," said Mr. Wilson.

I asked her to try. She shook her head firmly and said, "It's too cold already."

Shivering slightly I had to agree. And Mrs. Wilson, after all, was completely unclothed.

We moved indoors and Mrs. Wilson sat opposite me, completely at ease in her bracelets and necklace.

Religious

I said that many people thought that witchcraft was really just a sex cult. "Nonsense," she snapped. "A lot of people who apply to join think we dabble in black magic and hold orgies. They don't realise we are a religious group."

Why then did she and her husband work in the nude?

"It helps to create the power of inner feeling—some would call it auto-hypnosis," replied Mr. Wilson. "When we project our power to help someone we feel very tired afterwards."

What kind of help can they offer? "We have proof that members who have been ill have recovered when we have called a coven and worked together on their behalf," said Mr. Wilson.

"It happened to my wife. She was ill and doctors diagnosed a complaint that required an operation. We held a meeting and she was cured."

Said Mrs. Wilson: "That is absolutely true. I could feel the displaced part of my body being restored to its proper place."

I asked Mrs. Wilson if she could actually see things in her crystal ball.

"Of course," she replied. "I also have a witch's mirror—the glass is jet black—which

I must try some day. It's in a showcase at the museum."

Mr. Wilson said he could not see anything in the crystal. "But my wife is a medium and has remarkable powers," he added.

What was the significance of the impala head above the altar in the Magic Room?

"It fits in well with the atmosphere we try to create—I picked it up for five bob in a sale," he said.

How many witches were there in Britain? "We know of about 200, and also 20 High Priestesses," he said. "But there are many more who have no links with our coven."

He explained that anyone wishing to become a witch had to serve a year's probation. If satisfactory, the applicant was initiated into the Craft and sworn to secrecy.

"There are many things we cannot reveal to outsiders," he said.

Later in the day I went with Mr. and Mrs. Wilson to the Witches' Mill and the museum. Mrs. Wilson wore a black cat-suit and a splendid black cloak with a scarlet lining. We called at a pub on the way and no one gave her a second glance.

She told me she was born



The remarkable photos above were taken while Lady Olwen's coven was in session. She is seen on the left in her cat-suit and cloak outside the Witches Mill

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She told me she was born

in what is now North Vietnam, that her parents were French, and that she saw her father murdered by Communists in Hanoi. She speaks French and Spanish, and said she could understand Italian, Portuguese, German and Chinese.

She explained that she first met the late Dr. Gardner when he was working in the Far East and building up his large collection of mystic emblems and swords.

She became interested in sorcery and later Gardner told her she was far more advanced in the cult than she could ever hope to be.

"That is why he left us the mill and his house," she said. "Before we moved to the island we lived in Perth and Gerald often visited us."

Respect

"He was a marvellous man. On his last visit 17 witches from all over Britain came to the coven to show their respect for him."

And on that curiously touching note, I took my leave.

To the ordinary person the Wilsons' pre-occupation with, and faith in, spells and sorcery is utterly absurd. But more and more people are being drawn into witchcraft.

Some are disillusioned by the modern church and find the coven an exciting and stimulating alternative.

Others may hope to gratify some sexual urge in the orgies practised by many of the covens.

For despite the fact that all covens profess to be "white"—meaning they work only for the benefit of others—there is little doubt that black magic, or devil worship, is also on the increase.