

Britain's chief witch dies at sea

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TO the other passengers aboard the steamer sailing slowly off the North African coast he was just a strange old man appearing as usual in the breakfast lounge.

A grey goatee beard, strange piercing eyes, and a frail form. He was some "old writer" who had been wintering in the Lebanon and the ship had picked him up at Beirut.

When he collapsed and died over the breakfast table, there was the usual flurry. He was alone. Hurried consultations ended in the inevitable decision that he should be buried at the next port of call.

Upheaval

He was buried in Tunis last week—but not before distant relatives in Tennessee, U.S.A., had frantically cabled the Foreign Office about one Dr. Gerald Brossseau Gardner, aged 80, self-confessed witch, keeper of the museum of witchcraft at Castletown, Isle of Man, and author of books on witchcraft.

And when news of his death reached Britain there was a tremendous upheaval throughout every mysterious "witch coven," for Dr. Gardner was an unofficial, but tremendously powerful leader of the thousands of devotees to witchcraft here.

He was the man I heard mentioned many times during my investigations last Autumn into witchcraft in Britain to-day.

Thousands of Manx tourists met him—for he charged a shilling a head to visitors looking over Witch Mill at Castletown. They goggled at the collection of bones, charms, and "evil eyes" and instruments of torture connected with the great European purge of witches in the Middle Ages.

They heard Dr. Gardner (Doctor of Philosophy and



DR. GARDNER

Doctor of Literature) proclaim the virtues of the "old faith—older than Christianity" and heard him vow that he was a master of "white witchery."

The people of Castletown knew him only as a recluse; who suddenly came to them in 1946. Which by other records was the year he became a witch after 40 years as a customs officer in Malaya. And there are some who remember him in Liverpool.

But in England I knew him as a power—a leader of witches, who toured the country attending the secret meetings of the witches; advising and arbitrating on disputes.

Mrs. Eleanor Bone, a self-confessed witch of Trinity-road, Balham, London, told me: "The death of Dr. Gardner has shocked us all

deeply. There have been discussions as to who should take his place in our craft.

"I am the leader of a coven here in Balham, and I have talked with my counterparts in Sheffield and St. Albans. I anticipate that I will take over Dr. Gardner's role

Quarrels

"His rise in our craft was almost an accident. But his personality and knowledge made him acceptable in all quarters, except in Scotland.

"Our intention now is to form a central committee of English witches, and I shall probably be voted the liaison officer between all covens."

Great debates—and quarrels—among witches open and secret are raging because of the death of Dr. Gardner.

He took many secrets with him to the grave. But the upsurge in witchcraft in Britain which he lived to see is continuing—and even his death may well be accompanied by a further spurt.