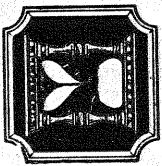
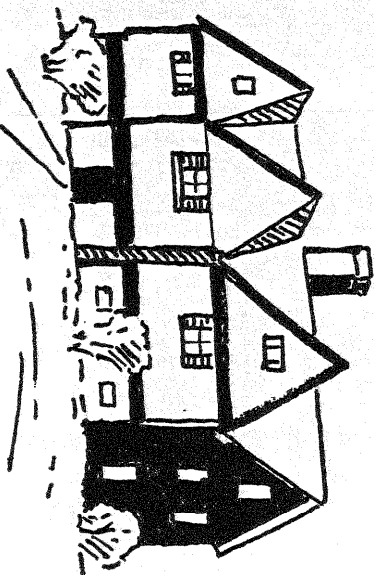
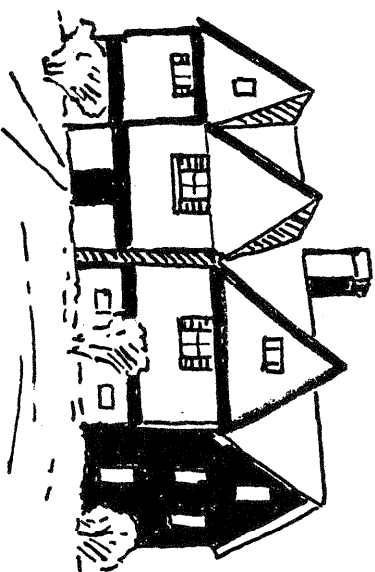


WITCHCRAFT AND WITCHES



By

HENRY CURTIS AHL



Witch House

WITCHCRAFT AND WITCHES

The fundamental idea of witchcraft may be traced from the dawn of civilization, from the very earliest representation of a sort of Nature God as a human being or an animal. Druidism with its magic stone circles and sun worshipping was a great deal similar in substance. In medieval Europe,—and in this little book I am limiting the account of witchcraft first to Europe and then to the United States,—a strong tendency persisted to adhere to pagan customs and

rites which had existed for hundreds and hundreds of years. That was adherence more or less in a symbolical way,—without entering into the often undesirable and uncivilized practices of early religions such as Druidism. For the first ten centuries or more after Christ, witchcraft and witches were tolerated by the Christians, but when the latter gradually gained in strength, and when resistance to the ever-spreading Christianity developed, the leaders of the Church and of the State proclaimed such activity to be under the auspices of the Devil, and adherents to those old beliefs and participants in the gatherings and practice of the rites associated therewith were classed as witches. Thus developed campaigns against witches and witchcraft, persecution which increased with each century and reached its height probably between 1400 and 1700 when thousands of persons were executed. These victims mostly were considered guilty of worshipping the Devil, although very frequently, or, rather, most frequently, they actually were not in sympathy with the new religion, or were not popular in the community.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the numbers killed in Germany, where barbarity was most acute, is estimated to be one hundred thousands; in France, seventy-five thousands, and in Great Britain, thirty thousands, with a grand total throughout Europe of three hundred thousands. Some historians

claim the number may have been as high as two millions, and one expert has stated the victims in Treves alone amounted to seven thousands.

It must be remembered that these statistics embrace a span of at least two hundred years; also, to be noted, when witches are spoken of, there were two types to be considered,—those who were professional sorcerers and those whose guilt was adherence to the ancient pagan practices.

The witch gatherings were known as *sabbats* or *Sabbaths*, and frequently were attended, quite largely out of curiosity, undoubtedly, by persons of high social and financial standing, an action which further increased the anger of the persecutors. It is recorded among those executed on the continent (Germany in this case) were senators, canons, vicars, and bailiffs.

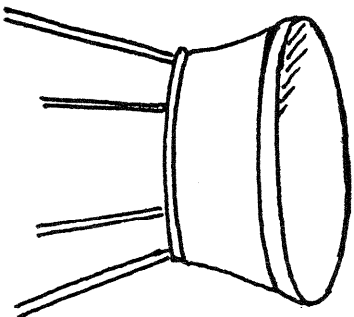
Thus was established a veritable reign of terror with the populace divided into two groups, the spiritualistic gravitating towards strict religious observances, purity, rejection of pleasure, etc., and the materialistic with the desire to participate in mundane enjoyments and popular amusements. Witch hunting became an organized business which involved providing occupations for thousands of men,—such as guards, judges, torturers, executioners, wood cutters, etc., a deplorable profession which brought considerable profit to many, and also a feeling that termination of the hysteria would produce

an economic regression. Witch executions became gathering places for the morbidly inclined populace, and it is claimed local concessions did thrive on this business.

Such conditions were all the more amazing when one considers that at this very time some of the highest culture in the field of art was flourishing throughout most of Europe. To give merely a few names, in Germany and France, where witch persecution was worst, there were Durer (1471-1528), Holbein (1497-1543), and Claude Lorrain (1600-1682); in Spain, El Greco (1550-1614) and Ribera (1588-1652); in the Netherlands, Rubens (1577-1640), Van Dyck (1599-1641), Rembrandt (1608-1669), and Vermeer (1632-1675); and in Italy, Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), Michelangelo (1475-1564), Raphael (1483-1520), and Titian (1488-1576). A factor to be taken into consideration in connection with this strange sociological situation is that the witch persecutions and the belief that these harmless people who held their meetings reminiscent of their pagan ancestors' gatherings were sinister tended to join together various factions in these countries,—the clerical leaders, the peasant class, and the nobility.

The reign of terror eventually spread to the United States, but in a far lesser degree, and the hysteria lasted but 40 years—from about 1652 to a termination in 1692. That was a long time, in fact, but brief compared with the extent of centuries in Europe. However, before enter-

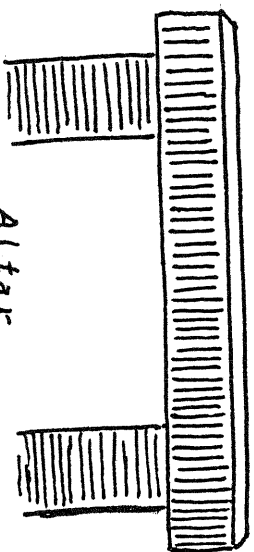
ing upon this phase of the subject, it is most appropriate to describe briefly the witch gatherings as they were held in mediaeval Europe, and explain the paraphernalia used thereat. The most important meetings were those *sabbats* on the equinoxes (March and September) and on the solstices (June and December), followed by the May Day Eve (Walpuris Night), August Eve (Lammas), November Eve (Halloween), and Candlemas festivals. Then, in addition, there was the *Esbat* which took place monthly close to full moon time, making altogether as many as twenty get-togethers during the year. The set-up of a group, or company, or chapter, was known as a *coven*. The origin of *coven* comes from covent or convent—religious assembly, but eventually the religious connection with the short form, *coven*, vanished. Covens generally consisted of thirteen members, the leader being the thirteenth, and a number of *covens* had a Grand Master. Naturally, many *covens* gathered at a *sabbat*. In each *coven* in top power was a high priestess, followed by a high priest and elders, and at *coven* meetings the priestess and priest symbolically represented the witch gods. In this witch-cult religion a god was often disguised as an animal,—hence a person might be cloaked with the skin and horns of a goat, possibly, for example, and the purpose of the rites held at these gatherings was for the fertility of the crops which meant success in life. And here I should mention that



Caldron



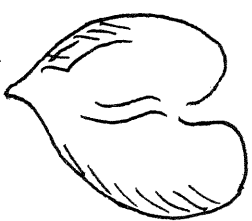
Cord



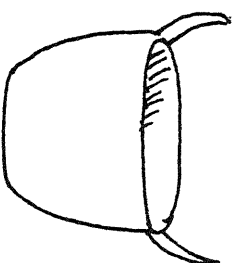
Altar



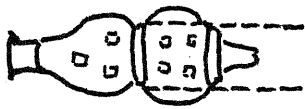
Athame'



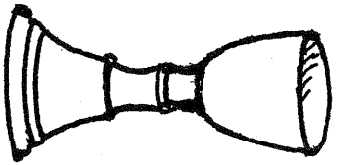
magic fossil



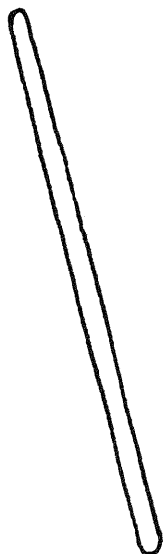
Horned cup



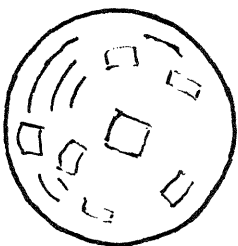
Censer



Chalice



Wand



Witch Ball



Scourge

WITCHCRAFT AND WITCHES

in witchcraft also was practiced the art of divination,—which is supposedly learning about the future from animals.

A number of illustrations supplement the following brief descriptions of the paraphernalia connected with witches and *subbats*. Associated with the altar were *candles* (four), and there was a caldron which might be used for stewing magic potions, and which was symbolic of Mother Goddess and of water. Then there were the horned *drinking cups*, the silver *chalice*, the incense *censer*, and the *athame*, a black-handled knife used for inscribing upon the ground a magic circle nine feet in diameter. Many other objects were entirely symbolic: the *wand* of hazel wood, the *broom* (symbolizing the sacred hearth), the *scourge* (a symbol of purification), and the *pentacle*, a witch insignia-decorated, flat, metal, five-sided star formed by extending the sides of a regular pentagon. A piece of *cord* signified the spiritual joining of everything. Some other less important witch objects included magic *fossils*, *witchballs* of silvered glass, and the snake-skin *garter*, the wearing of which was considered a badge of rank.

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In regard to the comparatively mild epidemic of witchcraft hysteria which reached the United States, the principal geographical location was New England where took place thirty-two executions, including four in Boston and twenty

WITCHCRAFT AND WITCHES

in Salem, the height of the persecution and also its last occurrence being in the latter community. The Puritans, as did their deeply religious brethren in Europe, followed literally the dictates of the Bible, and when they found a passage in Exodus 22:18, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live", it was misinterpreted. There are some other passages also of similar nature in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, but they all were directed against practitioners of black and harmful arts and not against harmless persons who were often victims of hoaxes or whose popularity was slight.

Salem being the principal locale of this most unfortunate American tragedy, the witchcraft account here will be limited to what transpired in that town in the late seventeenth century. The immediate origin of the fast spreading hysteria in the winter of 1692 was far different from what it was in Europe. Some local girls had been listening to West Indian witchcraft stories related by the pastor's slave. Their imaginations, aided by ministers' preachings, soon found expression in affected and continuous antics which eventually aroused the attention and alarm of clergy, doctors, and their own families. Finally, the girls blamed three influential women in the neighborhood (one the slave, one a tramp, and the other bedridden) for their own fit-like actions, and soon these three unfortunates were arrested in front of Ingersoll's Tavern, corner of Centre and Hobart

Streets, in "Salem Village", now part of Danvers, and then taken to the not-far-off Meeting House (now no longer in existence) for examination, Judge Hathorne (an ancestor of Nathaniel Hawthorne) presiding. As at Boston, the notorious Hopkins method, introduced from England, was employed to determine whether or not a person were a witch (Matthew Hopkins was a lawyer of poor caliber in Ipswich, England, and was the son of James Hopkins, a minister, of Wenham, England). This ridiculous and outrageous method consisted of observing and searching a suspected witch for twenty-four hours in order to discover the appearance of any marks or spots left by the visitation of an emissary of the Devil which during that period might appear as an insect, an animal, or even a visiting child.

In those days of witchcraft excitement people were credited with riding through the air on broomsticks and accused of holding gatherings with Satan. However, as mentioned before, the situation was not the same as in Europe where there had been involved an adherence to pagan rites, the organization of *covens*, and the holding of great *sabbats*. Here in New England the thirty-two victims were usually merely uneducated individuals. Among those nineteen hanged on Gallows Hill, now a city park near the corner of Boston Street and Highland Avenue, and reached from Proctor Street, were Bridget Bishop, Martha Carrier, George Jacobs, Jno.

Proctor, John Willard, George Burroughs, and Rebecca Nurse. Bridget Bishop was hanged alone, the others in two groups of five, followed by a final group of eight. In addition, a twentieth person, Giles Corey, was crushed by a pile of millstones. Besides Judge Hathorne there were Judge Jonathan Curwen (also spelled Corwin), whose home was the Witch House at the corner of Essex and North Streets, Judge William Stoughton, and Judge Samuel Sewell, the latter in charge of most of the trials in Salem and Boston.

In addition to Ingersoll's Tavern and the Witch House, another building with witchcraft connection still standing is the Nurse House, between Pine and Collins Streets, Danvers, where Rebecca Nurse lived. Among the descendants of Mrs. Nurse two became well known, — Amy Lowell, the poetess, and Representative Edith Nourse Rogers. I might mention that the so-called "witch jail" in Salem which had become merely a cellar containing timbers from the old jail was entirely obliterated by construction of the Telephone Company building in 1956.

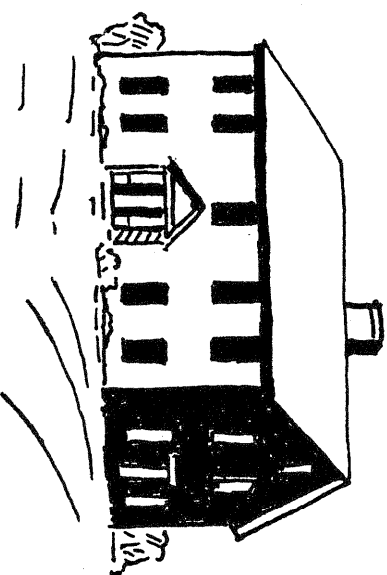
Less than a year after the commencement of the trials, Judge Samuel Sewell and jury recanted their wrong doings: ". . . We do heartily ask forgiveness of you all, whom we have unjustly offended, and we do declare, according to our present minds, we would none of us do such things again, on such grounds for

the whole world, . . . ". The jury: Samuel Sayer, John Peabody, Andrew Elliot, H. Herrick, sen., William Fisk, John Dane, and Thomas Fisk (foreman). Several years later, to the "Church in Salem Village", located near Ingersoll's Tavern, "rent by the witchcraft frenzy, came in 1697 the Reverend Joseph Green, aged twenty-two. He induced the mischief makers to confess, reconciled the factions . . . "

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In recent years in England there has gradually developed a cult of modern witchcraft, the purpose and nature of which is professed to be beneficial. Modeled after the ancient cult, the gatherings are held twenty times a year, out-of-doors or indoors depending upon the weather. If out-of-doors, a magic circle nine feet in diameter is drawn upon the ground by means of an *athame*, and if indoors, the circle is made upon the floor with chalk or some similar material. The *coven*, with the high priestess and high priest presiding, meets to participate in what is considered a sort of religious nature worship embracing spiritual reincarnation. Symbolism reigns as of old. There are *candles*, the *altar*, *caldron*, hazel wood *wand*, *pentacle*, *scourge*, *censer*, *chalice*, and piece of *cord*. Applicants for these *covens* are talked with first, and are not admitted if thought to be of troublesome nature or appear to be unable to fit in well with the group. There is no so-called "black magic" or "black-witchcraft"

performed, although a few incidents have occurred where vandals, probably not at all connected with these modern witches, have done damage and left witch insignia. When asked the reason for this cult connected with which there are estimated to be many thousands of members in England, proponents assert that uppermost in their minds is the encouragement of joy, love, and happiness in the world, together with the doing of good. Thus it is relieving to be able to terminate this brief witchcraft account with a brighter angle which is in marked contrast to the accusations, persecutions, horrors, and slaughters which persisted for so many centuries in connection with witches.



Ingersoll's Tavern