

WITCHES' ESBAT

by

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This article deals with an actual witch meeting and is a combination of fiction and fact since the full ritual cannot be described, but basically the forms used are correct for the witches of Warwickshire. Also there is no overstatement of phenomena, the writer has tried to describe accurately the actual feeling of working this type of ritual, which is not that type usually presented to the public as witchcraft yet is nonetheless of a pattern practiced by certain families for many centuries.

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IT IS COLD, the damp grass steaming mist upwards to the moon as we walk across the fields to the caves. Across the hills, somewhere towards the west, a dog fox barks defiance at we intruders of the night world. In the silent world of Hecate, a billion insects spin their small webs of destiny. We feel like invaders from a more brilliant age, treading carefully, threading our way in silence past the still hedge rows. The cauldron in Peter's haversack rings faintly as one of the knives strike against it. He stops and shifts the weight slightly, then points upwards towards the looming hill. The wind clatters a few leaves upon the trees as we begin the ascent to the caves. Seven of us, six men, one woman, feet slipping upon grass that feels slimy with night dew and unmentionable insects, sinking in the sodden ground under our own weight. Down below in the valley, the representatives of the twentieth century shoot along dark roads, headlights slicing the night for a brief minute, then vanishing with a flutter of mechanical life. Standing bleakly against the moonlight we can see the tumbled rocks that hide the caves. Our lead man stops then turns round and comes to us. "Be careful here, the hillside falls away pretty rapidly". His face is anonymous in the moonlight. Joan reaches out and takes my hand, and we walk forward carefully in the gloom. Gusts of wind buffet us, a sensation of space to our left side grows more definite; then we are out of the wind and into the lee of the rocks. Arthur, the lead man, seems to vanish suddenly from sight in a flurry of white torch light, then his voice comes from beneath the ground muffled and faint. "It's all right, come on down". One by one my companions slide through the entrance of the cave, slipping on the wet chalk. Joan sits down prettily upon her heels and follows them, still holding my hand to give balance to her impetus. I slide down after her and into the cave. We straighten ourselves out and stand up, torches on for the first time in the hour long walk, the light gleams from the wet sides of the caves reflecting into the lime water pools on the floor. Out of the wind and underground the silence is suddenly oppressive, then everybody begins to talk at once, unloading themselves from the tension of the walk and the fear of discovery.

I shrug the haversack from my shoulders and note with some disgust that it has become covered with wet chalk. Opening it I search for my compass, looking at it carefully until I find true north. The rest begin to pull out the equipment from their haversacks, throwing firewood over to me as they find it. I begin to build a fire, soaking it with paraffin bought specially for this purpose. The caves suddenly become alive and friendly as the yellow flames soar to the roof, a million drops of water reflecting the light like a million individual diamonds. Piling more wood upon the fire I stand back and the flames descend to eat the fresh fuel. Smoke coils around the roof and the boys put out the torches. We stand around the fire warming ourselves and begin to undress. "Dig the circle out," Joan says to Blackie. He is in the process of removing his trousers, and stands stork-like upon one leg as he considers what she has just said. "Right,

as soon as I'm changed." He hurries to stretch and moves nearer to the fire as he puts on the garb of the witch, and wraps the cloak about him. He goes to the center of the cave and begins to cut the circle out with his knife. The others all go about their appointed tasks in silence. Joan and I search out the implements from the haversack, fitting them together and wiping them carefully, laying them upon the ledge that acts as a serving table. John and Peter fit the banner together, facing the mystical symbols inwards at the four quarters of the compass, throwing up the chalk as they thrust them into the wet earth. Blackie straightens up, his face dark with the effort of digging. "What do we say if we're caught?" he asks generally.

"That we're bloody archaeologists of course", John answers. Blackie laughs then bends down and continues digging. We work steadily creating Caer Ochlen in the cave until at last everything is ready. The graal and cup reflect with silver the red flame of the fire. I build up the tripod and hang the cauldron. It swings gently in the heat. Joan brings over the wine in a thermos flask and pours it into the cauldron. Fragrant steam rises as the cold wine meets the hot brass base of the pot. "Smells nice, mum, what's for dinner?" Peter asks, smiling at his own humour. Joan laughs as she ties the girdle around her waist and arranges her shift, placing the seven knots carefully. We are all dressed now in our black garb, adjusting our cloaks as we stand now in humility and poverty; the beginnings of all magical power. Some more work, then I take up the skull and thrust the sword through it, tying the skull carefully to the carved hilt. Holding it aloft I go to the centre of the compass and thrust the blade deep into the earth. It is time to begin. Joan casts grains of incense into the fire, then blesses herself, first her left ear, then her left eye, up to forehead, then down to right eye and ear. She turns, outlined by the flames, touches her mouth, then her right breast, then finally her left ankle. We have grouped ourselves into a crescent about her, following the blessing, each action accompanied by buttered prayer to God. The old words reach out into the shadows of the caves, and echo faintly to the basso profundo of six male voices, with Joan's voice threading in between. The fire leaps up, and Joan reaches forward taking the graal from me. Holding it aloft she presents it to heaven and the moon, the herbs and apples floating gently upon the water, the darkness of the cave seems to surround it. I begin the words of the great chant, and the silence of the night suddenly breaks into life. Joan lowers the graal and breathes across it, then empties its contents into the cauldron. We stand up and walk towards it, still in a crescent, our hoods thrown back, and follow her as she begins the weaving dance of a maze in front of the boiling pot. Then the pattern changes and we dance around the fire. We stop, and she dips into the pot with the ladle and passes it from one to another, as we eat of the fruits of life. Whirling the ladle furiously Joan alone paces round three times more then plunges it back into the pot. We draw our knives and thrust them into the earth, then dance furiously around the fire once more. I, leading, dance off until we all surround the circle. The summoner, who is last, takes the cauldron off the fire and pours its contents into the ditch which surrounds the circle. Steam rises around us and the red liquid floods through and forms a completed circuit, washing the ash aside, swirling round the willow and rowan twigs. I step forward over the ditch and stand in front of the sword and skull. Raising my left hand I run the signs through with my fingers, then quickly go through the traditional gestures that mean so much to a witch, hands slapping upon my legs and body miming the old legends. The rest follow suit. Joan casts the cake upon the ground just by the door of the circle and at last we all step over the barrier which divides the quick from the dead.

"UEIOA", five fingers held high. UEIOA", slap upon the left thigh then forward with the wild horses and through the silver ring. We began to pace the compass round holding the ring in the air, then finally lowering it upon the skull. Turning, we place our staffs upon the ground fashioning the pattern of the

ritual and begin to tread the mill. Round and round in absolute silence, fingers following the pattern that the seven knots make in the cord. Willing, thinking, concentrating upon our work, the hoods of our cloaks down over our eyes, thinking, willing, visualizing the image of virtue shifting from one part of our bodies to the other, the sensations of changing like colours upon our minds eye. In the brief glimpses we get when our concentration lowers in its intensity the cave seems to be spinning around us, then back to the darkness of our hoods and our compressed wills. The smoke thickens as the fire lowers...and we all seem to have some difficulty in breathing, almost choking in the turgid atmosphere. Then suddenly it is like breathing pure ice, cold clear. The virtue has been transmuted. Immediately following this sensation a cold wind seems to whip around our ankles tearing off the physical power of the flesh. Fear suddenly descends like a clammy blanket and everyone receives the impression that we are being watched; it is the gathering of the force we are invoking. The sensation of fear deepens until we need every bit of our will to stop ourselves from running away. Knocks and taps seem to come from everywhere in the cave, and I give a start, coming back to complete consciousness for a brief second, then catching myself return back to the dark path of the will. I am no longer walking the floor of the cave, but treading on air. My body is in many different places at once, an incredible sense of disorientation fills me and I am no longer conscious of my body. Darkness rolls in upon my consciousness and I float in a void around the circle, my body stumbling mechanically on and on. I become aware of everyone else in the clan as if they were in me. I can feel them all. A strong feeling that someone is standing where the skull is impinges my mind. Immediately we begin to thrust our will towards it probing, questioning, a sensation of the stranger increases immensely. We know who he is. My heart gives a bound of fear and joy together. We intensify our will until it is like a bridge of iron, our total concentration is upon him. We can actually see green lights flashing on and off around the skull. "Master, Master" I can feel the group calling him. Blue slight twists and spirals in the centre. We work harder and harder still, our minds hurting with the intense effort. The light coalesces into the shape of a man, cloaked like ourselves. Wave after throbbing wave of power pulsates us. A feeling of exhilaration erases our tiredness, he exudes strength and wisdom. We greet him. We come to ourselves again back in the dank cave, the fire almost out. Pins and needles stab at our limbs, we feel very tired, we stop pacing, the air of the cave flat in our mouths. Joan offers a prayer of thanks, and we break up the compass, returning everything to where it was. It is all over now, we sit listlessly for a short while getting warmth from the dying fire, for we are both cold and tired, our minds numbed. Blackie throws more wood upon the fire, tending it, blowing upon it until the fresh fuel catches and throws a cheerful warmth upon everything. We look for food and drink in the haversacks and begin the feast. Gradually we feel refreshed, then full of energy. Talk rises with the smoke, there is a lot of laughter, and we stretch our limbs luxuriously in front of the glowing coals. Six men, one woman, all devoted to each other, and above everything else, to our Gods. The conversation increases, various things are discussed. How to do this...how to do that...women, how to get them in, but they have no interest in witchcraft today...the group remains unbalanced, no women, no balance. We talk and eat, then finally clearing up, begin our journey home. Tired yet refreshed, dirty from the caves, but pure in heart. We walk across the fields shivering in the dawn air, back to the cars. A policeman steps forward out of the shadows. Excuse me...parking...dangerous place...what have you in the haversacks? We empty them and explain. You can see by the expression of disgust and horror what he thinks. Questions and still more questions, misunderstandings, always misunderstandings. Gods, the things we poor witches suffer.