

# PEOPLE WHO STILL BELIEVE IN WITCHCRAFT

**B**URNING old women at the stake as witches is a pleasantry no longer indulged in, even in Salem, but belief in witchcraft is not altogether dead. Only a few months ago a woman in Jersey City had a neighbor haled to court on the charge of pretending to possess powers of evil and threatening to use them unless paid to desist. As the complainant had suffered a streak of bad luck, in spite of paying to ward it off, her belief in her friend, whom she called a witch, was cruelly shattered.

More recently a woman living near Butler, Penn., was accused of being a witch. Mrs. Laupaule Orber was the victim of this ancient superstition. She was charged by Mrs. Julia Kroner, a farmer's wife, with having gone to the Kroner barn and "casting a spell" over a cow so as to prevent her giving milk. Mrs. Kroner openly made the charge of witchcraft in court, but the Judge refused to consider it other than one of disorderly conduct. On this ground Mrs. Orber was found guilty and fined \$5.

Other tales equally as absurd could be told of the rural districts, but none possesses the elements of a witch story so much as that of Abel Spiva and his brother William, who lived until a few years ago in McDonough County, Illinois. The events with which it deals are a matter of court record at Macomb, the county seat.

Abel Spiva's forefathers came from the Carolinas at a time when belief in witchcraft was strong, and they brought their superstitions with them into what was then the Western wilderness. Thus Abel honestly inherited his belief in witches, as did his brother William, who as a witch doctor had quite an extensive practice as a regular country physician of those days. Whenever the simple folk of the neighborhood "felt a spell"—to which they attributed all their sickness and ill-luck—they called in William Spiva and he drove out the witches; at least he convinced his patients that he did.

One day Abel Spiva told his brother

## Instances of a Superstition Recalling Bygone Days in Salem.

that he was bewitched. Every night, said Abel, a witch took him from his bed, transformed him into a horse and rode him wildly about the country to attend the meetings of the Devil and his host of Imps. As a result Abel was so tired in the morning that he found it hard to do the work on his farm. William didn't suggest that Abel's complaint was probably sheer laziness, for they were agreed that the only way to break the spell was to find the witch and kill her. So they began to cast about for a likely woman whom they could accuse.

It so happened that at that time Mary Friend, wife of Charles Friend, a farmer living near the Spivas, was dangerously ill with a fever which had baffled the local doctor. Not believing in witches the Friends had refused to call in William Spiva, so when Abel opined that Mary Friend was probably the witch that found so much enjoyment in changing him into a horse, he had a ready and willing listener in William. The two brothers decided, after scant reflection, that Mrs. Friend was the witch and that her illness was only shammed in order to give her an opportunity to lie in bed and rest after her nightly rides to the Devil's camps.

At first William Spiva was puzzled as to how to rid his brother of the witch's spell, but after consulting his "witch's book" he hit upon a novel plan. Abel must go into the woods, carve the outlines of a woman's figure in the bark of a tree, give it the name of "Mary Friend, the Witch," mold a silver bullet and at sunrise the following morning shoot the image. Thus, reasoned William Spiva, would the spell be broken, for it would mean nothing else than Mary Friend's death.

Abel Spiva did as his brother directed and returned to his work with a feeling

of renewed vigor. Shortly before noon he was chopping wood when a passing neighbor called out:

"Heard the news, Abel? Mary Friend is dead."

"Oh, I knew that," remarked Abel indifferently. "I killed her. She was a witch and I shot her with a silver bullet." And he told the story of his bewitchment, and how, as he thought, he had killed Mary Friend.

The news of Abel Spiva's confession spread quickly, and from all sections of the countryside farmers came to ask him about it. His story sounded incredulous, but he told it with so much seriousness that it proved convincing, especially as she had died on the very morning Abel fired at her carved image on the tree.

While the majority of Abel Spiva's neighbors believed that Mary Friend had met her just deserts there was one who was convinced that a crime had been committed. Having no faith in witches he filed a complaint before Justice of the Peace Tridwell charging Spiva with murder. Abel was arrested, and upon being arraigned in court pleaded guilty.

Squire Tridwell was himself a believer in witches, but he admonished the prisoner that his confession made him liable to a death sentence. Abel insisted on his guilt, however, and the Justice reluctantly sentenced him to be executed forthwith, "the same as he shot the woman"—so reads the old court record—by being stood against a tree and shot by the constable. Because of Spiva's plea no evidence was produced to show that Mrs. Friend had not died as the result of a bullet wound.

From the courtroom to the woods at the edge of the village went the constable with his prisoner, followed by a crowd. Against a tree they placed Abel Spiva, and the constable, raising his long bar-

reled "squirrel rifle" to his shoulder, was about to fire when there came a shout from the road. It was the warning cry of Samuel Wilson, then a young lawyer, and later Col. Wilson of the Sixteenth Illinois Infantry, riding home from court in an adjoining county. He demanded to know what the proceedings meant, and when they were explained to him he ordered the shooting stopped.

"It's against the law," he told Justice Tridwell. "You have no right to send this man to his death. You can only bind him over to the court."

"It is the law, and it is here," the Squire retorted, taking from his carpet-bag the Illinois statutes and pointing to that section which imposed the death penalty for murder.

Wilson tried a new tack. "If you must shoot this man," he argued, "surely you will give him sufficient time to prepare to meet his God."

This appealed to the stubborn Judge, and he consented to give the prisoner a week in which to settle his worldly affairs and prepare to die. Spiva was thereupon turned over to Sheriff Francis D. Lips, but he refused to act, and Spiva was released, never to be tried on that charge again.

Some months later, however, he felt himself again "under a spell," and his brother William told him that his wife was the guilty witch. William advised Abel to wait until Mrs. Spiva was asleep and then, with a knife, draw a single drop of blood from her forehead "without letting her know it." This treatment, William said, would "break the spell."

According to instructions Abel sharpened his long hunting knife and that night pricked his wife's forehead. Startled from a sound sleep, she suddenly sat up in bed and the knife cut a deep gash down her cheek.

Abel Spiva was arrested and indicted for assault with intent to kill, but for some reason the case was nolle prossed and he never was brought to trial. But to her dying day his wife carried the scar as a ghastly emblem of Abel Spiva's belief in witchcraft.