

Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES

317 Baldwin Building

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GEORGE BURROUGHS, MARTYR

No 4

by Seabury
Quinn



Author of "The Phantom Farmhouse," "Out of the Long Ago," etc.

IN ONE of his terror tales, Poe tells how the inmates of a lunatic asylum overcame their keepers, locked them in the cells, and proceeded to administer the affairs of the institution according to the dictates of their own diseased minds. Something like this situation, magnified many times, prevailed in the village of Salem, Massachusetts, in the summer and autumn of 1692.

In the spring, a number of young women and girls, mostly members of respected and influential families, began acting in a way which would have led to an inquiry concerning their sanity half a century later, but which induced the authorities of that day to declare them the victims of witchcraft.

Encouraged by the Reverend Samuel Parris, pastor of Salem Village Church, and by the magistrates of the district, these "afflicted children" accused two poor, friendless old women, then a prosperous farmer and his wife, next a universally respected and revered old lady, of the diabolical crime of witchcraft. And in every instance, the accused suffered death.

Absolute power was lodged in the hands of this group of hysterical girls by the credulous public officials. No juvenile despot of antiquity—not even the Queen in *Alice in Wonderland*, with her customary order, "Off with his head!"—ever exercised greater authority over the lives and liberties of a community than this company of young women, the oldest of whom was twenty years of age.

Those first accused were residents of Salem and its environs, people whom the "afflicted" saw daily. In March, 1692, however, came the first "long distance" accusations when the Reverend George Burroughs, residing in Wells, in the Province of Maine, was "cried out upon" by the afflicted children.

MR. BURROUGHS was a man of more than ordinary physique and much more than ordinary character. Short of stature, he was abnormally strong, and combined with great physical strength a nature of unusual sweetness and charity. Prior to the Reverend Samuel Parris' accession to the Salem pastorate, Burroughs occupied the pulpit, but, unlike most

clergymen of his day, he dwelt more upon the love of God than upon His awful wrath, and the iron-souled members of Salem congregation released him in favor of a preacher of sterner doctrine. Incidentally, they allowed him to depart with a considerable portion of his salary unpaid.

Evil fortune seemed to dog Mr. Burroughs' steps. While he was in Salem his wife died; he remarried shortly after taking up his work in another parish, and his second mate also died. Discouraged, all but despairing, he quit the colony of Massachusetts to take up missionary work in Maine. On April 10, 1692, one John Partridge, a marshal of the latter province, arrested him on a warrant charging witchcraft, trafficking with the Evil One, and sundry other diabolical crimes. May 4, he was returned to Salem Village to answer the accusation.

The Reverend Samuel Parris, who acted as clerk of court and assistant prosecutor in this case, as well as others, leaves us this quaint notation of Mr. Burroughs' examination:

At his entry into the courtroom many (if not all of the bewitched) were grievously tortured. Susan Sheldon testified that Burroughs his two wives appeared in their winding sheets and said that man had killed them. He was bid to look upon Susan Sheldon. He looked back and knocked down all (or most) of the afflicted who stood behind him.

Mercy Lewis' deposition going to be read and he looked at her and she fell into a dreadful and tedious fit.

MARY WALCOT
ELIZABETH HUBBARD } Testimony going to
SUSAN SHELDON } be read and they
all fell into fits.

The magistrates, as was usual in these cases, attempted to bully the accused into an admission of guilt, asking him again and again if it were not a fact that his house in Maine was haunted by the ghosts of his two murdered wives. The officials appear to have taken it for granted that he had

murdered his wives, for had not their shades appeared to the "afflicted" children? And had not these very children sworn away the lives of half a dozen other persons?

Mr. Parris notes that the accused clergyman stoutly denied his house was haunted by ghosts, either of his wives or others, but adds with an air of triumph that he admitted "there were toads in his garden"!

Among other proofs that George Burroughs was a servant of Satan the following facts were testified to: he had been seen to lift a barrel of molasses in his arms and carry it; he had been seen to carry a barrel of cider in his arms; he had been seen to pick up a musket by the muzzle and hold it out at arm's length.

When he explained that God had been pleased to endow him with more than usual strength, the "afflicted children" were one and all "grievously vexed", falling in fits upon the courtroom floor and screaming and crying till the proceedings had to be halted.

No witchcraft trial was complete without testimony from that remarkable twelve-year-old child, Ann Putnam. It was on her testimony that Sarah Good and Sarah Osburn were condemned to death; Giles Corey, of Salem Farms, was arrested on her accusation, so was his wife, Martha Corey. Rebecca Nurse, loved and respected by nearly every dweller in Salem, received sentence of death by hanging largely on Ann's testimony. Whenever other witnesses were wanting to bear conclusive proof against a suspected witch, Ann Putnam could be depended on to furnish the necessary testimony. Consequently, we find this child being duly sworn upon the Holy Scriptures to tell "the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth" and testifying that Burroughs had appeared to her one night and told her he had three wives and had "butchered the first two to death."

Subsequently, she swore, the shade of Mr. Burroughs suddenly appeared in her bedroom at dead of night, bringing along the ghosts of his two deceased wives as corroborative witnesses. They had turned their faces toward him and "looked very red and angry," telling him he had been a very cruel man to them and that "they should be clothed with white robes in heaven when he should be cast into hell." How typical this statement is of an imaginative child, fed from earliest infancy on ghost tales and the flint-hard doctrine of Knox and Calvin!

EVEN the briefest survey of the Burroughs case discloses the keenest competition among the juvenile witnesses as to who could tell the most outrageously fanciful tale. Take, for example, this statement of Mercy Lewis, as recorded by the Reverend Mr. Parris: "On the night of May 9 Burroughs carried me up to a high mountain and showed me all the kingdoms of the earth and told me he would give them all to me if I would write in his book, and if I would not he would throw me down and break my neck. I told him I would not write in his book if he threw me down on a hundred pitchforks."

Leaving out of consideration the fact that there is no "high mountain" near Salem, the modern reader may be puzzled to know how Mr. Burroughs, who was then lodged under double lock in Salem jail, could get out to convey the girl to the mountain top, how he could manage to disclose "all the kingdoms of the earth" to her from the eminence, and especially how he, a poor, obscure Colonial preacher, with most of his pitifully small salary still owed to him by his former congregation, could deliver her so much wealth. Also, it may be wondered why he did not attempt to make good his threat to break her

neck when his munificent offer was refused.

But these questions seem not to have worried the court, for the child's preposterous story was received with all due gravity and made a part of the judicial record.

The book referred to by the Lewis girl was, of course, the devil's black book. In it were inscribed the names of all those who acknowledged themselves Satan's servants. By this acknowledgment they agreed to give the fiend their souls after death, and in return were granted certain supernatural powers which usually manifested themselves as ability to make neighbors' stock sicken and die, cream refuse to churn into butter and hens fail to lay their customary number of eggs. A moment's reflection, it would seem, should have warned the person intending to sign away his soul that the devil was getting decidedly the best of the bargain.

One other statement which sheds an interesting light on the public mind in 1692 appears in the records of this case. It is that of Abigail Williams, niece of the Reverend Samuel Parris and member of his household. It was not made in court, nor was it sworn to, yet it was duly received and preserved as a part of the court's record.

Some time before Mr. Burroughs was brought back to Salem to stand trial, while he was still a hundred miles or so away in Maine, Abigail met Benjamin Hutchinson in the street and suddenly declared she saw Burroughs.

"Where?" demanded Hutchinson, for, naturally, he saw no one.

"There," replied the child, pointing excitedly to a rut in the road.

Hutchinson was carrying a pitchfork over his shoulder, and, to pacify her, he flung the implement at the spot where she declared the clergyman stood. Thereupon (as was characteristic of the "afflicted children")

Abigail Williams fell to the earth in a fit.

After lying rigid in the roadway a few minutes, she rose with a shudder, exclaiming, "You have torn his coat, I heard it rip!"

"Whereabouts?" Hutchinson asked.

"On the side," she replied. "Do not you see the great rent in his garment?"

Naturally, Hutchinson saw no such thing, and said so.

A little later the same day Hutchinson met the child in the house of Lieutenant Ingersol, and she at once manifested every symptom of ungovernable terror, crying, "There he stands! Do not you see him there in the corner?"

The man, now thoroughly convinced the girl really saw some supernatural visitant, advanced upon the shadowy corner of the room, drawing his sword as he walked; but before he had gone four paces, Abigail shrieked, "He is gone; but there stands a gray cat in his place!"

At that Hutchinson struck his rapier through the empty air where the phantom cat was supposed to be crouching, and, in the words of the record, "thereupon she fell into a fit, and when it was over, she said, 'You killed her.'"

Now mark how ingeniously this shameless little impostor played upon the superstitious credulity of the man. Half unwilling to be beguiled by her words, yet half fearful she really had seen some evidence of witchcraft, Hutchinson protested he saw no cat's carcass on the floor, but the little maid replied, "Oh, the shade of Sarah Good came and carried her away."

Sarah Good was one of the poor old women who waited execution by hanging in Ipswich jail at the time, and her conviction had been pro-

cured largely on the testimony of Abigail Williams and Ann Putnam. Though she had probably never heard the word, Abigail Williams was a shrewd practical psychologist. Having prepared Hutchinson's superstitious mind by her imposing cries and fainting fits, she chose this moment to strengthen the already impregnable ease which popular ignorance and credulity had made against poor, friendless old Sarah Good.

THE jury impaneled to try George Burroughs gave little time to considering their verdict. He was found guilty as charged, and sentenced to be hanged on Gallows Hill August 19, 1692.

One of the current superstitions was that persons who had really sold their souls to Satan could not repeat the Lord's prayer correctly; but at the gibbet's foot George Burroughs recited the beautiful petition from beginning to end with great fervor and beauty, and quoted from the *Book of Job*:

"I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth. And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God."

The "afflicted children", who had gathered on Gallows Hill to see their victim die, attempted to drown out the sound of his words by shrieking that a great, black man stood at his shoulder, dictating the prayer and Scriptural passages to him.

Townsmen of Salem, assembled to see Satan's servant pay the price of his wickedness, were thunderstruck when they heard the holy words fall from the convicted wizard's lips.

"This man is no witch," a murmur ran through the crowd. "Save him; stop the execution; we commit murder!" The people pressed forward to take the condemned preacher from the hangman.

But the Reverend Dr. Cotton Mather, who was also present to witness the execution, spurred his horse between the victim and his would-be rescuers. He preached a fiery sermon from the saddle, reminding the people that the devil could quote Scripture for his purposes, and declaring this was but a cunning artifice of the Evil One to save his servant.

Meanwhile the hangman had adjusted the noose about the prisoner's throat, the platform was snatched away, and George Burroughs' stainless soul ascended to its endless home as his martyred body swung between earth and sky.

A CONTEMPORARY resident of Salem Village, writing of the execution to a friend in Boston, described the last chapter of the Reverend George Burroughs' tragedy in these words: "When he had been cut down, he was dragged by the halter to a hole or grave, between the rocks, about two feet deep, his shirt and breeches being pulled off and an old pair of trousers of one previously executed put on his lower parts. He was so put in that one of his hands and his chin was left uncovered."

So Christians did unto Christians in the name of their common religion in the year of grace 1692.



In WEIRD TALES next month Seabury Quinn tells of the end of the New England witchcraft horror, and narrates how, when more than two hundred witches were lying in the jails of Salem and Ipswich awaiting death at the hands of the common hangman, Governor Phips of Massachusetts suddenly ended the persecution and emptied the jails. The Puritan series will be followed by a thrilling true tale of witchcraft from medieval Germany, told in Mr. Quinn's most fascinating style