

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

A MAGAZINE of the



BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME VI

NUMBER 1

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 408 Holliday Building, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 30, 1923, at the postoffice at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor. Copyright, 1925, by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company

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The END of the HORROR

No. 5

by Seabury
Quinn



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

IN THE village church of Salem, Massachusetts, one summer afternoon in the year 1692, Mary Easty, wife of Isaac Easty, of Salem Village, stood to receive sentence of death by hanging.

"Mary Easty," said Chief Justice Stoughton, "you have been tried by a jury of your peers and found guilty of the horrible and detestable crime of witchcraft. Mary Easty, have you anything to say why sentence of death should not be passed upon you?"

The prisoner regarded her judges calmly. She was a fragile woman, about fifty-eight years of age, borne down by years of heart-breaking toil, by long imprisonment and the fear of death which had been with her since the day the marshal took her in custody. She had borne seven children to Massachusetts—sons and daughters whose descendants would one day sustain the rights of Englishmen by taking up arms against England's German king; she had always endeavored to live in love and charity with her neighbors; now she stood convicted of the most terrible crime known to the

law, a crime worse than treason itself. She curtsied to the court, as a well-behaved woman should to her betters.

"Your honors," said she, "I humbly petition you, not for my own life, for I know I must die, and my appointed time is set; but, if it be possible, let no more innocent blood be shed."

Mary Easty was the sister of Rebecca Nurse, already convicted of witchcraft, and, like her sister, she had been found guilty on the testimony of Ann Putnam and Abigail Williams, both children in their teens, who declared on oath that her shade had come to them in the night and "sorely afflicted" them.

On September 22 Mary Easty and seven other unfortunates, all condemned on the testimony of the "afflicted children," were conveyed to Gallows Hill and hanged by the neck until dead.

The Reverend Mr. Noyes, duly ordained clergyman and friend and confidant of Samuel Parris, pastor of Salem Village Church, looked at the bodies swinging from the gallows and

piously remarked, "How sad it is to see eight firebrands of hell hanging there."

It was the last time the reverend gentleman's churchly eyes were to be saddened by such a spectacle.

ENCOURAGED by their minister, the Reverend Samuel Parris, the group of girls had sworn away life after life during the long summer of 1692. No one, no matter how good his reputation, was safe if once these irresponsible children "cried out" against him. Giles and Martha Corey, well-to-do and respectable farmers, had been put to death on their testimony; Rebecca Nurse, dearly loved for her piety and goodness, had died a felon's death; even George Burroughs, an ordained minister of the Gospel, widely loved and wholesomely respected, had not been safe against their malice.

And once a person stood accused by these pitiless little wretches, his doom was sealed. No alibi could be pleaded, for the essence of the case in almost every instance was that the accused had "appeared unto" and "grievously afflicted" one or more of the accusing children when he (the accused) was well known to be somewhere else.

Absurd? Of course it is, by any process of modern reasoning; but the whole belief in witchcraft was based on a wholehearted acceptance of the existence of a personal devil. The fiend bought the souls of such as would acknowledge themselves his servants, and, as purchase price, gave them an attendant imp, or familiar. When Satan's servant wished to plague some godly soul, all she had to do was summon her familiar and bid it assume an exact likeness of herself; then, while the familiar, in the witch's shape, carried on her regular vocations, the witch bestrode her broomstick and hied away on her diabolical errand.

Granting the truth of these premises, it will at once be seen that the most ironclad alibi proved by the accused served only to strengthen the case against her.

Salem and its environs had been thoroughly combed by the "afflicted children" in their accusations. Beginning with Sarah Good and Sarah Osburn, two friendless old women, they had gradually worked up the social scale in search of victims till at last a clergyman's life had paid the price of their perjury. Their power was absolute. On all sides they were flattered and deferred to as if they had been royalty, for their unsupported accusation was enough to seal the doom of anyone they chose to cry out against.

Martha Corey, it was generally understood, had been cried out against because she had declared the "afflicted" were more in need of a sound thrashing than any other treatment.

But, like a well written stage play, the tragedy which marred New England's Colonial history came to an abrupt end at the very height of its horror. Increase Mather, president of Harvard College and father of Cotton Mather, had all along entertained grave doubts of the competence of the "specter evidence" upon which so many persons had been condemned. He ventured to voice these misgivings in a public address—and the afflicted children cried out against him!

Now, it was one thing for the humble pastor of a village church to be accused by these children of farmers and tradespeople; but quite another for the foremost divine and philosopher of a community which even then was the intellectual center of America to be made the target of their malice.

Even so, their accusation might have proved embarrassing to Dr. Mather if their overweening pride in their powers of destruction had not led them to shoot at the highest mark available in the colony.

MAY 14, 1692, William Phips had returned from London to Massachusetts with the king's commission as royal governor of the colony and an order of knighthood. He was an energetic, hardheaded Yankee, born of obscure parents at Monsweag, Maine, apprenticed to a shipwright as a lad, and successful as only those of marked ability can be. From journeyman shipwright he had graduated to command of a small merchant vessel, later held a command in the Royal Navy, still later amassed a considerable fortune for himself and turned in a handsome profit to the crown by salvaging treasure from Spanish galleons sunk in battle with the buccanniers of the Caribbean.

Sir William had acquired considerable polish in his upward climb, but his wife, whom he had married during his days as journeyman laborer, retained the plain thought and plainer speech of her early station in life.

When news of the witch trials came to Boston, especially when the affecting scene attending the execution of the Reverend George Burroughs was related to her, she expressed her sentiments in no uncertain terms. Her remarks concerning the "afflicted children" had a Shakespearian, if not a Chaucerian, directness.

This blow to the children's dignity was not to be tolerated. They, who had held absolute power of life and death in their immature hands for upward of a year, whose lightest word spelled unescapable doom, were not to be spoken of thus, not by the royal governor's wife herself.

One and all the "afflicted children" became "afflicted" as never before. The fainting fits and wild cries and writhing convulsions they had displayed while being "afflicted" by other witches were as nothing to those they now exhibited almost constantly. And each seizure was ac-

companied by the most heartrending prayers for help, help from the wicked Lady Phips, who thus sorely beset them. The sight of their sufferings would have wrung tears from a heart of stone, the sound of their tortured cries sent cold chills down the spines of every dweller in Salem Village. Surely, some servant of Satan more powerful than all the rest combined, had taken them in her wicked power. The town was in an uproar.

Sir William Phips was a product of his times; though possessing more than ordinary energy and ability, he suffered the timidity which went with the gross superstition of his day. But he had been married long enough to learn that a determined wife, like a force of nature, is not to be argued with. There is no record of the words Lady Phips used to convince her lord and master, but there is a very definite record that he was convinced.

An order from the royal governor of Massachusetts dissolved the special court which had tried and hanged nineteen innocent persons in ten months and put another to death by the most barbarous means ever employed by white men in America.

A second order, following hard upon the first, opened the jails where nearly two hundred hapless wretches awaited the hangman, and witchcraft trials, with all their horrors, disappeared from Massachusetts forthwith. Only the grisly memory of them lingered like the memory of a frightful dream when the night is done.

YEARS later Ann Putnam made public confession that the accusations she had brought against the "witches" were false in every detail. She asserted she had been "deluded by Satan" to perjure herself and swear away the lives of her neighbors. And so great was the belief in the powers of the devil that the congrega-

tion of Salem church accepted her excuse and forgave her, in word, if not in deed. She died of tuberculosis while still a young woman, unmarried and unloved, but apparently not regarded with any special hatred by the relatives of those her lying testimony had sent to death.

There appears no record of similar confessions by the other "afflicted children". Perhaps their moral courage was not so great as that which led the Putnam girl to acknowledge her fault, even though she placed the greater part of the blame upon the devil.

It would be pleasing to record that the Reverend Samuel Parris, whose desire to retain his pastorate began the terrible persecutions, suffered a

fate befitting his crime. It does not appear that he did.

In 1696 he was ousted from the pulpit of Salem Village Church on petition of several members of the congregation, among them John Tarbell and Samuel Nurse, both of whom had been bereaved through the judicial murders in which Mr. Parris had assisted four years before. But he left the parish with a handsome cash settlement, and continued in the ministry for several more years, always quarreling with his congregations and always getting the better of the controversies.

NOTE.—Number 6 of this series, "Maria Schneider," is a thrilling true tale of witchcraft from Germany, in the time of the Thirty Years War. It will appear in WEIRD TALES next month.