Charles Upham Background

Writing over 150 years after the Salem witch trials, Charles Upham was the first to compose a full, detailed book devoted to explaining the events of 1692. A minister, politician, and historian, Charles Upham lived in Salem in the mid nineteenth century. Utilizing the court documents from the witch trials, oral stories passed down through the generations, and town records, this work includes a description of Salem's history before 1692, followed by a full account of the witchcraft trials. His book, entitled *Salem Witchcraft*, was published in 1867.

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Excerpt from *Salem Witchcraft* by Charles Upham (1867)

WITCHCRAFT AT SALEM VILLAGE.

WE left Mr. Parris in the early part of November, 1691, at the crisis of his controversy with the inhabitants of Salem Village, under circumstances which seemed to indicate that its termination was near at hand. The opposition to him had assumed a form which made it quite probable that it would succeed in dislodging him from his position. But the end was not yet. Events were ripening that were to give him a new and fearful strength, and open a scene in which he was to act a part destined to attract the notice of the world, and become a permanent portion of human history. The doctrines of demonology had produced their full effect upon the minds of men, and every thing was ready for a final display of their power. The story of the Goodwin children, as told by Cotton Mather, was known and read in all the dwellings of the land, and filled the imaginations of a credulous age. Deputy-governor Danforth had begun the work of arrests; and persons charged with witchcraft, belonging to neighboring towns, were already in prison.

Mr. Parris appears to have had in his family several slaves, probably brought by him from the West Indies. One of them, whom he calls, in his church-record book, "my negro lad," had died, a year or two before, at the age of nineteen. Two of them were man and wife. The former was always known by the name of "John Indian;" the latter was called "Tituba." These two persons may have originated the "Salem witchcraft." They are spoken of as having come from New Spain, as it was then called,—that is, the Spanish West Indies, and the adjacent mainlands of Central and South America,—and, in all probability, contributed, from the wild and strange superstitions prevalent among their native tribes, materials which, added to the commonly received notions on such subjects, heightened the infatuation of the times, and inflamed still more the imaginations of the credulous. Persons conversant with the Indians of Mexico, and on both sides of the Isthmus, discern many similarities in their systems of demonology with ideas and practices developed here.

Mr. Parris's former residence in the neighborhood of the Spanish Main, and the prominent part taken by his Indian slaves in originating the proceedings at the village, may account for some of the features of the transaction.

During the winter of 1691 and 1692, a circle of young girls had been formed, who were in the habit of meeting at Mr. Parris's house for the purpose of practising palmistry, and other arts of fortune-telling, and of becoming experts in the wonders of necromancy, magic, and spiritualism. It consisted, besides the Indian servants, mainly of the following persons:—

Elizabeth, daughter of Mr. Parris, was nine years of age. She seems to have performed a leading part in the first stages of the affair, and must have been a child of remarkable precocity. It is a noticeable fact, that her father early removed her from the scene. She was sent to the town, where she remained in the family of Stephen Sewall, until the proceedings at the village were brought to a close. Abigail Williams, a niece of Mr. Parris, and a member of his household, was eleven years of age. She acted conspicuously in the witchcraft prosecutions from beginning to end. Ann Putnam, daughter of Sergeant Thomas Putnam, the parish clerk or recorder, was twelve years of age. The character and social position of her parents gave her a prominence which an extraordinary development of the imaginative faculty, and of mental powers generally, enabled her to hold throughout. This young girl is perhaps entitled to be regarded as, in many respects, the leading agent in all the mischief that followed. Mary Walcot was seventeen years of age. Her father was Jonathan Walcot (vol. i. p. 225). His first wife, Mary Sibley, to whom he was married in 1664, had died in 1683. She was the mother of Mary. It is a singular fact, and indicates the estimation in which Captain Walcot was held, that, although not a church-member, he filled the office of deacon of the parish for several years before the formation of the church. Mercy Lewis was also seventeen years of age. When quite young, she was, for a time, in the family of the Rev. George Burroughs: and, in 1692, was living as a servant in the family of Thomas Putnam; although, occasionally, she seems to have lived, in the same capacity, with that of John Putnam, Jr., the constable of the village. He was a son of Nathaniel, and resided in the neighborhood of Thomas and Deacon Edward Putnam. Mercy Lewis performed a leading part in the proceedings, had great energy of purpose and capacity of management, and became responsible for much of the crime and horror connected with them. Elizabeth Hubbard, seventeen years of age, who also occupies a bad eminence in the scene, was a niece of Mrs. Dr. Griggs, and lived in her family. Elizabeth Booth and Susannah Sheldon, each eighteen years of age, belonged to families in the neighborhood. Mary Warren, twenty years of age, was a servant in the family of John Procter; and Sarah Churchill, of the same age, was a servant in that of George Jacobs, Sr. These two last were actuated, it is too apparent, by malicious feelings towards the families in which they resided, and contributed largely to the horrible tragedy. The facts to be exhibited will enable every one who carefully considers them, to form an estimate, for himself, of the respective character and conduct of these young persons. It is almost beyond belief that they were wholly actuated by deliberate and cold-blooded malignity. Their crime would, in that view, have been without a parallel in monstrosity of wickedness, and beyond what can be imagined of the guiltiest and most depraved natures. For myself, I am unable to determine how much may be attributed to credulity, hallucination, and the delirium of excitement, or to deliberate malice and falsehood. There is too much evidence of guile and conspiracy to attribute all their actions and declarations to delusion; and their conduct throughout was stamped with a bold assurance and audacious bearing. With one or two slight and momentary exceptions, there was a total absence of compunction or commiseration, and a reckless disregard of the agonies and destruction they were scattering around them. They present a subject that justly claims, and will for ever task, the examination of those who are most competent to fathom the mysteries of the human soul, sound its depths, and measure the extent to which it is liable to become wicked and devilish. It will be seen that other persons were drawn to act with these "afflicted children," as they were called, some from contagious delusion, and some, as was quite well proved, from a false, mischievous, and malignant spirit.

Besides the above-mentioned persons, there were three married women, rather under middle life, who acted with the afflicted children,—Mrs. Ann Putnam, the mother of the child of that name; Mrs. Pope; and a woman, named Bibber, who appears to have lived at Wenham. Another married woman,—spoken of as "ancient,"—named Goodell, had also been in the habit of attending their meetings; but she is not named in any of the documents on file, and was probably withdrawn, at an early period, from participating in the transaction.

In the course of the winter, they became quite skilful and expert in the arts they were learning, and gradually began to display their attainments to the admiration and amazement of beholders. At first, they made no charges against any person, but confined themselves to strange actions, exclamations, and contortions. They would creep into holes, and under benches and chairs, put themselves into odd and unnatural postures, make wild and antic gestures, and utter incoherent and unintelligible sounds. They would be seized with spasms, drop insensible to the floor, or writhe in agony, suffering dreadful tortures, and uttering loud and piercing outcries. The attention of the families in which they held their meetings was called to their extraordinary condition and proceedings; and the whole neighborhood and surrounding country soon were filled with the story of the strange and unaccountable sufferings of the "afflicted girls." No explanation could be given, and their condition became worse and worse. The physician of the village, Dr. Griggs, was called in, a consultation had, and the opinion finally and gravely given, that the afflicted children were bewitched. It was quite common in those days for the faculty to dispose of difficult cases by this resort. When their remedies were baffled, and their skill at fault, the patient was said to be "under an evil hand." In all cases, the sage conclusion was received by nurses, and elderly women called in on such occasions, if the symptoms were out of the common course, or did not yield to the prescriptions these persons were in the habit of applying. Very soon, the whole community became excited and alarmed to the highest degree. All other topics were forgotten. The only thing spoken or thought of was the terrible condition of the afflicted children in Mr. Parris's house, or wherever, from time to time, the girls assembled. They were the objects of universal compassion and wonder. The people flocked from all quarters to witness their sufferings, and gaze with awe upon their convulsions. Becoming objects of such notice, they were stimulated to vary and expand the manifestations of the extraordinary influence that was upon them. They extended their operations beyond the houses of Mr. Parris, and the families to which they belonged, to public places; and their fits, exclamations, and outcries disturbed the exercises of prayer meetings, and the ordinary services of the congregation. On one occasion, on the Lord's Day, March 20th, when the singing of the psalm previous to the sermon was concluded, before the person preaching—Mr. Lawson—could come forward, Abigail Williams cried out, "Now stand up, and name your text." When he had read it, in a loud and insolent voice she exclaimed, "It's a long text." In the midst of the discourse, Mrs. Pope broke in, "Now, there is enough of that." In the afternoon of the same day, while referring to the doctrine he had been expounding in the preceding service, Abigail Williams rudely ejaculated, "I know no doctrine you had. If you did name one, I have forgot it." An aged member of the church was present, against whom a warrant on the charge of witchcraft had been procured the day before. Being apprised of the proceeding, Abigail Williams spoke aloud, during the service, calling by name the person about to be apprehended, "Look where she sits upon the beam, sucking her yellow-bird betwixt her fingers." Ann Putnam, joining in, exclaimed, "There is a yellow-bird sitting on the minister's hat, as it hangs on the pin in the pulpit." Mr. Lawson remarks, with much simplicity, that these things, occurring "in the time of public worship, did something interrupt me in my first prayer, being so unusual." But he braced himself up to the emergency, and went on with the service. There is no intimation that Mr. Parris rebuked his niece for her disorderly behavior. As at several other times, the people sitting near Ann Putnam had to lay hold of her to prevent her proceeding to greater extremities, and wholly breaking up the meeting. The girls were supposed to be under an irresistible and supernatural impulse; and, instead of being severely punished, were looked upon with mingled pity, terror, and awe, and made objects of the greatest attention. Of course, where members of the minister's family were countenanced in such proceedings, during the exercises of public worship, on the Lord's Day, in the meeting-house, it was not strange that people in general yielded to the excitement. But all did not. Several members of the family of Francis Nurse, Peter Cloyse and wife, and Joseph Putnam, expressed their disapprobation of such doings being allowed, and absented themselves from meeting. Perhaps others took the same course; but whoever did were marked, as the sequel will show.