

**We Aren't Superstitious**  
By: Stephen Vincent Benét

Usually, our little superstitious rituals and propitiations don't hurt our daily lives. Usually. And then, on occasion, a superstition—a belief—flares into crowd-madness and kills and kills again before it has run its course. As it did in Salem Village, in 1692.

That story is worth retelling, as a very typical example of what wild belief and crowd hysteria can do to an average community. For Salem Village, in 1691, was no different in any way from any one of a dozen little New England hamlets. It didn't expect celebrity or notoriety, and its citizens were the average people of their day and age. There was the main road and the parsonage and the meetinghouse, the blockhouse, the Ingersoll house where travelers put up for the night, the eight or nine other houses that made up the village. Beyond lay the outlying farms with their hard-working farmers—a few miles away lay Salem Town itself—fifteen miles away, the overgrown village that was Boston. King Philip's War had been over for some fourteen years, and the colony was recovered from the shock of it—there were still individual slayings by Indians, but the real power of the Indian was very largely broken. Men might look forward, with hope, to peace and thriving for a time.

And, as for the men and women of Salem Village—they were tough and knotty stock, if you like, not widely lettered, not particularly tolerant, especially in religion—but no different from their neighbors at Andover and Topsfield or in Boston itself. There were sensible men and stupid men among them, model housewives and slatterns, troublemakers and more peaceable folk. The names were the Puritan names that we are accustomed to reverence—Mercy and Abigail and Deborah, Nathaniel and Samuel and John. They lived a life of hard work and long winters, drank rum on occasion, took their religion with that mixture of grimness and enthusiasm that marked the Puritan, and intended, under God's providence, to beat wilderness and Indian, and wax and increase in the land. They were a great deal more human, crotchety and colorful than the schoolbook pictures of dour-faced men in steeple-crowned hats would suggest. In fact, if you want to find out how human they were, you have only to read Judge Sewall's diary. He was one of the judges at the Salem witch trials—and heartily sorry for it later. But his Pepysian account of his own unsuccessful courtship of Madam Winthrop, and how he brought her gloves and sweets, is in the purest being of unconscious farce.

And yet, to this ordinary community in the early spring of 1692 came a madness that was to shake all Massachusetts before its fever was burned out. We are wiser, now. We do not believe in witches. But if, say, three cases of Asiatic cholera were discovered in your own hometown and certified as such by the local board of health—and if your local newspaper promptly ran a boxed warning to all citizens on the front page—you would have some faint idea of how the average Salem Villager felt when the “afflicted children” denounced their first victim.

For witchcraft, to almost all the New Englanders of 1692, was as definite, diagnosable, and dangerous an evil as bubonic plague. It had its symptoms, its prognosis, and its appalling results. Belief in it was as firmly fixed in most people's minds as belief in the germ theory of disease is in ours. Cotton Mather was one of the most able and promising young ministers of his day. But when in 1688, in Boston, an eleven-year-old girl named Martha Goodwin accused an unhappy Irish Catholic laundress of bewitching

her, Cotton Mather believed the eleven-year-old girl. In fact, he took the precocious brat into his own house to study her symptoms and cure them by fasting and prayer, and wrote and published an elaborate, scientific account of his treatment of the case—which doubtless played its own part in preparing men’s minds for the Salem madness.

True, there had been only some twenty witch trials in New England up to the Salem affair—compared to the hundreds and thousands of hangings, burnings, duckings, drownings that had gone on in Europe and the British Isles during the last few centuries. But people believed in witches—why should they not? They were in the Bible—even the Bible itself said “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” They were in every old wives’ tale that was whispered about the winter fires. And, in 1692, they were in Salem Village.

Three years before, Salem Village had got a new minister—the Reverend Samuel Parris, ex-merchant in the West Indies. He seems to have been a self-willed, self-important man with a great sense of his own and the church’s dignity; and, no sooner were he and his family well settled in the parsonage, than a dispute began as to whether the parsonage property belonged to him or to the congregation. But there was nothing unusual about that—Salem Village was a rather troublesome parish and two, at least, of the three previous ministers had had salary and other difficulties with the good folk of Salem. The quarrel dragged on like the old boundary dispute between Salem and Topsfield, creating faction and hard feeling, a typically New England affair. But there were boundary disputes elsewhere and other congregations divided in mind about their ministers.

But the most important thing about Samuel Parris was neither his self-importance nor his attempt to get hold of the parsonage property. It was the fact that he brought with him to Salem Village two West Indian servants—a man known as John Indian and a woman named Tituba. And when he bought those two or their services in the West Indies, he was buying a rope that was to hang nineteen men and women of New England—so odd are the links in the circumstantial chain.

Perhaps the nine-year-old Elizabeth Parris, the daughter of the parsonage, boasted to her new friends of the odd stories Tituba told and the queer things she could do. Perhaps Tituba herself let the report of her magic powers be spread about the village. She must have been as odd and imagination-stirring a figure as a parrot or a tame monkey in the small New England town. And the winters were long and white—and any diversion a godsend.

In any case, during the winter of 1691-92, a group of girls and women began to meet nightly at the parsonage, with Tituba and her fortune telling as the chief attraction. Elizabeth Parris, at nine, was the youngest—then came Abigail Williams, eleven and Ann Putnam, twelve. The rest were older—Mercy Lewis, Mary Wolcott, and Elizabeth Hubbard were seventeen; Elizabeth Booth and Susan Sheldon, eighteen; and Mary Warren and Sarah Churchill, twenty. Three were servants: Mercy Lewis had been employed by the Reverend George Burroughs—a previous minister of Salem Village—and now worked for the Putnams, Mary Warren was a maid at the John Proctors’, Sarah Churchill at the George Jacobs’. All, except for Elizabeth Parris, were adolescent or just leaving adolescence.

The elder women included a pair of gossipy, superstitious busybodies—Mrs. Pope and Mrs. Bibber—and young Ann Putnam’s mother, Ann Putnam, Senior, who deserves a sentence to herself.

For the Putnams were a powerful family in the neighborhood, and Ann Putnam, married at seventeen and now only thirty, is described as handsome, arrogant, temperamental, and high-strung. She was also one of those people who can cherish a grudge and revenge it.

The circle met—the circle continued to meet—no doubt with the usual giggling, whispering, and gossip. From mere fortune telling it proceeded to other and more serious matters—table-rapping, perhaps, and a little West Indian voodoo—weird stories told by Tituba and weird things shown, while the wind blew outside and the big shadows flickered on the wall. Adolescence girls, credulous servants, superstitious old women—and the two enigmatic figures of Tituba, the West Indian, and Ann Putnam, Sr.

But soon the members of the circle began to show hysterical symptoms. They crawled under tables and chairs, they made strange sounds, they shook and trembled with nightmare fears. The thing became a village celebrity—and more. Something strange and out of nature was happening—who had ever seen normal young girls behave like these young girls? And no one—certainly not the Reverend Samuel Parris—even suggested that a mixed diet of fortune telling, ghost stories, and voodoo is hardly the thing for impressionable minds during a long New England winter. Hysteria was possession by an evil spirit; pathological lying, the Devil putting words into one's mouth. No one suggested that even Cotton Mather's remedy of fasting and prayer would be a good deal better for such cases than widespread publicity. Instead, the Reverend Samuels became very busy. Grave ministers were called in to look at the afflicted children. A Dr. Gregg gave his opinion. It was almost too terrible to believe, and yet what else could be believed? Witchcraft!

Meanwhile, one may suppose, the "afflicted children," like most hysterical subjects, enjoyed the awed stares, the horrified look, the respectful questions that greeted them, with girlish zest. They had been unimportant girls of a little hamlet—now they were, in every sense of the word, spot news. And any reporter knows what that does to certain kinds of people. They continued to writhe and demonstrate—and be the center of attention. There was only one catch about it. If they were really bewitched—somebody must be doing the bewitching—

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of February, 1662, in the midst of an appropriate storm of thunder and lightning, three women, Sarah Good, Sarah Osborne and Tituba, were arrested on the deadly charge of bewitching the children.

The next day, March 1, two Magistrates, Justice Hathorne and Justice Corwin, arrived with appropriate pomp and ceremony. The first hearing was held in the crowded meetinghouse of the Village—and all Salem swarmed to it, as crowds in our time have swarmed to other sleepy little villages, suddenly notorious.

The children—or the children and Tituba—had picked their first victims well. Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne were old women of no particular standing in the community. Sarah Good had been a beggar and a slattern—her husband testified, according to report and with a smugness that makes one long to kick him, that she "either was a witch or would be one very quickly," ending "I may say with tears that she is an enemy to all good." As for Sarah Osborne, she had married a redemptioner servant after the death of her former husband and probably lost caste in consequence. Also, she had been bedridden for some time and therefore not as regular in her church attendance as a good Christian should be.

We can imagine that meetinghouse—and the country crowd within it—on that chill March day. At one end was the majesty of the law—and the “afflicted children” where all might see them and observe. Dressed in their best, very likely, and with solicitous relatives near at hand. Do you see Mercy Lewis? Do you see Ann Putnam? And then the whole crowd turned to one vast, horrified eye. For there was the accused—the old woman—the witch!

The justices—grim Justice Hathorne in particular—had, evidently, arrived with their minds made up. For the first question addressed to Sarah Good was, bluntly:

“What evil spirit has you familiarity with?”

“None,” said the piping old voice. But everybody in the village knew worthless Sarah Good. And the eye of the audience went from her to the deadly row of “afflicted children” and back again.

“Have you made no contracts with the devil?” proceeded the Justice.

“No.”

The Justice went to the root of the matter at once.

“Why do you hurt these children?”

A rustle must have gone through the meetinghouse at that. Aye, that’s it—the Justice speaks shrewdly—hark the Justice! Aye, but look, too! Look at the children! Poor things, poor things!

“I do not hurt them. I scorn it,” said Sarah Good, defiantly. But the Justice had her, now—he was not to be brushed aside.

“Who then do you employ to do it?”

“I employ nobody.”

“What creature do you employ then?” For all witches had familiars.

“No creature, but I am falsely accused.” But the sweat must have been on the old woman’s palms by now.

The Justice considered. There was another point—minor but illuminating.

“Why did you go away muttering from Mr. Parris, his house?”

“I did not mutter, but I thanked him for what he gave my child.”

The Justice returned to the main charge, like any prosecuting attorney.

“Have you made no contract with the devil?”

“No.”

It was time for Exhibit A. The Justice turned to the children. Was Sarah Good one of the persons who tormented them? Yes, yes!—and a horrified murmur running through the crowd. And then, before the awestricken eyes of all, they began to be tormented. They writhed, they drew stiff, they contorted, they were stricken moaning or speechless. Yet, when they were brought to Sarah Good and allowed to touch it, they grew quite quiet and calm. For, as everyone knew, a witch’s physical body was ice, an electric conductor—it reabsorbed, on much, the malefic force discharged by witchcraft into the bodies of the tormented. Everybody could see what happened—and everybody saw. When the meetinghouse was quiet, the justice spoke again.

“Sarah Good, do you not see now what you have done? Why do you not tell us the truth? Why do you torment these poor children?”

And with these words, Sarah Good was already hanged. For all that she could say was, “I do not torment them.” And yet everyone had seen her, with their own two eyes.

The questions went on—she fumbled in her answers—muttered a bit of prayer. Why did she mutter? And didn't you see how hard it was for her to pronounce the name of God? Pressed and desperate, she finally said that if anyone tormented the children, it must be Sarah Osborne—she knew herself guiltless. The pitiful fable did not save her. To Boston jail.

Sarah Osborne's examination followed the same course—the same prosecutor's first question—the same useless denial—the same epileptic feats of the “afflicted children”—the same end. It was also brought out that Sarah Osborne had said that “She was more like to be bewitched than to be a witch”—very dangerous that!—and that she had once had a nightmare about “a thing all black like an Indian that pinched her in the neck.”

Then Tituba was examined and gave them their fill of marvels, prodigies, and horrors.

The West Indian woman, a slave in a strange land, was fighting for her life and she did it shrewdly and desperately. She admitted repentantly, that she had tormented the children. But she had been forced to do so. By whom? By Goody Good and Goody Osborne and two other witches whom she hadn't yet been able to recognize. Her voodoo knowledge aided her—she filled the open ears of Justices and crowds with tales of hairy familiars and black dogs, red cats, and black cats and yellow birds, the phantasm of a woman with legs and wings. And everybody could see that she spoke the truth. For, when she was first brought in, the children were tormented at her presence, but as soon as she had confessed and turned King's evidence, she was tormented herself, and fearfully. To Boston Jail with her—but she had saved her neck.

The hearing was over—the men and women of Salem and its outlying farms went broodingly or excitedly back to their homes to discuss the fearful workings of God's providence. Here and there a common-sense voice murmured a doubt or two—Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne were no great losses to the community—but still, to convict two old women of heinous crimes on the testimony of green-sick girls and a West Indian slave! But, on the whole, the villagers of Salem felt relieved. The cause of the plague had been found—it would be stamped out and the afflicted children recover. The justices, no doubt, congratulated themselves on their prompt and intelligent action. The “afflicted children” slept, after a tiring day—they were not quite so used to such performances as they were to become.

As for the accused women, they went to Boston Jail—to be chained there, while waiting trial and gallows. There is an item of “To chains for Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne, 14 shillings” in the jailor's record. Only, Sarah Osborne was not to go to the gallows—she died in jail instead, some five and a half weeks later, at a recorded expense to the Colony of one pound, three shillings, and five-pence for her keep. And Tituba stayed snugly in prison till the madness collapsed—and was then sold by the Colony to defray the expenses of her imprisonment. One wonders who bought her and whether she ever got back to the West Indies. But, with that, her enigmatic figure disappears from the scene.

Meanwhile, on an outlying farm, Giles Corey, a turbulent, salty old fellow of eighty-one, began to argue the case with his wife, Martha. He believed, fanatically, in the “afflicted children.” She did not, and said so—even going so far as to say that the magistrates were blinded and she could pen their eyes. It was one of those marital

disputes that occur between strong-willed people. And it was to bring Martha Corey to the gallows and Giles Corey to an even stranger doom.

Yet now there was a lull, through which people whispered.

As for what went on in the minds of the “afflicted children,” during that lull, we may not say. But this much is evident. They had seen and felt their power. The hearing had been the greatest and most exciting event of their narrow lives. And it was so easy to do—they grew more and more ingenious with each rehearsal. You twisted your body and groaned—and grown people were afraid.

Add to this the three girl-servants, with the usual servants’ grudges against present or former masters. Add to this that high-strung, dominant woman, Ann Putnam, Sr., who could hold a grudge and remember it. Such a grudge as there might be against the Towne sisters, for instance—they were all married women of the highest standing, particularly Rebecca Nurse. But they’d taken the Topsfield side in that boundary dispute with Salem. So suppose—just suppose—that one of them were found out to be a witch? And hadn’t Tituba deposed that there were other women, besides Good and Osborne, who made her torment the children?

On March 19, Martha Corey and Rebecca Nurse were arrested on the charge of witchcraft. On March 21, they were examined and committed. And, with that, the real reign of terror began.

For if Martha Corey notably religious and God-fearing, and Rebecca Nurse, saintly and thoughtful, could be witches, no one in Salem or New England was safe from the charge. The examinations were brutally unfair—the “children” yet bolder and more daring. They would interrupt questions now to shout that “a black man” was whispering in the prisoner’s ear—if the accused stood still, there were tormented, if she moved her hands, they suffered even greater agonies. Their self-confidence became monstrous—there was no trick too fantastic for them to try. When Deodat Lawson, a former minister of Salem and a well-educated and intelligent man, came to Ingersoll’s on March 19, he first saw Mary Wolcott who “as she stood by the door was bitten, so that she cried out of her wrist, and, looking at it, we saw apparently the marks of teeth, both upper and lower set, on each side of her wrist.” It would not have deceived a child—but Mary Wolcott was one of the “afflicted children” and her words and self-bitings were as gospel. He then went to the parsonage, where Abigail Williams, another afflicted child, put on very effective vaudeville-act indeed, throwing firebrands around the house, saying “Whish, whish, whish!” and saying that she was being tormented by Rebecca Nurse who was trying to make her sign the Devil’s book.

After that, there was, obviously, nothing for the Reverend Lawson to do but to preach a thunderous sermon on the horrors of witchcraft—interrupted by demonstrations and cries from “the afflicted”—and thus do his little bit toward driving the madness on. For by now, Salem Village, as a community, was no longer sane.

Let us get the rest of it over quickly. The Salem witches ceased to be Salem’s affair—they became a matter affecting the whole colony. Sir William Phips, the new governor, appointed a special court of Oyer and Terminer to try the cases. And the hangings began.

On January 1, 1692, no one, except possibly the “Circle children” had heard of Salem witches. On June 10, Bridget Bishop was hanged. She had not been one of the first accused, but she was the first to suffer. She had been married three times, kept a

roadhouse on the road to Beverly where people drank rum and played shovelboard, and dressed, distinctively for the period, in a “black cap and black hat and red paragon bodice broidered and looped with diverse colors.” But those seem to have been her chief offenses. When questioned, she said, “I never saw the Devil in my life.”

All through the summer, the accusations, the arrests, the trials came thick and fast till the jails were crowded. Nor were those now accused friendless old beldames like Sarah Good. They included Captain John Alden (son of Miles Standish’s friend), who saved himself by breaking jail, and the wealthy and prominent Englishes, who saved themselves by flight. The most disgraceful scenes occurred at the trial of the saintly Rebecca Nurse. Thirty-nine citizens for her, and the jury brought in a verdict of “not guilty.” The mob in the sweating courtroom immediately began to cry out, and the presiding judge as much as told the jury to reverse their verdict. They did so, to the mob’s delight. Then the Governor pardoned her. And “certain gentlemen of Salem”—and perhaps he mob—persuaded him into reversing his pardon. She was hanged on Gallows Hill on July 19 with Sarah Good, Sarah Wilds, Elizabeth How, and Susanna Martin.

Susanna Martin’s only witchcraft seems to have been that she was an unusually tidy woman and had once walked a muddy road without getting her dress bedraggled. No, I am quoting from testimony, not inventing. As for Elizabeth How, a neighbor testified, “I have been acquainted with Goodwife How as a naybor for nine or ten years and I never saw any harm in her but found her just in her dealings and faithful to her promises.... I never heard her revile any person but she always pitied them and said, ‘I pray God forgive them now.’” But the children cried, “I am stuck with a pin. I am pinched,” when they saw her—and she hanged.

It took a little more to hang Reverend George Burroughs. He had been Salem Village’s second minister—then gone on to a part in Maine. And the cloth had great sanctity. But Ann Putnam and Mercy Lewis managed to doom him between them—with he able assistance of the rest of the troupe. Mr. Burroughs was unfortunate enough to be a man of unusual physical strength—anyone who could lift a gun by putting four fingers in its barrel, must do so by magic arts. Also, he had been married three times. So when the ghosts of his first two wives, dressed in winding-sheets, appeared in a sort of magic-lantern show to Ann Putnam and cried out that Mr. Burroughs had murdered them—the cloth could no save him then. Perhaps one of the most pathetic documents connected with the trials is the later petition of his orphaned children. It begins, “We were left a parcel of small children, helpless.”

Here and there, in the records, gleams a flash of frantic common sense. Susanna Martin laughed when Ann Putnam and her daughter go into convulsions at her appearance. When asked why she saws, “Well I may, at such folly, I never hurt this woman or her child in my life.” John Proctor, the prosperous farmer who employed Mary Warren, said sensibly, before his arrest, “If these girls are left alone, we will all be devils and witches. They ought all to be sent to the whipping-post.” He was right enough about it but his servant helped hang him. White-haired old George Jacobs, leaning on his two sticks, cried out, “You tax me for a wizard, you might as well tax me for a buzzard!” Nevertheless, he hanged. A member of the Nurse family testifies, “Being in court this 29<sup>th</sup> June, 1692, I saw Goodwife Bibber pull pins out of her clothes and put them between her fingers and clasp her hands around her knee and then she cried out and said Goodwife

Nurse pinched her.” But such oppositions did not save Rebecca Nurse or her sister, Mary Easty.

Judge, jury, and colony preferred to believe the writhings of the children, the stammerings of those whose sows had died inexplicably, the testimony of such as Bernard Peach who swore that Susanna Martin had flown in through his window, bent his body into the shape of a “whoope” and sat upon him for an hour and a half.

One hanging on June 10, five on July 19, five on August 19, eight on September 22, including Mary Easty and Martha Corey. And of these the Reverend Noyes remarked, with unction, “What a sad thing it is to see eight firebrands of hell hanging there!” But for stubborn Giles Corey a different fate was reserved.

The old man had begun believing in the whole hocus-pocus. He had quarreled with his wife about it. He had seen her arrested as a witch, insulted by the magistrates, condemned to die. Two of his sons-in-law had testified against her—he himself had been closely questioned as to her actions and had made the deposition of a badgered and simple man. Yes, she prayed a good deal—sometimes he couldn’t hear what she said—that sort of thing. The memory must have risen to haunt him when she was condemned. Now, he himself was in danger.

Well, he could die as his wife would. But there was the property—his goods, his prospering lands. By law, the goods and property of those convicted of witchcraft were confiscated by the state and the name attainted. With a curious, grim heroism, Giles Corey drew up a will leaving that property to the two son-in-law who had not joined in the prevailing madness. And then at his trial, he said, “I will not plead. If I deny, I am condemned already in courts where ghosts appear as witnesses and swear men’s lives away.”

A curious, grim heroism? It was so. For those who refused to plead either guilty or not guilty in such a suit were liable to the old English punishment called *peine forte et dure*. It consisted in heaping weights or stones upon the unhappy victim till he accepted a plea—or until his chest was crushed. And exactly that happened to old Giles Corey. They heaped the stones upon him until they killed him—and two days before his wife was hanged, he died. But his property went to the two loyal sons-in-law, without confiscation—and his name was not attainted. So died Giles Corey, New England to the bone.

And then, suddenly and fantastically as the madness had come, it was gone....

The “afflicted children,” at long last, had gone too far. They had accused Mrs. Hall, the wife of the minister at Beverly and a woman known throughout the colony for her virtues. And there comes a point when driven men and women revolt against blood and horror. It was that which ended Robespierre’s terror—it was that which ended the terror of the “afflicted children.” The thing had become a *reductio ad absurdum*. If it went on, logically, no one but the “afflicted children” and their protégées would be left alive....

In 1706 Ann Putnam made public confession that she had been deluded by the devil in testifying as she had. She had testified in every case but one. And in 1711 the colony of Massachusetts paid fifty pounds to the heirs of various victims. An expensive business for the colony, on the whole.

What happened to the survivors? Well, the Reverend Samuel Parris quit Salem Village to go into business in Boston and died at Sudbury in 1720. And Ann Putnam died

in 1716, and from the stock of the Putnams sprang Israel Putnam, the Revolutionary hero. And from the stock of the “Witches,” the Nurses and the others, sprang excellent and distinguished people of service to state and nation. And hanging Judge Hathorne’s descendant was Nathaniel Hawthorne....

We have no reason to hold Salem up to the obloquy. It was a town, like another, and a strange madness took hold of it. But it is not a strange thing to hang a man for witchcraft than to hang him for the shape of his nose or the color of his skin. We are not superstitious, no. Well, let us be a little sure we are not. For persecution follows superstition and intolerance as fire follows the fuse. And once we light that fire we cannot foresee where it will end or what it will consume—any more than they could in Salem two hundred and forty-five years ago.