

# And A Child Shall Lead Them



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The following story is the author's fictional interpretation, based on factual evidence regarding the Salem Witch Trials. Excerpts from the book, "Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcraft and Possessions" by Cotton Mather, are taken from published text as presented by the author. Names, dates and any detailed accounts of the accused and executed are accurate.

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# Foreword

When we hear the word “Witch” most of us automatically think of the Salem Witch Trials that took place in the late 1600’s, in Salem Massachusetts. The truth is, witch hunts began as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century and ideas about witches can be found in most cultures around the world. Most beliefs are based on the idea of people possessing the ability to harm by the use of spiritual forces.

According to witch trial judges, there are two specific parts to the witchcraft crime. The first was practicing evil magic against other people and the second was the witch having a direct connection or pact with the Devil. Legal systems were formed by professional people who dedicated their lives to the persecution of women they believed were a threat to society, thus condemning them as witches. Some scholars suggest that Christian ideology, imposed on ordinary people to believe in male supremacy was the reasoning behind the oppression and persecution of women.

Although methods of torture and execution varied widely throughout various countries, it’s safe to say that those acting on the authority of God, showed no mercy to the accused. These methods included sleep deprivation, “the strappado,” which was a pulley that raised the accused off the ground by their arms or legs and “the rack,” an instrument of compression that consisted of head clamps, leg clamps and thumb clamps. Occasionally, witch chairs were used, which were heated by fire from below as the witch was strapped to it. In 1591 Scotland the most severe and cruel pain in the world was reported to have been inflicted on one accused witch, referred to as “the booties.” During this procedure, the witch’s legs were crushed and beaten together as small as possible until the bones and flesh were so bruised that blood and marrow spewed forth in great abundance. Regardless of which form was used, once the torture was complete the witch could then expect to be burned alive at the stake or hanged on the gallows.

All forms of torture and execution were inflicted with the blessings of the church, as the eradication of witches represented victory for the supreme power of God.



# And a Child Shall Lead Them

Betty Parris and her cousin, Abigail Williams, were just 5 and 7 years old when they first heard the tales of the scandal that rocked the little village of Salem. Witchcraft, possession, devils and molestation; the words alone were titillating and conjured thoughts and feelings otherwise forbidden and unknown to their young hearts and minds. Yet it was all anyone could speak or think of. Even in their hometown of Boston, the stories brought a level of excitement and scandal, the likes of which their community had never known. But once Goody Glover, the evil witch, was hanged, the excitement died down and all was calm.

The Parris's were a well-to-do family with connections to some of the most distinguished families in Boston. Their wealth was due to Samuel Parris' marriage to Elizabeth Eldridge and the land in Barbados that Samuel had inherited from his father, after his father passed away while he was studying at Harvard.

Samuel was a successful Boston merchant, who supported his family in a manner that left them wanting for nothing. But for Samuel, the position was unfulfilling and left him with an ever increasing desire to change his vocation. He began by filling in for absent ministers at informal church gatherings and eventually began negotiations with the village of Salem to become the new preacher. He eventually packed up his family, much to their dismay and they came to settle in the village of Salem in 1689. It was then that his ministry began.

There immediately began talk among the congregation about the family's wealth and the rumors that had started in Boston, regarding the Parris' live in slave-girl, Tituba. Some said that not only did she oversee the day-to-day household duties, but in the years before Samuel married Elizabeth, that she had acted as his concubine as well.

It was a disgrace, they said, for a minister of God to allow such an evil woman to care for his family. She was evil because she refused to succumb to their Puritanical ways and held strong to her own beliefs and

customs. Something that Samuel had never given a thought to, since receiving her as payment for a debt by one of his business associates in Barbados, when she was just 15 years of age.

Tituba was an Indian woman, originally from an Arawak village in South America, where she was captured as a child, taken to Barbados as a captive, and sold into slavery. Her story was heart-wrenching and Samuel would no more consider forcing her to submit to his Christian ways, as he would consider practicing hers. Her heritage and customs were all that she had left of the life she knew as a child and Samuel was not about to take that away from her, regardless of what anyone said.

Unfortunately, the villagers didn't agree and made life difficult for the Parris family. Although Reverend Parris and his wife, Elizabeth, were able to turn the other cheek, the children, however, were picked on and teased on a regular basis and soon came to hate their new home in Salem; Abigail and Betty especially, as the other girls could be wicked in their taunting.

As rumors and speculation continued to spread, dissatisfaction with the new minister began to spread as well, and the congregation vowed to drive him out. A committee was formed and it was agreed that not only would they not impose a tax to support his salary, but they refused to supply firewood for the family to use throughout the cold New England winter.

In response, Reverend Parris's sermons began to focus on warnings of Satan descending upon Salem, taking hold of the villagers and congregation, thus causing them to turn on him and his family. This did not produce the results he had anticipated, in fact, it seemed to add fuel to the fire, as things from there got progressively worse.

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The subject of Tituba had never failed to stir interesting conversation with the other Bostonian children, and Abigail and Betty often took

every opportunity to tout their knowledge of fortune telling and other non-Christian activities that they had learned from her. But this was not Boston and Abigail and Betty were growing desperate to gain the acceptance of their peers.

They thought about running away, but that would only be a temporary solution, as they were certain to be found and then punished accordingly. No...they agreed that they had to do something drastic, but between the two of them, they could come up with nothing. That was, until that fateful day when they found the book.

“Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcraft and Possessions,” written by the former Minister of Salem, Cotton Mather, gracing the shelves in the meager Parris library.

Abigail now 11 and Betty 9 snatched the book from its resting place, on a cold winter day in the year of our Lord, 1691 and proceeded to devour its contents, in the privacy of the upstairs room in which Abigail and Betty shared.

Since the book was only one, they decided to take turns reading aloud in hushed tones to each other, lest they be caught and punished. As Abigail read through the mundane introduction, she silently wished to herself that she had allowed Betty to go first, as requested, but as she came to the end, she found a renewed excitement in Cotton Mather’s words, as she spoke them in a tone mocking his own.

“But I can with contentment beyond mere patience, give those rescinded sheets unto the Stationer, when I see what pains Mr. Baxtrer, Mr. Glanvil, Dr. More and several other great names have taken to publish histories of witchcrafts and possessions onto the world. I said let me also run after them; and this with the more alacrity because I have tidings ready. Go then, my little book, as a lackey, to the more elaborate essays of those learned men. Go tell mankind that there are Devils and Witches; and that though those night-birds least appear where the daylight of the gospel comes, yet New England has had examples of their existence and operation; and that not only the wigwams of Indians, where the Pagan

Pow Wows often raise their masters in the shapes of bears and snakes and fires, but the house of Christians where our God has had his constant worship, have undergone the annoyance of evil spirits.”

“Go tell the world what prayers can do beyond all Devils and Witches and what it is that these monsters love to do; and through the Demons in the audience of several standers-by threatened much disgrace to thy author, if he let thee come abroad, yet venture that and in this way seek in just revenge on them for the disturbance they have given to such as have called on the name of God.”

The girls continued reading the tale, which described in great detail, the misfortune that had befallen the Goodwin family and four of their children, at the stupendous hand of witchcraft. The four children, who had enjoyed a religious education and possessed observable affection for Divine and sacred things, were afflicted with unaccountable stabs and pains, odd fits, bodily distortions and bouts that left them deaf, dumb and sometimes blind, and absolutely amazed their spectators.

Some weeks prior, the eldest Goodwin daughter had accused their laundress, the daughter of an ignorant and scandalous woman, of stealing some of their missing linen. The laundress’ mother cursed at the girl, upon her daughter’s defense and not long after, the attacks against the Goodwin girl began. Then one by one, the other three children came to suffer the same torture at the hands of this witch, who was then trapped and brought to trial. Unfortunately, the attacks didn’t stop once the witch was hanged, thus lending proof of her supernatural power that she wielded from the grave.

Betty and Abigail remembered it well, even though they were only 5 and 7 and living in Boston at the time. The air buzzed with activity in the days between the witches arraignment and condemnation, as it was the single most dramatic thing to have happened in New England. The hype was intoxicating and everyone seemed to be in a constant state of hyperactivity, turmoil and frenzy.

As they continued to read one passage after another, their own excitement grew, as the melodrama contained in Cotton Mather's book was spine-tingling and inspiring, and before they had even reached the end, they were formulating their own plan.

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Two days later, Betty began developing strange symptoms, as if some unseen force were pinching, pricking and choking her. Reverend Parris contacted the local doctor, who unfortunately was unable to diagnose the problem. Several more physicians were called in, and it wasn't until Betty was examined by Dr. William Griggs, that the suggestion of witchcraft was first voiced. The Reverend immediately organized prayer meetings and days of fasting in an attempt to rid Betty of her symptoms and the evil force that possessed his daughter. In the days that followed, his niece, Abigail, became afflicted with the same symptoms that Betty suffered, followed days later by an attack on Ann Putnam and soon other village girls as well.

In the privacy of their room, in times of pause from the forces of evil that tormented and tortured them, Betty and Abigail celebrated in secret. Not only had they managed to gain the attention and sympathy of the entire village, but they now had the support and friendship of other girls in the village, that at one time had mocked and teased them, but now followed their lead and had become afflicted as well.

Although her actions would eventually lead to accusations of witchcraft, Tituba could not stand by and do nothing with such suffering happening all around her. She decided to prepare a "witch cake," which was a mixture of rye and urine. The cake would be cooked and fed to a dog, in the belief that the dog would then reveal the identity of Betty's afflicter.

The girls were ecstatic when Tituba came to them and said that she wanted to help. Betty readily agreed to participate in her plan, by providing her with a cup full of urine to be added to the witch cake. It was the most exciting thing that had happened to them since moving to Salem, much more exciting than just telling tales to the children in Boston, because now *they* were the focus, not Tituba.

In the mean time, Reverend Parris was doing everything he could to support Betty and the other afflicted girls, including fanning the flames of witchcraft suspicion from his pulpit. Then he got word of the witch cake Tituba had made and in his rage he beat her into confession. Fearing for her very life, Tituba, who had been a faithful servant to her master, confessed to being a witch.

What began as an innocent and childish game had suddenly taken a serious and scary turn that the girls no longer wanted to be part of. Four weeks had passed and now the attention was focused on Betty, as she was the first to become afflicted. She was visited on a regular basis by ministers and townspeople, who interrogated and pressured her to name the person responsible for her behavior and affliction. Unable to take the mental strain and fear caused by her interrogators, Betty saw only one way out and identified Tituba as her afflicter.

Once the word spread, it wasn't long before the other girls were interrogated and following suit, accused Sarah Good, a homeless beggar and social misfit and Sarah Osborne, an old quarrelsome woman who hadn't attended church in over a year. Relieved that the game had finally come to an end, the girls would now share a secret bond that would seal their friendship forever.

That was, until a few days later when arrest warrants were issued for Tituba, Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne. The bond the girls shared quickly became a secret pact, as they vowed to maintain their innocence at whatever cost. They knew they would be forced to testify and convince the entire community that these women were to blame for their afflictions. Should their devious plot ever be found out, they couldn't imagine the severity of the punishment they would be forced to endure.

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And so the focus was shifted, from the afflicted to the accused and the girls were called upon to testify to their experiences, in the presence of magistrates, physicians, parishioners and townspeople. As if actresses giving stage performances to a packed house, they were only too happy to play their roles as innocent victims touched by the hand of evil. And the audience played right into their hands.

It wasn't long before they realized that the more elaborate their stories, the more excited the crowd became, cheering and jeering as they told

their tales and demonstrated afflictions, as they pretended to be attacked by an invisible force, right before the eyes of the awestruck crowd.

It was exhilarating, intoxicating and seductive, the power that these young girls wielded over grown men and women and the fear they struck into the hearts of the other children. Soon they were accusing anyone who had ever given them a sideways glance or done anything at one time or another to make them mad; and the best part was that everyone believed them, no matter how outrageous their claims.

The intensity in the court grew hour by hour, day by day and soon it wasn't enough to simply attend the hearings and sit idly by and watch the performances play out. Others wanted to be part of the outlandish production and soon many more came forward with claims and accusations, that they too had been the victim of witchcraft.

Between the months of June and September of 1692, total chaos erupted and the foundation that once upheld the community of Salem was shattered and anyone who scoffed at the accusations put themselves at great risk of becoming targets of accusation.

Hundreds were arrested, tortured and imprisoned on charges of witchcraft, including the 4-year-old daughter of accused witch, Sarah Good. Shackled by heavy chains in a dark, dank prison cell, the child would later watch as her mother was carted off to Gallows Hill, where her life was ended by hanging and her last thoughts were of her precious child imprisoned and facing the same fate. Her child was spared the noose, but remained imprisoned for eight months, where she cried her heart out and slowly went insane.

Eventually the bloodlust began to ebb, thanks to Reverend John Hale, who maintained a level of common sense in the midst of rampant insanity and raised doubts as to how so many respectable people in so small a compass of land could be guilty of having abominably leapt into the lap of the Devil at once. It was then that Reverend Increase Mather, President of Harvard College and father to Cotton Mather, the author of the book that was likely the root cause of the evil and hysteria that had befallen Salem, published a work in which he argued that, "It were better that ten suspected witches should escape than one innocent person should be condemned."

A total of nineteen men and women were hanged at Gallows Hill on charges of witchcraft and one elderly man was slowly crushed to death, under a pile of heavy stones, for refusing to submit to trial, before the hysteria and insanity that swept through Salem came to an end.

All in the name of God.



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