

Chronicles of Brunonia

Devils in the Root Cellar

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In Groton, Massachusetts, a young girl shows strange behaviors in 1671 and becomes known as the Groton Witch.

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Elizabeth Knapp sat perched on a small three-legged stool in front of a roaring fire in the hall of her family's home as the last late October light faded through the yellowish oilpaper windows. The wind had already picked up a taste of the winter bite that the early Massachusetts Bay colonists had grown to despise, and tonight it whipped down the chimney of the eight foot wide fireplace with a shrill, devilish whistle, causing the shadows projected by the bayberry wax candles to shimmy and waver against the rough hewn rafters. Elizabeth drew her red knit hood tighter down over her head and huddled towards the hearth.

Her mother, also named Elizabeth, watched her from farther back in darkness of the hall, where she was mending a pair of breeches. By December, she knew, the wind whipping down the chimney could cause the sap emerging from the burning logs to freeze solid. The temperatures would make many a grown man in town wish to curl up and sleep away the winter until rising temperatures and longer days made Groton, just hewn from the Massachusetts wilderness a few decades ago, hospitable once again.

Despite the gathering winter she felt relieved to see that her sixteen- year old daughter, now her only child after the early death of her son James, was acting normal again. For the past fortnight the younger Elizabeth had been carrying herself in a strange manner. While walking along normally she would sometimes cry out. Last week she had shrieked at extremely inappropriate time in Sunday dinner and that day in church she had been overcome with irreverent laughter. She was always quick to offer a reasonable excuse to spare the swift punishment usually dispensed to children at the time, but the extravagance and immodesty of her laughter still worried her mother. "It just did not seem right,"

she cautioned herself. She studied her daughter, noticing how the bright light from the fire played across her face and cast a line of darkness down her side. At last she assured herself that all was well as she rose and, bidding her daughter goodnight, crossed the hall to the master bedroom where her husband James was reviewing papers from last week's town meeting.

James looked up to speak to his wife, but before he could utter a word a shrill cry came from the hall.

"Help! My leg!!" their daughter cried, followed by a thump and the clatter of the wooden stool.

"Aye! My breast!" James rose quickly, pushing his papers and inkwells away, and rushed into the hall where he found his daughter seated on the floor, hands clutched about her throat, eyes rolled upwards.

"I'm strangled!!" she cried.

"Elizabeth! What are you doing?" James scolded, as he stooped to pull her hands away from her throat. At once she collapsed to the floor, giggling softly, and soon was asleep. James and his wife sat stunned, looking at their sleeping daughter, unsure what to make of her behavior. James, for his part, could be sure whether his daughter had been earnest or dissembled, as he later recounted. Her pain had been clear enough in her voice, but that giggle she gave as she drifted off...

They carried her up the ladder through the hole in the ceiling to her bedroom in the attic of the house. Elizabeth Warren Knapp, the elder, spent several hours that night watching her daughter sleep, and noticed a strange stoppage in her breathing that came and went. That, in its own way, was

reassuring, for it meant that perhaps she was just ill and not, well...under the influence of something more sinister. There had been almost no cases of possession in the new Colonies yet, but she knew well enough what fate befell witches back in her native England.

Witchcraft in the seventeenth century was not an idle belief held only by the simple or superstitious, but was entertained, in the words of nineteenth century Groton historian Samuel Greene, by "educated and thoughtful men everywhere" in the Anglo world. Colonists at this time viewed the presence of witches as a sign of the wrath of God. Early Puritans, such as John Winthrop, argued that the colony was founded because of a "covenant" with God and that the colonists violated that agreement and the purity of faith it demanded at their own peril. In an effort to maintain that purity of belief in the colony, the leadership had recently expelled Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson and Mary Dyer. If dissent and impure practices were the cause of the malady afflicting the colony, witches, and later trouble with Indians, were the symptoms. And, like any reasonable doctor would conclude, the cure for the diseased whole involved the removal of the malignant parts, either via expulsion or execution.

The next day, with these two options no doubt weighing heavily on him, James donned his best broad cloth suit with a single sash on the sleeves and his most stylish green stockings. It was October 31st 1671, and the fashion in England at the time was producing all sorts of double and triple sash designs with lace, but the Puritan church in the Colonies forbade anything but a single sash. After checking to see that his daughter was still peacefully asleep, he left the cottage.

Closing the heavy wooden door of their clapboard home painted deep

Indian red, James turned on to Main Street towards the center of town to the north. The rolling hills around Groton and the dead leaves underfoot were still aflame in the bright reds, golds and oranges of autumn. As he walked he remarked at how quickly the forest had been pushed back from the main street a mere sixteen years after he and nineteen other men had received the land grant from the Governor of the Colony to found Groton, thirty one miles north west of Boston, at the edge of civilization. Shade trees had been left standing along the edge of the packed dirt road for the benefit of travelers and herdsmen in the hot summer months, but beyond the narrow band of trees, pasture lots stretched back to short, squat ocher colored homes with heavy wooden shutters that were spouting coils of woodsmoke into the crisp morning air.

At the town hall he had business to attend to. He first sent word to the Willard family that Elizabeth, who had recently begun to work as a household servant for them, was ill and would be staying home today. He then met with the son of Captain Parker who had brought in two wolves he had killed beyond the Broad Meadow for a 40-shilling bounty from the town. John Tarbell raised the issue again of a town ordinance on fence height- he argued that fences five rails high were the only way to keep Lakin's pigs from running amok in his garden as they had a day earlier. And there was always the matter of the salary for the three herdsmen who collected the cattle of the townspeople and took them out to graze in meadows beyond the center of the town. They wanted a greater salary because their duties had grown to include more and more protection of the herd from local Indians and wolves. James could scarcely keep focused on the business at hand. His mind kept returning to his daughter's strange behavior the night before

and what it might mean. The Reverend Willard might have had some answers, but he could not be found.

James came home soon after his meeting at town hall to check on his daughter. He entered the hall to find Elizabeth in the corner conversing with one of the Blood family children, seemingly normal. He crossed to the hearth where his wife sat preparing the evening meal, whispering in low tones to Mrs. Richard Blood. She turned from her cauldron of hasty pudding, a mix of corn mush and milk, to search her husband's eyes.

"The Reverend was not in today... he went visiting his father out at Still River." James said. "How has she been?"

"She's been in a strange frame today, James, sometimes weeping, sometimes laughing. I don't know what to think." The lines on her face seemed deepened this evening, perhaps by lack of sleep. "Elizabeth," she called, turning from the stove, "fetch up some onion and parsnip for the stew from the cellar."

"Yes, mother." Elizabeth rose and shuffled out to the front door.

"She has me worried," James said as soon as she was out of earshot. "I think we should maybe call the physician from Concord out to..."

"AYEEEEEEEEEE" James was interrupted by a horrible shriek coming from the cellar. He quickly ran out the house and around to the back and nearly collided with his daughter coming up the cellar stairs. "What's the matter, child?" James demanded.

"I saw two men down there, father!"

James returned to the house and retrieved two tall tapers and, with Elizabeth behind him, crept down into the cellar while his wife and Mrs. Blood

peered down from the top of the stairs. He moved past sacks of Indian corn and rye to check a corner, while Elizabeth stood stock still at the foot of the stairs. Seeing no trace of any men, James turned around and stopped short as he saw Elizabeth standing still as a rabbit, brown eyes transfixed on point above the turnip sack. "What cheer, old man?" she asked the sack.

"So that's your person, eh?" James brushed past his daughter and climbed the stairs. "It's all a silly fantasy of hers, I tell you," he whispered to his wife as he passed. "She's not to be believed!"

That night Elizabeth again took the stool in front of the broad fireplace after supper, sitting quietly, almost sulking. Her parents had recently retired and were nearing sleep when again they heard an enormous crash and ran in to find Elizabeth writhing around on the floor, her eyes rolled back in her head, her limbs flailing and knocking stools about. As her parents rushed to hold her back she rolled towards the fire with a seeming determination to destroy herself. It took all of her parents strength to keep hold her away from the fire as she shrieked in their ears and clawed at their faces. When at last she passed out from exhaustion, James and his wife moved her to bed and sat whispering in low tones late into the morning. They had to let more people know. It seemed more and more that some demonic spirit in fact possessed their dear daughter.

Elizabeth's condition worsened. Her fits took on a more intense and forceful nature, and it took all the strength of James, his wife and several others who had been spending time watching over her to keep her leaping, kicking and straining in bound. In addition to her physical fits, Elizabeth began to cry out "Money! Money! Money!," "Sin! Misery!" and other statements.

Lakin's boy was sent on horseback that afternoon to retrieve the Reverend Willard from the home of his father, the commander in chief of several legions of local soldiers stationed by Still River to protect the frontier towns in the area from Indians. Willard returned at once, riding in on horseback past the triangular grazing commons with the burying ground along one side and the modest meetinghouse on the other.

Willard's home stood at the only crossroads in the town, the intersection of Main street and the only road out of town that wound past Gibbet Hill with its wide meadows dotted with cows, through the woods to Forge village and then on to Concord and eventually Boston. The location of Willard's home gave him a fine view of the comings and goings of townspeople and also gave the town easy access to their minister, a person the King of England required the town to employ in order to hold regular meeting as part of their land grant from the crown. In return for his services as their minister, the townspeople paid Willard's annual salary in cash or, as town meeting records from 1671 indicate, the equivalent amount of English and Indian corn, currants, peas, wheat, rye, pork and beef. The generous salary and his father's military wealth allowed him to keep a home that was far more lavish than the Knapp's. He had managed to secure several slat back wooden chairs, rugs to cover all of the beds in the house, a few tapestries and even some lead glass windows in the hall.

Willard stopped into his house long enough to change his soiled traveling frock, don a fresh shirt with a broad white collar and gather his papers and note taking material. He was a patient observer, and his letters to the heads of the Boston Churches, including the legendary Cotton Mather, are all that remain of

the following three strange months. Willard no doubt took a special interest in the case because Elizabeth had recently come into his employment as a household servant, where she was responsible for stoking the fires, cleaning, and caring for his young children. His record provides a meticulous account of the case from the perspective of a man of the cloth.

When the Reverend arrived at the Knapp house, he found Elizabeth in a more sober mood, sitting quietly with her family. When Willard asked her what might have caused her behavior, he noted that she called out a wealthy and upright neighbor. Elizabeth swore that the neighbor, or the devil in her likeness, had come racing down the chimney wearing a riding hood two nights ago when she sat alone by the fire and bewitched her with a spirit that caused her to thrash about on the floor. Willard knew the woman very well and greatly doubted the accusation that Elizabeth was making, and even went so far as to remove her name from all correspondence with Cotton Mather, perhaps to protect her innocence. In doing so Willard took a step that was unprecedented in any previous witchcraft cases in the colony, and chose to focus his attention on the possessed girl Elizabeth instead of searching for and destroying the "witch" who was causing her problems.

The next day, after more questioning, Elizabeth broke down in front of a larger group of people in her home. She admitted that the Devil had frequently appeared before her in the past three years and offered her "money, silks, fine clothes, ease from her labor" and other items of youthful fancy, particularly on her walks from the Willard home to her parents after work in the evening. These meetings had been infrequent at first but had become a daily occurrence in the

past four days. She could scarcely go from one room to the next without seeing him, she moaned. While at work at the Willard's the devil had constantly tempted her to murder her parents, her neighbors and the Willard's children. She had been particularly tempted to throw the youngest child, for whom she was responsible, "into the fire, on the hearth, and into the oven." She confessed that the devil had one time commanded her to murder the Reverend in her sleep when she was working there late, and that she had found herself on the stairs to his bedroom with a hook in her hand, only to be jarred out of her murderous trance by the Reverend who was still awake. She swore that she had never entered into any covenant, and that she had resisted the devil and that his visits were horrible and unpleasurable.

For the next few days, any time the Reverend came to call on her she would lapse into horrible fits, shaking in a random, irregular, violent manner with her eyes rolled upwards and half closed, sometimes calling out "money!" and other such words. At last the physician from Concord arrived on the 5th of November, and proclaimed her illness to be of a natural cause resulting from distemper in the stomach. He recommended fasting. Elizabeth was in and out of bed for the next month and a half, often taken with horrible fits that would last for up to 48 hours. She repeatedly confessed encounters with the devil, who took the forms of an old man, a dog and a black knife among other items, and announced her desire to turn back to God and banish these temptations once and for all. Willard vacillates in his opinion of Elizabeth's condition frequently. At times he felt that she might be faking her possession and that she was merely sick, while at other times the ferocity and the immense strength of her

movements during the fits convinced him otherwise.

On December 17, Elizabeth's fits had subsided slightly. Her mother permitted her to venture out into the snowy pre- Christmas cheer of the town, and in her travels she stopped by the Willard home in the center of town. While talking casually with Willard, she suddenly pulled back and reared up on her tiptoes, her eyes rolling upwards. Willard reports that the devil, who had clearly taken possession of her at this point, began to draw her tongue out of her mouth in a long, sinuous S shape that was remarkable in its length and greatness. She called out that her father and mother were both evil rogues, and began to twist her body in impossible shapes. Then a low, grim voice that was barely audible emanated from within her, though her lips did not move, and called to Willard "Ohhhh! And you are the GREATEST rogue!!!" Willard and the others in the room collapsed to their knees and began to pray to God for strength and salvation from this horrible apparition. Willard noted that as she spoke her lips did not move, even when speaking labial sounds like B and M.

Willard called out "Satan, thou art a liar! And a deceiver! And God will vindicate his own truth this one day!"

The devil, responding through Elizabeth, replied, "I am not Satan! I am nothing more than a pretty black boy; this is my pretty girl! I have been here a great while!" After that Elizabeth collapsed, the devil left her, and those present prayed over her.

This is essentially the last record that exists concerning Elizabeth's possession. She later confessed that the devil entered into her mouth the night before, and was still inside of her for several weeks following the incident. She

confessed that the devil came to her in her great discomfort and displeasure when she was working at the Willard's. The devil had used her desire for all the wonderful riches of the Willard home, which she would never be hope to have at that time as an uneducated girl from a poor family, as temptation. After a formal inquiry by the magistrates in January in which she confessed her sins, she went on to live a life that left little note in the public record save for her marriage to Ephrain Philbrick a few years later. Willard most likely saved the life of Elizabeth by working with her, talking to her daily, and refusing to fall into the dogmatic fear of the time that caused the death of dozens and the imprisonment of hundreds in the Colony for witchcraft. Several weeks after Elizabeth's recovery, as word of the strange case spread throughout the colony, Willard sought to drive the town towards a positive resolution of the experience in one of his weekly sermons:

"God hath, in his wisdom singled out this poor Town out of all others in this Wilderness... let us look upon our selves to be set up as a Beacon upon a Hill by this Providence, and let those that hear what hath been done among us, hear also of the good effects, and the reformation it hath wrought among us."

His compassion, though, was not heeded by other ministers and could not save the 19 victims of the trials in Salem twenty years later, at the peak of the colony's witch fervor. What other documents remain from this time and this trial were undoubtedly lost five short years later as the Weymessit Indians raged through the town, burning the homes of Knapp, Willard, and all but two townspeople, and driving the surviving residents to the better protected and more centrally located town of Concord until Groton could be rebuilt. Willard would

never return to Groton; his short time had been enough.

Note: Modern medicine has cast an interesting light on part of this story. It now appears that Elizabeth most likely was afflicted with adult onset Chorea, also known as Huntington's disease, a rare dominant genetic disorder that takes its name from the Greek word for dancer. Eight people in every 100,000 in Europe and North America suffer from it. The disease causes the selective deterioration of certain movement related structures deep inside the brain. The symptoms of the disease, which may first appear around puberty, include excessive, spontaneous, irregular movements of the limb that flow from one part of the body to the other that worsen over time, sometimes leading to neurological deterioration including apathy, irritability, memory loss, manic depression, and schizophrenia. Sleep is usually the only time when a chorics is not vulnerable to fits. There is currently no cure, but antipsychotic medications such as phenothiazines may lessen the symptoms. Bearers invariably die 10 to 25 years after the onset. Chorics have been dubbed everything for saints (the Catholic church recognizes four) to witches since the sixteenth century.

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