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SUPERNATURAL FOLKLORE

OF

RHODE ISLAND

BY

EIDOLA JEAN BOURGAIZE

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

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1956

ABSTRACT

MASTER OF ARTS THESIS

OF

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1956

ABSTRACT

Although folklore has attracted nation-wide attention in the past forty years, the task of collecting folk material peculiar to Rhode Island has been neglected. Several recently-published volumes have included small portions of Rhode Island folklore, but this amount has been very limited. In the past one hundred years a number of individuals have shown interest in one particular town or section of the state and have gathered material pertinent to their cause. No one in the past fifty years has made an effort to compile folklore material about the state as a whole and present it in one unified piece. If all types of folklore were included in this investigation, the study would be too lengthy for much consideration on any one topic. Therefore, one of the most neglected areas in this field was chosen, that of supernatural folklore.

The principal purpose behind this thesis is not to solve a problem or draw a conclusion; it is to help reconstruct a portion of the spiritual, historical, and literary heritage of Rhode Island, not as exemplified by the outstanding works of poets and thinkers, but as represented by the more or less inarticulate voices of the folk.

The mass of legends and traditions and superstitions loosely grouped together under the heading of supernatural

folklore embraces wonders of colonial days when the hand of God displayed itself in marvelous providences, gossip of witches bruited in every town and hamlet, imagined interviews and contracts with Satan inspired respect for the Evil One, and accounts of specters, visions, omens, and prophecies documented the human awe of occultism.

Since only Rhode Island folklore is here involved, just that material which could be definitely attributed to the state is included. Because folklore does not hesitate to cross state boundaries, it is sometimes difficult to ascertain whether a particular tradition or custom or legend was common knowledge in the state at one time. A belief known to be current in Massachusetts might possibly have been accepted in this state as well, but a definite statement to that effect in a reliable source is needed for positive proof. All material which was termed as "current in New England" or "accepted up the coast from New York to Penobscot Bay" was not included in this collection.

In this study direct oral sources of folklore are bypassed, with two exceptions, since the aim has been to locate, arrange, and present folklore material lodged in print. The conclusion does contain a measuring stick for the quality of folk tales, and stories in this thesis are compared for these fundamental characteristics, but this does not overshadow the major and simpler aim of treasuring the idle tale and fading legend of the past.

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INTRODUCTION

Folklore in the United States is a massive, vital, and portentous heritage. At first the unreflectively possessed memory of an ancient mother and an antique land, it has begun to achieve an unselfconscious expression of the experience of a continent that has wrought deep changes in human habits, attitudes, and outlooks. In its relation with literature it has been both borrower and lender. Indeed, present day means of communication and record are so swift and so nearly universal that they tend to sweep away the criteria of differentiation. Phonograph, radio, and sound movie now expand indefinitely the range of oral transmission. At the same time, with universally accessible print intelligible to a literate people, they diminish the need for memory. Folklore may instantly become literature, and literature may speedily travel the road to folklore. Their interaction may threaten to invalidate the "traditional" folklorists' criteria, but it will be beneficial for both. Thomas Mann makes Mai-Sache, Joseph's wise and humane jailer, say, "There are, so far as I can see, two kinds of poetry: one springs from folk-simplicity, the other from the literary gift in essence. The second is undoubtedly the higher form. But in my view it cannot flourish cut off from the other, needing it as a plant needs soil."¹

Folklore has definitely come of age, and it is now recognized as an important part of the literary heritage of the nation. A well-known folklore scholar, Alexander Haggerty Krappe, wrote twenty-five years ago:

I conceive folk tales and folk songs as purely literary manifestations of the popular genius, acting under the same impulses as the productive mind of literary men, scholars, and artists. The two differ only in much the same things in which different literary schools are apt to be at variance, that is, in

¹Robert E. Spiller and others (eds.), Literary History of the United States (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1948), II, 727.

questions of taste and methods of technique. . . . The critical standards of the eighteenth century are a thing of the past, fortunately, and many other things beside folk-lore which did not meet with the approval of Voltaire and Pope, are yet ranked as the very highest expressions of artistic feeling and inspiration.²

Yet for all the praise and interest given to the study of folklore in recent years, no exact agreement has been reached as to the meaning of the term itself. The word was coined in 1846 by the English antiquarian, William John Thoms, to take the place of the rather awkward expression of "popular antiquities." He wished to designate "that department of the study of antiquities and archeology which embraces everything relating to ancient observances and customs, to the notions, beliefs, traditions, superstitions, and prejudices of the common people."³ Since that time, however, the scope of folklore has broadened to include arts and crafts, dances, drama, festivals, games, music, as well as other activities which individual scholars have seen fit to introduce.

Folklore collections in the United States properly began with the first issue of the Journal of American Folklore in 1888, but serious and widespread study of folk literature in America did not get underway until 1910 when John A. Lomax published Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads.⁴ In the

²Alexander Haggerty Krappe, The Science of Folk Lore (New York: The Dial Press, 1930), p. x.

³Marian Roalfe Cox, An Introduction to Folklore (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895), p. 4.

⁴Spiller, op. cit., III, 192.

past forty years there have been almost as many definitions of folklore as scholars in the field. A two-volume folklore dictionary has devoted five pages to definitions by twenty-one authors. A random sampling from these definitions shows the slight divergencies of interpretation of the term.

Jonas Balys:

Folklore comprises traditional creations of peoples, primitive and civilized. These are achieved by using sounds and words in metric form and prose, and include also folk beliefs or superstitions, customs and performances, dances and plays. Moreover, folklore is not a science about a folk, but the traditional folk-science and folk poetry.⁵

B.A. Botkin:

In a purely oral culture everything is folklore. In modern society what distinguishes folklore from the rest of culture is the preponderance of the handed-down over the learned element and the prepotency that the popular imagination derives from and gives to custom and tradition.⁶

Aurelio M. Espinosa:

Folklore, or popular knowledge, is the accumulated store of what mankind has experienced, learned, and practiced across the ages as popular and traditional knowledge, as distinguished from so-called scientific knowledge.⁷

George M. Foster:

. . . to me the term "folklore" is most meaningful when applied to the unwritten literary manifestations of all peoples, literate or otherwise.⁸

M. Harmon:

Folklore is something which the individual has in common

⁵Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend (New York: Funk & Wagnall, 1948), p. 398.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., p. 399.

⁸Ibid.

with his fellows, just as all have eyes and hands and speech. It is not contrary to himself as an individual but a part of his equipment. It makes possible - perhaps it might be defined as that which constitutes his rapport with his particular segment of mankind.⁹

Stith Thomas:

The common idea present in all folklore is that of tradition, something handed down from one person to another and preserved either by memory or practice rather than written record. It involves the dances, songs, tales, legends, and traditions, the beliefs and superstitions, and the proverbial sayings of peoples everywhere.¹⁰

Approaching the problem of an adequate definition of folklore from another point of view, J. Frank Dobie separated the word to derive a satisfactory meaning of folk, "any group of people not cosmopolitan who, independent of academic means, preserve a body of tradition peculiar to themselves."¹¹ That body of tradition so preserved is the lore, or learning, of the group.

Most authorities recognize four main types of folklore. Three of these circulate by word of mouth: the literary, including folk poetry and such varied prose forms as legend, myth, and tale; the linguistic, including speech, proverb, and riddle; and the scientific, including cures, prophecies, witchcraft, weather lore, and other such forms of belief. The fourth, circulating by action or practical imitation, includes arts and crafts, customs, dance, drama, festival, games, and music.¹²

⁹Ibid., p. 400.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 403.

¹¹Ibid., p. 44.

¹²Spiller, op. cit., III, 704.

Unlike tales from the Old World, American folklore is, on the whole, closer to history than to mythology because America is closer to the beginnings of settlement and to the oral and written sources of local history. A great deal of the folklore of the early settlers on the Atlantic seaboard was written down in journals and diaries, letters, histories, town records, periodicals, church documents, books by persons living or visiting in the colonies, epistles by church fathers, primers. Although much has been gained by gleaning this material, a still greater amount of oral tradition has been lost in the passage of years. In the second decade of this century, independent efforts were instigated to collect hitherto unwritten folklore material throughout the United States. Isolated communities proved a fertile source for material since those societies cut off from the modernizing effects of an expanding civilization, by wish or by nature, held many of the traditions and beliefs of an earlier culture intact. In the urban centers there were two prime sources of information for the folklorist: the unscholarly or more primitive group in the society and the elderly persons who delighted in recalling tales of an earlier day.

The outcome of this tremendous amount of research was a large quantity of folklore volumes which might be classified according to region (South, Southwest, New England, etc.), state, racial group, occupation, chronological order, type (literary, linguistic, scientific, arts and crafts), subject matter (plants, animals, ghosts, etc.), heroes (Paul Bunyan,

Johnny Appleseed, etc.), or historical accuracy. A complete bibliography of folklore would contain a great number of books under each of these major classifications.

As a region, New England has had its share of folklore material published in books and periodicals, which is quite natural since New England, as a folklore country, has an advantage over other regions in that its lore is part of a well-defined and well-documented tradition. "In the sense of having accumulated about itself a body of superstitions, prejudices, myths, and legends regarding traditional or 'old New England,' New England not only has but is folklore--folklore of as well as in New England."¹³

In spite of the great amount of New England folklore which has been collected in recent years, only a relatively small number of tales and traditions are peculiar to Rhode Island. For example, B.A. Botkin's comprehensive book, A Treasury of New England Folklore, contains approximately eleven hundred stories, yet less than one hundred of these are concerned with Rhode Island places or people.

Of course many tales and traditions cross state boundaries. Stories of Yankee peddlers, ballads, superstitions, counting-out rhymes, proverbs, and other manifestations of folklore were common throughout the section. Since folklore is universal in diffusion and local in adaptation, there is no such thing as a purely regional folklore any more

¹³Benjamin Albert Botkin, A Treasury of New England Folklore (New York: Crown Publishers, 1947), p. xxiii.

than there is a purely national folklore. The nearest approach to it is place lore, which includes place-name stories, local foods, local anecdotes, local characters, and characteristic tales and traditions (many of them local in origin but national in scope) of the land and the people.

Rhode Island place lore has been neglected in this great resurgence of collecting tales and traditions of a bygone day. This state founded only sixteen years after Plymouth must have abounded in legends and myths at one time. A few people have stepped forward at various intervals in the last one hundred years to record a portion of the story, notably, several members of the Hazard family, Edgar Mayhew Bacon, Esther Bernon Carpenter, Alice Morse Earle, Rev. S.T. Livermore, and a number of newspaper columnists. No one, however, has made an effort to bring all this folklore material together to make a complete pattern.

The field is a fertile one, and a complete compilation of Rhode Island folklore would run into hundreds of pages. Early history books, state almanacs, town records, personal journals, guide books, social histories, newspapers and periodicals are waiting for a scholar with an investigative mind to reap the harvest of folklore waiting for him in the yellowed, time-stained pages.

Obviously, it is necessary to limit the scope of the investigation for this paper. Rather than choose one of the four main types of folklore as the basis for this inquiry, the writer has selected a topic which includes samplings from

those four types. In supernatural folklore there are tales and poetry, proverbs and riddles, prophecies and witchcraft, and customs.

One reason for choosing this particular facet of Rhode Island tradition is that supernatural folklore has received even less attention than other segments of local lore. Massachusetts, nationally known for her witches, completely overshadows Rhode Island in regard to supernatural folklore. There is a plausible explanation for this.

From the pages of old history books and town records step many a "heretic" banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony--Roger Williams, Mary Dyer, Anne Hutchinson. There were so many different religions in Williams' colony that Cotton Mather suggested if a man had lost his religion he would surely find it in Rhode Island. Since heretics were believed to be in league with the devil, the staunch Puritans looked with disgust on the region around Narragansett Bay. The "heretics" themselves were not as concerned with witches and devils as their neighbors to the north and east. While Cotton Mather was describing the wonders of the invisible world in Magnalia Christi Americana, Roger Williams was writing about freedom of conscience. Right from the beginning, then, Massachusetts took the lead from Rhode Island in supernatural literature.

It was not until the middle of the eighteenth century that a Rhode Islander did send a supernatural ripple over the borders of the state. The story of Jemima Wilkinson, who was

born in Cumberland in 1751 and died the first time in 1776, has been told in the best folklore tradition.

A gay and giddy girl, Jemima spent her youth in frivolous pursuits. Suddenly in 1774 she turned her back on fancy dresses and social affairs to take up a serious study of religion. Two years later Jemima became very ill. As strange visions haunted the sick woman, she often pointed out white figures and celestial forms which were visible only to her. One night after telling her attendants that her condition was to change very soon and she was to be called to act some great part in this wicked world for the benefit of mankind, Jemima Wilkinson died the first time.

After lying motionless for several days, the sick woman suddenly awakened to declare that she had passed the gates of death and had risen from the dead. Denying that she was Jemima, she told her astounded neighbors that her divine spirit was simply occupying the body of Jemima for the next one thousand years. Taking the name of "Universal Friend," she did not hesitate to admit that she had arrived at a state of perfection, could foretell future events, could discern the secrets in the hearts of men, had powers to heal diseases, and could even raise the dead. She tried numerous miracles -- walking on water, restoring the dead to life -- and when she failed, she blamed the lack of faith of her audience.

Judge William Potter of South Kingstown was one of her most enthusiastic and devoted adherents in Rhode Island,

CHAPTER I

THE THREE RACES

In order to understand the legends and tales which spring forth from a society, it is necessary to study the component parts of that society. In early Rhode Island were three races with distinctly different backgrounds--the native Indians, white settlers principally of English stock, and Negroes from Africa brought in as slaves.

Who were these people? What did they believe about the supernatural before one group began to influence another?

To begin with the first American, the Narragansett Indian acknowledged one Supreme Spirit, Giver or Master of Life. He was the chief manitou or spirit among the host of good spirits, and they addressed him as "Kautántowwit," according to Roger Williams.¹ He was the supreme source of all power and all good.

The Indians believed that the earth was an island resting on the bosom of a great deep. The Chief Manitou had drawn the earth from the abyss of the mighty waters and clothed it with trees and grass and caused the mountains and valleys, plains and lakes, rivers and bays to teem with all manner of living things. The Great Manitou had boundless

¹Roger Williams, A Key into the Language of America (reprint ed., Providence, 1936), p. 135.

benevolence and was symbolically represented as the great Hare or divine Hare.²

Of course it was Kautántowwit who created man. According to the legend believed by the Narragansetts, He made one man and woman of a stone, but He disliked the results and broke them to pieces. Then He made another man and woman of a tree, "which were the Fountaines of all mankind."³

In comparison to this ancient legend, a more modern version of man's creation became prominent among the Algonquin tribes, to which the Narragansetts belonged.

The Master of Life made the black man and the white man but was not completely satisfied with either one. As He contemplated the making of a more perfect man, various animals gave their opinions. The lions roared, "Give him strength." The deer echoed, "Give him a fleet foot." The eagle screamed, "Give him a keen eye." The elements, too, seemed to favor this coming man. The sun said, "I will warm him by day," and the moon answered, "I shall light his path at night." The voice of the hills spoke, "He shall lift his eyes to me in the early morn, and I shall give him the great passions of life." All nature sang, "Here we will teach his young the mysteries of life through our own pulse." The Great Spirit moulded a creature from red clay, breathed in him the breath of life, and endowed him with an understanding of nature.

²Job Durfee, "The Idea of the Supernatural Among the Indians," The Complete Works of the Hon. Job Durfee, LL.D., ed. by Thomas Durfee (Providence: Gladding and Proud, 1849), pp. 250-252.

³Williams, op. cit., p. 135.

The Chief Manitou was infinitely pleased with this last creation.⁴

Although this second legend is undoubtedly of a later origin than the one related by Roger Williams, it does show the Indian's basic beliefs in the importance of nature in the lives of men and in their feelings of superiority over the other races.

The Narragansetts found many manitous or spirits throughout nature. In a letter written in 1638, Roger Williams reported, "They have plenty of Gods or divine powers: the Sun, Moone, Fire, Water, Earth, the Deere, the Beare, &c. . . I brought home lately from the Narrhiggansicks the names of thirty-eight of their gods, -- all they could remember."⁵

Besides these official manitous, some particular animal often acquired such importance to an individual Narragansett warrior that the animal came to be regarded as his personal guardian. It was customary during the time of the ceremonies when a brave was to be initiated as a chief or warrior for the Indian to tell of a dream in which the great spirit presented him an animal which should be his special manitou. In such cases the representation of the animal would doubtless become the badge of the individual.⁶

While there were many good spirits above, beneath,

⁴"Where did the Indian Come From?" The Narragansett Dawn, I (June, 1935), 17-18.

⁵Rev. Frederic Denison, Westerly and Its Witnesses (Providence: J.A. & R.A. Reid, 1878), p. 25.

⁶Durfee, op. cit., p. 253.

around, and within him, there were also many evil spirits. If crops failed, if the fishing was poor, if rain was too heavy or too light, if sickness developed, an evil manitou had to be appeased or subdued.

The only one who could effectively control the evil spirits was the priest who was prophet, physician, and magician as well. He sacrificed to the Great Spirit; he received from Him revelations of the future; he expelled the malignant demons that afflicted the sick; he conjured up spirits from the vast deep to do his bidding. If a person was sick, the priest hoped to cast out the demons by charms and incantations. He sat day and night by his patient, rattling the chickicone in his ears and practicing other mystic ceremonies to direct the attention of the demons from the work of destruction.⁷

Roger Williams believed that the priests, or powwaws, used the help of the devil to work cures on the sick: "These priests and conjurers doe bewitch the people."⁸

The first settlers knew that the Indians were imps of Satan to be converted or destroyed. Although Williams was one of the more liberal-minded settlers, he also felt that the devil controlled the Indians. After watching the Indians worship in their native village, he wrote that never again would he do such a thing "least [sic] he should

⁷Ibid., pp. 258-260.

⁸Williams, op. cit., p. 138.

be accounted a partaker of Satan's inventions and worship."⁹
 And later, "By this Feasting and Gifts, the Divell drives
 on their worships pleasantly (as he doth all false worships)."¹⁰

Although the whites believed the Indians (like all pagans) were devil-worshippers, it was the white man who invented the devil. Indians knew nothing of purgatory or Satan until they were enlightened by the English. Even though there was no one chief evil spirit, as there was a Great Manitou, the Indians believed in a great variety of wicked demons with powers great and small. Also, the Indians had their trickster heroes and mischief makers distinguished for their devilish craft and cunning, such as Ojibwa Manobozho and the giant Maushope.

The Indian belief in the supernatural was shown symbolically in many ways. Their use of colors is a good example. Yellow was the symbol for the Great Spirit, red for mankind, blue for earth. When the Great Spirit joined with mankind, the result was orange, the symbolic color of the soul. When the Great Spirit combined with the earth, the result was green, symbol of vegetation. When man went into the earth, the resulting color was purple, symbol of death.¹¹

As these color symbols indicate, the Narragansett Indian did believe that man had a soul or spirit that went

⁹Ibid., p. 127.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 129.

¹¹Personal interview with Princess Red Wing.

to live with the Great Manitou after the flesh had returned to earth. But man also had a semi-animal soul that lingered for a time with the body after the pure soul had left. In order to fill the needs of this semi-soul, the relatives buried food enough to last for several days with the body.¹²

The Narragansett Indian did not come to his knowledge of the supernatural by a process of reasoning, but by a much shorter method -- he felt it. Everything around him which he could not explain compelled him to believe in manitous, good and evil, and the power of his priests. It was common for the Indian to look upon his chief as superhuman, for the head of the tribe was considered immortal.

The Indian felt a desire to communicate with the supernatural power whose presence was felt, and his method was entirely alien to the white man. The existence of all of these supposedly devil-worshipping red men was a constant reminder to the Pilgrims and Puritans of the dangers and power of the forces of Satan.

Whereas the Supreme Being of the Indians was benevolent and kind, the God of the white settlers was stern and forbidding. Although the Puritans had come across the Atlantic for freedom of worship, they wanted it for themselves alone. Soon dissenters, like Roger Williams, were heading west into the wilderness.

Although the white man scorned the Indian for wor-

¹²Denison, op. cit., p. 26.

shipping spirits of trees or animals, the new settlers had an unshakable belief in witches and demons, part of their heritage they brought from the Old World. In the 1600's whoever denied the occurrence of witchcraft in the past was an atheist; whoever refused to admit the actual possibility in the present was either stubbornly incredulous or unable to draw an inference from obvious situations.

That there had been witches and sorcerers in antiquity was beyond cavil. That there were, or might be, witches and sorcerers in the present was almost equally certain. The crime was recognized by the Bible, by all branches of the Church, by philosophy, by natural science, by the medical faculty, by the law of England.¹³

In his excellent book on the subject, George Lyman Kittredge points out that the essence of witchcraft is maleficium: "The hatred and terror which a witch evokes is due to her will and her power to inflict bodily injury."¹⁴ Of course witches make compacts with the devil, violate graves, take part in the Witches' Sabbath, ride broomsticks, change at will into a cat or a toad, but these things are mere incidentals. They aggravate the offence and may even be the proof which will send a woman to the gallows, but in the last analysis, witches are prosecuted because they are enemies to mankind.

Many critics do not agree with Kittredge. Blaming

¹³George Lyman Kittredge, Witchcraft in Old and New England (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929), p. 33.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 4.

Calvinistic theology for witchcraft in New England, George Lincoln Burr wrote that the Puritan's belief in witchcraft was "bigoted and cruel, even by the standards of their own time."¹⁵

There may be a question as to whether belief in witchcraft came from England or was nurtured on American soil, but there is no question about the early New Englander's attitude on the subject. Witches were as real as the sunrise and sunset, and western Europe had officially recognized them for hundreds of years prior to the founding of the colony at Plymouth. In 1582, one hundred thirty-four witches and wizards were burned to death on one occasion in Alsace. Nine hundred persons were sentenced to death in Lorraine between 1580 and 1595. Six hundred were killed in the Basque country in four months in 1609.

Records of the executions of witches in the British Isles are stark indeed. An estimated 3,400 persons were put to death for witchcraft in Scotland in the hundred years prior to 1680. There were nine major witchcraft scares in England from 1581 to 1682, and in two years, 1645-1647, two hundred witches and wizards went to the gallows. The last

¹⁵George Lincoln Burr, "New England's Place in the History of Witchcraft," Proceedings of the American Anti-quarian Society, Vol. XXI (Worcester: The Davis Press, 1911), p. 215.

¹⁶Kittredge, op. cit., p. 368.

witch to be hanged in England was in 1682,¹⁷ although there were trials in almost every year from 1694 to 1707 in which acquittals were granted.¹⁸

In contrast to these hundreds of witches executed in the Old World at the beginning of the settlement of this country, there were less than forty executions for witchcraft in New England. Between 1647 and 1662 an estimated eleven persons were hanged in Connecticut on witchcraft charges with twenty-six others being brought to trial and acquitted.¹⁹

Before 1692 only six witches had been hanged in Massachusetts, but that was the year of the famous Salem witchcraft scare when twenty more were put to death.²⁰

There were no witchcraft trials in New England after 1693.²¹

Like her neighboring colonies, Rhode Island had laws against the practice of witchcraft, but the very wording of the act passed in 1647 seems to be skeptical of the whole idea:

Witchcraft is forbidden by this present Assembly to be used in this Colonie; and the Penaltie imposed by the Authority that we are subjected to, is Felonie of Death. (1 Jac. 12)²²

¹⁷Ibid., p. 358.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 369.

¹⁹John M. Taylor, The Witchcraft Delusion in Colonial Connecticut (New York: The Grafton Press, 1908), pp. 156-157.

²⁰Kittredge, Witchcraft in Old and New England, p. 367.

²¹Ibid., p. 362.

²²Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England, Vol I 1636-1663, ed. John Russell Bartlett (Providence: A. Crawford Greene and Brother, 1865), p. 166.

It was expected that Rhode Island would obey the laws of England and impose the same regulations of the authority they were "subjected to," but there seems to have been no great determination on the part of the colony's lawmakers to do much else other than place the law on the books. The line between heresy and witchcraft was a fine one, and this colony was a refuge for all manner of heretics fleeing from the sterner Puritan governments. The other colonies realized this of course, and Cotton Mather felt that the wonderful physical situation of Rhode Island would make it "the best garden of the colonies, and were it free from serpents, I would have called it the paradise of New England."²³

But serpents to one indicated freedom to another. When James Walkley was arrested for witchcraft in Hartford in 1662, he managed to escape and fled to Rhode Island.²⁴

Even though there was never a witchcraft trial in the colony, Rhode Island lawmakers continued to pass statutes concerning this felony for the next fifty years.

In 1662:

And be it further enacted by the Authority aforesaid, that Witchcraft is and shall be a Felony, and whosoever shall be lawfully convicted thereof shall suffer the

²³Cotton Mather, Magnalia Christi Americana, Book VII, pp. 20-21, cited by Gertrude Selwyn Kimball (ed.), Pictures of Rhode Island in the Past, 1642-1833, by Travelers and Observers (Providence: Preston and Rounds Co., 1900), p. 22.

²⁴Taylor, op. cit., p. 153.

pains of death.²⁵

In 1705:

Concerning Witchcraft

Wee declare against and by ye Authority of this assembly Forbid the Same to be used or Practized wthin this Colony and doe Declare In Whom ye Practice thereof Shall be Found y^t It shall be Judged Felony of Death.²⁶

In 1719:

Witchcraft is and shall be Felony and Whosoever shall be lawfully convicted thereof shall suffer the Pains of Death.²⁷

All references to witchcraft were omitted from succeeding digests. Although the wisest, and perhaps the most persecuted, of the Rhode Island settlers may have had their doubts about the possibilities of the existence of witches and wizards, it is inconceivable that everyone who arrived at the shores of Narragansett Bay suddenly became shorn of all old superstitions and customs. In the supernatural folklore of Rhode Island are tales of witches who conjured spells and worked charms. Names of actual persons are surrounded by tales of magical power. The early settlers believed in witchcraft, not because they were Puritans or Colonials or New Englanders, but because they were men of

²⁵The Charter and the Acts and Laws of His Majesties Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in America 1662, A FacSimilie Reprint (Providence: Sidney S. Rider and Burnett Rider, 1895), p. 5.

²⁶Laws and Acts of Her Majesties Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations Made from the First Settlement in 1636 to 1705, A FacSimilie Reprint, (Providence: Sidney S. Rider and Burnett Rider, 1895), p. 3.

²⁷The Charter and the Acts and Laws of His Majesties Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in America 1719, A FacSimilie Reprint, (Providence: Sidney S. Rider and Burnett Rider, 1895), p. 5.

their times. Very often they attributed storms or plagues or poor crops to the supernatural powers of an individual, and some of those accused of having extraordinary powers believed themselves to be possessed with supernatural abilities.

If witches were not hanged in Rhode Island, they were ostracized or at least shunned wherever possible. Although some Rhode Islanders believed in witches until fairly recent times, the peak of the witchcraft delusion had passed before a third racial group entered the colony in any quantity. Yet it is this third group torn from primitive tribal societies which was a dominant factor in perpetuating tales of witches and ghosts.

The exact date when Negro slavery was introduced into Rhode Island is not known; it has been established, however, that the first slave trade vessel to touch the shores of the state was the brig Seaflower, which stopped at Newport in 1696 to sell four Negroes from a cargo numbering forty-seven.²⁸ In 1700 there were probably not more than one thousand Negroes in all of New England, but by 1730 there were 1,648 Negroes in Rhode Island alone. By 1755 there were 4,697 Negroes in the colony, amounting to more than eleven percent of the total population.²⁹

The slave trade became an important part of the

²⁸Irving H. Bartlett, From Slave to Citizen, The Story of the Negro in Rhode Island (Providence: The Urban League of Greater Providence, 1954), p. 5.

²⁹Ibid., p. 9.

commercial life of Rhode Island. Many of those who participated in the slave trade tried to justify it as did a Newport man who subsidized many successful voyages and returned thanks after a slave ship had come safely home "that an overruling Providence had been pleased to bring to this land of freedom another cargo of benighted heathen to enjoy the blessing of a Gospel dispensation."³⁰ Such piety was a thin disguise to the dark recesses of a money-conscious mind. A Bristol slave trader advised his men to "make yr cheaf trade with the Blacks and little or none with the white people , . . worter yr Rum as much as possible and sell as much by the short measurer as you can."³¹

Narragansett country in southern Rhode Island was most influenced by the institution of slavery. By 1718 most of the manual labor in that section was done by slaves. One of the largest owners at that time was Rowland Robinson with nine slaves. As large farms and plantations varying in size from five to ten square miles spread out across the southern part of the state, slave holdings increased until Robert Hazard, who owned seventeen thousand acres and grazed four thousand sheep, could boast that he had reduced his household to seventy "in parlor and kitchen."³²

³⁰William Weeden, "The Early African Slave Trade in New England," Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society (October, 1887), p. 122.

³¹William Weeden, Early Rhode Island, A Social History of the People (New York: The Grafton Press, 1910), p. 190.

³²George Mason, "Old Plantation Life in Rhode Island," New England Magazine, XXI (February, 1900), 735-740.

Most of the Negro slaves imported by the colony came from Africa by the way of the West Indies, and they brought with them the superstitions and beliefs they had learned in their native villages. Their belief in the supernatural corresponded more with the Indian's than with the white man's, although the religion of the Negroes varied widely in the different sections of Africa. In the equatorial belt it was animism or fetishism, involving much witchery, hocus-pocus, and human sacrifices. In the agricultural zones the religion was rather polytheistic but retained much of the grosser superstition of animism.³³

Like the Indians, most African tribes believed that spirits were everywhere; each species of tree, shrub, plant, and herb had its own spirit. One tribe in eastern Africa took special pride in the cocoa-nut tree, and the destruction of that tree was regarded as equivalent to matricide since it gave them "life and nourishment as a mother does her child."³⁴

There were many other points of similarity between the supernatural beliefs of the American Indian and the African Negro. Both thought that if a person ate the flesh or heart of an animal, he would assume the characteristics of that animal. Eating the heart of a lion would make a man brave; eating the flesh of a chicken or a rabbit might tend

³³Jerome Dowd, The Negro in American Life (New York: The Century Co., 1926) p. 5.

³⁴Sir James George Frazer, The Golden Bough (Abridged Edition, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1951), p. 129.

to make a man timid and weak.³⁵

Both races believed that animals were endowed with feelings and intelligence like those of men, and that they, like men, possessed souls which survived the death of their bodies either to wander about as disembodied spirits or to be born again in animal form. Therefore, they staged great ceremonies in honor of the animal to be hunted to explain the reasons necessary for the death of the animal; after the animal was killed, homage was paid to the dead beast, and often it was given an elaborate funeral.³⁶

On the whole, however, the superstitions of the African were more radical than those of the Indian. On the Slave Coast in Africa the mother of a sick child believed that an evil spirit had taken possession of the child's body, and in order to drive him out, she made small cuts in the body of the little sufferer and inserted green peppers or spices in the wounds, believing that she would hurt the evil spirit and force him to be gone.³⁷

In some parts of west Africa, wizards continually set traps for souls that had wandered from sleeping bodies. On snaring one, they tied it over the fire, and as it shriveled in the heat the owner died. The wizard did not do this out of malice for an individual; it was just his way of making

³⁵Ibid., p. 574.

³⁶Ibid., p. 600.

³⁷Ibid., p. 227.

a living. It did not matter whose soul had been captured, and the owner could get his soul back by paying for it. Some African sorcerers kept regular asylums for strayed souls, and anyone who had lost or mislaid his soul could have another from the asylum on payment of the usual fee.³⁸

These were typical beliefs of the Negro when he came to Rhode Island. In the plantation country in the southern part of the colony, Negro and Indian blood began to mix almost from the beginning. Both races were often held in slavery; they were both relegated to the role of menial laborer and occupied a similar social position. During the eighteenth century when some owners began to free their slaves, the Indian woman looked on Negroes as excellent husbands. More than one Indian woman, who disliked the idea that women should do all the drudgery, purchased a Negro's freedom that he might marry and support her.³⁹

Red man, white man, black man -- each made his own contribution to the long list of superstitions held by the early Rhode Islander. Without a belief in spirits walking abroad at night or in witches riding on broomsticks or in the devil's power to come to earth at will, there could be no ghost stories nor myths of witches nor legends about the devil. If there had never been a sincere belief in such

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 217-218.

³⁹ Bartlett, op. cit., p. 11.

supernatural occurrences, there would not be any supernatural folklore.

The majority of the folk tales described in this paper were once believed as actual truth by someone somewhere in the state. Perhaps at first some stories or customs or superstitions were whispered in broad daylight, but with the growth of scientific knowledge and human reasoning, they became good firelight tales.

Southern Rhode Island, where the majority of the Negroes and Indians lived during the eighteenth century, is perhaps the primary locale of supernatural folklore within the state, although ghosts and witches were known to have been transients in other parts of the state as well.

CHAPTER II

THE DEVIL IN RHODE ISLAND

Whenever the devil visited Rhode Island, he was able to outwit his opponents with ease. In Massachusetts men like Jonathan Moulton and Daniel Webster proved a good match for Satan, but in Rhode Island men of wit and courage were not challenged. Otherwise, the devil behaved in Rhode Island much as he did elsewhere. He assumed divers shapes; he made compacts with witches; he lent his name to caves and glens and other natural objects; he left giant footprints in numerous rocks. Popular fictions, taking their cue from the verbal portraits of evangelical Christianity, pictured him as a physical personality with constant attributes, a sly, wily, unscrupulous prowler for hell recruits.

Although the devil was a white man's notion, the Indian and the Negro very readily accepted the idea of a chief evil one. The Indians gave him another name, Hobomoko, and one of the best known local legends in the state tells of events at the deep fissure in the rocks on the coast of Middletown known as Purgatory. Local legends, such as this one, are tied to the landscape in which they arise; most of them are invented to explain some uncommon feature in that very landscape. Such is the case with Purgatory. Some legends give

the devil credit for making this chasm, which is one hundred sixty feet long, from eight to fourteen feet wide at the top and from two to twenty feet at the bottom. Hobomoko created it by merely stamping his foot, and it is said his footprints may be seen at low tide just at the base of the fissure.¹

The devil's footprints are also at the top of the ledge, but that has to do with this second and more famous tale of Hobomoko. After the Narragansett Indians had sold their territorial possessions to the white men, the natives began to think that they had made a bad bargain of it. Nevertheless, the Indians continued to live on good terms with their new neighbors; some of them even made their homes in the villages of the Yengeese, as they called the English. But one Indian woman harbored so much hatred that she murdered her white master and fled to the woods to offer prayers to Satan. While she was mumbling her devotions, the old crone heard a rustling among the boughs. She turned around to see a very stern-looking English gentleman beside her.

This man, who was really the devil in disguise, asked her to walk a short distance with him, but the squaw refused, saying that she had business in Wickford. Grabbing her by the arm, he dragged her along. In a frightened voice the squaw called to Hobomoko to save her.

"I'm Hobomoko," said the gentleman who immediately

¹Harriet E. Thomas, Along the Shore Stories (Newport: Remington Ward, 1928), p. 1.

dropped his disguise. Seizing the unhappy woman by the waist, he made one or two fierce stamps on the ground, flew with his victim towards Purgatory, and threw her into the chasm.²

Other sources give a more graphic description of the squaw's death. When they landed near Purgatory, "the squaw showed fight and the devil was forced to bump her head against the boulder and finally to draw his tomahawk. He bumped and bumped, chopped and chopped, until he had chopped her head off, and then ran up on the ledge with the body and threw it into the chasm."³ As proof of this version, the bowl-like depressions on the ledge are described where he bumped the squaw's head, and the ax-marks where the tomahawk struck.

Another addition to the legend which goes with the first version and not the second is that on the rocky walls of the fissure are marks which are said to be prints of her fingers as she clung in her last frantic fight for life.⁴

By the early part of the nineteenth century, skeptics were growing in numbers, and one early traveler wrote:

To what source we are indebted for this facetious tradition, it has not happened to me to learn; or which of the two has had the larger share in its putting together, the superstitions of the Indians or the superstitions of their English successors. The Indians knew nothing till the English told them, either of purgatory or of the devil; and why, when the settlers imparted their derision of the one and their fear of

²John Dix, A Handbook of Newport, and Rhode Island (Newport: C.E. Hammett, Jr., 1852), pp. 47-48.

³Federal Writers' Project, Rhode Island A Guide to the Smallest State (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1937), p. 48.

⁴Thomas, op. cit., p. 2.

the other, a poor Indian woman should have become the victim of both, it may not be easy to discover.⁵

The devil made other visits to Rhode Island, leaving footprints on a ledge of rock on the west side of the highway leading from Wickford to East Greenwich where the railroad from Davisville to Quonset crosses it. Whatever the mission, he had his dog with him, and both were so hot that they left their marks in the hard granite. Higher on the ledge stands the devil's chair made of rock. A number of legends have grown up around this Devil's Foot Rock.

One story is that he stepped across to Devil's Foot from Conanicut Island on his way to Westerly. Another is that he came from Massachusetts, having completed the establishment of his kingdom there, and headed for Connecticut to continue his labors. "There are two guesses as to why he passed through Rhode Island so swiftly. One is that he was convinced he couldn't do any proselyting in this state, the other that it was his already so he didn't have to linger."⁶

A third story tells of an Indian squaw who lived in Massachusetts during the early days of the Puritan colony. By some trickery the devil had persuaded her to forfeit her soul to him. Later she tried to escape Hobomoko by fleeing into Rhode Island. The devil gave chase, leaving the first

⁵Edward Augustus Kendall, Travels Through the Northern Part of the United States in the Years 1807 and 1808 (New York: I. Riley, 1809), II, 11-13.

⁶J. Earl Clauson, These Plantations (Providence: Roger Williams Press, 1937), p. 99.

A shock of thick eel grass surrounded his head,
 His beard of fine coral, a bright flaming red,
 His teeth like barnacles that cling to a ship,
 To which beauty now add a very thick lip,
 And two clambshells immense which served him for ears
 And you have the ensemble exciting her fears.

But it was too late for Polly to back out of her bargain, so Apponaug lost its prize beauty.¹⁰

Satan did not always come to Rhode Island on evil missions; sometimes he was just out for a good time, or perhaps to drop a reminder that he was still around, as in the case when he went skating with an Indian.

Old John Onion lived in the Charlestown woods near the old Narragansett Indian school house located about a mile back of the Indian church, on what is now called School House Pond. He came down to the pond to skate one bright cold night, feeling mighty frisky. He out-skated all the other lads and vowed he could out-skate the devil. . . . It wasn't long before he realized he wasn't skating alone. The faster and fancier he skated, this figure followed. He shouted but no reply. Soon he recalled his vow of the early evening, and John asked no more questions. Breathlessly he skated by him and disappeared. John did not stop to remove his skates but skated right up the banks of the pond right through the woods, as fast as his legs could carry him, and on right into the house. He never after tried out-skating the devil.¹¹

Many people near Westerly believed that the devil visited the Sims house on the south side of the post road one dark, stormy night:

The evening had been devoted to hilarity and coarse carousal, singing, story telling, drinking, dancing, and wild frolic. The scenes closed by an unceremonious and sudden descent of the horned and grizzly monarch of darkness through the tunnel of the chimney, and his awful presence was accompanied by the tumbling of the main part

¹⁰ Clauson, op. cit., p. 101.

¹¹ "John Onion," The Narragansett Dawn, I (January, 1936), 206.

of the chimney-top into the rooms of the house.¹²

When the devil could not pay his respects personally, he oftentimes sent a personal emissary to do his bidding. One man with such a reputation was James McDaniel, a Negro who lived in Hopkinton. His cocked hat, glaring eyes, and daring manner had won this reputation for him. McDaniel was quite a fiddler, and when Amos Langworthy, Jr., brought home his bride to his father's house, the old Negro wanted to fiddle for the newlyweds. Amos Langworthy, Sr., refused the request because it was against his principles to have fiddling in his house. McDaniel was enraged and prophesied that the old father would yet be obliged to have fiddling under his roof.

Shortly after Mr. Langworthy's daughter, Amy, was seized with fits that nothing would allay but music; at the sound of the viol, she would recover, and then dance for hours. Many came to witness the matter, and it was believed that Miss Langworthy was bewitched by McDaniel. At last, Mr. Langworthy hired a fiddler by the month, as his daughter had fits nearly every evening until she was visited by a Mr. Mason of Connecticut, who laid his hands upon her and prayed; after which she had no fits; but she never fully recovered. Other spirits visited Mr. Langworthy's dwelling, entering locked rooms, deranging and polluting the dishes and milk-pans. On one occasion, when riding in great haste for a physician, Mr. Langworthy dismounted to open the bars, and on remounting found his bridle reins tied in knots. McDaniel was not long a resident here. He came from New York, and had been a drummer in the Revolution.¹³

Some actual events with a definite supernatural element took place only to be explained many years after the occurrence, but in the intervening years the tales enhanced

¹²Denison, op. cit., p. 171.

¹³Ibid., p. 166.

the belief in devils and ghosts and witches of that day.

William H. Potter reported such a situation in The Narragansett Weekly of November, 1860:

During the Revolutionary War, Hannah Maxson and Comfort Cottrell, . . . two girls then staying at the house of Esquire Clark, of Westerly, were trying their fortunes, and endeavoring to bring their beaux, by throwing each her ball of yarn into the well, and winding them off while they severally repeated a verse from the Scriptures backwards. They completed their charm about dusk, and went to the front of the house, and were there standing, awaiting the arrival of their sweethearts, or the result of their incantations. . . . Lo! they both saw a monster-figure coming up the road. It was some eight or ten feet high, and marched with a stately step, but with eyes, as they said, "as big as saucers," and breathing flames from his distended jaws. They saw it turn from the street and approach the house. In consternation, they fled frantically. . . . Esquire Clark, who was a pious man, and not easily frightened, came in at the back door the moment the monster had mounted the front door step, and was glaring steadily into the house through the panes of glass over the front door. The steady, unmistakable gaze of the demon, for such they believed him to be, convinced Mr. Clark at once that spiritual weapons were alone adequate to combat such an adversary. He immediately went into prayer, and the devil, meantime, left, never again reappearing to trouble the good man's house or the terror-stricken girls. Both became serious. One or both of them soon after found relief in a strictly religious life.¹⁴

No one knew an explanation for this incident for seventy years; then it was revealed that a gay young Newporter, Dan Rogers, had been responsible for deceiving the two young ladies. Because of the delayed explanation, the story became a part of Rhode Island's supernatural folklore.

Such hoaxes were not uncommon, and tales of practical jokes carried the devil into nineteenth-century humor. In his Jonny-Cake stories, Tom Hazard reveals the escapade that gave

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 163-165.

a cleared spot in Wilson's woods the appellation "Devil's Ring." While crossing that spot, Richard Cory found himself suddenly seized by a great horned monster, who promised to spare him on condition that he bring to the Ring the next day a bigger liar than himself. Cory promised and sought out Paris Garner, whom he attempted to cajole to the designated place with a story of Kidd's treasure. Paris, who was actually the devil, declared Cory was such a liar he couldn't believe him and refused to go. Thereafter Cory went the long way round Wilson's woods.¹⁵

Perhaps the devil's activities never made the headlines in local papers, but at least one vampire received more notoriety in 1892:

EXHUMED THE BODIES

Testing a Horrible Superstition in
the Town of Exeter

Bodies of Dead Relatives Taken
From their Graves

They Had All Died of Consumption,
and the belief was that live flesh
and blood Would Be Found That Fed
upon the Bodies of the Living.¹⁶

This was not the first vampire active in Rhode Island. At the time of the Revolution a farmer named Stukely was the father of fourteen children. He had a frequently recurring dream that half of his fine orchard died.

¹⁵Thomas R. Hazard, Folk-Lore of the Narragansett Country in Rhode Island. The Jonny-Cake Letters of "Shepherd Tom" (Providence: Sidney S. Rider, 1888), p. 185.

¹⁶The Providence Journal, March 19, 1892, p. 3.

Shortly afterwards his oldest daughter, Sarah, died, and in quick succession five other children. When the seventh child became ill, the parents realized that a vampire was to blame. After due consideration, the six bodies were disinterred. Five were found badly decomposed, but Sarah's body was in good condition and her arteries were filled with fresh blood. Her heart was removed and burned. The seventh child was too ill to be saved, but the other seven Stukelys reached maturity.¹⁷

There is no other account of vampires in the state until the above-mentioned one made the headlines in 1892. Mrs. Brown and her two daughters were buried behind the Baptist Church in the Chestnut Hill Cemetery. Apparently, they had died of tuberculosis within a comparatively short time of one another. A son and brother, Edwin A. Brown, lived at West Wickford, and when he came down with the disease, his relatives discussed the situation. Out of this conference developed a conviction that his life was being sapped by visits from a vampire. Very likely it was also responsible for the deaths of the other three members of the family and was living in the grave of one of them.

They dug up the bodies of the three women, removed the hearts and burned them on a rock in the cemetery. The bodies were returned to their resting places. In the veins of one of the sisters, the old story goes, there was blood, proof of vampirism. Edwin Brown dissolved the ashes of the

¹⁷Sidney S. Rider, "The Belief in Vampires in Rhode Island," Book Notes, V (March 31, 1888), 37-39.

burned hearts in the medicine his doctor had given him. Apparently it was not effective because Brown died shortly afterwards.¹⁸

Although the devil and vampires did parade through the minds of former generations, tales about them are not as numerous as those of witches and ghosts.

¹⁸Clauson, op. cit., pp. 67-68.

CHAPTER III

WITCHES AND FORTUNE TELLERS

The mumbo-jumbo of spells and incantations was an important part of the folklore of witchcraft, which outlasted, as it antedated, the witchcraft delusion in New England. All of the trappings and paraphernalia of black magic, possession, transformation, and divination surround the Rhode Island species of witch, just as old crones with supernatural power are found throughout the country. A flurry of tattling rumors elevated to unwelcome prominence crabbed spinsters, widows, and goodwives whose errant actions enlivened folk history. Magnetizing the superstitious mood of the eighteenth century, witches everywhere performed similar mischiefs and succumbed to identical reprisals.

Although there were no Rhode Island witches with the official sanction of a court trial, many of the early settlers did not doubt for a moment that witches were at large in the colony. North Kingstown had a number of favorite resorts of the witches of the colony. On the hillsides adjoining Goose Nest Spring, the witches were said to have held high carnival.¹ Hell Hollow and Kettle Hole were the places of the witches'

¹George W. Gardiner, "Swamptown--A Queer Locality," Facts and Fancies Concerning North Kingstown, R.I., op. cit., p. 70.

unhallowed sabbaths.²

In contrast, to the south around the region of Worden and Tucker Ponds and half score or more of other clear water lakes, the "fairies used to congregate and dance by moonlight in the olden time when the gods and goddesses made Atlantis their summer abode."³

But there were more witches than fairies in southern Rhode Island, even if some of the devil's women could be accounted for by other than supernatural means. Thomas R. Hazard tells of a prank he and his friend Abe arranged one "First-day forenoon when all the great-room folks had gone to Quaker meeting." Young Thomas had torn his breeches on purpose so that he would be left at home. The two boys herded fifteen full-grown cats, "besides some litters of kittens," into one room.

[The cats were] all the colors of the rainbow, including several other shades to boot. Next Abe and I each got a window stick and went to chasing the cats like mad around the room, occasionally hitting one on the head or wherever came handiest. After racing round and round a few times, the great yaller cat darted into the fireplace and up the chimney, followed by the whole drove.

Just as this time Old Kit Potter, the Tower Hill cooper, chanced to be coming down the lane, and seeing the cats pouring out of the top of the chimney, he hurried back to his house and told his wife that she needn't dispute with him any longer about Hazard's house being haunted, for he had just seen more than

²Edgar Mayhew Bacon, Narragansett Bay, It's Historic and Romantic Associations and Picturesque Setting (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), p. 346.

³Hazard, Folk-Lore of the Narragansett Country, p. 265.

five hundred witches sitting on the roof and more coming out of the chimney.⁴

This was not as foolish as it may sound, for the one power above all others which distinguished the village witch was that of transformation. Sundry were the animals and birds whose forms housed an evil spirit--cats, dogs, rabbits, cows, horses, bulls, hogs, sheep, crows, pigs. When the enchanted animal was beaten or bruised, the ill effects displayed themselves on the body of the witch.

In Exeter a farmer was driving a load of lumber along the road when a black cat jumped up on the reach pole. The oxen pulling the cart stopped and would move no farther. After failing to get the cat down from the pole, the farmer walked back to his house for a gun. Lacking bullets, he loaded it with a silver button. Returning to his cart, the farmer shot the cat, and the animal ran off howling into the woods. Several days later a woman in the neighborhood who was suspected of being a witch fell on a stump and broke her hip. A doctor was called and in treating her injury, he found a silver button imbedded in her flesh.⁵

The silver button is a favorite device to destroy the power of a witch. An old woman named Granny Mott, who lived in Hopkinton (then Westerly) about 1740, had the reputation of being a witch. It was said that she would ride a smooth-shod horse on ice with the greatest speed. Once she went

⁴Ibid., pp. 82-83.

⁵Federal Writers' Project, Rhode Island, p. 109.

to the home of Thomas Potter to ask for work. Mr. Potter's son Stephen was playing on the floor when one of the older children whispered to him to stick an awl in the old woman's chair. She sat immovable for hours until the family became convinced of her character and removed the awl. Ever after when she visited a house, she would stand or sit upon a chest or bed, but she would never sit in a chair.

One of her neighbors was much annoyed by a flock of heath-hens, the head one of which would fly close around him, and bid defiance to his oft-repeated shots. He finally cut a silver button from his coat, and loaded his gun, and thus brought down the troublesome bird. He soon heard that Granny Mott was sick unto death; she was attended by her daughter, who refused all assistance in preparing the body for interment, and permitted others simply to bury her. This secrecy was employed to prevent persons from discovering the wound inflicted by the silver button.⁶

About fifty years after Granny Mott's death Westerly had another witch, Rebecca Sims. Her neighbors said she could run around a room on the chair mouldings and dance on them. She also was credited with the ability to change into various charmed forms to haunt the townsmen. One man averred that she often visited him in the night-watches; she would put her witch-bridle on him and ride him great distances as though he were a horse, greatly to his fatigue and suffering. Sometimes on a cold night Rebecca would leave the man hitched to a post for hours while she was in the house where there was fiddling and dancing.

Besides being a witch, Rebecca had a reputation for

⁶Denison, op. cit., pp. 165-166.

shrewdness, wit, and practical jokes. "When Smith Murphy stole her hot mince pies and concealed them under his coat, she lovingly embraced him till his bosom swelled with blisters as well as other emotions."⁷

Perhaps the best known witch in Rhode Island made her headquarters around Hopkins Hill in East Greenwich, just over the border of North Kingstown. According to the legend, "a boulder in a nearby wood bears the ominous name of Witches Rock and marks the spot where in a wretched hovel one of the most dreaded of the evil sisterhood brewed her philters and worked her unhallowed charms."⁸

Scoffing at the idea of witches, a daring farmer named Reynolds vowed that he would plow up the ground around this rock. As everyone versed in occult lore knows, there is just as great an animosity between witches and ploughshares as between witches and horseshoes, possibly because of an early custom of making one suspected of witchcraft walk barefooted on red-hot iron. If the victim's feet were not burned, she was a witch; if they were, she was simply unfortunate.

Reynolds had just begun to plow around the rock when his ploughshare stuck fast, and his oxen could not move it. The pin flew out of the yoke, and finally the ploughshare cracked. At this point a crow perched on a dead tree began to caw in a terrifying manner. The farmer answered it with

⁷Ibid., p. 166.

⁸Bacon, op. cit., pp. 353-356.

a volley of oaths which must have had a magical charm, for the crow was unable to fly and fell to the top of the rock, dropping from its mouth the pin that had disappeared from the ox yoke. Suddenly the crow turned into the witch

. . . with her bell-crowned hat and besom of nettle-stalks, and the way she glared made the boldest, even Reynolds himself, start back in panic. The witch vanished, and in her place a large, black cat sprang from the top of the rock and scuttled into a hole at the base. They tried to dig it out but the earth flew in as fast as it was shovelled out, and at last they gave up. Reynolds struck the rock so lustily with the broken ploughshare that the dent may be seen there to this day.⁹

All Rhode Island witches seemed pale in comparison with their more notorious sisters of Massachusetts. The Salem witchcraft trials left their impressions on two Rhode Islanders who were visiting in the north during 1692.

Adam Powell, a Newport merchant, made frequent trips to Boston and Salem,

. . . attended by his negro servant, Peter, who whilst at one of these places, went into the Court-house, where some of the witches were on trial. On his return to the house where his master lodged, he was taken apparently with convulsion fits, falling down in great agony, and the people of the house called him bewitched, but Mr. Powell, who had expressed much indignation at the scenes he had lately witnessed, declared with much energy that nobody would be hanged for Peter, for he himself would undertake his cure. Accordingly, having observed him some time attentively, he applied his horsewhip to Peter (but for the first and only time),¹⁰ with such effect that he gladly returned to his duty.

The second tale concerns a member of the Helme family

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Esther Bernon Carpenter, South County Studies of Some Eighteenth Century Persons & Places & Conditions in that Portion of Rhode Island Called Narragansett (Boston: The Merrymount Press, 1924), p. 161.

of South Kingstown. He appeared at the scene of the trials

. . . when the "witches" and their accusers were confronted with one another. He had scarcely entered when one of the sufferers, a young woman, was attacked with convulsions, which, of course, elicited much sympathy from the spectators. When, on her recovery, she was asked the name of the sorcerer whose spells had been the cause of her suffering, she promptly replied that it was the stranger who had just come in! But while the officers of the law, animated by the indignation of the whole assembly, were sternly seeking the offender, whose recent entrance had been overlooked, all attention being centered on the afflicted girls, Mr. Helme lost no time in escaping from the court house and the town, no doubt glad enough to regain the land of Roger Williams and liberty.¹¹

Witch tales have also been perpetuated or even been initiated in literary form--that is, in ways other than the unbroken oral descent whose interception is sought by scientific folklorists. Literary tales may represent one or more gradations away from the original source or may merely be suggested by popular motives; their treatments are colored by the purposes of the composers and the circumstances that govern their appearance. In Old Narragansett by Alice Morse Earle may be classified as a literary effort based on actual customs and folkways and events in the early years of the republic. The witches are described as they were actually conceived in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Although a few superstitions are noted among the white people, most of the witchcraft hocus-pocus is among the Negroes. Tuggie Bannock is the best drawn witch-like character in the book:

¹¹Ibid., pp. 161-162.

As she stood in the red glow of the firelight she was the personification of Negro superstition. Tall and gaunt with long bony arms, and skinny claws of hands, with a wrinkled, malicious, set half-frightened countenance, surrounded by little pig-tails of gray wool that stuck out from under her scarlet turban, with her old petticoat turned inside out, and a gay little shawl pinned on her shoulders, she stood like a Voodoo priestess eagerly watching and listening.¹²

Like other witches, Tuggie had very peculiar habits; she

. . . never sat upon stool or chair or settle in anyone else's house; no one had ever seen her seated save on a table or dresser or bed, or even on a cradle head--this to the painful apprehension of the mother who owned the cradle. When spinning flax in one house she sat on a saw-horse. She had not a chair in her house, but there was an oaken chair-moulding at the top of the wainscoting in her spacious old kitchen; and it was currently reported and believed that when she was alone she perched or clung with her heels on this moulding.¹³

When Tuggie wanted to conjure old Bosum Sidet, the Negro tinker, there were definite steps she had to take in order for the spell to be effective:

- (1) Obtain twigs or sprigs of withered grass in the dooryard of the one to be conjured.
- (2) Strike up an argument with a relative to get ordered out of the house. A witch cannot work a thoroughly successful conjure on one who has always treated her with due hospitality.
- (3) Clip some hairs from the tail of a cow owned by the victim if it is impossible to get hairs from the victim's head.
- (4) Mix a small amount of flour and water into a dough and

¹²Alice Morse Earle, In Old Narragansett, Romances and Realities (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898), p. 72.

¹³Ibid., p. 69.

stir in the hairs from the cow's tail.

(5) Mould the dough into the shape of a heart and stick two pins in for legs and two for arms. This would give the victim "misery in de legs and arms." This dough-heart should be set aside, for it is not actually part of the project and will only fulfill its diabolical mission when carried to the victim's door and set upon his fence or doorstep.

(6) "To burn the project," throw into a pot of water sprigs from the dooryard, rusty nails, tail of a smoked herring, a scrap of red flannel, a little mass of "grave dirt" taken from the graveyard, and a rabbit's foot. As soon as this project boils, the conjured one would begin to suffer some mental or bodily ill.¹⁴

Once a witch has taken a project off the fire before it is "worked," the spell is broken, and that witch can never try to conjure that person again.¹⁵

Graveyards and deserted churches were favorite haunts of witches, and in one of Miss Earle's stories Old Cuddymonk, the Negro "governor," makes the usual protests about going by such places at night because "Ole Tuggie Bannocks an' all dem dashted ole witches gadders in de ole noon-house dat stan's in de church-yard an' brews dere witch-broth; an' ef anyone sees 'em a brewin' dey can nebber eat nothin' else, an' pines away wid misery ob de stummick an' dies."¹⁶

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 65-75.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 114.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 190.

Cuddymonk blames much of his troubles on Tuggie. He has rheumatism so badly that he knows he "must be witch-rid by ole Tuggie Bannocks. . . . Times nebber'll be good in dis country whiles dey don' hang old witches like Tuggie Bannocks."¹⁷ Cuddymonk finds some consolation when he goes off to jail; he think he will get "red ob my rehumatiz. Old Tuggie Bannocks can't get me out nights ter witch-ride me."¹⁸

Tuggie Bannocks has her worries, too, as she complains about the spells of another witch, Mum Amey:

Mornin's when I wakes up I sees marks ob de bit in de corners of my mouf, where Mum Amey ben a-ridin' me all ober Boston Neck an' up de Ridge Hill till I so tired and stiff I can't hardly move. Ise ben pinched in de night an' hab my ha'r pulled. An' my butter won't come till I drops a red-hot horseshoe in de cream to drike her out.¹⁹

Another of Miss Earle's witches was a Narragansett weaver:

She would sit for hours bending over her loom, silent, peering into it and not doing a single row. This angered the dames for whom she worked, but they said nothing, lest they get her ill will. Suddenly she would sit up and start her treadle; bang! bang! would go her batten as fast as corn in a corn popper; and at night, after she had gone home, when her piece was still set in the loom, the family would waken and hear the half-toned clapping of the loom which someone was running softly to help the witch out in her stint, probably the old black man. So behold! at the end of the week more cloth appeared on the cloth-beam, more linen was ready for bleaching and more rolls of carpet were woven than could be turned out by any man-weaver in the province. . . . She never ate with the family of her employer as did every other worker in house

¹⁷Ibid., p. 89.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 96.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 115.

or on farm, nor was it evident that she brought food with her. The minister suspected she ate nocake, which she could easily hide in her pockets. She never asked for water, nor cider, nor switchel, nor kill-devil, nor had anyone ever seen her drink.²⁰

After this Narragansett weaver witch died, the windows of her house were broken by witch-hating passers-by, "and the spring rains and summer suns had freely entered the room. And lo! the witch's bed, on which she died--a sack full of mouse barley, with occasional spikes of grain attached--had sprouted and grown through the coarse hempen bed-tick, and was as green and flourishing as the grass over her unmarked grave."²¹

A certain class of witches, less common than the ordinary vexatious meddlers, specialized in necromancy, curses, prophecies, and powers of second sight. The superstitious were both attracted and repelled by old crones who possessed the magical power necessary to predict coming events--attracted by the desire to know the future and repelled by fear of witches.

A noted fortuneteller on Block Island was Dutch Kattern, a survivor of the famous Palatine disaster. She would hide behind a wall or in a thicket of bushes and lie in a trance for hours and would be exhausted when she returned to the house. When asked where she had been, Dutch Kattern would reply that she had been across the sea to Holland and give an account of her friends and her relatives whom she

²⁰Ibid., pp. 46-47.

²¹Ibid., p. 50.

just visited.²²

In the middle of the nineteenth century an old Negress named Silvy Tory stepped forward to be the principal fortuneteller around South Kingstown. She was

. . . thin and tall even in extreme old age, with small, erect head, and glittering, watchful eyes; her wild, uncanny, almost feral aspect was doubtless of good service to her in the pursuit of her occult métier. But (with whatever natural disappointment to narrator and readers) it must be owned that Sylvia's record was merely characterized by a most annoying tameness, not at all in accordance with the expectations awakened by her high tragic air. Though every commendable effort was to be made to invest her with the dim, uncertain atmosphere of romantic interest and mystery, she would still remain, perhaps, the most harmless, innocent, poor, good old woman that ever assumed the direful character of sorceress.²³

Silvy read palms, but she did not rely solely upon this means of predicting the future:

She drew various auguries from an examination of the "grounds" in the teacup. Dismissing all members of the visiting party but one, she carefully steeped a "drawing of tea," with such obscure rites and ceremonies as she had brought with her out of African savagery. Shaking the cup and gazing at its slowly settling contents, she would gravely announce the decrees of fate to her listener, some half-amused, half-frightened girl, who then withdrew, giving place to her companions, who followed her in turn, and whose separate experiences were usually found to bear a marvellous resemblance to each other.²⁴

Tom Hazard visited Silvy's "small hovel off in the northwest corner of the forest" with two companions, Adam Babcock and Charles Baker, about 1820. "The old black sybil"

²²Rev. S.T. Livermore, A History of Block Island from Its Discovery in 1514 to the Present Time, 1876 (Hartford: The Case, Lockwood, & Brainard Co., 1877), p. 119.

²³Carpenter, op. cit., p. 214.

²⁴Ibid., p. 215.

told Tom's and Charles's fortunes for more than an hour, but she would say no more to Adam than "don't you by no means go east." The "old shrivelled, gray-headed crone" would say no more. When Abe left, Tom asked why she refused to tell his fortune, and she replied, "That young fellow has no fortune to tell." A week later Adam went to New Bedford, thirty miles east of Silvy's hovel, "where he sickened in a few days and died a fortnight later."²⁵

This episode proved to be the crowning point of old Silvy's career, and there is no recorded instance where she bettered her reputation as prophetess. Fortunetelling was not the extent of her magical powers. When a cow strayed beyond boundaries, or when a horse was stolen, the bereaved owner would hasten to Silvy, who would give him various occult directions to follow to bring back the lost animal.²⁶ When an accident caused the death of Silvy at one hundred and four years old, her granddaughter Bridget tried to succeed her as a soothsayer but was not successful.

A phase of fortunetelling which met particular favor with the sea captains and merchants was astrology. Almanacs of that day were filled with heavenly implications for the human body. "Astronomy is the Mother of Almanacks," wrote Poor Job in Shepherd's Almanac of 1752. Another editor wrote, "Astrology has a philosophical foundation; the coelestial

²⁵Hazard, Folk-Lore of the Narragansett Country, pp. 267-268.

²⁶Carpenter, op. cit., p. 217.

Powers that can and do agitate and move the whole Ocean have also Force and Ability to alter the Fluids and Solids of the human body; and that which can alter and change the Fluids and solids of the Body, must also greatly affect and influence the Mind; and that which can and does affect the Mind has a great Share and Influence in the Actions of Men."²⁷

About the middle of the eighteenth century it was customary for many Rhode Island merchants to employ an astrologer to cast a horoscope in order to determine the exact day and hour at which a vessel should weigh anchor for an important voyage. This seems to have been particularly common in the case of slavers, perhaps because of the possibilities of tremendous profits or of the peculiar risks the slave traffic involved. One captain who had a personal superstition wrote on the margin of one of these horoscopes, "6 D. & h. [i.e. the sixth day and hour] always wins the profits."²⁸

Another Newport captain who waited for a soothsayer to cast a horoscope to determine the proper day for putting out to sea with two large vessels was told that the day before Christmas, 1745, was the best time. In spite of a driving snowstorm, the two vessels destined for the Spanish Main, where they expected to do a lucrative business in overhauling

²⁷ Nathaniel Ames, An Astronomical Diary: or, Almanack for the Year of our Lord Christ 1764 (Newport: Reprinted and sold by Samuel Hall, 1764).

²⁸ George Lyman Kittredge, The Old Farmer and His Almanack (Boston: William Ware and Co., 1904), p. 40.

merchantmen, set sail. They were never heard of again. About four hundred lives were lost, and nearly two hundred women became widows.

Witches and fortunetellers were stock figures manipulated in a series of characteristic practices by facile imaginations. Since the bogey witch figure lay already implanted in men's minds, its sinister form-fitting cloak was easily draped over likely individuals. The reputations of these persons were as great, or as small, as the corresponding superstition of the people.

CHAPTER IV

GHOSTS AND APPARITIONS

With the entrance of ghosts and apparitions into the traditions and customs of early Rhode Island comes a certain sense of morality and poetic justice. The accusing ghost who returns to avenge a wrong, the devil-doomed spirit condemned to perform some endless task, the consequences which follow a prophetic curse--all are enshrouded with a certain aura of divine order.

Mary Dyer lived up to this promise of being rather a saintly ghost. Wife of the secretary of Rhode Island, she was hanged in Massachusetts for "rebellion, sedition, and presumptuous obtruding" herself.¹ A rumor ran at the time of her execution that she had given birth to a "monster," and John Winthrop put it down as a visitation for her "sins."² Clad in the simple gray in which she died, this Rhode Island ghost once haunted Boston Common. One October evening she appeared, seated herself on a bench beside an old man, and said, "This is the fairest day of the year, and this Common

¹George F. Willison, Saints and Strangers, Being the Lives of the Pilgrim Fathers & Their Families, with Their Friends & Foes; & an Account of Their Posthumous Wanderings in Limbo, Their Final Resurrection & Rise to Glory, & the Strange Pilgrimages of Plymouth Rock (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1945), p. 379.

²Ibid., p. 472.

is the fairest place in the world; for here in October of the year of our Lord 1659, Marmaduke Stevenson and William Robinson offered up their lives that the minds and consciences of men might be free in Massachusetts."³

Folk tales and legends about ghosts are so numerous that it is necessary to classify them in some manner. For sake of convenience, four main headings have been chosen: murder, haunted houses, famous Indian ghosts, and legends connected with Indian Corner. There is some unavoidable overlapping in each of these sections, but this outline will give a semblance of order to the whole.

Murder

In the seventeenth century, spectral evidence was accepted in court as legal evidence, and one of the earliest recorded supernatural tales in the state described an ethereal vision who revealed a murder. Richard Smith, Jr., wrote to John Winthrop, Jr., of Connecticut in 1672 or 1673:

. . . att Rhode Island a sade aixedent latly hapned. Ould Mistrs Cornall who lived with her son wase found burned to death nerly to a cole. Butt litell feyer being in the rome and she not neare it wher shee laye ded, severall pepoll being in the next rome, only a perticion of bords betweene, nott hard her dry, nor smelt her wolone cloths tho burned to a cole, having no coten cloths aboutt her, an inquest pased on her who returned a verditt thett shee was burned to deth by fyer, so shee was buried. In a shortt time afterwards an aperriscion appeared to one M^r Briges who was a frend of this Mistres Cornall. As he laye in his bed she heved up the cloths and

³William Root Bliss, Side Glimpses from the Colonial Meeting-House (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1894), p. 116.

awaked him, she standing by his bed side; he asked her in the name of God who she was. She replied she was his sister Cornell, soe s^d she howe I am burned with fyer, and a glimmering light apeared in the rome, wher he afermeth on his injagment he perfectly saw her deformed with the feyer to his greatt astonishment. One devilging of which and the obscervance some had of the unkindnes used by her sonns behaver twowards his mother when living and after she laye ded, she was by the thoroty taken up agayne and serched by the curirgions with a juroy of 24 men, who found a wound thatt went in neare her hartt. Shee being ripped open found cloted bloud a greatt deall, the hole suposed to be made with sune instramen licke, or the iron spyndell of a spinning whelle.⁴

Eventually the son was arrested, brought to trial, and found guilty.

A similar incident was recorded in the New England Journal of December 1, 1729:

Last week one belonging to Ipswich came to Boston and related, that, some time since he was at Canso, Nova Scotia; and that on a certain day there appeared to him an apparition in blood and wounds and told him, that at such a time and place, mentioning both, he was murdered by one, who was at Rhode Island, and desired him to go to the said person, and charge him with the said murder, and prosecute him therefor; naming several circumstances relating to the murder; and that since his arrival from Canso to Ipswich, the said apparition had appeared to him again, and urged him immediately to prosecute the said affair. The above-said person, having related the matter, was advised and encouraged to go to Rhode Island, and engage therein, and he accordingly set out for that place on Thursday night.⁵

No mention is made as to the outcome of the search by this man who came to Rhode Island seeking the murderer de -

⁴Daniel Berkeley Updike, Richard Smith, First English Settler of the Narragansett Country, Rhode Island (Boston: The Merrymount Press, 1937), p. 93.

⁵Richard M. Dorson, Jonathan Draws the Long Bow (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946), p. 61.

scribed to him by the apparition.

Another post-murder apparition has been known to frequent the shores of Pettaquamscutt Cove. Miss Mumford was murdered by a Negro boy who weighted her body with stones and threw it into the Cove. When Black Jim's club struck down Miss Mumford, her knitting fell to the ground but her ball of yarn remained in her pocket. This clue of yarn led her neighbors to her body at the bottom of the Cove. "The ghost of old Miss Mumford, with an unfinished piece of knitting in her hands, and her lips moving inaudible animations, still wanders by the border of Pettasquamscutt Cove."⁶

Caroline Hazard, another of the literary storytellers, remolded this legend into a more romantic version with the victim the center of a triangle. In "The Blue Thread," two young men are bereft when a Negro slave kills their mutual sweetheart. They follow her blue knitting thread to her body in the Cove.

The date of the fourth murder is pinpointed in the winter of 1741. Two men were on their way from Narragansett to Newport. Captain William Carter, an old privateersman of Newport, had been shipwrecked on the coast of North Carolina and was traveling home on foot. In Virginia he met Mr. Jackson who was on his way to Boston with a horse pack load of deer-skins, and the two men agreed to travel together. Nearing

⁶Bacon, op. cit., pp. 235-236.

their destinations, Carter killed Jackson to steal the load of furs, and the body was shoved under the ice in Petta-squamscutt Cove. The corpse was discovered several days later by a man who was jabbing for eels, and Carter was caught and brought to trial. The murderer was "hanged in gibbets, where the body remained until it dropped piecemeal from the irons to the ground beneath, which I have heard say the soil and verdure were for years made rank and dark with blood."⁷

Jackson's ghost was restless for almost two centuries. Indians living at the bottom of the hill where the murder took place heard the clanking chains of the ghost whenever someone had done an evil deed. Finally in desperation, the Indians moved their village.⁸ Then Jackson took to haunting travelers on nearby roads, and the ghost was reported to have been seen until as late as the mid-1930's. At that time a Narragansett Indian who lived near Westerly was driving along the lonesome road late one night when a face suddenly leaned against the window of his car and a hand clutched the car windowsill. Noticing that the figure was dressed in black with a big black hat and a black Winsor tie, the Indian concluded it must be Jackson's ghost. The stranger vanished as suddenly as he had appeared.⁹

⁷Hazard, Folk-Lore of the Narragansett Country, pp. 188-189.

⁸Personal interview with Princess Red Wing.

⁹"A Ghost Story," The Narragansett Dawn, I (January, 1936), 206.

Haunted Houses

There was a time when every town, village, and hamlet had its haunted house, but most of them have vanished. One still hears occasionally of such places, but most of them prove as elusive and difficult to track down as the ghosts which are supposed to haunt them. Clues as to their whereabouts are too indefinite and shadowy to permit location and identification. They are generally referred to vaguely as "somewhere in Newport," or "a stone's throw from the Blackstone River," or "near Lincoln Woods." There are many deserted and derelict houses which imaginative children living in the neighborhood like to invest with the glamour of a ghost, but this is only make-believe, and these places are not genuine haunted houses, save in the sense alluded to by Longfellow when he said, "All houses wherein man has lived or died are haunted houses."

Of the genuine haunted houses in Rhode Island, only one has had official confirmation. In the Rhode Island Census for 1885, the physical assets of the town of Foster are listed, and this includes:

Mills. -- Ram Tail Factory (haunted); Major Sam's Grist Mill, now Searle's; Yell Mill . . .¹⁰

Perhaps the author had tongue in cheek, but nevertheless, there it is on the state census.

Actually the Ramtail Factory was burned in 1873, but

¹⁰Rhode Island State Census, 1885 (Providence: E.L. Freeman & Sons, 1887), p. 36.

it had stopped production several years earlier and fallen into decay. It was not only a factory, but also a village on the Ponagansett a short distance south of the Danielson Pike in Foster. The owners of this cotton cloth factory were the brothers Potter and Peleg Walker. The Potters ran the mill during the day, and Walker was the night watchman. During a dispute over money, Walker threatened that the Potters would have to take the key from a dead man's pocket to get into the factory some morning. Shortly afterwards when the mill bell began to ring, the Potters went to open the mill and found it locked. Breaking a window, they discovered their dead night watchman hanging from the pull rope. Thereafter the bell on top of the mill roof would ring furiously at midnight, even when the pull rope had been removed. Taking the bell away only incited the spook to new mischief; he drove the mill wheel (which was driven by the waters of the Ponagansett) backwards. Once he even ran the factory at top speed--every wheel, loom, and spindle was turning. Only once did anyone see the ghost. Three men saw a white figure, swinging a lantern, making his rounds. He greatly resembled Peleg Walker.¹¹

Whether the other haunted houses are official or not has made no difference to the abundance of legends which have come forth. The trading house built by Richard Smith in 1639 near the present town of Wickford has had more ghosts "than

¹¹Clauson, op. cit., pp. 95-98.

could be numbered at any other spot in Rhode Island, but happily these are laid." The ghosts included several Indians who were captured by a band of settlers and brought to the house. In a drunken moment, a settler struck off his captive's head with his sword, and "as the gory ball rolled away it struck a tall clock in the corner and the sensitive timepiece, unable to contain itself, struck one." Another Indian was trussed like a fowl and roasted in the great fireplace. In another generation, a woman "preyed upon by a dreadful melancholy" hanged herself in the best bedroom. All of these, and more, have been accused of haunting this old building.¹²

A one-time haunted house near Noyes Point on Watch Hill has a rather romantic, true-to-tradition legend surrounding it. Benoni Fayerweather built a large two-story gambrel-roof house facing the ocean. His beautiful daughter, Penelope, was in love with a dashing naval officer, Lt. LeClare. When the couple tried to elope, a slave named Lucina managed to hold Penelope until Mr. Fayerweather came to her assistance. The father drove the naval officer out of the country, and it was not long until Penelope died of a broken heart. In later generations the spirits of the four people were said to visit the house again and again. The naval officer's knock was heard at the door; Penelope's spirit would steal down to meet him; Lucina would cry in her room; and the

¹²Bacon, op. cit., pp. 334-335.

father's spirit stood motionless in the hall. Scientific explanations were given for these supposedly supernatural phenomena by an early twentieth-century skeptic who signed himself "H.K.," but the legend is better reading than the science lesson.¹³

Several writers undertook to educate the public about the "wonders of the invisible world." In her short story, "The Haunted Brook," Catherine Williams explained away the mysteries surrounding a haunted house in North Providence. Using actual names of persons concerned, the author presented her evidence with the conclusion that smugglers or thieves had wanted the house to be vacant and had done various things to encourage occupants to leave.¹⁴

A doctor in a story by Alice Morse Earle unveils a "ghost" to old Cuddymonk:

The doctor raised his whip and brought it down on the shining ghost; a great swarm of fireflies rose in the air, leaving disclosed a juniper tree, which had chanced to grow somewhat in the form of a human figure. This strange phenomenon I cannot explain, but it is not the only time that a juniper tree on a misty night in fall has attracted a swarm of fire-flies to light upon it.¹⁵

Westerly has had its share of haunted houses. One was . . . once fearfully haunted by a slave woman, whom her master kicked downstairs, and killed, and buried secretly in the graveyard, or, as some say, in the river; or, as

¹³The Providence Sunday Journal, January 3, 1904, p. 20.

¹⁴Catherine R. Williams, "The Haunted Brook," Rhode Island Tales, ed. Henrietta R. Palmer (New York: The Purdy Press, 1928), pp. 58-83.

¹⁵Earle, In Old Narragansett, p. 174.

others say, in the cellar of the house. Hence strange noises were heard, lights of various hues and forms were seen, some of them about the house, some moving towards the river. Rumor had it that a part of the cellar was planked up without any place of egress, and that afterwards certain bones were here found.

Other houses in Westerly and Hopkinton were revisited by the spirits of those who had been abused in the flesh; the windows were illuminated; cannon balls were heard rolling across the floors; loom and wheels were operated; cries of sufferers were rung out upon the air; divers significant warnings of death were given.¹⁶

"Being abused in the flesh" was certainly adequate reason for a ghost to come back for his revenge, but if he was in a haunting mood, it actually did not matter whether the person who had caused his earthly misery was around or not. The moaning bones of Mount Tom were moaning long after the death of everyone concerned in the original incident.

Many years ago a peddler knocked at the door of a lonely farmhouse at the foot of Mount Tom. When the farmer opened the door, the peddler offered to sharpen all the knives in the house in return for his supper and a night's lodging. After having supper with the farmer and his daughter, the peddler started to work on the knives while the farmer sat watching him. Soon the daughter went upstairs to bed, but when she heard a commotion downstairs, she returned to find her father patting the hearthstones back into place. The room showed evidence of a fight and the peddler had disappeared, but his pack remained on the floor and a pile of silver lay on the table. The girl quickly understood and began to rummage through the pack in search of trinkets. Her

¹⁶Denison, op. cit., p. 172.

father, fearing that she might give him away, burned out her tongue. There were no indications that a ghost lurked near the old farmhouse until long after the farmer and daughter had died and nothing remained of the abandoned house except the stone chimney and fallen timbers. One day while playing hide-and-seek about the old chimney, neighborhood children heard moaning sounds that seemed to come from beneath the stones at the base of the chimney. The frightened children fled home and told their parents. A neighborhood group, armed with picks and shovels, went to the ruin and dug up the old hearth to find the bones of the vanished peddler.¹⁷

The ghost of a mistreated son in Kingston acted up only once, according to this legend:

In Narragansett, on the old Indian trail, which is now a dirt road, is the cellar hold of a former house in which lived an old man and his son many years ago. The father had a reputation for being miserly and cruel and according to the local gossip, disciplined his son by beating him with an ax helve. After one such beating, he announced that his son had run away to sea, but his neighbors were inclined to believe that the boy had been beaten to death and his remains buried in the cellar. When the old man died, he had such an unsavory reputation that no one cared to volunteer to sit up with the body on the night before burial. Finally a grandfather of a family still resident in Kingston volunteered. He fell asleep in the next room but was soon awakened by the opening of the outer door, which unlatched itself and swung inward. He arose and closed the door, latching it carefully, but again the door opened. Angered by this occurrence, he whittled out a wooden plug and secured the latch with the plug, but he had hardly done so when the plug popped out and a heavy object was tossed into the room from the outer darkness. It was an ax helve, worn and smooth from use. He could discern no one outside, so shut

¹⁷Federal Writers' Project, Rhode Island, pp. 109-110.

and fastened the door once more, and it remained closed for the rest of the night.¹⁸

At one time the most famous haunted house in Providence was the Halsey Mansion at 140 Prospect Street. Built in 1801, the house did not assume legendary stature until it remained vacant for many years. Then the Negroes in the vicinity were convinced that a piano-playing ghost haunted the mansion. It is also said that a blood stain on the floor has defied many years of scrubbing.¹⁹

A gentle ghost is said to have haunted the Carr Homestead on Jamestown for many years. John and Mary Carr had ten children during their seventeen years of married life. The last infant died a few weeks after birth, and Mary succumbed shortly afterwards. When John died the following spring, the nine children carried on, with Peleg, the oldest, taking over as head of the house. The spirit of Mary Carr used to come back by night to her old bedroom where she would yearn over her son and his oldest sister struggling to raise the family she left.²⁰

Indian Ghosts

All of the other New England states have tales with Lovers' Leap and Pocahontas motifs which tell of ghosts of Indian braves and maidens returning to haunt the places of their deaths. Such tales reflect the taste of a past genera-

¹⁸Ibid., p. 110.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 290.

²⁰W.L. Watson, The House of Carr (privately printed, 1926), p. 45.

tion which apparently attempted to make amends for exterminating the Indian by romanticizing him, only to continue to kill him off by suicide, as if the only good Indian was an Indian who died for love. The ghosts of Rhode Island Indians have more individuality than that.

In North Scituate there was an Indian who was a "hanger-on" at the Pine Tree Tavern, and he took to the grave with him "such a grateful memory of the 'kill devil' and applejack drunks he had amassed there from time to time that he determined to turn in and 'hant' the rival Black Horse out of existence."²¹ Reuben Jencks was owner of the Black Horse Tavern, and the Indian ghost decided to concentrate all his efforts on one room which became known as the Indian Chamber.

This ghost was not one of the inconsiderate kind that comes when you are awake and half scares you to death; this noble red man stole in silently by night, so silently that the sleeper never awakened, and hence was never frightened, for nothing seems overstrange, uncanny or impossible in a dream. Even when the Indian brandished his tomahawk and seized the visited one by the hair of his head, it never seemed to be anything more than might be expected, nor did he ever appear overfierce in his threats and gestures.²²

After traveling men began to object to staying in the room because the ghost was "somewhat of a nuisance," the Jencks and their children moved into the Indian Chamber. Putting his tricks into high gear one night, the ghost pulled Mrs. Jencks out of bed, dragged her downstairs and

²¹The Providence Journal, December 9, 1900, p. 16.

²²Alice Morse Earle, Stage Coach and Tavern Days (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1900), p. 410.

out-of-doors, pointed to a great cedar at the gate, and muttered in broken English of avenging an insult to his race. Her husband dug all around the tree but found nothing. The Indian ghost pulled the same stunt again and again, each time pointing to a different tree; Mr. Jencks destroyed a good part of his orchard before he denounced the ghost as a liar and gave no more heed to his antics. Mrs. Jencks continued the treasure hunts by herself, in the attic, cellar, well, barn, but all she found was a wig block with curling irons and wire wig-springs.²³

Another unusual Indian ghost who clattered around southern Rhode Island had the unfortunate habit of mislaying his head. One summer evening a road mender discovered a skull lying by the side of the road and took it home. Since his wife would not let him bring it into the house, he stuck it upon a pole at the back of the house.

. . . It chanced to be a moonlight night. Just after midnight, when all out-of-doors was bright as day, there was a great clatter under the road-mender's window, so that his wife looked out to see what was happening. There in the road stood the headless skeleton, in a great state of excitement, shaking his bones till they rattled like a waggon-load of castanets. The woman fell back from the window in a great fright, but her husband merely called out, "If you are looking for your head, you will find it stuck on the pole at the back of the house." Following this direction, the visitor secured his skull and, clapping it on as one would don a hat, he strode wrathfully down the road. Since that time, if local gossip is to be credited, the headless Indian has been frequently seen, standing guard over the buried members of his own race.²⁴

²³Ibid., pp. 411-418.

²⁴Bacon, op. cit., pp. 349-350.

Other Indian ghosts do not assume the usual ethereal appearance; they are the scrub pines that come up every year in meadows and fields. No one plants them; they just grow, and each one, according to legend, represents an Indian killed unnecessarily. One old farmer vowed to dig up every scrub pine that came up in his meadow every year. It was a never-ending task, for some seemed to sprout and grow overnight. An Indian warned the farmer that the trees represented dead Indians, but the old man would not listen as he chopped and pulled and dug. Then a tree which had grown miraculously fast fell on the farmer as he was trying to chop it down and killed him.²⁵

All Indian ghosts are not as violent as these first three. The spirit of Dorothy, an Indian squaw, was restless but not noisy. In the latter part of the eighteenth century, Dorothy went out in a heavy snowstorm to find her lost sheep and never returned. In the spring her body was found beside her sheep in a deep ravine, now called Dorothy's Hollow.²⁶ A short distance from the hollow is Crying Bog where the early traveler could hear doleful weepings and wailings from the ghost of Manouna, another Indian squaw. Her cries were prompted by a guilty conscience, for while on earth she had murdered her two helpless children and secretly buried their bodies in the bog. Some say she was

²⁵Personal interview with Princess Red Wing.

²⁶Bacon, op. cit., p. 236.

driven to madness by a faithless white lover; others, that the brutality of her Indian husband drove her out of her wits. After she had buried her children in the bog, she stood wringing her hands and mourning over their grave. "As long as she lived--and for long years afterwards--her pitiful cries rose through the chill, misty, night air that lay upon the marsh."²⁷

The ghost of Manouna did not confine herself to haunting the bog where her children were buried, for last century she was seen

. . . sitting under some old willow trees . . . that stood on the east side of the Point Judith Road, some twenty rods south from the Crying Bog, and half as many east of Kit's Pond. . . . I remember hearing of a stranger, who came late on a moonlight evening to Christopher Robinson's, and requested lodgings, under the plea that he was on his way to a friend's house who lived on the "Point," but that as he approached these willow trees he saw an old Indian squaw sitting on the ground beneath them, rocking herself backward and forward, and moaning and weeping most dolefully. Nor would she take the least notice of what he said until he rode up and took a stone from a wall and rolled it against her feet, when she suddenly vanished from his sight, uttering such unearthly shrieks as she went that he could not force his horse to pass the spot.²⁸

It was said that after spending most of the night in wailing and crying, the ghost of the wretched murderess would go to a small wooded island that stands in the southwestern part of Kit's Pond, keeping close to the surface of the water in her hasty flight. The horrifying screams of the ghost would continue until she reached the island, then

²⁷Ibid., pp. 236-237.

²⁸Thomas R. Hazard, Recollections of Olden Times, pp. 123-124.

all would be still again.²⁹

Caroline Hazard has fictionalized this legend, along with two others, for her short poetic trilogy, "A Narragansett Tragedy." In the first section, a half-breed infant is thrown into the bog by its Indian mother. In the second part, the Indian mother throws herself into the sea, at which point a rock rises from the water to mark her grave; the peaked rock stands there for many years, and when it disappears, some say, "A soul was purged from sin that day." In the third section, a Frenchman, father of the infant, returns after many years and hears the cries at the bog; he races off to help whoever is in distress and sees the face of his Indian bride. When morning comes, all trace of him is gone.³⁰

South of the Crying Bog are the Crying Rocks in Charlestown. From the base of these jagged rocks when the wind blew just enough, there often rose the plaintive cries of infants' voices. Since the early white settler saw only healthy, strong Indians, they surmised that the red heathens threw any deformed and sickly infant over the brink to the sharp stones. The wailings at the Crying Rocks come from these murdered babies.³¹

Of the famous Indian leaders slain by the white men, just one returned to haunt the settlers. The ghost of King

²⁹Ibid., p. 124.

³⁰Caroline Hazard, Narragansett Ballads with Songs and Lyrics (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, & Co., 1894), pp. 22-30.

³¹Devere Allen, "Rhode Island Lore and Laughter," The Providence Sunday Journal, August 21, 1955, p. 15.

Philip, according to tradition, "was sometimes seen on moonlight nights, but particularly before a storm, springing from foothold to foothold through the marsh" where he had been killed. "There are even now unaccountable wailings in the woods, and strange indefinable whisperings on the hilltop, and the shadows reveal moving gleams of dusky light that flit from place to place."³²

Another legend about King Philip is not ghostly, but definitely on the supernatural side. After he was killed, his head was put on a pole in Boston, from whence it was stolen by his Indian comrades who hid it under the doorstep of a house in Taunton, Massachusetts. Later the head was buried with proper ceremony near Mount Hope. The Indians believed that every three generations the location of this unmarked grave would be revealed to someone in the House of Pokonoket. Some have claimed to have this information, but no one has told where it is.³³

Indian Corner

The last group of ghost tales have one thing in common; they all took place near Indian Corner in North Kingstown. The name of the corner supposedly commemorates the deadly battle between the whites and the Indians, and there is Bleeding Rock which, like the ground beneath the dripping corpse of Captain Carter, oozes blood.

It was at this corner that the Indian skeleton had

³²Ibid., p. 124.

³³Personal interview with Princess Red Wing.

misplaced his head for the workman to find, and also there grew up the story of a decapitated Negro boy whom the be-lated traveler was likely to see surrounded by a blue flame, "by the light of which its blind gropings and staggerings were quite visible. Just as it reached the crest of Pork Hill the fearful creature went off like a comet, with a sulphurous train of fire in its wake."³⁴ A hole was dug to mark the spot where this apparition was seen, and strange to say, that hole never fills with leaves.³⁵

A bluish light appears in other stories about the corner. One night about ten o'clock three Swamptowners were walking near the old tavern near Indian Corner when a sudden glare of bluish light showed a huge dog behind them. "It's [sic] eyes glistened in the bluish light, and its tail beat incessantly on the ground with dull, resounding thuds." When one man grabbed a fence rail and made a dash at the beast, the dog disappeared.³⁶

Another story about the corner relates how a farmer's horse would not go past Bleeding Rock. Finally after many trials, the horse "went by sailin'!" When the farmer reached home, the horse was trembling violently, as if he had seen a ghost.³⁷

For the most part, ghosts seem solitary creatures,

³⁴ Bacon, op. cit., p. 346.

³⁵ Gardiner, op. cit., p. 70.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 68.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 69.

but there is at least one instance when they traveled in a group. In 1894 a man was driving home from Peace Dale one foggy night when the thick, low-hanging mist hovered just far enough above the ground for the road surface to be visible. He heard footsteps and saw the legs of three men ahead, keeping an even pace with his progress. As he reached a fork in the road where he was to turn off, the fog suddenly lifted, and he saw that the three pairs of legs had no bodies above them.³⁸

Even twentieth century minds are not allergic to beliefs in ghosts and apparitions. In March, 1931, a picture of a white statue appeared in The Providence Sunday Journal with the solemn caption:

Monument erected by members of the Mt. Tom Club, near Escoheag, in commemoration of a legend of that district concerning the occasional appearance of a maiden in white who still keeps her lonely vigil waiting for her lover, a British army officer of the Revolutionary time who was warned to leave by the enraged country folk following discovery of the love match.³⁹

Many vowed that they had seen the Maid of Exeter; all of the twentieth century reason and logic could not shake the ghostly figure from the minds of those who knew they had beheld her. Over a year later the hoax was out:

Dr. John I. Pinkney ran across her [the statue] on a dump in Providence, a white plaster cast of a robed female, presumably model of some saint or angel.

³⁸ Federal Writers' Project, Rhode Island, p. 110.

³⁹ The Providence Sunday Journal, March 22, 1931, Artgravure Section, p. 1.

With the infinite pains for which he has a pure genius in any such worthy undertaking, he salvaged her, transported her to Mt. Tom, and set her up in the shrubbery at the bend of the highway near the club. The result was tremendously satisfactory. . . . A legend of a ghost spread over the countryside. One or two motorists narrowly escaped complete collapse. Before worse happened, the club rescued the lady again and put her in an upper window of their clubhouse.⁴⁰

If spectral tales and traditions partially succumbed to the vogue of folk humor, their appeal to credibility has not necessarily languished. In many cases the ghost tale became established as a local legend because persistent repetition of the story or renewed appearances of the unaccountable sights and sounds kept fresh the eerie tradition.

⁴⁰J. Earl Clauson, "These Plantations," The Evening Bulletin, Tuesday, November 22, 1932, p. 21.

CHAPTER V

SEA TALES AND TRADITIONS

As with any land which borders a great ocean, Rhode Island men and women gave lip service to innumerable tales about the mighty waters, the seamen and the ships which sailed from home ports. Since the commercial life of the colony depended to a great extent upon the merchant enterprises, legends of the sea were listened to with great attention. The captains were vitally concerned with the powers of that sea serpent in Gloucester harbor during the first part of the nineteenth century, as well as the various customs which had to be strictly followed if a voyage was to be successful.

Some of the supernatural manifestations were results of guilty consciences. A Bristol captain who dealt in slaves often had to put down his morning cup of coffee "because he seemed to see blood on the surface of it, and when he saw it, he remembered his throwing a slave with small-pox out of a boat, and chopping off his hands with the axe when he tried to pull himself back over the gunwale."¹

But erroneous perception by masses of people was the basis for the more celebrated tales and superstitions.

¹M.A. DeWolfe Howe, Bristol, Rhode Island (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930), p. 66.

The famous Palatine Light off Block Island was seen by thousands over a period of almost one hundred years, many of them reputable men and women of the larger cities of the northeast. The light was a controversial subject for several generations, as has been the story behind it.

According to tradition, the Palatine was a German vessel bound for Philadelphia with passengers and merchandise. When the ship was set off her course by gales, the crew mutinied, killed the captain, and starved and plundered the helpless passengers. When they had looted whatever of value they could lay their hands on, the crew took to the long boats, leaving the few surviving passengers to their fate. The Palatine went upon the rocks of Block Island where the local wreckers swarmed aboard, stripping the ship of whatever the crew had left. All the passengers were rescued with the exception of one poor crazed woman who had hidden on board. The shore sharks set fire to the hull, and the tide floated the wreck away. As the flames enveloped the ship, the frenzied shrieks of the mad woman were borne back to those on shore.²

This legend has many variations. While one version indicates that the ship drifted onto Block Island with the helpless passengers aboard, another relates that the ship was purposely run on shore by her captain and crew for the sake of plunder, and a third states that the vessel was decoyed

²Bacon, op. cit., pp. 356-357 and 360.

one dark, stormy night by means of false lights arranged by the islanders who wanted to wreck the ship.³

Choosing the last version for his poem, "The Palatine," John Greenleaf Whittier infuriated the islanders, particularly Rev. S.T. Livermore, who berated the poet for portraying the islanders in such an unsavory light. After a thorough investigation, Rev. Mr. Livermore came to very definite conclusions about the ship. Estimating that the incident occurred between Christmas and New Year's Day, about 1750, he takes away all the tales of mutiny and mistreated passengers, and even the wreck itself.

According to Rev. Mr. Livermore, the Palatine, a Dutch trading ship, stopped at Block Island and left a considerable number of dying passengers on its way home from the West Indies. Even if the ship had been wrecked, the islanders would not have burned her because every stick of wood and every bolt was of great value to them. Rev. Mr. Livermore's denouement was his evidence that the Palatine was wrecked in the Bay of Bengal in July, 1784.⁴

But historical and scientific impulses have a way of reversing themselves, and in 1923 it was proved that a ship was wrecked off Block Island, and a group of Palatines, the name given to groups of people of Germanic origin who came to America early in the eighteenth century, did come ashore on Block Island. On December 27, 1738, the Princess Augusta

³Hazard, Recollections of Olden Times, p. 128.

⁴Livermore, op. cit., pp. 120-121.

grounded during a heavy snowstorm and "broke to pieces on the rocks." The men on the ship tried to save everything they could, but the islanders were scavenging on their own and were later accused of misdemeanors.⁵

In the light of this later evidence, Rev. Mr. Livermore's proof based on misinformation only tended to supplement the myth. He credited two persons as the principal initiators of the tales of the Palatine: Dutch Kattern, a surviving passenger who became known as a witch, and Mark Dodge, "an inveterate opium eater" who lived in a haunted house.⁶

In 1899 a newspaper reporter interviewed Dutch Kattern's granddaughter on her one hundred and first birthday, and she asserted that the ship was burned by the captain to rob his passengers,

. . . who he starved and abused, hoping they would die, so he could rob dem easier. My grandmother . . . was de only woman saved. There was anoder woman that Mat Dodge tried to get ashore, but she ware lost, and they tell me Matt went away and used to go up and down de beach asking, "Where dat woman?" Then he would mutter, "She am lost."⁷

All of these conflicting stories have tended to increase an interest in the legend and augment it until the story of the Palatine ranks with that of Purgatory to be the best known of Rhode Island's supernatural tales, although the unworldly part of this legend does not begin until the ship

⁵ Philip Carleton Wentworth (ed.), Depositions of Officers of the Palatine Ship, Princess Augusta (Providence: E.L. Freeman Co., 1939).

⁶ Livermore, op. cit., p. 121.

⁷ The Providence Journal, December 14, 1899, p. 5.

itself had come and gone.

It matters not whether the ship drifted ashore or was lured ashore, nor does it matter whether she was burned or not, the burning light that appeared many evenings off the Island in the following years was associated with the Palatine. Dutch Kattern's granddaughter described it:

That ship, o'course I saw it. She used to come sailing in to Sandy Point with de sails fluttering and hanging loose like and sparks of flame flying up all 'round her. The ship would run mighty close to the Point, and then she would go away to de east'ard again. That captain must have been a mighty cruel man.⁸

Although Tom Hazard never saw the light himself, he heard

. . . of an islander by the name of _____, who was generally well and in his right mind except at the season of the year when the Palatine ship was wrecked, and after being stripped of everything of value was set on fire by the land pirates and burned with all the crew and passengers on board. At this particular season this old man, it was said, always became madly insane, and would rave about seeing a ship all ablaze, with men falling from her burning rigging and shrouds, and ever and anon shrink in horror from the spectres of two women, whose hands he cut off or disabled by blows from a cutlass, as they sought to cling to the gunwale of the last boat that left the burning ship and all on board to their fate that not one might remain alive to bear witness of this terrible catastrophe and crime. Whether the legend is true or false, I know not, though I do know that many Block Islanders, in my early days, firmly believed that the burning Palatine ship was often seen near the island.⁹

Mr. Hazard heard the tale from less imaginative men who were not quite so wild when the light of the Palatine showed high in the sky:

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Hazard, Recollections of Olden Times, pp. 128-129.

On one occasion I remember asking the late George Sheffield, who had just arrived at our house from Block Island, what he thought the weather would be, to which he replied that it would continue fair, but directly hesitated and said to Shedrick Card--a venerable old patriarch, who happened to accompany him--,"Mr. Card, the old Palatine loomed high last night, didn't she?" Mr. Card answered in the affirmative, when the other rejoined, addressing his words to me, "I was mistaken; it will be stormy soon." It was evident that neither of these men, both of whom were very intelligent, had the least doubt of their having seen the ship all in flames the night before, and that her bona fide appearance was no more than an ordinary occurrence."¹⁰

Another eye-witness to this light was Benjamin Congdon, who published an account of it in the Newport Mercury, March 23, 1878, "I have seen her eight or ten times or more. In those days nobody doubted her being sent by an Almighty power to punish those wicked men who murdered her passengers and crew. After the last of these were dead she was never more seen."¹¹

A more scientific description of the light is included in Rev. Mr. Livermore's book. Dr. Aaron C. Willey wrote in 1811:

This curious irradiative rises from the ocean near the northern point of the island. Its appearance is nothing different from a blaze of fire. Whether it actually touches the water, or merely hovers over it, is uncertain, for I am informed that no person has been near enough to decide accurately. . . . Sometimes it is small, resembling the light through a distant window, at others expanding to the highness of a ship with all her canvas spread. When large it displays a pyramidical form, or three constant streams. In the latter case the streams are somewhat blended together at the bottom, but separate and distinct at the top, while the middle

¹⁰Ibid., p. 129.

¹¹Bacon, op. cit., p. 360.

one rises higher than the other two. . . . It does not always return in the same place, but is not unfrequently seen shining at some considerable distance from where it disappeared. . . . It is seen at all seasons of the year, for the most part in the calm weather which precedes an easterly or southerly storm. It has, however, been noticed during a severe northwestern gale, and when no storm immediately followed.¹²

The light has long since disappeared, but the legend it nourished still makes a good fireside tale.

Another phase of the Palatine episode is the dancing mortar, a piece of lignum-vitae fourteen inches high and ten inches in diameter and nearly as heavy as the same amount of stone. Tradition says that it came from the ship and was first owned by Simon Ray, at whose house several of the unfortunate passengers were received and cared for. When all the Ray family died, the house was occupied by another family, and for a long period after this change, the house was said to be haunted. The mortar became bewitched; it danced around the house, threw itself on its side and rolled to and fro, then it would right itself again and hop up and down several times. The debunker, Rev. Mr. Livermore, adds that he thinks "all the dancing the mortar ever did was in the imagination of one who was then known as the 'old opium eater' and who was a near neighbor to the old mortar."¹³ In proof of his statement, Rev. Mr. Livermore states that the dancing mortar stopped dancing when Mark Dodge, "the opium eater," died.

Perhaps Mark Dodge and Dutch Kattern were the prin-

¹²Livermore, op. cit., pp. 123-125.

¹³Ibid., p. 199.

cipal source of the various Palatine legends, but if that was the case, these two certainly found many persons eager and willing to spread the tales, and embellish them, over the next century.

Another Block Island legend tells of ghosts of the Old Harbor Landing; they have called for help on many a stormy night:

Refugees, desperadoes who had deserted from both armies during the Revolution and devoted themselves to plunder, would sometimes invade the island. They often rowed light boats known as "Shaving Mills" because they tossed like shavings upon the waves and were capable of eluding the swiftest sails. . . . A galley with nine oarsmen, with such a boat, came to the Island in a rough sea, for plunder. It approached the Old Harbor Point Landing, where the water has always been deep, and the rocks dangerous. The surf was dashing fearfully and the galley of refugees attempted to land, but were swamped and all drowned in the evening. It is said that while they were straining every muscle upon their oars, the Islanders on the beach heard a powerful voice among them saying, "Pull! boys, pull for your lives!" followed by the cries--"Help! Help!" For many years afterwards persons in the vicinity claimed to have heard the command at night when no boatmen were there, and within the memory of the living scores of men at a time have thus been deceived, and hence originated the "Harbor Boys." . . . The frightful calls of the Harbor Boys died away about the time the Palatine ship of fire sailed off to return no more to Block Island.¹⁴

The excitement found in the tales of the Palatine and the Harbor Boys is matched with still another Block Island tale about a buccaneer, a Spanish lady, and a snow-white steed.

Lee, a Block Island fisherman and wrecker, turned buccaneer and outfitted a vessel with guns and an evil crew.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 105. .

In a Spanish port he agreed to take as a passenger a beautiful widow, her servants, and her white horse. Once at sea, he killed the servants and went down to get the lady. She eluded him and threw herself overboard. In a rage, he ordered that the white horse be thrown overboard, too. The horse tried to swim after the ship, but finally with a great cry, the animal sank. After many adventures when the fame of Lee's ship was wide-spread, Lee brought the ship to Block Island, removed everything of value, and set her adrift. The captain and a few chosen associates lived like kings on their stolen wealth. One night

. . . something like a burning vessel was seen approaching the rocky shore. As the wreck came towards that bold coast, Lee saw with horror that the waves were covered with the bodies of those who had been his victims, among them the form of the beautiful widow, whose veil floated like a pall upon the blood-red waters. In advance of all swam a white horse, that sprang upon the shore and made directly for the terror-stricken pirate. Controlled by some destiny against which he was powerless, he mounted the spectral steed and was borne away. Some say that he was taken into the sea and drowned . . . others aver that he is still riding.¹⁵

So much for Block Island's seafaring legends, and while the Island lore has a better quality than the mainland's sea tales, the latter has the edge on quantity.

There has been just one ghost ship recorded sailing up Narragansett Bay. Under a full August moon, Ben Gladding was clam digging in a cove on the end of Conanicut, just above Beavertail. Once he straightened up to rest and saw a strange vessel, unlike any craft he had ever beheld,

¹⁵Bacon, op. cit., pp. 362-365.

having a high stern, crossyards upon her bowsprit, and sails curiously fashioned, come rapidly towards him. The oddest thing about this peculiar vessel was not her appearance, though that was odd enough, but the fact that she seemed to have come over a shoal where no vessel should have come and was sailing swiftly right in the eye of what wind there was, with her yards square and her sails rap full.

She passed within a biscuit toss of Ben, heading for the shore a little to the south of him, where . . . she crossed the land as easily as she had traversed the water, and the last he saw of her she was heading for Graves's Point. Ben afterwards swore that she had no lights, but in the moonshine he could clearly see the flag that flew from her mainmast, spread out by the same mysterious wind that filled her sails, and that flag was adorned with a skull and cross-bones.¹⁶

Sea tales are filled with such nocturnal voyages as this by Captain Kidd or some other pirate, but old Ben Gladding was the only Rhode Islander to see one, or at least to have his story written down. Along with pirates goes buried treasure, and there are various spots along the coast where pirate gold was believed to have been buried at one time or another, but none of these places have supernatural tales surrounding them, unless you consider the general superstitions and mystic protections given to all buried treasure.

Stolen valuables were always buried geometrically, and broken swords were often buried on tops of the chests. Further safeguards could be human blood and bones, and there are tales of Captain Kidd having a pirate killed (preferably a Negro) to bury with the chest to protect it. Perhaps all of this hocus-pocus explains "why so few of the seekers have success, and why perfect darkness and profound silence are

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 350-351.

the conditions of success.¹⁷

Two Rhode Island tales, both from Westerly, reveal the unhappy consequences awaiting treasure seekers who speak while digging for treasure.

A dying man confessed that he had stolen some treasure from a British ship and buried it north of the village of Westerly. The agent sent to search for the treasure failed to find the spot, but rumor brought a lot of prospectors, including Elias Crandall, who found the correct place. He and his friends started digging. After several hours

. . . they touched a trunk or box, apparently covered with bear-skin. In their surprise and extreme joy, one of the company, unlearned in respect to the necessary silence to be observed in all such enterprises, thoughtlessly exclaimed, "We have found it; we have found it." The day was lost. The treasure, almost in their hands, vanished from sight, and all subsequent digging has been in vain.¹⁸

In a similar situation, people who lived in Lamphear Hollow became convinced that money had been buried in the orchard. They sent for Charles Green to come with his mercurial or witch-hazel rod to point out the treasure. The site was selected, and

after digging some three feet, near the foot of an apple-tree, they struck something hard. Surely fortune had smiled upon them. Hope was on tiptoe. In the greatness of their joy, not doubting success, one of the party spoke. Alas! the mystic power was broken; the box apparently rolled off with a rumbling noise, and was lost forever. Apropos: fortune is fickle to fools whose tongues are untied.¹⁹

¹⁷Denison, op. cit., p. 172.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 170-171.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 172.

The remaining sea tales do not fall into any one category. Each of the four is separate in theme from the others.

Captain Jimmy Hammond saw a vision and heard a deep voice as he stood on the shores of Fox Island. He was told to mend his ways, and Captain Hammond became a changed man. Continuing to have visions and hear voices, he was told in later communications that Rhody Baker would be his wife. Although he had never given the lady any serious attention before this, the Captain spent the rest of his life courting Rhody Baker; however, his voices had misinformed him, for she never consented to be his wife.²⁰

The second tale tells of a wicked sea captain who went down with his ship off shore near Second Beach, Newport. He swore a mighty oath and cursed the briny deep, and for his punishment he was doomed to serve the sea as a fearful ogre beneath the waves. The ogre would reach out and grab people and either pull them beneath the water or hold them until the sea beats them to pieces. The ogre's appetite was never satisfied as he constantly reached for additional victims.²¹

Further up the island roams another ghost as a result of a storm at sea in which a ship was lost. A maiden who lost her lover on that ship haunts the beach between Purgatory and Paradise. Sometimes in her despair, she seemed to lose her-

²⁰Harriet Langworthy Gardner, "Captain Jimmy's Near Romance," Facts and Fancies Concerning North Kingstown, p. 89.

²¹Thomas, op. cit., pp. 5-6.

self in the rocky abyss of Purgatory, but her youth and beauty could not be buried in such murky depths, and she always floated forth again in search of her lover. She found a home on Paradise Rocks where she could look out on the sea and sing to the spirit of her beloved coming toward her over the waves. He never reaches her, but it is Paradise to her because he is ever coming.²²

The Indians had a legend about the siren of Narragansett Bay:

There lived, many summers ago, a set of giants on the islands of Narragansett, who were of great power and strength. Among these giants, one was called Moshup, who had a reputation of being very cruel when in anger. This report was corroborated by the following anecdote. One day, while in his lodge, something occurred to enrage Moshup, at which he caught up his wife, who stood near by, and hurled her through the air. She dropped upon Seaconet Point; but, singular to relate, survived the fall, and for many years was heard singing low, melancholy songs, while she sat alone overlooking the bay. These songs were so sweet and seductive that many a fisherman moored his canoe and sought the singer, when he was always obliged to pay her tribute. Many moons passed, and the siren sat upon the shore, singing her songs; but finally, one morning it was noticed that her song had ceased. Great curiosity was felt among the people; one, who had been very much enamored with her, went to the place where she usually was found. Alas! she had been transformed into a rock.²³

Although the sirens, ogres, ghost ships, dancing mortars, and all the other supernatural phenomena of Rhode Island waters have disappeared, legends remain to excite the modern generation.

²²Ibid., pp. 3-4.

²³Ellen Russell Emerson, Indian Myths (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1884), pp. 438-439.

CHAPTER VI

THE NATURAL AND THE SUPERNATURAL

Folklore had its origin at that stage in the evolution of the mental life of man when an intelligent curiosity concerning himself and his surroundings took the place of mere animal inquisitiveness. At that time no sharp line severed nature from the supernatural. The early peoples rose slowly to the conception of the absolute, but at the same time they felt that great powers overshadowed the world, both for good and evil.

Although further advanced than the Indian and Negro of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the Englishmen intertwined the forces of the natural and the supernatural in their superstitions. What is now called ordinary events were explained as supernatural (illnesses caused by witches; disturbances in a house caused by an avenging ghost), while the supernatural became ordinary (the devil mistaken for a distinguished gentleman; belief in astrology taken for granted). This habit of mixing the natural and the supernatural was even more apparent among the Negroes and Indians who believed plants and animals possessed magical powers and could govern the destiny of mortals.

In this chapter is that mixture of the natural and the supernatural in superstitions, customs, and tales about animals, charms, and curses. Both oral and literary traditions have helped to perpetuate these folkways. In the absence of methodical field collecting in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, verbal traditions seeped into print through various channels, often opened by literary, antiquarian, or commercial vogues; conversely, the printed mediums originated and distributed fictions that eventually found their way into oral movement.

Many times the lasting tradition is a combination of the oral and literary sources. Thomas Hazard wrote of some sheep placed under the care of old Benny Nichols by his father:

Among these sheep were two ewes of the creeper or otter sheep, so called, it is supposed, from the peculiar shortness of their legs. One of these sheep lay drifted under a snow-bank twenty-one days. The place where it lay was discovered by old Benny, from chancing to notice a small hole in the snow not bigger than his finger, called "a breathing hole," that was made, as is usually the case, by the warm breath of the sheep underneath. When taken out the poor thing was almost naked, having eaten off its own wool as far as it was within reach. Old Debby Nichols--Benjamin's wife--fed the sheep, at first very cautiously with a little warm milk, gradually increasing the quantity until it got strong enough to digest its ordinary food. When restored to health, the old woman dressed the naked sheep in a suit of clothes made out of old ragged garments of her husband's. It was several days, however, before the flock would permit its approach in so unsightly a garb.¹

In relating this same tale, Alice Morse Earle inserts

¹Hazard, Recollections of Olden Times, p. 81.

a bit of black magic to give a different ending. The local witch, Tuggie Bannock, sees this strange sheep among the flock and thinks it is a witch. Terrified, she runs to tell Benny and Debby, who only laugh at the superstitious Tuggie. Angered by their ridicule, Tuggie decides to conjure a spell. Strange things happen the next few months, but when the lamb's wool grows out and the homemade coat can be removed, the "project" is worked out. From then on, creeper sheep "were known and sold throughout Narragansett by the name of witch sheep."²

A mixture of the two stories has been recorded as a South County legend by Anna Stanton Nugent. She follows Mr. Hazard's anecdote very closely, but adds Tuggie Bannock was frightened by the odd appearance of the lamb and called it a witch, after which the name of creeper sheep changed to witch sheep.³

In giving an explanation of the origination of these sheep, Mr. Hazard does state a superstition of last century:

I have since learned that the first creeper sheep originated on an island in Maine or Massachusetts, on occasion of the mother being frightened, when conceiving, by an otter. If this is so, I think the sudden shock may have imparted to the incipient embryo not only some of the external characteristics of the otter, but some of the instincts also. . . . Two otter sheep swam across and back a wide mill pond.⁴

²Earle, In Old Narragansett, pp. 105-119.

³Anna Stanton Nugent, "The Witch Sheep," Facts and Fancies Concerning North Kingstown, R.I., pp. 47-48.

⁴Hazard, Recollections of Olden Times, p. 82.

In the Almanac of 1789 was this note on natural history:

A toad was seen fighting a spider in Rhode Island; and when the former was bit, it hopped to a plantain leaf, bit off a piece, and then engaged the spider again. After this had been repeated sundry times, a spectator pulled up the plantain, and put it out of the way. The toad, on being bit again, jumped to where the plantain had stood; and as it was not to be found, she hopped round several times, turned on her back, swelled up, and died immediately. This is an evident demonstration that the juice of the plantain is an antidote against the bites of these venomous insects.⁵

Even more, this is an evident demonstration that people believed animals knew instinctively what is good for them and will seek curative herbs when they have suffered an injury. This simple tale with every appearance of being a mere bit of local observation is a variant of a widespread piece of legendary lore; this same story in different settings was known in both England and Flanders. Both toads and spiders were considered very venomous and possessing curative powers; a sick person could hang either a dead spider or toad around his neck to help him get well.⁶

Snakes, too, had a certain magic charm. Near the Connecticut line in what is now Coventry, a great snake once lived on Carbuncle Hill. Its species was unknown, but its size was enormous, and in the center of its head was a large gem--a carbuncle--deep red, glowing with the brilliancy and radiance of a great fire. Wherever it went at night, its

⁵Kittredge, The Old Farmer and His Almanack, p. 104.

⁶Ibid., pp. 104-119.

presence was always announced by the glow of the gem, and even in the daytime the light from the carbuncle could be seen in a crimson flood in the darkness of the woods. The Narragansetts and Mohegans, who had a mutual claim on this territory, tried to capture the great snake, but all efforts were unsuccessful until shortly before the coming of the first white man. A large party of Indians managed to surround the reptile and kill it; during the terrific battle, the snake cut a huge rock in two with one swipe of his tail. The carbuncle became the treasured talisman of the Indian tribe, and it served as a warning of danger for many years. When the white man came and heard the story of this wonderful gem, they wanted to have it and arranged an expedition against the Indians to take it away. Since the settler's surprise attack was announced by the increased glow of the stone, the Indians were prepared. After the long, bitter battle, all the Indians were killed except the chief who stood alone with the carbuncle. When the white men tried to take the gem away from him, he drew back his arm and gave it a mighty throw. It landed with a great splash in the middle of a pond and was lost forever. Today that small lake is known as Carbuncle Pond.⁷

In this superstition-tinged section of animal lore, there are two stories about cows.

Rowland Robinson, who owned a large dairy, wanted all

⁷Federal Writers' Project, Rhode Island, pp. 106-107.

"blanket cows," that is, cows which are entirely white around the body between the shoulders and the hips. His ambition was to have exactly one hundred of these blanket cows, no more and no less. He could manage to keep ninety-nine fairly steadily, but whenever the total reached one hundred, one or more became sick and died or lost in an accident. He never had his hundred, and some of his neighbors attributed this to supernatural causes.⁸

A cow with miraculous powers once fell into Kettle Holes in North Kingstown. The animal was not seen for two days, and then she was off Beaver Tail, making her way to shore.⁹

Combining the natural with the supernatural in the bird world, the whip-poor-will was believed to be a harbinger of death throughout Narragansett. Thomas Hazard once asked a Quaker lady who lived on Rhode Island if she had ever heard a whip-poor-will. "Never but twice," she replied, "once on the night that my father died, and again on the night preceding the day on which I lost my mother."¹⁰

Rhode Islanders of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had many other superstitions other than those dealing with animals. Superstition, in common parlance, designates the sum of beliefs and practices shared by other people

⁸Hazard, Recollections of Olden Times, p. 30.

⁹Gardiner, op. cit., p. 72.

¹⁰Hazard, Recollections of Olden Times, p. 139.

in so far as they differ from our own. What we believe and practice is, of course, religion. In other words, any belief or practice that is not recommended or enjoined by any one of the great organized religions may be termed a superstition. The roots of superstition are, to a certain extent, identical with the roots of religion taken in its broadest sense.

In earlier chapters were descriptions of superstitions dealing with devils, vampires, witches, fortunetellers, astrology, ghosts, phantom ships, and buried treasure. Indeed, practically every tale and tradition related herein could be tied under the heading of superstition. The following charms, precautions, and curses are but another phase of this larger classification.

Certain charms were said to have the power to ward off evil spirits:

Drop a piece of silver behind you in your path and a witch cannot follow.¹¹

Hang a bag of egg shells around your neck.¹²

Carry a horseshoe or a prayerbook.¹³

Women should wear their petticoats inside out, and men should do the same with their waistcoats.¹⁴

Other precautions were advised to be taken into consideration for all types of endeavors:

Cut your hair on the new of the moon if you want it to

¹¹ Earle, In Old Narragansett, p. 115.

¹² Ibid., p. 70.

¹³ Ibid., p. 74.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 70 and 187.

grow; cut it on the dark of the moon, and it will not do well.¹⁵

Plant vegetables that ripen underground on the dark of the moon; plant vegetables that ripen above the ground on the new of the moon.¹⁶

What a cat's eye is narrow, or the pupil one thin line, the tide is in; when the tide is out, the cat's eye is round and the pupil covers nearly the whole color spot.¹⁷

If you want to know if there is a dry season ahead, look at the new moon. If you can hang a bucket of water on the lower corner, the season will be dry; if your bucket would fall off and water spill, the Narragansett predicted a wet month ahead.¹⁸

Time for planting corn is when the oak leaf is the size of a mouse's ear.¹⁹

These superstitions, some of which are founded on reasonable facts, are a mixture of ideas from the three races, and these beliefs are no more outlandish than some of the medical treatments of the times. Some of the early remedies sound as much like black magic and hocus pocus as Tuggie Bannock could contrive:

Toothache -- cut the ear.

¹⁵"Listen to the Medicine Man," The Narragansett Dawn, I (May, 1935), 17.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷"Listen to the Medicine Man," The Narragansett Dawn, I (June, 1935), 16.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Personal interview with Henry G. Jackson.

Earache -- hold the end of a cat's tail in the ear.

Apoplexy and epilepsy -- "powder of earthworms taken fasting before and after ye change and full of ye moon."

Ache in the shoulder -- grind "oyle of marsh mallows, raisons of the sun, and figgs" with mustard seed and good wine vinegar; spread it on a lamb's skin and lay it on the place grieved.

Jaundice -- "take a piece of Casteel Soape and slice it into thin pieces and put ym into half a pint of water and let it dissolve and drink 2 or 4 times."²⁰

Certain places have had supposedly miraculous curative powers, and one of these is a spring in North Kingstown which flows westerly into Pausacaco Pond, north of Gilbert Stuart's birthplace. This is the headwater of the Pettasquamscutt River. In the eighteenth centry people with poor eyesight came from miles to bathe their eyes in the water of this spring, which is called the Eye Spring.²¹

Certain men have been considered to have great healing powers, too, and a celebrated rain water doctor once established himself in Providence. He advocated a spare diet, rain water and gruel, and proper exercise, which according to his own testimony, "benefitted many." The people finally decided he was a hoax and chased him out of town.²²

²⁰Carpenter, op. cit., pp. 255-267.

²¹Sara Tillinghast Warren, "The Eye Spring," Facts and Fancies Concerning North Kingstown, p. 46.

²²Bernard Whitman, A Lecture on Popular Superstitions (Boston: Bowles and Dearborn, 1829), p. 51.

These medical curiosities of olden days are closely related to the superstitions of the time, for one who believed that a cat's tail in the ear would cure an earache would, very likely, be easily led into giving many inanimate objects various kinds of powers, healing or hurting.

An opal ring was one of these objects which carried a spell. John Bell, son of a London merchant, came to Newport before the Revolution as the King's revenue officer. There he met Mary Antony, a daughter of a Quaker and staunch patriot, and they fell in love. They were secretly married before his return to England in 1766, and as a parting gift he gave her an opal ring that had belonged to his mother. She took the ring and wore it secretly in her bosom. Years slipped away, but John was never able to return to his wife. The Revolution began, and in an engagement off Hatteras in 1778, John was killed. From that moment Mary wore his ring on her finger, no longer afraid of her father's wrath, but her life began to ebb away. A few months later as she lay on her deathbed, she presented the ring to a friend with the instructions that it be given to the oldest daughter in the family. In compliance with this request, the ring was bestowed upon the daughter, who died in 1799. Another daughter was born in 1800, named Mary, and given the ring. She, too met an early death. Wherever the ring was placed, it brought disaster and death. The opal was haunted with sorrow.²³

²³George Champlin Mason, Reminiscences of Newport (Newport: Charles E. Hammett, Jr., 1884), pp. 126-129.

Although good wishes went with the giving of the opal ring, the ring itself was cursed and no one could escape the spell. There are many tales of curses which were effective for many years.

In the early 1750's in Swansea, Massachusetts, a vagrant fortuneteller, Jeffrey Martin, put a curse on Miss Chloe Wilbur who had made him angry, "Your husband will have a withered left arm; your oldest son will drown in a seething river." She married William Hammond, who had a withered arm, and they came to live in North Kingstown. The couple had ten children, all reaching maturity. In 1792 her oldest son was on his way to get a doctor for his wife during a storm when he fell in the river and drowned. When she heard the news, the old mother fell back crying, "The curse! You can't forestall the ruling of fate."²⁴

Curses muttered on the deathbed have such an effect that they last for several generations.

In the earliest list of "twenty-five acre men" received as inhabitants of Providence (Jan. 19, 1645-6) are found the names of John x Clawson and Benjamin x Herendeen. Their families were very intimate, and it is probable were connected by marriage. Clawson was a hired servant of Roger Williams. One night (Jan. 4, 1660-1) he was attacked from behind a thicket of barberry bushes near the north burial ground by an Indian named Waumaion, whom Clawson supposed to be instigated thereto by Herendeen. At the first assault, Clawson's chin was split open by a blow with a broad axe, from the effects of which wound he soon afterwards died, but not before he had pronounced a strange curse, . . . "that

²⁴Abbie Peckham Gardner, "The Ancient Curse," Facts and Fancies Concerning North Kingstown, pp. 39-41.

he and his posterity might be marked with split chins and haunted with barberry bushes." More than a century later, testimony was collected in proof of the fulfillment of this dying malediction. By this it appears that the descendants of the murderer were remarkable for the excavated or furrowed chin, which caused the curse of Clawson to be kept in remembrance, and many a quarrel was excited among them at huskings²⁵ and frolics by mention of the word "barberry bushes."

A dying curse supposedly given by George Washington had general acceptance, and great effect, among the Negroes in South County:

Constable Cranston of North Kingstown said to old Cuddymonk, "I can't see why all you blacks are so dishonest and tricky!"

"Why, Mass' Cranston" (with an injured and unresentful air), dey has ter be--dey so kep down. It all de fault ob dat unrageous ole George Washington. When he a-dyin he rolls his eyes an' say: 'Forebber keep de nigger down' -- an it take a hundred year to work out a dyin' spell."

This astounding piece of post mortem news about the Father of his Country was new to the constable, though it was commonly believed by negroes then as now.²⁶

Because dying curses were so potent, any dying wish had to be carried out in a very strict fashion.

As Captain Caleb Greene of Abponaug lay dying, he told his old Negro servant to take care of the remaining members of the Greene family as faithfully as he had when the captain was in charge of the house.

"I'm going to be buried right up in the plot behind the house and can keep an eye on you," the captain reminded the servant, "and it would be a good idea if you came up to

²⁵Samuel Greene Arnold, History of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations (2 ed., New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1874), I, 465-466.

²⁶Earle, In Old Narragansett, pp. 97-98.

my grave once a week and knock on my stone three times. Then you just tell me what you have done wrong during the week, or if you have done everything just right, tell me that, too." For the rest of his life, the Negro servant went to the captain's grave to carry out the orders of the dying man.²⁷

These dying wishes and curses, as well as the superstitions, rested their case on faith from the evidence of experience--erroneous observation, hearsay, resemblances mistaken for causes--evidence that proves nothing except that superstition sees what it wants to see and believes what it wants to believe.

²⁷Personal interview with Henry G. Jackson.

CONCLUSION

If folklore is to be ranked as one of the "highest expressions of artistic feeling and inspiration," can it be measured by the same standards as other literary works? Alexander Haggerty Krappe believes that it should:

I make bold to claim that productions of the popular mind demand and deserve the same standards of criticism. There is no value whatever in refusing to call platitudinous and trite what deserves to be called so and what would inevitably be called so were it a literary product in the general acceptance of the term.

In an effort to determine the quality of the tales in the supernatural folklore of Rhode Island, it would be well to examine for a moment the art of storytelling, for no human art is older. Before primitive peoples could write or read they told tales to one another. From the mists of antiquity there have come vast numbers of traditional tales which express the instinctive feelings of immature tribes and races in a kind of story-philosophy. Most of the legends which have survived several centuries are good tales or they would have died out from lack of interest.

The habit of storytelling took early root in colonial New England, where the tales ran to the comic anecdote and local legend, the tall story and trickster yarn, rather than

¹Krappe, op. cit., p. x.

to the creation myths, prose sagas, animal fables, and aetiological tales familiar in medieval, classical, and primitive cultures. Elizabethan superstitions, frontier humor, rural character types, outdoor occupations, Indian place histories, and geographical landmarks have largely determined the content and flavor of the New England homespun yarns, which grew from a people born in the seventeenth century, when talk traveled by print as well as by mouth, pagan gods had died, science was diminishing wonder, and emigrants crossing the sea exchanged old associations for new.

Lacking books, loving horrors, bred in demonology, and surrounded by dread animals and savages, colonial New Englanders turned naturally into vivid spinners and eager consumers of folkyarn. These popular traditions began to be valued just as they began to decline and disappear. Such factors as the spread of book-learning, the levelling of ancient social distinctions, the growth of new industrial conditions, and the breaking down of geographical barriers stayed the tide of traditional tales, and diverted the powers of expression into other channels.

Folk tales have been described as "the little novels of child-like intellects." They belong to and issue from a class whose daily life lies close to the earth--toilers in the field and in the forest and on the seas, who render with simple directness, in stories or charms, their impressions of the natural or supernatural forces with which their own

lives are surrounded.

The tales were told to amuse and to inform, for life was told in a tale, not explained by a philosophy. A good folk tale is essentially dramatic, and of course the very act of committing oral traditions to writing lessens their intensity and power. To fully appreciate these stories, the reader should try to visualize the many varied scenes beside a campfire, in a Negro cabin, on the village green, near the cracker barrel of a country store, or in an Indian wigwam, where the early storyteller whiled away the hours, with no thoughts of his words ever being written down, much less printed in a book. Thus will the folk tales be enhanced by a simplicity and directness, otherwise impossible to attain in a modern civilization.

The tales recounted in this paper are mere skeletons. Just as one cannot accurately judge Moby Dick or The Scarlet Letter by reading a two or three page summary of the plot, neither can one properly appraise a tale spun in the mystic past that is condensed into a few modern paragraphs. A good storyteller could enthrall a fireside audience with even one of the most trite ghost stories, the tale of the haunted Fayerweather house on Watch Hill. A poor storyteller, on the other hand, might get no more response than a yawn with the exciting witch weavers of South County or the humorous tale of the cats sitting on the roof of the Hazard house.

But in spite of the absence of this authentic and complete setting which would give a certain air of romance and glamor to the tales, the basic skeletons may be judged on the fundamental qualities of any story-- originality, dramatic power, simplicity, directness, and sincerity.

Above all others, the tale of the Palatine fulfills these qualifications. Although phantom ships have been seen off the coast of Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Maine, and at least three have been described by nineteenth century poets, the Palatine remains the best specter ship in New England. The dramatic power of the traditional tale is tremendous--the starving passengers, the wreck and looting of the ship by the islanders, the shrieks of the mad woman as the burning boat drifts seaward, and the fiery phantom which returned at various times for the next one hundred years to haunt the islanders. The simple, direct story evolved from an actual event, and no one can doubt the sincerity of those who told and retold the tale each time the burning specter appeared on the horizon.

In the best of the other sea tales, the great dramatic force is missing in the story of the ghosts of Old Harbor Landing, and simplicity and sincerity are lacking in the one of the buccaneer and the white horse. This last tale, although romantic and exciting, never held the popular appeal of the Palatine story.

The humorous qualities of the ghost of the Black

Horse Tavern help to make that tale a good one, as well as to give it an original quality that is missing in many other ghost stories of New England. The ghost of the Ram-tail Factory did the usual ghostly things, but the tale itself is better than usual because of its dramatic appeal, although the ghost of the Indian squaw Manouna, who killed her children, is able to capture more sympathy, if not more interest, because of the tragic circumstances which led up to her death.

Two ghost legends deserve mention for their originality: the story of the scrub pines which represented an Indian killed unnecessarily, and the one of old Miss Mumford whose body was found in the cove by following a piece of yarn. While not as original, the tales of the moaning bones of Mount Tom and the cruel father who beat his son to death do have dramatic effect.

None of the tales about the devil stand up well under the light of critical appraisal. Even the story of Purgatory, perhaps the best known legend in the state, is trite and kept alive by the prominent feature of the Middletown landscape. Purgatories are scattered throughout New England, as are devil's footprints and bleeding rocks. "Polly of Apponaug," the closest thing to a folk poem dealing with the supernatural in Rhode Island, is the only interesting piece in the whole collection.

The witch weavers, so expertly described by Alice Morse Earle, are an important part of the folklore of the

Narragansett country, and the career of Silvy Tory translated into the hocus-pocus of witchery is an exciting basis on which to drape all kinds of legends and stories. Of course Tuggie Bannock cannot be included here, for although her story is based on fact, she is a fictitious character created in the mind of Miss Earle.

The tale of the witch sheep, half legend and half popular story, is unusual and humorous, as is the story of the dying wish of Captain Caleb Greene.

Two last tales do meet the necessary qualifications; both are about murders--Clawson and Cornell. The tale of the Clawson murder is chosen because of the unusual curse pronounced by the dying man and the prophetic way that curse was carried out for many generations. Perhaps because it is the only instance of a first-hand account of a specter, the story of the Cornell murder has particular appeal; it has all the basic qualities of a good tale, plus one thing--it is couched in the language of the time when it happened.

In summary, there are four tales which could be matched against the best from any other section of the country: the Palatine, the ghost of the Black Horse Tavern, the Narragansett witch weavers, and the Cornell murder. Representing two centuries of Rhode Island folkways, they are an important part of our literary and historical heritage.

Cradled and nurtured in the wonder-laden atmosphere of a new world and stimulated by a brimstone theology that

clothed evil in human form, this native flair for story-telling found fertile ground in the supernatural realm.

Folklore is not something which can be strictly dated as beginning here and ending there. Many things in our society will be part of the folklore traditions a hundred years from now, for the learning of one generation has a way of becoming folklore of another. An understanding of that folklore helps reconstruct the spiritual, historical, and literary heritage of man, not as exemplified by the outstanding works of poets and thinkers, but as represented by the more or less inarticulate voices of the folk.

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