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## A CURIOUS "WITCHCRAFT" CASE

WILLIAM RENWICK RIDDELL<sup>1</sup>

A charge of Witchcraft would now be met with a smile of derision in most of the civilized world, even by the illiterate. I have personally known only one woman reputed to be a witch; and she was only a "white witch," consulted as to the whereabouts of strayed cattle, stolen goods, etc. Probably Satan would not acknowledge her; but she did make—or was reputed to have made—astonishingly accurate discoveries or guesses for the advantage of those consulting her. Poor woman, she passed to her reward, whatever it was, more than half-a-century ago; and I have not heard of a Canadian witch, since—except, indeed one endowed with a metaphorical witchery.

Two hundred years ago, such a charge was not so innocuous: true, there were already a few daring spirits who ventured to question the existence of diabolical powers given by the Prince of Darkness to deluded votaries, and while not actually directly challenging the divine command not to permit a witch to live, either interpreted it as applying to pretenders to supernatural powers or limited it to the Hebrews among whom such Satanic beings as witches might still be found. But the reality of witchcraft was believed in by practically all of every degree from king to hind, learned lawyer, physician, priest and philosopher to ignorant and illiterate peasant and boor, "tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, beggar-man, thief."

That splendid collection of true stories, the *State Trials*, gives a good example of the estimate of the common people of England concerning witchcraft and of the consequences following a reputation for it, late in the 17th and early in the 18th century.

The story comes out in two trials: *Reg. v. Hathaway* and *Reg. v. Hathaway et al.* (1702), *14 Howell's State Trials*, 639, *sqq.*: 690, *sqq.*

Richard Hathaway became a servant of one Thomas Welling, a blacksmith in Southwark, Surrey, about 1697-8: he seems to have been neurotic to a degree, whether insane depends upon the definition of insanity but undoubtedly abnormal. After serving faithfully some two years, he was seized with fits, plainly epileptic "Jacksonian" fits

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and not simply *petit mal*; and was sent to a hospital after "his master had spent a great deal of money with doctors and apothecaries and could get no cure for him."

Being put to bed in the hospital he took a fit, turning up the whites of his eyes, etc.; he seems also to have been semi-delirious if he was not malingering.

He remained in the hospital under treatment for some five months: he suffered from chronic constipation which did not yield even to liquid quicksilver, and he was weak and unable to walk firmly. After five months, he was discharged somewhat improved in health, but with the verdict that he was incurable. He had a relapse and was again admitted into the hospital: his symptoms were now more alarming although wholly consistent with epilepsy—he lay seven or eight days at a time without food or drink, his constipation continued in an even aggravated form, quicksilver administered did not operate and "the doctor wondered it should lie so long in his body," "his eyes were set in his head"—we are not told of his kidney condition. The constipation of epileptics as well as their sluggishness, fixity of the eyes, somnolent and stuporous condition lasting, perhaps, several days, all medical authorities agree on if all are not agreed as to the cause. See, e. g., Drs. Church and Peterson's convenient and useful handbook: *Nervous and Mental Diseases*, Philadelphia, 1911, pp. 641, 844, 845.

But it must be remembered that with the Romans, Greeks and practically every people in an early stage of civilization, as, for example, our Indians, epilepsy was the *morbis sacer*, the sacred disease, produced by no mortal cause, but supernatural in its origin and significance.

Counsel for Hathaway on his separate trial said that the "tenders," i. e., the attendants, at the hospital told him "that he must lie under some evil tongue," and in that way the first thought was raised in his mind that he was bewitched. It is but fair to Hathaway to say that his hospital nurse swears that he never in the hospital pretended to have been bewitched.

Being again discharged as incurable, he went to his master's: he now had, however acquired or suggested, the real or pretended belief that he was bewitched. Notwithstanding his conviction in 1702 as a cheat and imposter, I think he actually believed that he was bewitched.

That his master, Welling, the blacksmith, so believed, there can

be no doubt; and it is equally certain that many of the neighbors later shared the belief.

Mr. and Mrs. Welling being told by Hathaway that he was bewitched, began to "consider what person it should be that should have any evil designs against him: and at last they recollected that" Welling "had taken a room over the head of . . . Sarah Morduck, and she had gone in to the shop often and had given them very ill words, and she should be even with him one time or other; and, then [mark the logic!] they concluded this woman was the person."

Sarah Morduck (Murdoch), née Hearne, was the wife of Edward Morduck of Southwark, a waterman; she was a fruit-dealer and, except that she had a nasty temper and a sharp tongue, there does not seem to have been anything against her; moreover, no reason is given or suggested why even a "Saga, *Anglicé*, a witch," should torture a servant for his master's sin; but popular logic is past finding out.

A curious superstition took possession of Hathaway—he conceived the idea that by scratching Sarah Morduck and drawing blood from her, he would be freed from the bewitching. On September 25th, 1700, he went to her house and coming behind her as she was opening a window, attacked her from behind, scratched her face in several places till blood came, knocked out one of her teeth and tore her clothes. He said that he found great relief from this; and, no doubt, he did. The news was spread around the neighborhood that Sarah had bewitched Hathaway and that he had obtained relief by scratching her till the blood came: and when he had another attack in the same month, Elizabeth Willoughby, wife of Walter Willoughby, went with several other neighbors, and, leaving Hathaway at an adjoining street-corner, entered Sarah's house to take her out for him to scratch. She refused, Mrs. Willoughby struck her with her fist, and succeeded in dragging her out of the house, but Mrs. Sarah Hall came to her assistance and with difficulty got her back into the house again. The gang beset the house and threatened to pull it down unless the witch should be delivered to them; but Mrs. Hall called her husband who was in bed—it was about 8 o'clock in the morning—and Hall frightened them away.

Mrs. Willoughby, by the way, swore at Hathaway's trial that she believed that Hathaway was bewitched—she had been bewitched herself when she was a child and "a woman was taken on suspicion for it": and she added: "I flew over them all. . . . One held

me by one arm, another by the other, and another behind and I flew sheer over their heads." She could not tell Lord Chief Justice Holt what had become of the woman who made her fly: "I have been well ever since I was married."

An attempt was made to check the Hathaway scandal but with little success. On February 9, 1702 (1701, O. S.) the witch went to the Parish Church: the people threatened her and she took refuge in the Vestry where she was found by the Rev. Dr. Martin, the Rector. He made inquiries and determined to make an experiment to test the good faith of Hathaway. Visiting him, he found him affecting to be unable to speak or to see, but able to hear and express assent by holding up his hand. Dr. Martin told him that he had been informed that Sarah Morduck had bewitched him and that he obtained relief by scratching her, that he wished to see the experiment himself, and had brought her for the purpose. Hathaway assented: Sarah came to the bedside and spoke to him, and Hathaway was told to scratch her. The clergyman, however, had been told by Mrs. Welling that scratching another woman had no effect and had determined to see for himself. He had offered Mrs. Willoughby who was "a very big woman and very much unlike Sarah Morduck . . . a shilling if she would let this man scratch her: She flew off, and said she would not suffer it for all the world," perhaps misunderstanding what was proposed or perhaps remembering her girlhood experience.

But a poor woman by the name of Johnson agreed to be scratched: and when the sufferer made to scratch Sarah's arm, Dr. Martin substituted Mrs. Johnson's: Hathaway thought to make sure that he had the right woman by feeling the arm two or three times from wrist to elbow and then razed the skin. The parson said: "You have drawn blood, and you may be satisfied"; Hathaway turned over on his back. Dr. Martin sent Mrs. Johnson away at once and stood by the bed with Mrs. Morduck. Hathaway opened his eyes took hold of Mrs. Morduck's apron and was able to see and speak. Dr. Martin told him of his mistake, Mrs. Johnson came in with her arm bleeding and "the fellow at this seemed very much cast down." Dr. Martin gave him some good advice, told Welling of the deceit and went away satisfied that the fraud had been thoroughly exposed.

But on returning in the afternoon about 5 o'clock he was assailed by Mr. and Mrs. Welling: he had ruined them, the man was worse than before and the clergyman had given it out as a cheat: did he get

any money by it?: two doctors were with Hathaway and they would swear that he was bewitched, etc., etc. And that was not all: the ungrateful Sarah had spread it abroad that Mrs. Johnson had been proved to be the witch and Johnson would have nothing more to do with her. She met Dr. Martin and covered him with reproaches for getting her into this trouble; and he had to placate the angry husband as best he could, by assuring his wife was not a witch.

Southwark was not convinced but rather confirmed in the opinion that Sarah was the guilty witch.

Shortly after this unsuccessful attempt at undeception, other and successful efforts were made to procure the unfortunate Sarah to be scratched by Hathaway: on February 11, 1702 (1701, O. S.) a gang of six men all disguised forced her out of her house to Welling's, and there Hathaway by the encouragement of the company "scratched her barbarously. . . . Welling's wife scratched her and tore her hair and face and pulled off her head-cloaths; then Welling kicked her two or three times . . . threw her on the ground, . . . stamped on her and bruised her so much that she had to keep her bed for a fortnight"—she was then thrown out on the street where she was picked up with "her face much torn in a most barbarous manner, and her legs, arms and body cruelly bruised and black."

Sarah did not take kindly to this treatment and declined to offer herself again to be scratched when requested to do so. Hathaway had long before developed alarming symptoms, fasting for a long time, vomiting bent pins and passing them *per alvum*, etc. The vomiting of the epileptic is a well recognized phenomenon: Church & Peterson, *op cit.*, pp. 635, 640: the pins were certainly a fraud consciously contrived to convince others of the bewitchment—and the deceit was ultimately detected.

The witch fled to London for shelter and Welling had her haled before the Alderman, Sir Thomas Lane, to compel her to allow Hathaway to scratch her: Sir Thomas said that to scratch her without her consent would be illegal: she agreed that she might be scratched if that would put an end to them troubling her, and she was scratched accordingly—whereupon Hathaway, who had been unable to eat or drink, partook of food and drink with avidity. This Sir Thomas Lane had previously refused her protection, as had another J. P., both apparently believing her a witch. Lane also insisted that she should be stripped and examined by women in his own house for teats sucked by Satan or other signs and tokens of witchhood; and

wound up by committing her to Wood-Street-compter. She was tried for Witchcraft at the Guildford Assizes and acquitted: while Hathaway was committed for a Cheat and Imposter.

He was sent for observation to the house of a Mr. Kensey, a surgeon: he refused to eat for two days; but Kensey and his maid, pretending to quarrel, framed a scheme on him, and he ate and drank heartily when he thought he was not observed. In like manner, his pretense of the cessation of natural excretions was fully exposed—and while hundreds of pins were found in his pockets, he could not vomit a single one if his hands were kept from his mouth or pass one *per alvum* if closely watched.

There can be no doubt of his “faking” evidence of his being bewitched; but I do not believe nor will any medical man believe that he did not actually think himself bewitched by Sarah Morduck.

He was tried as a Cheat and Imposter at the Surrey Assizes, 1 Anne, A. D. 1702, and was admirably defended by Serjeant Jenner: Lord Chief Justice Holt left the case most fairly to the jury, saying: “If you do believe upon the whole matter that this man has imposed upon the magistrate or upon the world, or endeavoured by counterfeiting these infirmities, to persuade people to believe that this woman was a witch and had bewitched him, then there is all the reason that can be to find him guilty. But if you believe he did not counterfeit, or that he was *non compos mentis*, or under any kind of delusions, you must acquit him.” The Jury convicted without leaving the Box.

I think a modern physician would have said: “*Non compos mentis.*”

At the same Assize, Welling, his wife and Mrs. Willoughby were convicted of a Riot and Assault.

We find it difficult to understand a state of society in which an innocent if ill-tongued woman could be so persecuted and tortured through an accusation by a half-crazy epileptic.

Nous avons changé tout cela.