

ROBERT CALEF AND COTTON MATHER.

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CALEF IN BOSTON, 1692.

Two men met in Boston town,
One a tradesman, frank and bold
One a preacher of renown.
Cried the last, in bitter tones,
Poisoner of the wells of truth;
Satan's hireling, thou hast sown
With his tares the heart of youth.

Where the thought of man is free,
Error fears the lightest tones;
So the priest cried: Sadducee,
And the people took up stones.
Spake the simple tradesman then:
God be judge twixt thou and I.
All thou knowest of truth hath been
Unto men, like thee, a lie.
Falsehoods which we spurn today
Were the truths of long ago.
Let the dead boughs fall away,
Fresher shall the living grow.

In the ancient burying ground
Side by side the twain now lie
One with humble grassy mound,
One with marble, pale and high.
But the Lord hath blest the seed
Which that tradesman scattered then,
And the preacher's spectral creed
Chills no more the blood of men.

J. G. Whittier.

In the year 1677 Robert Calef, then a young man, became a member of the first Baptist Church in Boston. A few years later he was destined to deliver New England from a plague, uncalled-for and self-inflicted and, therefore, absolutely humiliating, the witchcraft delusion. It is useless to try to defend the court, the church and the college of that day by saying that this delusion prevailed among all civilized nations at that time. It is enough to reply that there was one man, Robert Calef, who, in the year 1693, defied the professors, the judges and the ministers and exposed and denounced the abominable fraud.

The judges at Salem hesitated after the execution of Bridget Bishop as a witch on June 10th, and turned to the clergymen of Boston for counsel and advice. And what did they receive from the wigged pedants who occupied the pulpits in the bloody year 1692? Blind leaders of the blind, they both fell into the ditch. The Salem Court adjourned for a fortnight to hear the reply of their foolish advisers to their unwarranted question.

At that time the jails of Salem and the adjoining towns were filled with prisoners accused by lying children of bewitching them. The question was, what should be done with these prisoners, many of them already condemned and awaiting trial, and this is the answer, written by Cotton Mather and signed by twelve pastors, which was given to the judges, June 15th, 1692: "We cannot but recommend unto the government the speedy and vigorous punishment of such as have rendered themselves obnoxious according to the directions given in the laws of God and the wholesome statutes of the English nation for the destruction of witchcraft. We hope that some of the accused are yet clear from the great transgression laid to their charge." "The people stood poised upon the panic's brink," as Brooks Adams says (*Emancipation of Massachusetts*, page 223), "and their pastors lashed them in. The Salem trials left a stain upon the judiciary of Massachusetts that can never be effaced." Drake says (*History of Witchcraft*, Preface XXX), "Some say it was worse in other countries and long after. Yes, ignorance and superstition prevailed to as great, if not to a greater degree, in Europe than in New England. Mental darkness was as dense in Old England as in new." A later writer (Moore, *Notes on Witchcraft*, page 12; *Am. Antiq. Soc. Proc.*, 1911, p. 186), has shown that Drake was wrong as far as England was concerned for the last execution of a witch in that land occurred ten years before the tragedy took place at Salem. It was Montague, the skeptic, whose voice was raised almost alone among the

writers of Europe against the nefarious inquisition. "It is rating our opinions high to roast other people alive for them," he said.

The Boston shepherds turned wolves, as Calef said, and, on July 19th, the judges, Sewall and Stoughton, encouraged by their spiritual advisers, committed the judicial murder from which they had instinctively shrunk. They hanged nineteen innocent persons, and pressed Giles Cory to death. At last Governor Phipps interfered and forbade any further executions or trials for witchcraft. Russell protested: "It will be inconvenient if the court should fall." The only answer was, "It must fall."

James Russell Lowell, in his essay on Witchcraft, makes the Salem trials seem a little matter, he mentions so many other trials that were worse, but Drake (*Witchcraft* XXX 111) refers to it as "a humiliating and, in some respects, a revolting subject." "The great transgression," Moore says, "was threatening the destruction of New England." G. L. Kittredge (*Notes on Witchcraft*, 1907, p. 18) admits that "by common consent it is the darkest day in New England History. If the settlers of New England were victims of circumstance," he says, "they were not its masters. I cannot plead for them the baby act. Those who begin by excusing their ancestors will end by excusing themselves." George H. Moore (*Notes on Witchcraft*, p. 84) declares that "the judgments of posterity ought to echo in tones of thunder the faint whispers of helpless, contemporary indignation at injustice and cruelty, whether of Kaisers or consuls, Popes or Puritans, fanatics or fools, knaves or nobodies in authority." Henry Ferguson (*Essays on American History*, p. 77) says that "the recrudescence of witchcraft in Massachusetts may be directly traced to the publication of a book styled 'Memorable Providences Relating to Witchcraft,' which Cotton Mather issued, with an introduction by Richard Baxter, in the year 1689, three years before the epidemic reached its climax at Salem."

Governor Phipps, who was a member of Cotton Mather's church, appointed a special court of seven judges to go to Salem and try the witches. One of the judges, Richard Saltonstall, of Haverhill, to his honor be it said, refused to try the cases and left the bench. Cotton Mather was present and urged the use of swift, cross-questions to confuse the prisoners. When Rev. Mr. Noyes of Salem said to Susan Martin of Amesbury, "I know that you are a witch," she replied: "You lie; I am no more a witch than you are a wizard. If you take my life away, God will give you blood to drink." Hutchinson (History of Massachusetts, Vol. II, p. 56) reports a tradition current at Salem that the curse came true, and that the reverend gentleman was choked to death with his own blood.

On the 25th of June, William Milburne, a Baptist preacher, was summoned before the court for reflecting upon the administration of public justice. His crime was the circulation of a petition for signatures of persons who opposed the further prosecution of suspected witches on specter testimony. "The innocent will be condemned," he said. "A woeful chain of consequences will follow, inextricable damage will come to this province. Give no more credence to specter testimony than the word of God alloweth." George H. Moore (Notes on Witches, p. 12; Final Notes on Witchcraft, p. 72) says that "William Milburne, upon examination having owned that he wrote the papers and subscribed his name to them, was ordered to be committed to prison or give bonds of \$200 with two sureties to answer at the next session of the Superior Court for framing, contriving, writing and publishing the said seditious and scandalous papers or writing. William Milburne was a brother of Jacob Milburne and the prosecuting attorney was Thomas Newton, who had secured the execution of Jacob the year before in New York. The magistrates and ministers of 1692 who engineered the witchcraft business were the trusted leaders of the people." That year there was an *inter regnum* between

the old charter and the new. (Milburne's petition may be found in *Am. Antiq. Soc. Proc.* n. s. Vol. 5. p. 246.)

The court met again on June 30th. During the progress of the trial John Proctor, Jr., wrote from his prison appealing from judges and jurymen to the ministers, saying: "The innocency of our case with the enmity of our accusers, our judges and the jury, whom nothing but our innocent blood will serve, makes us bold to beg and implore your favor and assistance of this our humble petition to his excellency the Governor. Two of the Currier sons would not confess anything till they tied them neck and heels until the blood was ready to come out of their noses," but Cotton Mather said he "was thankful unto God for justice being so far executed among them, and that all had died by a righteous sentence." Sewell in his diary says that Mather "rode to the place of execution on horseback and harangued the people on the good work that they had done."

On October 11th, two of the Salem judges, Sewell and Stoughton, recommended an account of the witch trials prepared for publication by Cotton Mather and entitled "Wonders of the Invisible World." Thus, while the Governor was condemning the trial, ministers and judges were justifying them. Even the legislature, in face of the Governor's prohibition, re-enacted, on October 29th, an old Massachusetts law which ordered that "if any man or woman be a witch, that is, hath consulted with a familiar spirit, they shall be put to death." As Drake says, "the teachers of the people were themselves grovelling in the mire of superstition. It is not easy to comprehend how men accustomed to literary society should be the dupes of such absurdities. They showed a total want of judgment, common sense and humanity." Moore (*Notes*, p. 24) says that "the credulity and vanity of Cotton Mather account for almost any measure of folly and wickedness. After a reversion of popular feeling had arisen, his pride and prudence carefully concealed his

honest convictions." Drake adds (*Witchcraft Delusion* 1866, Preface, p. 201) "after the tempest had subsided, he shuffled out of it. He cast a mist before his readers' eyes, to appear to posterity as one of the first rank of men, as he was in his own estimation. But the mist was too transparent, and Cotton Mather was regarded as the promoter of the witchcraft delusion." Barrett Wendell (*Life of Cotton Mather*, p. 88) says that "it was the great tragedy of witchcraft, I think, that finally broke the power of the theocracy. It was almost surely the part that Cotton Mather played in it that made his life for 35 years a life, at least publicly, of constant, crescent failure. It was as early as 1686 that Cotton Mather received a special revelation that his chief mission was to fight the witches. In 1688 he took a bewitched child into his own house and that increased his belief in the reality of the devil's work. His later career was marked by a ridiculous, by an overweening vanity. No one has borne so much of the odium of what was done as he. His books tended to stir up public feeling against the witches. His conduct and words had as much as any one man's words could have to do with the raising of the panic."

J. L. Sibley (*Sketches of Harvard Graduates*, Vol. 3, p. 91) confirms what Wendell had said of the responsibility of Cotton Mather for the outrages. "The tendency of his books was to extend and increase excitement. He was credulous, superstitious, and fond of the marvellous. Previous to the witchcraft trials he possessed more power and wielded greater influence than any other individual ever did in Massachusetts. After this his influence declined until at length, he sometimes became the object of public ridicule and open insult." G. L. Kittredge (*Antiq. Soc. Proc.* 1911, p. 186) tries to excuse the Mathers and the other ministers by saying that "the position of the men who believed in witchcraft in the 17th century was logically and theologically stronger than that of their opponents. The impulse to put a witch

to death was no more cruel than for us to hang a murderer," but Prof. G. L. Burr of Cornell University replies by saying, "Mr. Kittredge is more generous than he is fair to our ancestors. The superstition of the lowly may be met by education, but who shall save us from the superstition of the learned?" H. C. Lea describes witch madness as essentially a disease of the imagination created and stimulated by the persecution of witchcraft. "I should not look for opponents of witchcraft," Burr says, "chiefly among theologians, jurists or teachers; theirs are the most conservative of professions. They are men of systems, of books not of life, doctrinaires, while this is a question of common sense. I would look among men of practical affairs, men in touch with the people and the facts, men of business, men who trust their own human intelligence, their own hearts against the dictation of authority."

Prof. Burr has correctly described the men who did not rise up against the witchcraft delusion, and Robert Calef, the man who did.

After the court that had condemned the witches had been dissolved, the deputies, on October 12th, by a divided vote, 33 to 29, ordered a fast that "we may be led in the right way as to the witchcrafts." Evidently the minority of 29 thought that it was time not for fasting, but for action. The law that had been re-enacted against witches was annulled by the English Privy Council. In December, Increase Mather reported the condemnation of three witches to death. The three graves were all dug, he said, but the Governor reprieved the prisoners. A witch was freed in Boston on January 3, 1693, but prosecutions did not cease until April, when all the remaining suspects, one hundred and fifty in number, were liberated by the Governor. It was not until 1702 that a bill was passed to prevent trial for witchcraft, and not until 1711 that the decrees of the judges at Salem were reversed, the brand of infamy on the families that had suffered re-

moved and some compensation offered to the heirs of the twenty victims. It was in 1705 (Drake, p. 203) that Michael Wigglesworth wrote to Increase Mather: "I fear that innocent blood has been shed." In 1695 Judge Sewall had written in his diary, referring to Neal's History of New England: "It grieves me to see New England's nakedness laid open in the business of the Quakers, the Anabaptists and the witchcraft trial." The next year he wrote a confession of guilt and stood bareheaded in the South meetinghouse while it was publicly read: "I am sensible of the guilt contracted. I am more concerned than any that I know of. I desire to take the blame and shame of it. Asking pardon of men, I pray that God will not visit the sin upon myself nor any of mine nor upon the land." Unlike Sewall, Judge Stoughton, who was acting Governor at the time of the trial, never acknowledged his error in the matter. "I have no such confession to make," he said, "I have acted according to the best light God has given me."

As late as 1694 the Mathers, father and son, urged ministers to collect "accounts of remarkables, that is, of possessions by spirits," an undertaking in which they were assisted by the Rev. Fellows of Harvard College. It was not until 1696 that Rev. Samuel Willard came out smartingly against the magistrates for not asking God's pardon. Ten years later he was bolder still. "The witchcraft trials," he said, "have left a public guilt and blot behind them, not time, but only repentance will wipe off." He was praised for saying this when his funeral sermon was preached, but the praise must be cut short by the fact that in a sermon which he preached in November, 1692, on "The Signs of the Times," he makes no reference to the grievous evil which he deplored too late to prevent.

Andrew D. White, in his "Conflict of Science and Religion," praises Francis Hutchinson and Wagstaffe for opposing witchcraft, but the former did not publish until

1718 and the latter's book was "quite an inconsiderable affair," Ferguson says. There is one name to be mentioned with honor in this struggle for righteousness, and that is Thomas Brattle, treasurer of Harvard College. He wrote (Mass. Histor. Soc. Coll. V, p. 61) a letter at the height of the epidemic, a letter that would do him greater honor if he had given it to the public. He was too cautious for that. "I should be very loath," he begins, "to bring myself into any snare by my freedom with you. If God does not graciously appear, New England is undone, undone. The Salem gentlemen are possessed, at least, with ignorance and folly." This letter did not see the light for a full century. This leaves Robert Calef as the only writer in New England at the time who had convictions which he dared to express. He wanted a reformation without tarrying for any. Moore (Notes, p. 23) says that "Calef's book is unsurpassed in authority and is a lasting monument to his fame. Nobody but Robert Calef ever ventured to violate the injunction which was on every avenue to the consciousness of the Mathers: "Don't touch me." "They thought of nothing but prayers and fastings all around as a panacea for their inhuman persecution, robberies, and murders on Aceldema, the field of blood, on Witches Hill."

G. L. Burr points out the care and exactness which all comparison of Calef's book with the records seem to show." He denies the charge that is made in the "Memorial History of Boston by Poole," that Robert Calef had a bitter personal quarrel with Cotton Mather. Poole tries to throw suspicion on Calef himself, for he says it is not known when Calef was born, or where he was buried. Poole did not know that Calef was buried in the Eustace St. cemetery in Roxbury, and that the inscription over the grave tells that he was born in 1648. His name first occurs in any document in the records of the First Baptist Church, Boston, for the year 1677.

It was the publication of Cotton Mather's book and his examination of a bewitched Roxbury girl named Margaret Rule, that first aroused Robert Calef to action. He saw in her sufferings, as Wendell says, "a vulgar cheat," and in the conduct of the Mathers "deliberate connivance in her imposture. From his charge of dishonesty the name of Cotton Mather has never been cleared to the satisfaction of his opponents."

The wicked purpose on the part of educated leaders of public opinion to revive and spread this foul superstition to Boston, compelled Calef, a man without the learning of the schools, to come forth like a David to put to flight the host of the Philistines who were defiling the Lord's heritage.

He began by giving an account of Mather's examination of Margaret Rule in September, 1693. This angered the minister, who used vituperative language in reply, and threatened a libel suit which he did not dare to press. The merchant proposed a conference at R. Wilkins' or Benjamin Harris' bookstore to compare notes as to the examination, and he agreed to correct any statement made by him which could be proved to be unfair. Cotton agreed to come, but dropped that plan also. The layman next reviewed the minister's book, and received hearty curses from the haughty dignitary. As Mather had claimed that all the ministers, Dutch, French, as well as English, held to his opinion on witches, the persistent opposer of error turned to the French and Dutch ministers with an appeal to them to come out boldly and denounce the degrading superstition.

The jurors now began to feel that they had been guilty of shedding innocent blood, and confessed that "they had been deluded and mistaken and would not do such a thing again for the whole world," but Cotton Mather, chief instigator of the plot, made no plea of guilty, but sought to lay the blame on Governor Phipps, who had stopped the whole holocaust.

The following quotation from the minister's mediæval dissertation will show what it was that stirred the righteous indignation of the doughty Baptist. "The houses of good people are filled with shrieks of children and servants who have been torn by invisible hands with tortures altogether preternatural. The recent extreme measures for the destruction of witchcraft are justified. The devil exhibits himself ordinarily as a small black man. He has his sacraments; he scratches, bites and sticks pins into the flesh; he drops money before sufficient spectators out of the air; he carries witches over trees and hills. Twenty persons have confessed that they signed a book which the devil showed them."

Calef championed the cause of the innocent because no one else dared to do it. He was the first to agitate and then to publish against this criminal folly. He dared to face the ostracism of the upper classes. Cotton called him from the pulpit and in print, "one of the worst of liars," "a wicked Sadducee," "a weaver turned minister," a "vile fool," a "coal from hell." Mather's friends referred to Calef's book as "a firebrand thrown by a mad man."

Calef modestly said: "Others not appearing, I have enforced myself to do what is done. I thank God I have the Bible and do judge that sufficient. As in case of a fire I thought it my duty to be no longer an idle spectator. The disease is so catching and so universal I make no apology for endeavoring to prevent any more bloody sacrifices." Calef's book entitled "More Wonders from the Invisible World," was finished in 1697, but he could not find in Boston a publisher who dared to issue it. It finally appeared in England in 1700. The sensation it produced when it reached Boston may be imagined after reading a few quotations from its spicy pages.

"I hope I understand my duty better than to imitate Mr. Mather in retorting his hard language. If his report stands in competition with the glory of God, His truth,

and His people's welfare, I suppose these be too valuable to be trampled on for Mr. Mather's sake. This country will be likely to be afflicted again if the same notions are still entertained. 'God has implanted in our consciousness to judge a miracle,' Cotton Mather says. It seems the light within is here our guide and not the Scripture. Such ridiculous and brutish stuff as 'turning men to cats and dogs,' 'riding on a pole through the air.' Mather calls Baxter's book, 'The World of Spirits,' 'an ungain-sayable book.' I know no ungain-sayable book but the Bible. What mean these specters that none can see but those that have not the use of their reason and senses? Plastic spirit! What's that? Some ink-horn term. So hardy and daring are some men, though without one word of Scripture proof for it. Sound reason is what I have been long seeking for in this country in vain.

"You forbade my making a copy of the four pages that you let me read. I am not surprised at your caution in keeping from the light the crude matters and impertinent absurdities that are found there. My task is offensive, but necessary. I would rather expose myself to censure than that it should be omitted. I took it to be a call from God to vindicate his truth. The principal actors in these tragedies are far from defending their action now, but they do not take due shame to themselves. It was bigoted zeal stirring up blind and most bloody rage against virtuous and religious persons. No one of them has testified as the case required against the doctrine and practice though they have brought a stain and lasting infamy upon the whole country, if not entailing upon themselves all the blood of the righteous.

"I cannot believe that there are several Almightyies. My letter to Mr. Mather remains unanswered, so that I suppose he regards it as either orthodox or as unanswerable. What he says about a thunder storm breaking into his house savors too much of enthusiasm. He magnifies the devil's power beyond and against Scripture. Not

bringing Scripture to prove his positions shows that there is none. If I err I hope you will let me see it by Scripture. What do you find in Scripture for your structure? If you are deficient in that warrant, the more eminent the architect the more dangerous he is. I pray that you may be a useful instrument in the removal of this popish and heathen superstition. It may be asked what need is there of raking up coals that lie buried in oblivion, but Satan would like to drag us through the pond again by the same cat. This is an affliction far exceeding all that ever this country has labored under. Those who oppose such a torrent know that they will meet with opposition from magistrates, ministers and people, and the name of Sadducee, atheist, witch, will be cast after them. God is able to protect those who do their duty herein against all opposers.

“Mr. Mather’s language sounds more like that of a manichee or a heathen than like that of an orthodox believer.”

Robert Calef’s continued attacks upon Cotton Mather troubled the learned man’s conscience a little, for in January, 1697, he commits to his diary these words: “discouraging thoughts as if unavoidable marks of the divine displeasure must overturn my family, because, when the inextricable storm from the invisible world assailed the country I did not appear with vigor enough to stop the proceedings of the judges.” On June 10th, 1698, he makes another note, saying that “Calef’s book against him was finished.” On that account he devoted the day to fasting. When the book reached Boston, November 5, 1700, he spent another day in fasting. For the 5th month, the second day of 1701, he writes: “the enemies of the churches are set with implacable enmity against myself, and one vile fool, Robert Calef, is employed by them to go on with more of his filthy scribbling.”

Increase Mather, then President of Harvard College, took what he called “the wicked book and had it burned

in front of Stoughton Hall. Calef was driven out of Boston, and he settled in Roxbury where he was more highly esteemed than in the neighborhood of the Mathers. Cotton's son Samuel wrote in 1728: "there was a certain disbeliever in witchcraft that wrote against my father's book, but the man is dead, and his book died long before him." This prediction did not prove true, for four American editions of Calef's book have been called for.

John Eliot, in his biographical sketch of Calef, says that the book Cotton Mather's friends published in reply to Calef's had on its frontispiece the motto: "Truth will come off Conqueror." "This proves a satire upon them," he says, "because Calef obtained a complete triumph." Charles W. Upham, who in 1833 vindicated Calef at the expense of the reputation of the Mathers, says that "Calef's book drove the devil out of the preaching, the literature and the popular sentiment of the world. It struck a blow at the whole system of popular superstition under which it reels to this day."

Drake says that "Calef wrought a revolution in the mind of men;" and Savage that "the book prevented a renewal of the horrible tragedies;" and Brooks Adams that "it dealt a death-blow to the witchcraft superstition in New England."

Whether the burning of Calef's book produced a reaction or simply brought the opposition to President Mather to a head, the fact remains that a few weeks after his *auto da fe* at Harvard he was ousted from the presidency. Another author makes bold to assert that "the descendants of Calef rank as high as those of the Mathers," and, seeing that Warren, the hero of Bunker Hill, the lover of civil liberty, came out of the loins of Calef, the lover of religious liberty, the claim may not be an exaggeration after all.