

# The Sorcerers of Salem

A fictionalized account by Anne Cordwainer

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*[I'd like to thank the Prospero, SIRRUS, and Spellman families of the U.K. and the U.S.A. for allowing me to access private documents. Although the following is obviously a work of fiction, their generosity has allowed me to keep it firmly grounded in heretofore-secret history. -A.C.]*

*“Only an unfortunate combination of an ongoing frontier war, economic conditions, congregational strife, teenage boredom, and personal jealousies can account for the spiraling accusations, trials, and executions that occurred in the spring and summer of 1692.”*

*-Douglas Linder, legal historian*

*“Simpler explanations are more likely to be correct.”*

*-Unknown, applying the principle called Occam's Razor*

Witch-hunts in the Colonies. Thomas Prospero could still hardly believe it, despite having had an entire sea-crossing on which to accustom himself to the idea. It had to be quelled at once, of course. The Continent would no longer infect the Empire with its butchery, nor would Thomas allow its mania to take root in His Majesty's Colonies.

He assumed the victims unmagical, accused and convicted by hysteria. To the best of Thomas' knowledge, no families of sorcerers had established branches in America. But acquittals should come thick and fast until the outbreak of deadly superstition ended, now that further trials would be attended by three true sorcerers.

His wife, Jane, smiled as he helped her down from the carriage. “A boarding house will be a relief after so much travel,” she said.

He smiled in return. “I'm sure you ladies will enjoy a proper rest.” Then he turned back to the carriage, in which his sixteen-year-old sister adjusted her garter in near-plain view of the street. Her skirts were pulled up almost to the knee. “Charlotte! Do that in private!”

“This is private,” Charlotte replied innocently. “There's no one else left in the carriage.”

“We're in the Colonies, not a heathen wilderness,” he snapped. “For Heaven's sake, pull your skirts down before someone sees you.”

She scowled at him, but obeyed. Then she ignored his outstretched hand to disembark unaided, boy-fashion, and gazed boldly around the cobblestone streets of Boston.

Thomas sighed. Of all his siblings, his baby sister was both the most aggravating and the most suited for this mission. A sorceress who specialized in the magic of the mind, she would cool the inflamed hearts and heads of the Colonists. She would also test his patience to its limits, as she had done during the ocean voyage here and would no doubt continue to do on the journey home.

Their father had charged Thomas, a healer with necessarily limited power over others, with supervising and instructing her. It was the most difficult job Thomas had ever undertaken.

He escorted the ladies into the boarding house, then sent a porter for their trunks while leasing one room for himself and Jane and an adjoining one for Charlotte. He wrote the family's usual alias of "Prospect"—ever since that benighted playwright had named a wizard character after an acquaintance, the name of Prospero had been deemed dangerous even in an England where witch-hunts had ended decades ago.\*

Then he took the ladies upstairs to rest. Jane might need to engage in the exhausting practice of scrying on a moment's notice, and keeping Charlotte in a single room was the best way of keeping her out of trouble. Thomas himself went downstairs to learn what he could from tavern talk.

In mere minutes, he learned that the next trial would be held in Salem—not Salem Village, where the trouble had begun, but Salem proper. During the time needed to cross the sea, the trouble had spread from its hamlet of origin to several surrounding towns.

How great had it grown? Pressing his new acquaintances further, he discovered that it had spread as far as Ipswich. Could it engulf Boston and tear the colony apart? Could it even spread back to England, rekindling the fear under which his great-grandparents had lived?

No. It would end now. Charlotte had their father's full permission to influence minds for the sake of acquitting innocents. And after a few trials ended in acquittals, sanity should return of its own accord.

Thomas confirmed the time and place of the next trial, and sought his own bed with a grim but confident heart.

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A few days later, as their carriage wended through Salem, Jane frowned. *"I sense another sorcerer."* She spoke mind-to-mind, since any public mention of magic could be deadly in a witch-hunt climate.

Thomas concentrated. *"I, too. Good news. I had no idea others had come, and it will only make the work easier. I'll speak with him, while you speak with others out loud and Charlotte skims the accusers' minds."* Then, to Charlotte: *"Sister, learn what you can of the accusers' motives. Why are they saying these things? If there's a*

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\* The playwright must have been William Shakespeare, but no one knows the name of the careless boyhood companion who let slip that the Prospero family had magical powers. Or, at least, no one would admit it to this researcher.

*chance to sway them with reason, we should try that before resorting to mind control."*

The other sorcerer had perceived them as well, of course. The gray-haired man calmly awaited them in a corner of the courthouse. While the ladies scattered to their respective tasks, Thomas approached and bowed. "Thomas Prospect, sir. Good day to you." Then, *"Thomas Prospero, of the Stratford Prosperos."*

*"William Spellman, of no family."* The man bowed in his chair as he responded. "Well met, sir. You're from England? Have you come to help?"

Of no family? An odd phrase, even if he were a bachelor orphan. There might be a story behind it, but his question was more important than his introduction. "Yes, sir. My wife and sister and I. We didn't realize anyone was already here. We arrived three days ago."

"Just in time, then." The elderly man smiled warmly. *"It's really quite simple. I've had dozens convicted already. You'll soon get the hang of it."* He laughed. *"I apologize for the wordplay."*

While still grappling with what he'd just heard, Thomas felt Charlotte's mind touch his. *"The accusers really believe they're being attacked. They have memories of ghosts, and of being pinched and poked."*

Thomas stared at Spellman. "You—" No, not out loud. Not here and now. *"You're giving them false memories of being attacked by witches? For the love of God, why?"*

*"That's only part. But now I must take my place for the trial; we'll speak more later."* He rose. "Your faithful servant, sir."

Thomas watched, incredulous, as Spellman took his place among the magistrates. Jane and Charlotte joined him as a young man spoke on behalf of the accused, arguing that English law forbade many of the Court of Oyer and Terminer's practices. Spellman's boredom was palpable, but Thomas found his interest piqued. *"Charlotte, can you influence that young man to sit near us?"*

*"Surely."* As the young man walked away from the bench, Charlotte smiled at him. "Would you join me, sir? You appear pleasant company."

Thomas closed his eyes for a moment. *"Not by playing the harlot!"* But the young man accepted, and Thomas bowed slightly in greeting. "Thomas Prospect. My wife, Jane, and my sister, Charlotte."

"George Blessing. Well met, sir."

“Well met indeed. Mr. Blessing, can you tell me who that man is?” Thomas indicated Spellman.

Mr. Blessing’s eyes opened wider. “Do you not know? ‘Tis William Stoughton, Vice-Governor of Massachusetts and Chief Magistrate of this Court.”

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Charlotte was a talented young mentalist, but Spellman—no, Stoughton, he didn’t deserve the honorable name of Spellman—was a talented and experienced one. Thomas felt their fierce battle, ending with Charlotte close to fainting and Stoughton as calm as before. The trial ended in conviction, as had so many others, and the victims were remanded to jail until their scheduled hanging.

Mr. Blessing excused himself to help Charlotte outside to fresh air, while giving Thomas a rather unadmiring look. Thomas let them go; being thought an unchivalrous brother was the least of his worries. “Jane, will you chaperone them? I wish to speak more with Stoughton.”

Stoughton waited. “I see that you oppose these trials.”

“Indeed I do. The victims are innocent of wrongdoing. They aren’t even—” Thomas paused. *“They aren’t even magical.”*

“Innocent? Perhaps it seems so, to you.” Stoughton’s face hardened. *“You’re a young man. I’m an old one. When I was younger than you, I watched my grandmother swing. I worked as a curate under the Protectorate, and watched Cromwell look the other way as the killings continued. And I note that you fear to use the proud old name of Prospero.”*

Thomas had heard the stories of his elders, of course, and had never dared to use his true surname among the unmagical. But that prudence was precisely to prevent the return of superstitious fear. *“We must still be circumspect, but no one in England has been convicted of witchcraft in years. King Charles—”*

Stoughton smiled again, the smile of an old man who had seen too much. *“Which one? The spokesman of God beheaded for high treason, or the hedonistic jester who dissolved Parliament? No, it’s the New World which offers us our best chance of a sorcerer’s world. We will never be safe as long as they’re here and hating us. We can have them kill each other just by making them think they’re us. They have only their own hatred to blame.”*

*“You’re making them think they’re being attacked! Do you expect them not to defend themselves?”*

*“I expect them to do exactly as they have done—turn on each other with hatred and tear each other apart in their zeal to find and kill us. They barely need my prompting.”* Stoughton stood up. “Your faithful servant, sir.”

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Thomas rejoined Jane and Charlotte as they chatted with Mr. Blessing. The young Colonist explained a great deal of what had happened while the news had traveled to England and the Prosperos had traveled back. The trials had begun with accusations against a few women who were disliked to begin with, but had quickly spiraled into a climate of terror. When one woman had been acquitted, Stoughton had commanded the jury to reconsider its verdict. \*

Mr. Blessing asserted that this was because the Vice-Governor was such a powerful man, and believed that he need only convince Stoughton, or that a jury might even be willing to acquit against Stoughton’s wishes if shown enough evidence. At a previous trials, he had presented petitions.<sup>+</sup> Today, after both oral testimony and written petition had failed, he had attempted in vain to argue the law.

The jury will return any verdict Stoughton wishes, thought Thomas. And we know something else Mr. Blessing doesn’t. We know the accusers aren’t lying.

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Back at the Boston boarding house, Thomas’ first task was to inform his father that the problem was much more difficult than they had assumed. England would send more help, but what would they do until then? Charlotte had no hope of winning a direct battle against Stoughton.

Jane frowned. “Could we only persuade the Governor to disallow these false memories of spectres as evidence . . . .”

“What need to persuade him?” asked Charlotte. “Perhaps Stoughton is more skilled than I, but I am still a sorceress. The Governor will reverse his position if I can only get near him.”

Thomas considered. Controlling one man, to save near twoscore innocent lives . . . it seemed well worth the price, but a moment's thought showed the idea flawed. “Think of the future, Sister. Will you control him forever, keep him as your puppet until his death? Battle Stoughton for control of his mind? The Vice-Governor is sure to notice that the Governor is no longer following orders.”

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\* Rebecca Nurse was originally acquitted, by a jury unable to believe such an upstanding and pious woman guilty of witchcraft.

+ The name of the person who petitioned on behalf of Rebecca Nurse, and then John Proctor, is lost to conventional history. This researcher is honored to be able to give George Blessing belated credit for his bravery.

Charlotte thrust out her jaw. “I don’t fear Stoughton.”

“You should. He’s a remorseless killer, and more powerful than you. Or I. Cross him openly, and you could be next on Gallows Hill.”

“Perhaps we should stay in Salem, not here,” mused Jane.

“Are you mad, woman? Any hint of magic seen, and they’d hang us with no help from Stoughton. Charlotte’s the only one of us who might defend herself from such a mob, and even for her it would be a dreadful gamble. Certainly she couldn’t defend the lot of us.”

“What, then?” Jane asked.

“I don’t know,” Thomas said heavily. “But we should at least attend the hanging. If Stoughton isn’t there . . .” He glanced at Charlotte. “Perhaps the hangman can have an unexpected change of heart?”

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Stoughton was there. Charlotte prepared to do battle with him again, but Thomas knew it hopeless. He instructed her to focus on the unmagical audience instead, to find those unconvinced and strengthen their misgivings. He felt the stirrings of her magic as she moved among the crowd, strengthening doubts in some and planting them in others.

And then the hangings began.

The hangman tied the condemned, one by one, to a high branch and pushed the cart from beneath their feet. The Colonists either didn’t know how to build a proper gallows or didn’t care. They simply tied the convicts up by their necks and left them to strangle.

The brutality of frontier hangings appalled the more civilized Thomas. He remembered the Court’s sentence, “to be hanged by the neck until dead,” but hadn’t realized it would be so literal. He wished he could spare his wife and sister this sight, but the delicate sensibilities of a lady must fall before the duties of a sorceress.

Jane screamed. She couldn’t use her dark mirror in public, but she bare-mindedly examined the accusers present to ascertain just what had been done to their minds. Such a task was intense enough even with the proper tool, never mind without it, and she soon grew pale and wobbly. Thomas took her arm to steady her. “You’re no good to them if you faint,” he told her. “Don’t knock yourself out.”\*

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\* According to a letter from the time, this is the actual phrase Thomas used. The term didn’t enter general usage until the 1930’s. This researcher wonders if later generations of sorcerers, not needing to be quite so careful, eventually spread some of their private terms into general slang usage.

For Thomas' own part, he did all a healer could do—reduced the pain of each victim as he or she slowly strangled. Reduce the pain in the neck, lessen the suffering . . . but let the neck be pressed, since prolonging the death would only be cruel.

“So barbaric,” he whispered. “This is death by torture, not hanging.”

“Half-Hanged Mary,” murmured a voice behind him.

Thomas turned to see Mr. Blessing. An unwanted distraction, but someone so strong of will could be a vital unmagical ally. “Well met, sir, but I’m afraid I don’t understand your meaning.”

“Mary Webster,” replied the young Colonist. “She was acquitted of witchcraft years ago, when I was a child.” And when Stoughton was still in England.\* “Her neighbors hanged her anyway, but she survived the night. Some took that as a sign of unquestionable innocence, and she lived out her natural span.”

Keep all eight victims alive, all night long? It was probably impossible, but he had to try. Thomas ignored the young man’s curious stare and focused ferociously on letting blood and air flow freely through eight throttled necks.

Then he felt Stoughton seize his mind. “*Charlotte, help me!*” His sister entered the fray instantly, but again proved no match for the more experienced mentalist. Thomas, stripped of volition, watched with artificial calm as the victims died.

His free will returned as the bodies were cut down. He found himself sitting on the grass, looking up at clouds, even humming carelessly. Aghast, he scrambled to his feet and assumed a more dignified demeanor. “*Stoughton, why? Let us talk more.*”

The Vice-Governor entered his carriage without answering. Thomas, despondent, turned back to his family.

Mr. Blessing still stood nearby, at Charlotte’s side. What must he think of Thomas’ despicable behavior? He should be disgusted, but apparently he had kept his own attention rightly focused on the dying. When he turned to Thomas, he said only, “Thank you three visitors, for caring so. You could flee this nightmare.”

“Thank you, sir, for your steadfastness in fighting for justice in His Majesty’s Colonies.”

Mr. Blessing bowed. “I remain your faithful servant.”

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\* Thomas erred in this. William Stoughton actually returned to the Colonies long before, shortly after the Restoration in England. The case of Half-Hanged Mary was years before Stoughton developed and implemented his plan to invoke witch-hunt hysteria against the nonmagical, though, and so the gist of Thomas’ inference was valid.

“Your servant,” Thomas responded automatically. As Mr. Blessing left, he turned to the ladies. “I hope you were of more use than I was.”

“I made some progress with doubting Colonists.” Charlotte probably thought her expression was hopeful, although in fact she looked shocked. “And I tried the false memory spell for myself. One woman had a vision of a victim’s ghost, appearing to her and proclaiming innocence.”

Thomas frowned. “I know you meant well, Charlotte, but let’s have no more of that. It will only increase the belief in spectres.”

Charlotte sighed, rather more loudly than necessary, and gazed Heavenward in a mock prayer for patience. Then her eyes lit on the hanging tree, and her expression went blank.

Jane looked more thoughtful. “I’ve made an interesting discovery. I’ll tell you more when we’re home.”

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Back in the privacy of their rooms, Jane pulled out her knitting. She had never finished a garment in her life, but sorceresses learned the basics of threadcraft as an excuse to keep yarn. In public, the practice priests had once dubbed Scratch Cradle was still too dangerous.\*

Jane looped some thread onto her hands and began the sequence of transformations. “This, here, is a simplified version of the spectral memories.”

Charlotte nodded confirmation.

Jane switched yarns, and her hands worked again. “But *this* is the spell worked on the girl who felt pinched when the accused were brought.”

The pattern was almost familiar, but not quite. “My dear, are you certain? And why are you using the blue thread?”

“Quite certain. And I use the blue thread for its accustomed purpose—to show a direct effect on the body.”

Thomas frowned. “Healing magic on the accusers? What on Earth for?”

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\* This practice still exists as a children’s game, although its name has changed from Scratch Cradle to Cat’s Cradle. “Scratch,” of course, was once a colloquial nickname for the Devil. The game is also known as Witches’ Cradle. In a few areas it’s called Jack-in-the-Pulpit, which is the name of a poisonous plant, further confirming that the game was once regarded as dangerous. This researcher notes with interest that 21st-century sorcerers still speak of the “threads” which they use to construct spells.

Jane gazed at him solemnly. “Tell me this: if someone were pinching me, actually pinching me with his hand, and you wished me not to feel the pain, what would you do?”

Thomas had never tried to stop a mere pinch, but the theory was simple enough. “I’d block the feeling.” Jane indicated the yarn with her head, and he obligingly created a representation of the appropriate spell, albeit far more clumsily than she had. And then he glanced back and forth between Jane’s hands and his own. “It is healing magic,” he whispered. “But not to heal. Healing magic to harm? Can such a thing be?”

Stoughton was a mentalist. He could probably cure his own minor aches, as most sorcerers could, and he had evidently figured out how to reverse that simple process, but a mentalist would know little of the inner workings of the human body.

Thomas, by contrast, was a healer.

Charlotte frowned. “Does this matter? He actually pinched them, instead of making them remember being pinched. Is that important?”

“Not in itself, Sister, but the implications are tremendous. If I can work out the right spells, the next trial may go quite differently. Perhaps I can fight Stoughton directly, myself, instead of relying on you.”

“How?”

“Like that wicked barber of whom we heard in a parlor tale. By using a scalpel as a sword.”

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With his father’s reluctant blessing, Thomas spent the next few weeks stringing yarn across pegboards to teach himself to be a wicked barber.\* He considered many spells, finally settling on the enchantment used to soothe heart palpitations. Perhaps it could be perverted to cause them, or even intensified to create immediate heart failure, if only he could find the key.

He felt unclean even for trying. Sorcerers had killed before, of course, as had people of any sort, but this new method would be completely undetectable even upon autopsy. Stoughton had handed him a clue to the first truly new method of killing in uncounted ages. It would seem a natural death. Indeed, it would *be* a natural death.

And he, a healer by talent and inclination, sought to bring it into the world.

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\* Thomas was presumably thinking of an earlier version of the story of Sweeney Todd. The first written version, “A String of Pearls,” dates only to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but many folklorists believe that older stories fed into the tale. Barbers, of course, were England’s surgeons until doctors assumed the task.

Charlotte waited without patience. “We have no time for research. We must take action, before more innocents die.”

“I’m almost ready,” he said. He hoped it true.

“And when at last you are? Then what?”

“We’ll return to our original plan,” he told her. “You’ll remove any instructions already placed in the judges and jurors, and you’ll exert as much influence as you must to secure their acquittals. If Stoughton interferes, then—” He hesitated. “Then I will kill him.”

Charlotte nodded. “And what of those others, already convicted but not yet hanged?”

“I don’t yet know,” he replied. “We’ll arrange for retrials. Heaven knows they haven’t followed the rules of evidence. We’ll find a way.”

She stared fixedly at the bedknob. “Hangings can be scheduled at any time,” she whispered.

“Yes. There may be another tragedy. But you are not to take action without me, do you understand? We thought that this would be your job, but as it happens, you cannot do it without my aid. I know how the hangings affected you. No girl your age should see such a brutal thing. We’ll find a plan, never fear, but you must wait for that. Do you understand?”

She didn’t respond, so Thomas took her jaw in his hand and forced her gaze to him. “Do you understand, Charlotte?”

“Yes. Oh, yes.”

The next morning, Jane found Charlotte’s bed empty.

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While they still waited for their hired coach, Mr. Blessing arrived at the boarding house. “Miss Prospect tried to free the convicted. Several of the accused cried out against her. The Court convenes for her emergency trial, even as we speak.”

Cursing his willful sister, Thomas leapt onto Mr. Blessing’s trailing horse and began a twenty-mile sprint to Salem. “*Jane, tell Father!*”

A vision of Charlotte on Gallows Hill turned his blood to ice. His youngest sister, cruelly strangled after barely reaching womanhood—and while trusted to his care. This was the dread under which his grandparents had lived as children, knowing that any

family member could hang at any time. He no longer felt the slightest qualm about seeking a way to kill Stoughton, only fear for Charlotte and determination either to free her or to avenge her.

Could they reach Salem in time to aid her? A flat-out gallop would take less than an hour, but the horses had already trotted the road during Mr. Blessing's pre-dawn trip to alert them. Tired horses couldn't gallop twenty miles, unless . . . Thomas explored their steeds' bodies. He had little experience with animals, but the similarities were there. Flush toxins from some muscles, direct the best blood where it would do the most good—yes, the horses could endure the forced sprint until they could have real rest.

That added two new problems to the roster. As Thomas spent power on the horses which he might need to help Charlotte, he also virtually guaranteed that his companion would notice their mounts' unusual energy. Mr. Blessing currently believed the witch-hunts to be pure hysteria, but if he saw undeniable magic, Thomas might find himself betrayed and beside his sister in the dock.

Still, what choice did he have? He had to risk his own neck to have a chance of saving hers. That was the terror and tragedy of sorcerers living under a witch-hunt. As they briefly slowed to pick their way through a particularly muddy stretch of road, he allowed himself a moment of indignity: "Damn you, Stoughton!"

Mr. Blessing answered his imprecation directed at no one. "The Vice-Governor isn't there, sir. He's meeting with the Governor and Reverend Mather, back in Boston. Some sort of emergency gathering."

Stoughton had set a neat trap. Charlotte might swing—unmagical juries had killed sorcerers ere now, with enough fear fueling them. She'd need time to pick through the maze of Stoughton's control and the witch-fear which had seized the area. Even if she succeeded, Stoughton would have all day to give further instructions to those enforcing his will.

He'd have to handle the fresh problems later. At the moment, Thomas only prayed that Charlotte's trial lasted long enough for her to do the disenchantment she'd need to secure acquittal. Her only other hope was for some powerful motive to awaken the Court's own desire for acquittal, and Mr. Blessing had already failed at that on numerous occasions.

The two men tied the horses up wet and ran for the courtroom, arriving just as Charlotte was led in. She trembled in her chains. "*Charlotte, I'm here,*" he told her.

"*Thomas, help me,*" she pleaded. "*Stoughton's fixed his commands in so many of them.*"

Thomas tried. His own lesser talent at mind magic had no chance against the commands Stoughton had placed and strengthened over months. He turned to the

judges and jurors with whom Stoughton had not tampered, applying all his strength to planting a single thought: "She is innocent." He felt their minds move, one by one.

*"Charlotte, for once in your life you must listen to me. Ignore Stoughton's puppets. Concentrate on the others, who convict out of their own real fear. Force them to believe you innocent, and we can at least create a deadlock."*

She glanced at him. "Fear," she thought to him. "Yes, fear."

"I will protect you," he promised, although he had no idea how he might keep that pledge.

She recited the Lord's Prayer mechanically, and a judge reminded the jury that the Devil could appear as an angel of light.

She spoke no other words until asked the fatal question—was she a witch? "I am no witch," she replied. She paused, then, before the question could be repeated, she added, "But like your Mary Sibley and your Mary Herrick, I do sometimes have visions in my dreams. Like you, sir—" She gazed directly at a judge. "I once dreamt that you visited your neighbor's wife." Her glance turned to the crowd. "And you, goodwife, I had the oddest dream in which you confessed to lying to this Court." Then to the foreman of the jury. "And Goodman Hector, once I dreamt that you had kept money which belonged to your employer."

Mr. Blessing leaned forward with interest.

Charlotte looked boldly around the room, her gaze saucier than was wise for an accused witch, but effective. "They were only dreams, of course. Does the Court wish me to speak more of them?"

Fear, indeed. People feared many things other than witches. And in a climate where any sin might lead to an accusation of witchcraft, exposure of one's sins was a greater fear even than witches.

Thomas felt Charlotte pushing at minds, her work much easier now that their worries stemmed from other matters. Over the nervous whispers, the judge whom Charlotte had addressed spoke. "I remind the jury that, while some witches are able to recite the Lord's Prayer, it is not usual. Further, Miss Prospect placed her hand on the Good Book with no sign of distress. The jury shall take this into account in its deliberations."

Acquittal came rapidly.

Some in the audience murmured, but Thomas pulled his wayward sister out of the building as quickly as the Court officers would allow. "Never do that again, do you hear me? Until this is over, you will stay by my side unless you have my leave to go."

Charlotte nodded, perhaps chastened for once, although Mr. Blessing rather spoiled the effect by praising her courage. Thomas couldn't complain, though, since the young Colonist had also paid the captain of a watercraft to carry them back to Boston. "I guessed that you'd want to leave Salem as quickly as possible," he said. "The Packet's much faster than a carriage."\*

"Many thanks, sir. Your servant," called Thomas, as the boat pulled away.

He then spent a full ten minutes scolding Charlotte, who hung her head in what he suspected was a mockery of repentance. "Think of what you've done, Sister. Imagine if Jane had been forced to watch you slowly strangle."

Not to mention Thomas himself, of course. The hanging of strangers had burned into his mind the vision of brown rope across white necks, the purple bruises spreading as they struggled—

Brown. Purple. And a proper hangman's knot, instead of a sailor's knot . . . .

On the docks of Boston, he half-pulled Charlotte into a coach. "Driver!" he shouted. "Don't spare the horses, and I'll double your fare."

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Back at the boarding house, Thomas didn't even stop to assist Charlotte from the carriage. He pelted up the stairs and threw Jane's knitting on the floor, rummaging for the purple and brown yarn. While Jane embraced Charlotte and scolded her fondly, he ripped a third of his blue work from the pegboard and replaced it with purple. Then the brown, tying the two together in a few places, forcing false healing to run parallel with an implacable outer rhythm—yes. It would work.

The two ladies watched. Jane, who knew enough to understand, stared at him with something like awe. "Husband," Jane whispered, "What has God wrought through your hands? What have you done?"

"Just as we planned, I've invented a new way to kill. We go now to the Governor's mansion. And on this day of all days, no one is to argue with me."

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\* A packet was a schooner which kept a regular schedule, although George Blessing apparently persuaded or bribed this one's captain to delay a bit. The Boston Packet was still relatively new, but already provided much of New England's transport and commerce. Blessing would have taken it himself to get to Boston, if Charlotte's folly hadn't happened in the dead of night. Thomas, accustomed to England's better roads and frequent waystops, didn't know about it until informed by his Colonial ally.

Then came a third mad dash, this to the Governor's home, where he still held private session with Vice-Governor Stoughton and the Reverend Increase Mather.

"Our first task is simply to gain entrance," he told them. "I'm an important messenger with urgent news from the Crown, and you two are—oh, you're my servants or something. Anything that will let you pass unnoticed by my side."

They nodded, and Thomas presented his quick lie to the sentry. Unmagical minds were quickly swayed in such small matters, and the trio soon entered the room where the great men conferred.

Stoughton had felt their approach, of course. *"Freed her so soon, did you? That was unexpected, but it makes no difference. We already know she can't best me."*

*"She can't, but I can,"* replied Thomas.

He squeezed.

Stoughton clutched his chest and cried out, his face a mask of shock. Governor Phips and Reverend Mather leaned toward him in concern.

*"Perverting healing magic, in front of a healer. Not your cleverest move, Stoughton."* Out loud, Thomas smoothly switched lies for the unmagical. "I'm not just a messenger; I'm a doctor as well. This man will be fine, but he must lie down at once. I recommend at least a week of bed rest." And again, to Stoughton: *"This has ended. The next palpitation will be fatal."* Stoughton stared in helpless fury as servants assisted him into another room, to lie down until a carriage could return him to his own home.

"What is your message, sir?" inquired the Governor.

Thomas hadn't had time to think of one, much less forge a paper, but Charlotte would ensure belief. "The Crown—the Crown wishes to remind you that your royal charter does not extend to special courts, and that spectral evidence is not admissible in ordinary courts." He felt Charlotte push.

After that, the process was almost as simple as he had once thought it would be. Governor Phips disallowed spectral evidence. Reverend Mather visited the Salem jail and learned that many prisoners wanted to recant their confessions when free of torture, and he reversed his official position on spectral evidence.

There were a few more skirmishes with Stoughton. After the Governor dissolved the Court of Oyer and Terminer, Stoughton had him commission a new special court which again had Stoughton as Chief Magistrate. Charlotte ensured that it considered only valid evidence, and so it produced only acquittals.

The Prospero trio was now unstoppable. Stoughton constructed protective spells, Jane dissected them, Thomas broke them, and Charlotte worked freely. With Stoughton afraid to face Thomas, there were no more accusations. Those already convicted had a harder path, but were freed to rebuild their lives.

Within weeks, it was as if the mania had never been.

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“I’m still afraid to take us home to England,” Thomas said. “As much as I despise this barbaric frontier, my duty comes first. Stoughton’s a powerful man. We’re all that’s stopping him from starting the whole thing over again.”

“I’m happy to stay,” Jane said. “And I don’t believe you dislike America half as much as you insist; I notice you haven’t asked your father to replace you. But we should leave these rooms for a townhouse.”

He nodded agreement. “But what about Charlotte? I can’t remain her guardian forever. It would be the death of me. And rather unfair to her, since a sorceress has few marriage prospects in a land which still fears witches. I should send her home, but a young lady can’t cross the Atlantic unchaperoned.”

Jane smiled. “I suspect Charlotte could. A sorceress needn’t fear for her virtue. But there are appearances to consider, so I suppose she must stay until someone can come to collect her.”

A knock on the door interrupted further discussion. Mr. Blessing stood in the hall, Charlotte at his side. “Mr. Prospect, may I have a word?”

“Of course.” He stepped aside to allow entry. “We can’t thank you enough for your help in rescuing Charlotte.”

“It’s actually Charl—Miss Prospect about whom I would speak.” The young man took a deep breath. “I’d like to ask for her hand in marriage. Can you answer, or must I wait for word from her father?”

Charlotte’s mind touched Thomas’. “*You’d better answer, and it had better be yes.*”

Thomas raised an eyebrow at her. “*This was unexpected.*”

She smiled mischievously. “*Not entirely.*”

“*Does he know you are a sorceress?*”

She looked abashed. *“No, not yet . . . but I suspect he suspects. And isn’t there a Blessing family in London?”*

There was indeed, and a branch which had lost its magical power could have slipped from notice and emigrated.

George Blessing, who had staunchly fought the hysteria against impossible odds, mentioned Half-Hanged Mary at precisely the right moment, ignored Thomas’ apparent callousness at the hanging, shown a surprising lack of surprise at his horses’ ability to gallop a full twenty miles, been more fascinated than frightened by Charlotte’s remarkable knowledge of Salem’s secrets . . . . Mr. Blessing might well know a great deal more than he had ever dared admit.

Then again, he might not. *“I will agree, with the conditions of a long engagement and full honesty before the ceremony. You’ve known him only briefly.”*

She smiled, and he turned back to Mr. Blessing. “I can answer. Barring a refusal from her father, you may have her hand on her eighteenth birthday. And may you have more luck controlling her than her father or I have ever enjoyed.”

Mr. Blessing smiled. “God bless you, sir. And may I just say that Massachusetts isn’t like England? As you’ve seen, it’s a good deal wilder. Here, a bit of spirit in a wife is a good thing.”

Thomas could not deny that Charlotte had plenty of that.

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With their magic parchment, Thomas wrote to his family: “Honored Father and Dearest Mother, I have amazing news. The three of us have become Colonists. Jane and I find we like the New World more than we first thought, and Charlotte has received an excellent offer of marriage.

“Giles, my brother, you are now the heir to headship of our family. We are all starting anew. The Stratford Prosperos have begotten both the Boston Prosperos and the Salem Blessings—true American sorcerer families, who will conduct themselves as sorcerers should and never permit such horror again.”

There was no immediate response. They couldn’t be asleep at this hour, so perhaps they were simply digesting the news. He decided to add a jest as a codicil: “And please tell Cousin Abigail that I fully expect the American Boston to eclipse its English namesake.”

The Stratford Prosperos were delighted on all counts.