

His Last Shirt: A Story of Salem Witchcraft
by Mary Kyle Dallas

Every one in Salem said that it was “Something dreadful,” “Something terrible;” something that could not be explained by natural means; that was all that the neighbors knew; but something had happened to Master Bennett. The old housekeeper, who had taken care of the place since his mother died, was the first to know it. Then the minister, then the doctor—neither of these latter could help the poor man, who was so anxious and troubled he looked like the ghost of himself. The thing had been going on for months, and this is the way it was discovered.

Old Betty Brown, the housekeeper, went to her master one day and said:

“There’s some mistake, sir! There have been none of your shirts in the wash for two or three weeks. I’ve looked in vain and can’t find ’em, and yet I notice you change your linen oftener than usual.”

At that the farmer turned pale, and after looking at Betty for awhile asked her to come to his room. When there he opened the long chest of drawers and bade her look in. There were in one of the drawers but three shirts.

“You remember making me two dozen shirts about three months ago—do you not, Betty?” asked Master Bennett.

“Indeed I do, sir,” said Betty.

“Those are all the shirts I have left,” said Master Bennett, solemnly.

“Then we have thieves in the house. Lord save us! But who can they be?” asked Betty.

“I cannot tell. They are brave ones,” said the farmer. “Listen and I will tell you all about it. Twenty-one days ago, when I retired I left my shirt as usual upon a chair. In the morning it was gone. I fancied I had made some mistake, and left it in some odd corner, so I put on another; though, as you know, Betty, I generally change only twice a week. That night the same thing happened, and the next and the next. I strove to remain awake, and I kept my loaded pistol under my pillow, but in vain. I always fell asleep, and when I awoke the shirt was gone. I tried keeping the garment on. Betty, if you’ll believe me, the result is the same. Every morning the shirt had been taken from my very back. I have now but three remaining.” He paused and shook his head. “My door is locked every night,” he added, slowly. “I bar my window; it is no human agency that is at work.”

It was a long time ago; every one was superstitious. Old Betty threw her hands up and declared her that her poor master was bewitched, and begged him to send for the clergymen.

“I have long thought it my duty,” said the farmer. Therefore the Reverend Aminidab Praisewell was summoned, and he, being imbued with the spirit of the day, declared it a woeful case of witchcraft. He prayed with the victim loud and long, and stayed with him all night, and so

frightened the witch that she kept away. This made the farmer more hopeful, and old Betty set to work to make him a dozen new shirts. She sat up stairs with the lame seamstress who went from house to house to do plain sewing, and for all her promise could not refrain from telling the dreadful story.

Yes, that was why all these new shirts were wanted so soon. Her poor, poor master was certainly bewitched.

The seamstress promised not to repeat the story, and went her way; but the very next household she entered heard the whole, and now it flew from tongue to tongue.

The butcher, the baker, and the candlestick-maker told it over their counters. The elders talked of it, the congregation whispered about it in psalm-time. Farmer Bennet was bewitched. And who had bewitched him? There was a leaning to the supposition that it was Dame Betty for awhile, but finally popular opinion settled upon one Madam Creamer, a gentlewoman in reduced circumstances, who lived in a small house all by herself at the top of the hill.

People over whom she had, as they said, “taken airs” had for a long while thought that something must be wrong. Gentility without a penny to bless itself with was not to be endured. Why should not Madam Creamer be friendly and sociable with her neighbors—ask them to take a glass of ale with her, or eat their bread and cheese? They knew now she desired to be alone to do her evil deeds. Yes, that was it. There was not the slightest doubt that it was she who carried off Master Bennett’s shirts.

And all the new dozen were going now—all the new dozen. It was awful.

The town buzzed with the story for a few days, then the witch-finder went to the little house where Madam Creamer abode, and after frightening her after the fashion of these wretches, pricked her on the arm with a pin, which appeared to run far into her flesh. In reality, there was a spring in the handle which caused the pin to recede into it when touched; but he appealed to the witnesses he had brought with him to answer whether they had not seen the pin enter the old lady's arm without bringing blood, and none even wished to deny it. She was under a ban from that day, and soon there were plenty of people to declare that they had often seen her riding on a broomstick through the air, with a shirt in her hand.

Master Bennett finally dreamt that he saw her at his bedside, and the affair came to a climax. Madam Creamer was taken into custody on the charge of being a witch, confined in jail, and tried for her life. Witnesses appeared against her—the witch-finder, the people who hated her, the mad people who had seen her on a broomstick, and poor, nervous Master Bennett himself, who, having a good heart, wept while he gave testimony, and prayed them to be merciful even to a witch.

But one person in court really looked upon the case as a matter quite aside from witchcraft. This was the old doctor who had attended Mr. Bennett at various times. He could not fathom the truth, and he dared not deny the possibility of witchcraft; but as poor Madam Creamer was sentenced

to be burnt at the stake, he vowed to save her if he might. And with this purpose he went to old Betty that night at sundown.

“The wicked witch who has bewitched your master dies in three days,” he said, “but it would indeed be a great pity if she were not made to confess. Now, I desire to apprehend her in the act of stealing your master’s shirt, which she will doubtless do to-night.”

“His last shirt,” said Betty, “and it is useless to make him more until the witch is dead.”

“Yes, that is very true,” said the doctor, “and I desire to take her in her last act of wickedness. Let me hide to-night in the great linen press in your master’s chamber, and tell no one—no one—not even Master Bennett himself. Then while he sleeps the witch will come and I will pounce upon her.”

Dame Betty was delighted with the idea. She led the doctor to the room in which Master Bennett slept, put him in the press, with the greatest caution, and said no word to any one.

Late that night the farmer retired, full of grief and anxiety, for he knew the poor old lady, Madam Creamer, must suffer death because of his charges against her.

He prayed long and fervently ere he went to bed, and he retired in the clean, new, white ruffled shirt which was, indeed, the last one in his possession, thirty-five shirts having now disappeared in the same mysterious manner.

For a long while he tossed and turned, groaned and sighed, but at last he began to breathe heavily. Then all was silence but for a subdued creaking and rustling.

The watchful doctor opened the press-door and peeped out. To his astonishment he saw, by the light of the moon which streamed through the window, that Master Bennett was sitting up in bed, carefully taking off his shirt, which he rolled up into a small bundle and tucked under his arm. The doctor fixed his eyes upon the face of the farmer, which was strangely rigid, its eyes wide open, its lips apart. Experience taught him that, decisive as were all his motions, the man was still sound asleep. Somnambulism was regarded with a sort of horror by many people, yet it was an accepted truth, even in Salem. Hope began to rise in the doctor’s bosom. He held his breath, and kept his eyes fixed upon the farmer, who now arose, and going toward the window, removed the bar which fastened its casement sash, opened it, and springing to the sill, let himself down upon the ground below as lightly as though he had been a cat.

The old doctor followed more cautiously, and at some little risk, and saw the form of his friend, clad in a long night-gown, skimming over the fields in the direction of the barn-yard.

There he paused beside a sand-heap. The bells had rung the hour of midnight; but at that moment the doctor heard feet passing upon the road. The elders, who had been vainly exhorting Madam Creamer to confession, were on their homeward way from the prison.

“God be praised!” said the doctor to himself.

Then he leant over the fence and called softly:

“Come hither. Come hither. We have caught the witch in the act.”

The elders obeyed, as did also two laborers, who had been setting the stake and laying the logs in order for the morrow’s murder.

They stood before the sand-heap, about which a white figure fluttered.

Master Bennett had now placed his shirt upon the sand-heap and was raking the dirt over it. The garment was hidden from view, and he was about turning away, when one of the elders cried aloud:

“Seize the witch!” and all three flew toward him. The violence of their attacked aroused the somnambulist, who stared at them with waking eyes.

“What does this mean?” he cried.

“Ah!” cried the doctor, “Master Bennett, this is a thing that happens to many. Thou hast been walking in thy sleep, and in thy sleep hast hidden thine own shirts in this sand-heap. I know thee to be a good man, and a kindly. Search now for those garments and so save a poor innocent old woman’s life.”

Master Bennet needed no bidding, and the end of his night’s work was that the thirty-six shirts lay upon the ground, and that he denied, in a loud voice, that poor Madam Creamer had ever bewitched him.

So, to the disappointment of the witch-finder and her enemies, Madam Creaner was saved from a cruel death, and rich Master Bennett ever after was her friend, so that she wanted for neither comforts or luxuries.

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