

## **“WITCHES CROSS”**

by, G. Thomas Hedlund

More’n I’d like to tell you ‘bout Wilber Stunning, first’n I must tell you ‘bout Witches Cross. They come here in aught-five. That be seventeen aught-five. Moving in from the bitter seas up Boston way they come. Then they move north and south, away from the legend bein in Salem. They’s treat it like a plague, like they could sense it in they bones. Some kinda tingle on they neck tugging this-a-way and that. Some moved on down to Connecticut land, while others took a place where the colony Massachusetts and New Hampshire met. It come to us known as Witches Cross.

People settled in this low valley a safe distance from the goin’s on in Salem. They say they don’t want no trouble, just to keep to themselves and build a life. We all looked at them with a side eye, but they seemed nice enough. The men folk worked the land like us, keeping they noses down, as well as they eyes. The woman folk, they just keep down, stuffed inside homes they spend years buildin. In our little spot-a soil we called Camden –named for the man who come here first, Marcus Camden. Legend tell he run away from England cause his mistress (we not supposed to use that word round here –I pray you not tell on me) wound up dead in ole man Singleton’s farmhouse up in the mystic spanse of York, in the old country. Anyway, Camden run from the law and laid his hat down here. Not sure anybody looked for ‘im, but he passed on from this earth in aught-two. Nobody knew how. Just up and died, all quiet like.

So these folk come in, all respectful and stuff, quiet and resolved to life in peace. We never asked no questions. They never telled no stories. It was fine by me and the other sixteen fam’lies who rooted here. It was a time –a good time- ‘fore any of us rooters struck up much of a knowing of these new folk. Fact was, I didn’t want nothing to do with them. They keep away from me, I keep away from them, was my thinkin. But of course, a young man named Randall Cross and his bride Maryland up and dug into fields past my own. I had to see him out there, working the land, pulling food from the earth, day in and day out.

I watched him from my fields, he walking back and forth, row after row, stooping over a stalk here, plucking at a brush there. I never done see him with a hoe or a plow. The man had two horses and they never seen a day of yolkin, I tell you. So one day I walk over there and strike up a talk.

"Quite a field you got on here," I say, admiring the bright greenness of his crop. He look at me and smiled. White teeth you don't see round here jumped at me. They grabbed my eyes and I was embarrassed to starin at them.

"Oh, thank ya kindly," he says to me in a quiet voice that seemed to echo off everything. "I always had a touch for this. Mama told me I could grow wheat in the Sahara." I smiled and nodded. Didn't know what a Sahara was –still don't. I don't quite care none, neither.

"How you do it?" I ask him. I see his wife walk from their house off in the deep distance. She watches us and it felt like her eyes were right on top of me. I got right down cold, right to the bone.

Mr. Cross narrowed his eye at me but said nothing. He looked behind him and nodded, as though understanding somethin I ain't heard. "Let us say that me wife helps a mite," he say as he turned back to me. "She's got a magic touch."

I had enough then. Usin that word, specially these times round these parts was just about the same as blasphemy. I ain't never done no such disrespect to my Lord and to hear that refrain near tore a hole in my skull from one ear to the other. "I got to go now," I says to him. "Sure was a pleasure, Mr. Cross." I nodded to his wife, who was but a blot of white in the distance, but somehow I knew she could see me. I had to gather the other fam'lies. They had something to learn about these people here. Salem ain't the only place in the New World that got a sitcheeation on they hands.

Mr. Cross watched me as I stepped back, stomping some of his crop –not meanin' to, mind ya- and he jest watched me move. That smile tucked inside a cold eye and even on that hot August day, I could stop my shiverin.

Well, I made it out of that there field. Damn near soiled myself tryin. Seemed the farther I walked, the farther my own farm got. When I finally reached it, I looked back, though that naggin voice in my head said not to, and all I seen was an empty green

field. I turned and ran, trippin over a runt of logs rottin in the open. Clumsy and scared I was. Why not? We had witches in our midst.

So I ran. Ran right past my place to the Porter's a mile down the road. I ran and not looked back. But I swear those eyes were on me the whole way. Stalkin me with a grin. Her husband's teeth –those white fangs- bearin wide open for me. Waitin to taste my flesh. Sweat poured from my scalp as I stood on Aaron Porter's stoop, poundin on his door. I knocked so long my knuckles bled. Finally the door swung open. Porter's wife look at me cross.

"What in Lord's name is in to you?" she said. Katherine's voice pinched through her nose on its way out her mouth, like she's always talkin through a bamboo chute. I never none got used to it neither. She wasn't like none other of the women-folk round here. She was mean, nasty. Cut you down without blinkin an eye. Right then, I didn't care none about her attitude. I needed Aaron.

"Where's yore husband?" I asked, looking past her. She had a fire roastin somethin tasty in there. I seen them flames dancing against the wall. The smell sweet making my stomach flip. "I need Aaron, ma'am."

"He ain't here."

"You tell me where he is."

She sucked her lower lip in while she studied me. Didn't suppose she wanted to tell me. But that wasn't her place. It's wasn't no woman's place to deny a man. That's how we lived in Camden. So finally she spit out the words. "He's out tending cattle." She never done wait for me to say nothin else. Just turned her back and slammed the door behind her, little shrew.

I didn't none care. I ran round back, toward the straw-roof lean-to he called a barn. Cows don't need much, just a place to hide out in the rains. I saw them black and white and brown animals grazin in the field beyond the barn. I kept runnin til I saw Aaron sledgin water on a bull's back. "Aaron," I yelled, wavin my arms like an idiot, "I got to talk to ya."

He looked tired, like the long days of summer here was gettin the best of him. His head dragged along like that bull, sloggin too much of a burden. He barely lifted his head as he passed. "Lemme drop this load," he said and I followed.

As he sat in the shade of that massive bull, I told him about Randall Cross and his wife, about they eyes. He listened, sure as heck he did. His head bobbed like a log floatin down river. He

didn't seem much interested in my story. My face grew hot, feelin sheepish for bringin this to him.

"And you think they's a witch cause they fields are greener than yours?" I never muched liked being condese- condensat-talked down at, but I took it better'n most I guess. Aaron was a man who shot from the hip. He had somethin to say, he said it. That's just his way. I told him no, it was they eyes. Her eyes and the way I knew they was on me, even from across all them corns and stuff. All that green.

"It's unneratural, Aaron," I says to him. "They don't do no work and they got the greenest fields I ever done see."

"Natural," he says to me, his voice limp in the August breeze.

"Huh?"

"Unnatural, not unneratural."

"When you become an English teacher?"

He waved a hand at me. That bull shader flicked its tail and done near hit me with it. I never did like that animal much. I stepped back. "All right, Francis, tell you what," he squinted up at me, "I'll go over and talk with Wilber Stunning. See what he got to say about them neighbors of yours. He shares a border with them. Maybe he can help us straighten this out for you."

I can't say I was thrilled with it, but it was somethin. "Obliged," I said as I left him to his daily chores, and trudged on back to mine. It occurred to me I hadn't thought none about talking to Wilber first. Aaron Porter was our town magistrate and my best friend. It just was that he be the first person I went to with problems. Most everyone did, too. But Wilber Stunning was our leader. We hadn't got into elections or nothin like that. He jest kinda fell into the job, if ya know what I mean.

But a funnier thing bout old Wilber, there. He's just about the oldest man I ever done know. When we was kids, me and my brothers, Mr. Stunning would always be putterin around his yard, sorta like them Crosses. He always waved and smiled and said hello and all and we all called him gran, an affectionate thing short for grandpaps. Cause that's what he was, kinda ... the town's grandpap. And as I left Aaron Porter's plot of home, I realized that Stunning looked the same now as all them years ago. Not a day older, I swear. And I also remember chucklin at the thinkin that he was one lucky guy to hold back the years the way he done. I shoulda seen it then.

I went straight home from Porter's and stood in my kitchen watchin my wife stir somethin dark in the large, rusted pot she cooked nearly every night in. The wood stacked next to the fire looked to last another few days, then I'd be off hackin through another cord or two. Winter'd be on its way soon, rumblin from around them corners, wherever them seasons come from, but I still had time to get the place in shape. My wife noticed me and said in her most typical edge, "Whachew starin' at, sir? Have you no manners?" She knew I didn't, she just liked askin I think cause she always said it with a smile.

I smiled back, though it didn't feel much like one, like cutting through stubborn pine with a dull axe. You forced it until it finally crashed down. I couldn't tear my mind from those Crosses out yonder. I knew I shouldn't get her involved none, but I couldn't help myself and had to ask. "You ever get around to talkin' to them Crosses?"

She stopped stirrin and looked at me, the smile spread like soft butter straight from churnin. "You mean Randall and Maryland? Why yes I have. They are just the most lovely couple I think I ever met."

Not the answer I wanted, but not one I didn't none expect. My wife would find King Henry agreeable, and I reckon she be the only one. "Nothing unusual about them you see?"

She cocked an eye at me, "Whachew diggin' up now, sir?" I shook her off and tried to wander from the room, but she wasn't havin none of it. "Francis," she calls after me, "I beg you're not stirrin' up another bout of trouble are you?"

I turned my head some and asked in a shocked tone, "What do you mean, another?" I was thinkin she forgot that trouble with the Rice family back over by the Paddox farm last year. I often forgot, much to my despair, the torrid memory of my wife. She none forget too quick.

"Whachew done to those poor Rices. I still wonder if they made out last winter and all, and can only hope they did." She went back to her cookin, which was what she ought to be doing, but her notion sat hard on me. It sat hard me too many nights, too.

It was about a year ago, if my mind recalls that right. The Rices pulled up crop more'n twice what I had coughin up through my bone dry soils. We ain't seen no stitch of rain that year once May come and gone. Most our crop went to dust. Lost many cow,

too. Made for a difficult summer, to be sure, and not all made it through, neither. But I went walkin last fall, during harvest since they wasn't much for me to do, 'cept squint against the dust blowing across my field. I seen them Rices plowing crop with smiles on they faces and a skip in they steps. They was mighty happy. A bit too happy for my takin. I watched them for some time but I didn't run off to Porter's place that day. I waited for the town meetin that happened to be the next night.

All twenty-one families was represented that night. Wilber Stunning done start off the meetin –we had meetins once a month most of that time, whether they was anything to talk about or not–mutterin about the dry spell and how we needed rain and how it was important for all of us to pray as much as we could. A murmur of 'ayes' and 'yassirs' filled the room. I kept my eye on Mr. Rice. I never done got his name, for the matter. Never much cared none, neither. I didn't like the looks of him and I don't think he liked me neither. I kept wond'rin how he got such good soil under such a blazin sun.

I stood up while Stunning talked about poor Aaron Porter's prize steer that had crumpled under the awful stretch of heat. I think I interrupted when I asked anyone if they could 'splain how those Rices managed the most greenest crops while all I could get up were some brown weeds and limp carrots. That room buzzed like bees. I seen men noddin to each other and the voices grew louder. I saw Wilber Stunning pound the table in front of him with his fist, tryin to quarter some restraint in the room.

"Now we shan't be throwing around any strong accusations like those I been hearing," he said when the air quieted down. I guess I wasn't the only one who'd been thinkin those same thoughts, just the first one to say so. "I know the Rices. Known them for some time. They're fine upstanding people and I don't have to remind any of ye about the goings on down there in Salem few years back, do I?" He done spit that town like rotten fruit from his mouth. None of us liked to talk about it, or mention the name. It was what we been runnin from and all those absurd Puritan ways.

"But tell me how they cut crop like that," Milford Brimley, who lived on the other side of them Rices, shouted. That was followed by more voices agreein.

Things blew out of control then and nothin old Wilber Stunning said could stop it. By daylight next morn', the Rices were

packed up, thrown on their battered horses and set off. We none cared where, as long as they wasn't here. We burned they crop and then they house. Mrs. Rice wept and begged for mercy, but in our little town, witches just ain't welcome and since we vowed not to burn 'em or drown 'em or hang 'em, we had to drive 'em off. Else we be surrounded by 'em. None of us wanted that. A part of me done felt bad about the whole thing, but there's not much a man can do sometimes, especially in the face of that kind of ... magic.

So now I see them Crosses from my yard, toiling so little to breed so much and I knows in my heart of hearts that they's just like them Rices. Witches to the core. But Porter wants to deal with this a little softer than before. Wilber Stunning none talked much to us for many months after we run off them ... things. It hurt to have him shun us like that and neither Porter nor me wanted to go through that again. So he's gonna go talk to Wilber after him and his missus have they dinner. I was left to wonder and wait. And look out beyond my fields at them evil things.

My wife none liked my ... what did she call it now ... meddlin, I think it was. She always believed to live and let live. To mind one's own business. And that's all well and good, but I knows that if ye let one get away with whatever they's wantin to do, then they'll be no stopping 'em before too long. My fingers itched waitin for the night to roll on. I just had to know what Wilber said when Porter done talked to him. I paced around our tiny house, waitin for the wife to finish cookin so I could eat. Some days that woman could bake till the sun gone down and my stomach be growlin like one of them wild dogs tryin to steal our chickens. I hoped she'd be done soon.

The night snuck up on us like it always done and I kept lookin over at them Crosses. They house burned in the settin sun and gave me the chills something fierce. I still felt them eyes of Maryland on me across both our fields. Each minute that burned down the candle I knew more and more what they was. I knew Porter be comin by soon enough to tell what Stunning done say about it.

The wife's cookin left something unsettled in me and I asked her what she thought she was doin. She huffed and sulked back to the kitchen without none word and I heard wooden spoons and metal pots and water bangin and sloshin around. She wasn't none too happy with me then. I couldn't much care. She done

better. She always done better, and then I realized that it wasn't her that done that ill flavor to the food. It was that Cross woman. She sent some spell down my way and took the flavor right out of the pot. Or, what did them witches use? A cauldron? Yeah, I done knew then that maybe she even poisoned my food. I called to my wife to apologize, but she done hear none of it, I'm sure, what, with all that bangin and clatterin goin on in that room. I shrugged it off. Someday she'd come around to see what these types were really all about. The witches that fly in like locusts and drive the good folk out. She'd get it soon.

Porter never done come by my house that night. I slept in fits, tossin and turnin, puttin my wife out most of it. I wondered why he never done come by to see me and thought that maybe he never made it to Stunning's. Maybe them witches took him down before he could get there.

I threw on my work clothes and readied to toil in the fields and hopin not to catch too much of an eye from Randall Cross or that wife of his when my front door echoed with a blast of fists and kicks. My wife grabbed my elbow and I looked at the fear in her eyes. I heard voices callin for me through that door. "Oh, Francis," she said with that disappointed tone stuck in her throat, "I hope you didn't start somethin again, causin trouble for the Crosses."

I looked at her odd, wonderin how there could be trouble yet. I jest talked to Aaron Porter last night. I jest done realized what them peoples was yesterday. I mean, I thought some about it before, but never much talked to the man, or his wife, til yesterday. Kinda of strange to be livin next to people you don't never talk to, much less meet. But that was they way. They kept to themselves. Hidin their true nature. Perhaps til they could boil up some new magic and root good in our little town. Damn Salem, I thought, lookin at my wife, why couldn't they jest keep all they witches to themselves.

I opened the front door and saw five men standin there, all of them with tools from they barns. Sickles and poles and lashin ropes and a shovel. They was out of breath, like they all done ran down here at the crack of dawn. I looked past them and didn't see no horses. The shortest one, Mattis Sams -who we called Tragic cause he had jest about the worst luck of any man we ever done see- spoke first. "Porter told us to fetch ya," he said grabbin breath

in between the dust floatin around him, "said you'd be right with us."

"Whachew talkin' about?" I said. "Wichew for what?" I had no clue what they was talkin about and knew the night hadn't been kind to my mind. I couldn't think about much.

"The Crosses," another man spit out. Prentiss Porter (no relation, mind you) wiped the drool hangin from his mouth with the back of his filthy sleeve. Runnin or walkin wasn't much his thing. I stared at him until he done told me what was goin on. "We heard what Porter, you know, Aaron, talked to Stunning about last night. Stunning gone and chased him right off with a broom, yellin that we best not be messin with any more folk if he knows what's good for him."

"Yeah, we heard all this right after," Sams said, "when Porter come knockin on our doors right after dinner. He was straight-sure that you was right. We all been thinkin it, too, about them Crosses, that is."

I nodded, feeling the blood comin to my face. "They witches, ain't they?"

"Damn right," all five of the men said. They smacked their tools on the ground in front of me and I seen they knuckles turn white from they grip.

"We're goin' to fetch them up," Sams said holdin some of the rope toward me. "We done been good Christians about it once and they ain't left us alone."

"I bet the Crosses are the Rices," Prentiss said. A murmur of agreement spilled across the men. "I bet they just changed their look and came back, that's what I been thinkin'."

"Yeah," a stocky man and good friend of mine, Braylon Hempstead said, "we was nice once. They didn't get the hint. This time we ain't gonna be nice."

I looked at the men, waitin for them to say what we was gonna do to them Crosses to be rid of them once and for all. When none spoke, I had to ask.

"We're gonna burn 'em." They smacked the ground again with they tools. I heard my wife groan and protest behind me, but she's jest a woman and not worth answerin. I walked out, shuttin the door and her whinin behind me.

We went off through my fields, chargin the Cross house. I saw three other groups of men and women surroundin the house

as we came up to it. They all had tools, or weapons. I saw Wilber Stunning standin in front of Randall and Maryland Cross, talkin as loud as he could, but I couldn't none hear what he be sayin. Didn't much matter none neither. My mind was beginnin to think that he was jest as much witch as they was. Then I remembered I realized I never done seen him age in all the time I know'd him.

We got closer and they turned to face us. Wilber done stared right at me, like he was looking through me, or at least into the deep well of my soul. "Ah," he said, "if it isn't the instigator of yet another witch hunt."

I didn't none know what that word meant, but I knew what he was meanin. "I ain't the only one who knows it," I said.

"Not now. But you brought disaster on the Rice couple because you were jealous of their fields. Because they knew things you didn't, because they toiled longer than you did."

There were angry voices thrown at Wilber, but I didn't none hear them. All I saw and heard was him, like he drew me right into him and I felt my chest grow thin and it was tough to breath. I struggled to get words. "I didn't none have nothin' to do with them Rices. They brought that to they own door."

Wilber opened his mouth to say somethin more to me when shoutin began. Everyone jest seemed to move at once, closin in on the Crosses and Wilber Stunning. I couldn't move. I jest stood their watchin. Wilber Stunning never done took his eyes off mine, even when he was thrown to the ground and trampled under two or three dozen feet. Randall and Maryland got lost and when I saw them next, they was tied up and bein dragged up the road by the mob of men and women. Most of them was singin a song about burnin witches. I done liked it none. I was left behind with Stunning starin at me.

He finally stood up and smacked the dirt off his clothes, never takin those eyes off me. "If you don't do nothing to stop this nonsense," he said in a soft and quiet voice, "it is you who I will hold responsible." He turned and walked leisure-like up the road followin the crowd.

I didn't none know what to think. I was wonderin what I could do, or if I even wanted to do anythin to stop this. They was witches. Witches, witches, witches. That's all. They deserved whatever they got, especially if they was really them Rices in disguise. I ran after the crowd. I didn't none want to miss nothin.

By the time I got to the town green, Randall and his wife were strapped good to stakes that musta been dug deep overnight. People, both the men and the women, and even some children, was tossing any bit of wood they could grab into piles beneath each of them. Neither of the Crosses looked too concerned, like they was jest hangin around on a Sunday afternoon. The world felt to me like it was spinnin in rapid circles. I was jest beginnin to wonder what in God's good name we was doin here. Jest like Salem, I remember thinkin when a hand found my shoulder and a voice caught my ear.

"Take a good look at them, Francis." It was ole man Stunning and I glanced at him over that shoulder and his rough hand. I'd run past him like he was inching along and it was a good jag at that and yet here was he was, two seconds behind me and not a drop of sweat on his forehead. He was completely calm. I was sweatin and pantin, a good forty years his junior. "Take a good look at them."

I didn't have to look. Randall Cross's gaze caught mine and dragged me into him. I couldn't pull away. There was no fear in him. No panic, just that calm, leisurely manner I done seen when I wandered into his field jest ... yesterday. I couldn't none believe it was only yesterday. Wilber Stunning was right, this was my fault. If I'd have known, then I'd have stopped it before it got started. But how was I to know?

"Wasn't s'posed to go like this," I said, not sure whether to me, Cross, or Stunning. Wilber was the one who answered.

"How'd you expect it to go, son?"

"You's one of them, though, ain't ya?"

"If you mean a witch, then yeah, I guess you could say that." I wanted to look at him. I jest couldn't none believe that he was a witch. In all the years I knowd him, since I was running around without no care, he was always there. "And you know what else Francis?"

I shook my head, my eyes still locked in by Mr. Cross. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the torches makin they way to the dry kindlin.

"We wasn't the only ones."

"Wh- what do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

"They's more."

“Uh-huh. Lots more. And they’re just under your nose. But you can’t see them until they do something a little better than you, or a little faster. Then, by God, you just up and have a fit, don’t you?” That man’s rough hand never left my shoulder and felt like it dug in deeper as they torches was tossed onto the wood.

“I ... din’t ... mean ...”

“You just watch there, son.” He grasped the back of my neck and held my head straight. “You watch them burn.”

But I didn’t none want to watch. People was cheerin and throwin they fists in the air. Randall let go and shut his eyes. Maryland was already dropping her head. They was goin fast and for some unknown reason, I was thinkin they wasn’t dying. They was movin. I heard that flesh begin to sizzle and the smell hit me. Some of the women folk started covering they mouths and gaggin, tryin to get away from it, but you never got away from that smell. Once it hit you, it always stayed. I was glad my wife wasn’t down there with me. But I felt it in my bones that they was movin onto another place. Another body, maybe. Perhaps they was the Rices last year, and next year they was something else, but I knows they didn’t burn. That was what witches did. They did magic. They did it all the time.

Wilber Stunning leaned in a bit and whispered low in my ear, “They may be the ones burning in flesh, Francis, but you best bet they ain’t being the ones whose soul’s be burnin’.” He paused then got even closer. “I give you that.”

I felt the chill ride all down my body, like the day I dumped a nest of ants all over my body by not knowins they was in the wood pile we used for heatin and cookin. I didn’t none knows what he was saying at the time, but I knows now.

Three hundred years ago I watched them Cross bodies burn in our little town of Camden. I ain’t none smarter today than I was then, but I does know I haven’t lived my last day any more’n I did that day.

Alls I know is that until old man Stunning wants to let me go, I’ll have to wait and bear my own witches cross.