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Your most esteemed Excellency,

I write to you on this the second day of January in the New Year of our Lord 1567 as, thanks be to God, I emerge from my darkest hour. Excuse the feeble hand in which this letter is rendered, for I am presently a man whose body is broken even as his soul exults.

You have heard that terrible events have befallen the parish of Witney recently. I should like to offer you my interpretation of these events to dispel any ambiguities that idle rumour may have fomented.

Since I met with you last, we have here been overwhelmed by misfortune, and death has levied an awful price on our community. Regrettably I must confess I have been remiss in the care of the flock entrusted to me, but you have been a very great friend and mentor to me these past years and it is my hope that a clear exposition of the facts of my case may forestall any unduly harsh judgements on your part.

I must tell you that when I returned to Witney after our last meeting I was inexplicably plunged into an appalling melancholia. I will not say that my vocation has been without its trials, but prayer had always been my greatest comfort. However in those days following my return from Oxford, prayer had become empty and burdensome, even (God forgive me) tedious. I failed entirely to re-ignite the sparks of piety where once my fervour had been a barely contained conflagration. Saying Mass too felt cumbrous and alien -no more than a meaningless drill.

I wondered had God abandoned me? Or perhaps more terrifying, had I (unknowingly) abandoned God? I despaired as to what sin I had committed requisite with this sudden dreadful isolation.

I recalled precisely when grace withdrew itself. On that vile morning I had awoken in a torpor. I forced myself about my usual round of duties, hoping that this unprecedented malaise would lift. To my horror, it only intensified with the hours and days. What was the cause of this unnatural foulness of spirit? I scourged my conscience, reflecting on my conduct in the days preceding this crisis.

As you know, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of December I travelled to Oxford where you received my confession and gave me Holy Communion. I was delighted as always to spend time in your company, and though it is true that I only ever want you to think well of me, I am certain that I confessed fully and with the greatest possible candour.

Upon leaving you and at your recommendation, I travelled to Radcliffe Square to witness the hanging of two heretics. You are aware that this is not the kind of spectacle that I relish and I stayed well back from the scaffold. You had advised me that it was important for representatives of the Holy Church to attend such proceedings in order to provide a positive example for the populace, so in obedience to you I endured the grim performance. I confess I averted my eyes at the moment of execution. Immediately feeling ill, I made home for Witney. Was this cravenness my sin?

The day after, as part of my parish duties I had given a blessing of the new oven at the village bakery -a facility serving near a fifth of the county.

The baker, Henry Tate, worked the bakery with his several young daughters, each still a maiden. It was a pleasure to be among exuberant young people, but I was careful to contain my attention from them as much as possible. I am as yet only in my thirtieth year and you taught me well that good Christians must be constantly vigilant against insidious lust.

Henry Tate thanked me with a gift of cakes and his daughters, who tended the ovens daily, presented me with an ornamental salt-dough garland. This was a scarlet cord hung with small decorative loaves, each studded with poppy seeds and caraway and woven with ribbons, pine cones, pieces of cinnamon and suchlike. It was intended for ornamenting the threshold of the church for Christmas. I took it and afterward put it in place above our church door, thinking it a very fine decoration (though I know you do not approve of levity at Christmastime).

Despite my concern for rectitude around Tate's daughters, later I considered whether I had secretly and sinfully lusted. Had I deceived myself?

In the afternoon following the blessing I went to administer the last rites to a parishioner of semi-noble birth named Richard Folsom. Mr Folsom had been an infrequent congregant at church over the years and though fundamentally a good man, he was a sceptic in matters of religion.

Sadly, his doubts about the truth of revelation were burgeoning rather than

diminishing as he approached death. Though he was glad to receive me a last time, his opinion was that Christian theology was absurd.

Doubtless, you would have had him arrested for apostasy immediately and without mitigation despite his ailing condition, I know, but the patient's fever was such that I did not believe he truly understood the gravity of his declamations.

He died that evening. Having completed the rites, I determined that he should be interred within the sanctified compound of our churchyard here in Witney. Could this have been my offence? Firstly, that I failed to save his soul from damnation in the final moments of his life? Secondly, that by permitting him a Christian burial, reserved for the faithful, I was committing sacrilege?

Further, Mr Folsom bequeathed me several books on his deathbed and insisted that I take them away, him knowing that I had a love of learning. These were rationalist texts of the kind you despise. I stayed up late that night poring through their pages. Oh, terrible guilt. Was this my transgression?

It hardly warrants mentioning, though I feel I must, that subsequent claims from the Folsom Widow that I removed these books without the deceased's consent beggar credulity. That unfortunate lady is renowned for her bouts of confusion, sadly.

On the following morning of the 10<sup>th</sup> of December, that suffocating, tenebrous despondency descended. By the 15<sup>th</sup> I had quit my duties completely, locking myself away, receiving no visitors and taking to wine for comfort.

It was Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> of December when events took a new turn. Baneful day. Named for Saturn, that pagan deity of death and leaden gloom.

The winter snows had arrived and the church was cold. I had told the sexton that I was too ill to give services and I was not to be disturbed by anyone. In an effort to avoid all human contact, I had decamped myself to the vestry where I could be assured of solitude.

It was the middle of the evening when I was roused by an urgent knock on the church door. As to why I chose to answer the call, when I had ignored visitors on all previous occasions, we can perhaps speculate. Regardless, it was a decision I was to rue.

Drowsy, I staggered through the nave to the porch. I noted the scarlet garland from the bakery draped over the door. Faintly, I thought how ridiculous its gaiety now seemed.

I opened the door to the church and there before me was a young woman, no older than seventeen. She was in obvious distress and was inadequately clad against the icy night.

She pleaded to be allowed into the church, and fearing she might collapse there and then on the steps, I admitted her. Her face was a mask of fright. I asked her why she was abroad on such an evening, ill-equipped and unaccompanied. In response to my question, tears instantly tumbled down her cheeks. I tried to elicit some explanation from her as to her situation but my entreaties were met only with inconsolable sobbing. I took hold of her fearing she might swoon. In these

circumstances I felt it appropriate to allow this poor creature into the church vestry where there was a fire in the hearth.

Ensnoced there, I warmed some wine whilst she gained composure. While she drank I queried her again gently. Finally she was able to give an explanation and what was said caused me the utmost alarm.

Her name was Alice. She was an unmarried woman of my parish, and though somewhat familiar, unknown to me.

She claimed that in the last three nights there had been three miscarriages of unborn children in Witney, each child lost to a different woman on a different night. It is a measure of how detached I had become from my responsibilities that I had as yet no awareness of these shocking events.

Alice further claimed that this extraordinary misfortune had created a furore among the villagers, many of whom were convinced that black magic was at the root of this woe. There were whispers that a crooked hobgoblin, summoned from Hell, prowled the streets of Witney after dark. It need only peer through a window at a sleeping woman and she would expel her unborn child.

Your Excellency, you can only imagine my horror. Not because of these claims of magic as such, the like of which (as you are aware) had tended to rouse my scepticism hitherto, but because I had been derelict in my duty to steward my parishioners through these harrowing events, assuaging impulsive speculations about their causes. I had always felt that charges of witchcraft are far too liberally imputed these days.

I asked Alice how these matters related to her distressed presence here at my church on this winter evening.

In a trembling voice she told me that a party of men had denounced her as a witch and accused her of directly affecting the three infant deaths by means of infernal practices. They had dragged her from her house into the street and broadcast to the village their suspicions. Neighbours, former friends, had showered her with acid imprecations. She had been spat on and humiliated.

They had bundled her into a cart to take her to where she knew not. Only by throwing herself from the vehicle as they passed through thick forest had she effected her escape.

I observed that it was remarkable that she had not injured herself. But why, I asked, why had she attracted such grave suspicions? Surely her words or conduct must have served to indict her in the eyes of her neighbours?

Alice told me that two possible reasons occurred to her, neither of which implicated witchcraft.

Firstly, she said that though she had done nothing to encourage it, the husband of her neighbour, one Sarah Derby, had been unsubtle in demonstrating his lustful admiration for Alice. Often he watched her as she washed her hair in a tub in the yard of her house. His leering made her uncomfortable but she did not know what to do about the matter.

Sarah Derby had become aware of her husband's fickle glances and unjustly assigned the blame to Alice. Sarah Derby did likely denounce her therefore, Alice said, due to her injured pride and jealousy.



A further factor that may have drawn unwarranted suspicion, so Alice claimed, was her habit of preparing medicines and poultices using roots and berries gleaned from the forest.

Seeing the uncertainty flicker in my expression, she begged me to believe her. This was but the simple lore of the traditional cunning woman, nothing more. She claimed she was a good Christian and God strike her down if she would ever consider making charms or potions for evil intent.

Whatever the case, I thought her conduct dubious in that regard and I told her so. I explained to her that as a woman, and one of little means as she appeared to be, she was well advised to avoid activities that attract the suspicions of fearful people, and indeed with regard to the desires of errant husbands, greater modesty in dress and conduct can be a defence. Why must she wash her hair in the yard, for example?

Why should she not, she retorted defiantly. Was she to bear the guilt of another's moral weakness simply because of her sex?

I argued that there is that which is right and then there is that which is prudent, and the wise find a way to navigate between one and the other.

Alice, exasperated, complained there was no peace from the lusts of men in or out of her home.

You say you are unmarried, I reminded her.

There was always a man in her home, she said sombrely, and his authority obtains completely in that house. His attentions are inescapable.

I was perturbed by the unhealthy implications. She said nothing more, but

stared at the floor. We sat in silence for a time, watching the embers in the hearth.

Finally, I said I would try to help her in her plight. I could talk to the villagers, meet with the local magistrate -who was known to me. I would be her advocate and ensure her case was treated fairly. When she was ready I would prepare the horse and trap and drive her to town.

No, no, she implored. If she was surrendered to the mob they would beat her and put her to trials without any hearing. Did I not know what had happened to those accused of witchcraft at Gosford? Or Sandford Saint Martin?

I had in fact heard something of the extra judicial methods employed by the outraged public in such cases. The liberal use of *judicium aqua frigidae*, for example. The lack of legal governance.

She suddenly fell to tears again.

I was about to sooth her when thumping at the church door again disturbed my evening. Alice looked at me in terror. I put my finger to my lips to calm her. Slowly, I got up and left the vestry making my way across the chill cavern of the nave to the porch. I opened one of the double doors and peered out into the night.

There was Matthew Garrett, our constable, and a party of soldiers. Matthew bade me good evening and asked if I had seen a young woman for whom they were searching. This woman was suspected of witchcraft and they had orders to arrest her.

Though I respect the law, Your Excellency, on this occasion I felt the Christian

recourse was to postpone surrendering the fugitive until the morning at least.

This would give me time to consider the most appropriate steps.

I have not seen anyone this evening, I said.

Garrett looked agitated and doubtful, almost straining to peer over my shoulder into the darkness of the nave. He observed that there were tracks in the snow leading to the door of the church. Surely these were hers or had I welcomed another guest on such an inhospitable evening?

I told him frankly that I need give no account of my guests -real or imagined- to one such as he, and that if he wished to enter the church without my consent he should seek ecclesiastical authority from the bishop himself (pardon, Your Excellency).

Garrett reminded me that it was a crime to harbour or give succour to a witch. Frustrated, he left promising to return by dawn.

So I lied. Shamelessly justifying the deceit with scriptural precedent. Did not the midwives lie to Pharaoh in the Book of Exodus to protect the Israelite children?

I returned to my charge to find her hiding in the corner of the vestry. No sooner had I told her that the soldiers were gone then she grasped me in a desperate clutch, thanking me profusely. I am unaccustomed to such contact with women, of course, but in her state I understood the need for the security of a human embrace.

This is what I told myself. The truth is that I too felt a sublime comfort in her arms. For days now I had dwelled in isolation, cut-off both from the world and

from God. It had not occurred to me that the greater part of my despair was loneliness. And if God had turned his back on me, how could I not but seek love elsewhere?

Yes, love, Your Excellency. This is what I thought I felt. Alice and I held each other and talked of the trials of this world. As the fire died we exchanged kisses in the darkness. Innocently enough at first but undeniably, for I am very sure she felt it too, with a growing thrill of intensity. Her lips on mine. The heat of her breath on my cheek. The softness of her bosom against my chest. Then naked, we found each other and fell into each other. My priestly vow was forgotten.

Afterwards I was swept up in a madness, overcome by fantasies of escape, my vocation cast aside. My plan was to rescue the girl from her unhappy fate. I locked the church and wrapping my cloak about me, hurried across the graveyard through drifts of snow to my cottage. It was cold and dark inside, having remained uninhabited for many days. I found my trunk and hurriedly began to pack it to facilitate our flight from Oxfordshire.

On my return to the church I was alarmed to find that one of the exterior windows had been broken in. Shattered glass littered the pavement. I could hear sharp voices echoing in the nave. I followed them.

There in front of the chancel, right before the altar, was Garrett. He had Alice by the wrist. His shortsword, the sole badge of his office, was drawn. I cried out to him to desist. He wheeled on me in anger, releasing Alice who fell to the floor. He

drew a folded paper from inside his jacket and thrust it on the altar. Here was his warrant.

I ordered him to leave my church. Alice would not be leaving my care this night.

The girl was a witch he bawled, and did not the Bible command that none shall suffer a witch to live? Confounded and furious, Garrett turned on Alice, raising his blade to strike.

Without forethought I raced forward and scooped up the nearest object to hand, the heavy brass crucifix on the altar. I brought it down on Garrett's skull with all the strength that I could summon. He collapsed, blood pouring onto the stone flags. I struck him again and again. Alice screamed.

I staggered to the vestry to wash the blood away. My sanity returning, I reflected on my deed. I was overcome with horror at myself. Murder. Christ save me.

On my return to the nave I saw the dark shape of Alice crouched above the broken form of Garrett. Oblivious to me, she leant over as if to lick the bloodied face of the corpse. As I approached and she became aware of my presence, she scuttled away into the shadows. The unsettling impression I had was of a spider forced to withdraw from its prey.

On the altar was Garrett's warrant. I unfolded the paper and examined it. Her name was written in full. Alice Tate.

I realised now why she had been vaguely familiar to me. The bakery. She was one of Henry Tate's daughters. My mind span and then a dark notion pierced my consciousness.

I raced to the porch of the church and ripped down the salt-dough garland that hung there. Frantically I broke open the tiny loaves, grinding them to crumbs between my hands.

Then I found it.

Small, pale and hard like bone. I worked it between my fingers and blew off the dust.

A child's tooth.

I felt my jaw tighten and my eyes screw shut, as in agony. My fist constricted around the tiny fragment and I heard myself involuntarily expel a single poisonous word like a hiss: *Devilry!*

I found the bitch in the vestry. I shook her and demanded to know her purposes. She claimed to know nothing of the tooth though she did indeed work in the bakery under her father. She had not concealed this, she remonstrated, assuming all along that I knew of it. Several women other than her sisters worked at the bakery, she continued, and often brought children with them. Sometimes the children helped. It would not be impossible for a shed tooth to end up in the dough.

And what of Matthew Garrett, I demanded? Did I not see her drinking his blood in the shadows just now?

Again more tears. It was nothing more than a kiss, she pleaded. Matthew had been her secret lover.

Garrett was a married man, I objected.

Indeed so, she agreed, and this was why he wished Alice dead prior to any questioning. He did not want his infidelity exposed, as it must inevitably be under torture.

Is there no end to the sin, I screamed? Not only a sorceress but also an adulteress and a seducer of priests!

I rained blows on her.

Later there was the sound of hammering at the church doors again. This time with the most vehement urgency. A substantial party were attempting to gain entry. I left Alice where she lay on the vestry floor and made my way through to the chancel. I fell to my knees before the altar and I lifted up my heart in prayer. Already, with her spell broken, I could feel the presence of The Divine once more. Weeping, I gave thanks for my deliverance.

Both Alice and I were arrested. As we were led across the churchyard she threw me a spiteful glance. I steeled myself against a final malediction. Instead she said, God forgive you.

A performance for the soldiers, nothing more.

And so at present, Your Excellency, I am confined here at Charlbury. I shall be free at the end of the month, now that the part of the inquiry that concerns me has concluded. During the inquiry I submitted myself without complaint to the methods and processes of my investigators. I found solace in knowing that my

agonies were but a pale imitation of those suffered by Christ.

Unfortunately, the accused, Alice Tate, expired under question and so the full extent of her mischief may never be known. Happily, there is consolation in the fact that the names of several accomplices were elicited before the devil reclaimed her.

As you may be aware, I myself have been acquitted of the murder of Matthew Garrett due to the overwhelming evidence of possession by means of black magic. Even now that I am exonerated of all blame, that I left my soul so undefended from the wiles of the witch causes me intense shame.

Alice Tate's claims that I, a servant of God, pressed her for carnal satisfaction in return for concealing her from the forces of justice have been rightly dismissed. As has her scandalous accusation that I murdered Matthew Garrett from jealousy to prevent him rescuing and absconding with Alice, who was his lover.

My great solace in all this tribulation is that once more I feel the proximity of God and the infinite love of Jesus Christ. The many hours in my prison have been spent productively in prayer. Now that Alice Tate's monstrous schemes have been vitiated, the light of the almighty has broken through to me anew. I rejoice in my reunification.

I ask that I may see you upon my release to discuss penance. In view of my recent experiences I wish to request of you a commission and legal warrant, that I might travel the country and undertake investigations to find, expose, prosecute



and punish those practicing witchcraft. I feel my insights can be of singular utility in this enterprise.

I know that you will agree, we must purge our congregations and utterly extirpate this pestilential contamination in God's England.

Your most humble servant in Christ

Fr. D.C.

THE END.