



jeanette
winters on

the
daylight

gate

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a nightmarish novella
that burns like a hot coal.”
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The
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Jeanette

Winterson

The
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To Henri Llewlyn Davies
1954–2011.

Her own witch and mine.



Introduction

The Trial of the Lancashire Witches, 1612, is the most famous of the English witch trials. The suspects were taken to Lancaster Castle in April 1612 and executed following the August Assizes.

The Well Dungeon can be visited and Lancaster Castle is open to visitors.

It was the first witch trial to be documented. Thomas Potts, lawyer, wrote his account: *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Witches in the Countie of Lancashire*. It is supposedly an eyewitness verbatim account, though heavily dosed with Potts' own views on the matter. Potts was loyal to James I – the fervent Protestant King whose book, *Daemonology*, set the tone and the feel of a century obsessed with witchcraft, and heresy of every kind – including those loyal to the old Catholic faith.

Witchery popery popery witchery, as Potts puts it, is how the seventeenth-century English understood matters treasonable and diabolical.

All of the conspirators of the 1605 Gunpowder Plot fled to Lancashire. And Lancashire remained a stronghold of the Catholic faith throughout the seventeenth century.

The story I have told follows the historical account of the witch trials and the religious background, but with necessary speculations and inventions. We do not know if Shakespeare was a tutor at Hoghton Hall, but there is evidence to suggest that he might have been. The chronology of his plays, as used here, is correct. His own use of the religious, the supernatural and the macabre, is also correct.

The places are real places – Read Hall, the Rough Lee, Malkin Tower, Newchurch in Pendle, Whalley Abbey. The characters are real people, though I have taken liberties with their motives and their means. My Alice Nutter is not the Alice Nutter of history – though why that gentlewoman was tried for witchcraft along with the Demdike and Chattox riff-raff remains a mystery.

The story of Alice Nutter and Elizabeth Southern is an invention of my own and has no basis in fact. It pleases me though, that there might have been a connection with Dr John Dee, and with Manchester, London, as well as Shakespeare himself.

And Pendle Hill is still the enigma it ever was, though the Malkin Tower is long gone.

Jeanette Winterson

June 2011



Pendle

The North is the dark place.

It is not safe to be buried on the north side of the church and the North Door is the way of the Dead.

The north of England is untamed. It can be subdued but it cannot be tamed. Lancashire is the wild part of the untamed.

The Forest of Pendle used to be a hunting ground, but some say that the hill is the hunter – alive in its black-and-green coat cropped like an animal pelt.

The hill itself is low and massy, flat-topped, brooding, disappeared in mists, treacherous with bogs, run through with fast-flowing streams plunging into waterfalls crashing down into unknown pools. Underfoot is the black rock that is the spine of this place.

Sheep graze. Hares stand like question marks.

There are no landmarks for the traveller. Too early or too late the mist closes in. Only a fool or one who has dark business should cross Pendle at night.

Stand on the flat top of Pendle Hill and you can see everything of the county of Lancashire, and some say you can see other things too. This is a haunted place. The living and the dead come together on the hill.

You cannot walk here and feel you are alone.

Those who are born here are branded by Pendle. They share a common mark. There is still a tradition, or a superstition, that a girl-child born in Pendle Forest should be twice baptised; once in a church and once in a black pool at the foot of the hill. The hill will know her then. She will be its trophy and its sacrifice. She must make her peace with her birth right, whatever that means.



John Law

The pedlar John Law was taking a short cut through that nick of Pendle Forest they call Boggart Hole. The afternoon was too warm for the time of year and he was hot in his winter clothes. He had a hurry. Already the light was thinning. Soon it would be dusk; the liminal hour – the Daylight Gate. He did not want to step through the light into whatever lay beyond the light.

His pack was bulky and his feet were sore. He slipped and put out his hand to save himself, but he sank wrist to elbow to knees into a brown bubbling mud, thick under the surface of the spongy moss. He was a heavy man. As he struggled to get up he saw the witch Alizon Device standing in front of him.

She was wheedling, smiling, flouncing her skirt. She wanted pins from his pack: *Kiss me, fat pedlar*. He didn't want to kiss her. He wouldn't give her pins. He heard the first owl. He must get away.

He pushed her roughly. She fell. She grabbed his leg to steady herself. He kicked her away. She hit her head.

He ran.

She cursed him. 'FAT PEDLAR! CATCH HIM, FANCY, BITE FLESH TO BONE.'

He heard a dog snarling. He couldn't see it. Her Familiar . . . it must be. The Devil had given her a spirit in the shape of a dog she called Fancy.

He ran. Stepping out of the furze another woman blocked his path. She held a dead lamb in her arms. He knew her: Alizon's grand-dam. Old Demdike.

He ran. The women were laughing at him. Two of them? Three of them? Or was it the Devil himself stepping through the Daylight Gate?

*

John Law, running and falling, collapsed through the door of the Dog in Newchurch in Pendle an hour later. His lips were foamy. Men loosened his clothes. He held up three fingers and said one word: *Demdike*.



Alice Nutter

Alice Nutter rode out from the Rough Lee.

She took her pony up towards the slopes of Pendle Hill where she could look back at her house at the beginning-sun.

It was a handsome house; stone-built, oak-lined, lime trees trained to make an avenue to the door. Hornbeam hedges surrounded the house itself, and opened in wide useful squares towards her stable and poultry pens, pike pond and kennels.

Here was wealth. Her wealth. And she had not been born to it nor had she inherited it. Her fortune had come through the invention of a dye; a magenta that held fast in water and that had a curious depth to it – like looking into a mirror made of mercury. The Queen had ordered vats of the stuff and Alice had worked for a long time in London, with her own dye-house and warehouse.

Her knowledge of plants and their dyes, her instinctive chemistry, had recommended her to the Queen's astrologer and mathematician, John Dee. Alice had worked with him in his laboratory at Mortlake, where he used the lunar calendar of thirteen months. He believed he had succeeded in making a tiny phial of the Elixir of Life. Alice did not believe it. In any case, it had not saved the Queen or John Dee. They were both dead now.

Elizabeth had left no heir. In 1603 the English Crown had passed to James the Sixth of Scotland, now James the First of England too; a Protestant, a devout man, a man who wanted no dyes or fancy stuffs. A man who had two passions: to rid his new-crowned kingdom of popery and witchcraft.

Perhaps you could not blame him. In 1589, bringing his bride home to Scotland from Denmark, a storm had nearly drowned him. It was witchcraft, he knew it, and he had the witches tried and burned at Berwick, attending the sessions himself.

In 1605, Guy Fawkes had tried to blow him up by stacking enough gunpowder under the House of Parliament to detonate half of London . . . And every conspirator a Catholic.

The Witch Plot and the Gunpowder Plot.

But every good Catholic would see a witch tortured on the rack until her shoulders dislocated the sockets and her legs broke at the ankle and hip.

And what witch would save a Jesuit from the knife that would first castrate him, and then disembowel him, still alive?

James was fortunate that his enemies were enemies.

But Alice wondered how safe was any safety that depended on hatred?

Alice whistled. A falcon flew. One circle. One swoop. The powerful bird landed square on Alice's outstretched arm. Her long leather riding gloves were not the kind a woman wore – hers were double-stitched and heavy. Hers were scarred with the landings of the bird. As he landed she fed him a dead mouse from her pocket.

Alice was riding astride. She would not do this to attend church in Whalley or to call on her neighbour, the Magistrate Roger Nowell, or to visit the sick or to go about her business in the parish. Then she rode side-saddle and wore a magenta riding habit on top of her copper mare.

She looked beautiful. She was beautiful, even though she was – how old? Nobody knew how old. Old enough to be soon dead, and if not soon dead, then as lined and wrinkled as the milk-and-water well-behaved wives of religious husbands with their hidden mistresses. And if not that, then as toothless and foul as the hags and beldames who could afford no horses but rode broomsticks . . . some said.

This was Lancashire. This was Pendle. This was witch country.



Sarah Device

‘Duck her!’

The woman on the riverbank was struggling and kicking. The man behind her held her arms back, tying her hands. Her dress was open. The man standing in front of her was tall, shaven-headed, lea- faced like a rat. He was playing with her breasts with both hands.

‘This one’s the Demdike witch that got away.’ Constable Hargreaves tying her hands was slower be so sure. ‘If she be a witch, Tom, then it must be proved according to the Law and the Scripture.’

‘The Law and the Scripture? Her grand-dam and her sister sit in Lancaster Castle for maiming b witchcraft.’

‘You got no proof of witchcraft!’ said the woman.

The man called Tom hit her across the mouth. ‘The pedlar John Law is a friend of mine. His legs gone, his speech is gone. The last word he spoke was Demdike.’

‘John Law spoke nowt but pigshit and drink.’

The man hit her again. She spat at him.

Constable Hargreaves had finished his knot-work. He was a lumbering man and he lumbered round to the front of Sarah Device. He held up three fingers. ‘John Law held up three fingers. Three women ran after him through the forest. If the third be not you, then say who.’

‘Three women never ran after John Law in his life! He is as ugly as a boiled head.’

Tom Peeper ripped her dress away from her shoulders and down to her waist. ‘Ugly? Not so ugly that you didn’t lie on your back and open your legs when you wanted ribbons from his pack.’

‘He was as mean as he was ugly and he was as fat as he was limp. If I had laid down under him a day I would have stood up at night still a virgin.’

‘Virgin? You were born with your legs open.’

‘Cats fleshed as women, that’s what witches are, tempting men to sin and damnation.’

Sarah Device smiled at him. ‘Let me go, Tommy, Harry. I’ll give you pleasure for your pains.’

The men looked at each other. Tom undid his breeches. He had an erection. ‘Do you miss your broomstick? Here’s one.’

‘Don’t look her in the eye, Tom. She’s got the Demdike eye,’ said Hargreaves.

‘Strip her,’ said Tom. ‘Search for the witch marks. A cat comes and sucks you, doesn’t he, Sarah Tibbs, is it? Or Merlin? I’ve seen that black cat with eyes like red coals.’

‘You’ll not touch me till you untie me,’ said Sarah. ‘And then I’ll do what you want.’

‘I’ll do what I want now,’ said Tom. ‘Not when a trollop tells me I can. Stop her from wriggling, Harry.’

Tom Peeper raped Sarah Device.

He was quick. He was in practice. ‘Wet as a marsh in there for you now, Harry. They’re all dry, the Demdike women.’

A boy with a fishing rod was coming along the bank. He stopped and stared at the woman with her torn dress around her feet. He was about to run away but Tom Peeper went and grabbed him.

‘Youth has sharp eyes. Look over her for the witch marks – go on, Robert, run your hands across her. Do you like her breasts? She can’t hurt you.’ He took the boy’s hand and held it on Sarah’s breasts.

‘Touch me again and I’ll curse you for it.’

Tom Peeper laughed. ‘You don’t have the power now that Old Demdike is in the gaol. Don’t be afraid of her, boy. Here . . .’

He went behind and shoved Sarah onto her knees, standing astride over her and pushing his weight onto her shoulders. She could feel his balls on her neck.

‘Get your cock out, boy – she’ll suck it if she wants to get home alive.’

‘Let him kiss me first. I am a woman.’

Tom nodded at Hargreaves who prodded the boy to kneel down in front of Sarah. He wouldn’t look at her. She leaned forward and kissed him. He tasted of fear. Sarah stopped struggling. She closed her eyes. She felt his tongue in her mouth. She was dizzy. She hadn’t eaten for two days. She could feel the sun on her face and a cold shadow at her back. She could hear the sound of hooves. The Dark Gentleman would come for her soon enough. Hadn’t Demdike always said so? Today, tomorrow, the next day.

The boy put his hands on her breasts, feeling the nipples. He was getting excited. She could hear voices like she was underwater. They would duck her after this. They would kill her. Today, tomorrow, the next day.

She bit.

The boy pulled back screaming low in his throat. He fainted. Sarah, with her mouth full, spat the bloody tongue onto the ground. She stood up, her mouth open, covered in blood. She started to laugh with wild hysterical laughter.

Tom unsheathed his knife from his belt. ‘I’ll cut your witching throat, you cat.’ His hand pulled Sarah’s neck back by the hair so that her throat was bare and skyward. She opened her eyes. Let him come.

The sound of a horse . . . faster now, nearer. Let him come.

Alice Nutter rode straight into Tom Peeper, knocking him down. Sarah Device got to her feet and leaned against the rump of the pony. She was shaking.

Constable Hargreaves started to mumble something about proving a witch. Alice Nutter cut him short. ‘The Magistrate decides what woman will be proved. Not the mob.’

‘She bewitched John Law!’ said Hargreaves.

‘That’s a lie,’ said Sarah. ‘I am not accused.’

Tom Peeper got up and dragged the maimed boy up with him. He pulled Robert’s hands away from his bloodied mouth. ‘You see this? What woman that is no witch-woman would do this to a man?’

‘What man that is a man would do this to a woman?’

The men did not reply.

‘Take the boy to the herbalist in Whalley and set the charge to my account.’

‘The herbalist is a witch!’ said Tom.

‘Yes and every midwife with her according to the likes of you. Get him away and see to him.’

before he chokes to death on his own blood. Sarah Device – pull up your dress. You will come with me.’ She passed Sarah a cloth from her saddlebag to wipe her mouth. Sarah did not speak. She could not stop shaking.

‘Constable Hargreaves! Untie her.’

Hargreaves cut the cords with a single slash of his knife, not caring that he took the skin off Sarah’s wrist. Then he bent down and picked up the torn-out tongue. ‘Does she want this to take with her to her grand-dam Demdike in Lancaster Castle?’

Alice Nutter did not flinch. ‘Wrap it and give it to me.’ She stared steadily at Hargreaves until he looked away, took out his handkerchief, wrapped the object and handed it to Alice, who put it in her saddlebag.

Hargreaves looked as if he might say something but Alice Nutter was not that kind of woman.

Without glancing at Sarah, who was holding onto her stirrup leather, Alice rode off.

Hargreaves and Tom Peeper watched her go. Neither spoke until she was out of earshot. Then Hargreaves said, ‘She rides astride like a man, and she rides with the bird even though no woman is a falconer. I tell you I don’t trust her. A woman astride and a falcon following – that’s unnatural.’

‘And she took the witch’s part.’

‘I tell you they are the same.’

‘You wouldn’t be calling Alice Nutter a witch, would you, Harry?’

‘I wouldn’t call her nowt, Tom, leastways not in public, but there’s many in private have things to say about her wealth and her power, and who she favours and who she don’t – and why. Why does she let the Demdike live in Malkin Tower on her land?’

‘You can’t take her on.’

‘Not me. There’s one who would do it if he had evidence to do it.’

Tom Peeper nodded his head. ‘You’d best get up to Read Hall then, Harry, and tell Magistrate Nowell what’s happened.’



Roger Nowell

Roger Nowell was a handsome man. He could read as well as he could ride. He liked a play as much as a cockfight. He was the Magistrate of Pendle Forest and the Master of Read Hall – the finest house in Pendle.

Old Demdike and her granddaughter Alizon had been dragged before him accused of maiming the pedlar John Law by witchcraft. Evidence against them was given by Mother Chattox. She had seen them that day at Boggart's Hole.

But Old Demdike was wily, and she had turned and faced her accuser Chattox and accused her in turn of being a witch from the womb. *Baptised twice – once for God and once for Satan. She bears the marks.*

Since they were all shouting witchcraft at each other, and since John Law was on his deathbed, Roger Nowell had a choice: pack them off to Lancaster to await trial or hand them over to the mob for a ducking that would certainly have meant a drowning.

He was hoping to quieten things down by committing them to trial – he disliked the slavering excitement of the mob. But the sensational news of this nest of witches spread long past Lancashire and soon reached London. Roger Nowell was obliged to receive an unwelcome visitor at Read Hall. Thomas Potts of Chancery Lane – Recording Clerk for the Prosecution and the Crown.

'What more do you want?' asked Roger Nowell. 'The Demdike and Chattox will be tried at the August Assizes. There is nothing more to say or to do and I would prefer to return to my regular duties when Easter is past.'

Potts fluffed himself up inside his ruff. He was a proud little cockerel of a man; all feathers and no fight. 'King James is an authority on witchcraft. What other monarch has written his own book on the subject?'

'Your point?' said Roger Nowell.

'My point, sir, is that if you had taken the trouble to read *Daemonology* you would understand what the King in his wisdom understands; that where there is one witch there are many. Here we have four witches –'

'All in prison.'

'The Demdike has family. Mother Chattox has family. Serpents, sir. I say it again – serpents.'

Potts preferred to say things again. And again and again. Roger Nowell controlled himself.

'I have read King James's *Daemonology* and much else besides on the subject of sorcery. My mother's family was once afflicted by Demon Possession.'

'So I had heard,' said Potts.

'So I say to you as Magistrate of the District of Pendle that four witches will stand trial. None else is accused.'

Potts stalked about the room. ‘Accused, no. At their filthy labours? Indeed! In all England no county is as known for its witches as Lancashire. The abbey at Whalley, before it was destroyed by King Henry the Eighth in his just and wise Reformation, had been the sacrilegious altar of the anchorite Isolde de Heton. Anchorite become sorceress.’

‘You have been studying our local history in your free time,’ said Roger Nowell.

Potts had no sense of irony. ‘And that lady Isolde – better call her a cat or a beldame than a lady when she was discovered, she fled the abbey and made her fortress at Malkin Tower – now home of the witch Demdike.’

‘It has been a home to sheep and pigs in the years in between. The Demdike are remote from the villages out there and make less mischief than elsewhere. The land is owned by Alice Nutter. She is a widow. She may do as she pleases with her property.’

Potts regarded him with fury. He liked to be taken seriously. ‘It has been noted, sir, and by the highest in the realm, how slack you are in Lancashire to seek out and stamp out evil. Tomorrow is Good Friday. I am expecting a Sabbat on Pendle Hill.’

‘Are you?’ said Roger Nowell. ‘I shall be in church. At Whalley.’

He was pleased to see his visitor turn purple with indignation, but Potts was not giving up.

‘Since you take the evil of witchcraft so lightly, what have you to say on the other matter?’

Roger Nowell knew what was coming next.

Potts fluffed himself up again. ‘Have you forgotten that only six years ago, after the Gunpowder Plot that was set to claim the life of the lawful and crowned and God-anointed King, every conspirator fled to Lancashire?’

Roger Nowell had not forgotten.

‘What is worse, sir? A High Mass or a Black Mass? To practise witchcraft or to practise the old religion? Both are high treason against the Crown. Witchery popery popery witchery. What is the difference?’

‘Are you saying that a Mass celebrated in the name of God is a profanity? Equal to the Black Mass of the Prince of Darkness?’

‘They are both diabolical,’ said Potts. ‘Treasonable and diabolical. Diabolical and –’

‘Treasonable,’ said Roger Nowell.

‘I am glad we are agreed on that at least,’ said Potts. ‘For while so little has been done to wipe the stain of witchcraft from these lands, less has been done to prosecute those who are loyal to the King in name only and yet follow the old religion.’

‘If you mean Sir John Southworth . . .’

‘I do,’ said Potts.

‘He pays his fines as a Catholic recusant for not attending Anglican Communion and he does no harm. He is not a Jesuit. He is an old man who follows his conscience quietly. He celebrates no Mass and he hides no priests. Besides, he is my friend.’

Potts looked up at his host beadily. ‘You do not choose your friends with care, sir.’

‘I have known him all my life,’ said Roger Nowell.

‘And his son, Christopher Southworth? The Jesuit?’

Roger Nowell was uncomfortable. This was difficult.

‘Christopher Southworth is a traitor – granted. If he were here I would arrest him – friendship with his father notwithstanding. But he escaped from prison after his part in the Gunpowder Plot. He is

France. You know that.'

'I know he is training priests under Father Gerard at Douai and sending them in secret to England. The English Mission is paid for and protected by the Pope himself.'

'I had heard as much. Then catch him in France.'

'We have tried. In a Catholic country we are hardly likely to succeed.'

'Then give up,' said Roger Nowell.

Potts's small eyes widened. 'Give up? The reward is vast. And think of the glory. The advancement. If I were instrumental in the capture of Christopher Southworth, King James would raise me up.'

Roger Nowell would gladly have raised Potts up and thrown him on the fire. Instead he forced himself to speak reasonably.

'Christopher Southworth is a traitor but not a fool. If he set foot in Lancashire I would know within a day. He will never return here.'

'He might,' said Potts. 'I have had his sister arrested.'

Roger Nowell was taken aback. 'Jane? She is Protestant! She is the one Southworth who has renounced the old religion – Sir John won't speak to her – you can hardly arrest her for –'

'For witchcraft,' said Potts.

'But that is foolery!'

'You take it all too lightly it seems to me. She has been accused of causing mortal sickness by sticking pins into a poppet. Her maid fell ill like to die. The maid's mother found the poppet pinned and bristling like a hedgehog. Jane Southworth has been arrested.'

'House arrest?'

'She is in Lancaster Castle.'

'With the Demdike and Chattox?'

Before Roger Nowell could press Potts more on this, Harry Hargreaves was shown in.

Constable Hargreaves began to explain in his slow lumbering way about Sarah Device and Alice Nutter. Roger Nowell could barely contain his irritation. He wasn't listening. He didn't like Alice Nutter but he was hardly going to accuse her of witchcraft. He was far more concerned about Potts and the Southworths.

Potts was delighted by Hargreaves's news. He was all for them riding out to Malkin Tower right away, but Hargreaves had some further interest to add.

'My spies have reported a band of persons travelling through the forest – unknowns – vagrants – they could be, yes, begging for alms at Easter – or they could be to do with the Good Friday Black Mass that we have suspicions of tomorrow, on Pendle Hill.'

Potts rejoiced at this possibility and ordered Hargreaves to get him some men. They would go to the top of Pendle Hill and lie in wait.

Roger Nowell was relieved to see them leave together. Potts couldn't have arrived in Lancashire at a more inconvenient time. Witchcraft did not interest Roger Nowell; superstition and malice, however, did. He had spies of his own at work and he was waiting for other news.



Is that him? The Jesuit?

Yes.

Shall we take him?

Follow him.

Where will he go?

To Lancashire, where his home is. To Pendle Forest, where his heart is.



Malkin Tower: Good Friday 1612

It was a strange, wild, ragged group of men and women beginning to arrive at Malkin Tower.

Mouldheels had walked from Colne, begging, cursing and spitting all the way, trailing her family's stink behind her, and bringing no broomstick with her, only a cat as clean as his mistress was rotten. Mouldheels had flesh that fell off her as though it were cooked. And her feet stank of dead meat. Today they were wrapped in rags already beginning to ooze.

There was pretty Margaret Pearson from Padiham, getting food from her favours given to the farmhands. The Puritan who owned the mill called her a ditch-trollop and beat her if she came round looking for barley. But his son never turned her away. Fornication was a sin but not with a witch who had put a spell on you.

John and Jane Bulcock were there; some said they were husband and wife, others said brother and sister though they slept in the same bed.

Old Demdike's disfigured daughter Elizabeth had called the meeting. Her son James, 'Jennet Device', had stolen a sheep to roast for the feast.

And there was the little girl Jennet Device, vicious, miserable, underfed and abused. Her brother took her with him to the Dog to pay for his drink. Tom Peeper liked his sexual conquests to be too young to fall pregnant.

The tower had not been so busy for a long time. The table was roughed out of a few planks set on trestles and there were no plates. The mutton spitting above the smoking fire was torn off the carcass and served straight onto the table. Each person had brought a cup to be filled with ale.

Malkin Tower was a squat stone round of a building, soundly constructed and strangely placed alone and remote, with no purpose anyone could remember, and no inhabitants anyone ever knew but for the family they called the Demdike.

The tower might have been a prison – it stood like one, grim and windowless, except for slits that looked east and west, north and south, like narrow suspicious eyes. There was a stagnant moat around the tower, filled with thick green algae. The sun did not shine here.

It was nearly noon, and there were eleven of them present when Alice Nutter rode up with Sarah Device walking beside her. Squint-eyed Elizabeth came out to meet them. She bowed briefly. 'Mistress Nutter!'

Alice acknowledged her but without warmth. 'Sarah was on her way to me yesterday, bringing a message from you, she says, when she fell foul of Tom Peeper and Constable Hargreaves. My advice to you and your family is to stay away from either man.'

The child Jennet came out of the tower. Bare feet. Ragged dress. Pinched and starved, she gnawed jealously on a piece of fatty mutton, like a wilder thing than a child.

Alice Nutter dismounted her pony and took loaves, butter, apples and a large cheese from her saddlebag. She gave them to Elizabeth. 'When did that child last eat?'

'Three days ago, like the rest of us. The parson calls Lent a fast, for it suits the church to starve the poor. I begged from the church and the parson said that a fast did a woman good. I answered that must be the goodliest woman in Pendle.'

Alice tossed Jennet her own bread and cheese. The child made off with them into the bushes.

'What is it you want from me?' asked Alice.

'Please to come inside, Mistress.'

It was a strange sight. It was a strange company.

The dinner guests were smeared in grease and fat. The rough plank table now had the remains of the sheep carcass in the centre, a hacking knife stuck into its middle. Most of the sheep had been eaten. There was a jug of ale on the floor and a pot of turnips steeping over the fire.

As Alice entered, the company stood up and bowed to her.

Elizabeth Device was behind her, with Sarah Device. 'Now we are gathered thirteen,' she said.

Alice Nutter began to realise what this was about. 'I am not one of your thirteen,' she said.

She turned to leave. Jem Device was behind her at the door. He was leaning on it, a rough axe in his hand. Alice looked around. The tower had no other door and no other means of escape. She was aware of a powerful smell of rot.

'I called this meeting,' said Elizabeth Device, 'that all of us here might free my mother Demdike and my daughter Alizon from Lancaster Castle. I will even free the Chattox if they will help us.'

Agnes Chattox nodded her head.

'What has this to do with me?' said Alice. 'If you wish me to speak with Roger Nowell on your behalf I will do so. Not because you are witches, but because you are not. Witchcraft is superstition.'

There was a murmur round the table. Elizabeth spoke again.

'Alice Nutter. My mother, Old Demdike, knew you well, do you deny it?' Alice did not reply. Elizabeth continued. 'You were her friend once, in better times, in times forgotten. You have the gift of magick and you learned it from the Queen's own magician, John Dee.'

'John Dee is dead,' said Alice. 'He was not a magician, he was a mathematician.'

'And Edward Kelley? Was he a mathematician too?'

Alice was surprised. Edward Kelley was the most famous of the mediums and spirit-raisers. He had been an intimate of John Dee in Manchester and at Mortlake. He had been Alice Nutter's lover too. Many years ago. He was long dead.

'What do you want from me?' said Alice again.

'Blow up the gaol at Lancaster and free Old Demdike and Alizon and the Chattox and her daughter Nance Redfern. Spirit them away. It is not too much for a woman of your magick and we here will serve you as we served Old Demdike.'

'I never served Old Demdike,' shouted Agnes Chattox.

'The general point is good,' said Elizabeth. 'And as for you, Agnes Chattox, will you or won't you serve Mistress Nutter?'

'I will if she can make a spell.'

'I cannot make a spell,' said Alice. 'I have no magick.'

'Then how did you come by your money? Then how did you come by your youth? Look at your unlined and strong, and yet you are not so much younger than Old Demdike and she is eighty.'

The company was astonished. Alice was uneasy yet she kept calm. 'I am not the age you reckon. I knew your mother when I was young and she had her own ways of seeming youthful. It was the Demdike had youth when others had age, not that I had age and now I have youth.'

This answer was sufficiently confusing, and the company were all convinced of the powers of O Demdike. Then Jem Device began kicking the door with his heel. 'Make her do it, make her swear!'

The rest at the table began banging the table in rhythm with Jem's kicking. 'Make her do it, make her swear, make her do it, make her swear!' The pounding and the chanting got louder and wilder. They were drunk already and now they were intoxicating themselves with the thought of power.

Jem Device came round to the table and threw down his axe. He took out a knife and held it out to his mother.

'Take her blood – make her swear.'

Elizabeth was white. 'I cannot take her, Jem. She is too powerful.'

'She is not too powerful to bleed,' shouted Jem. He came up fast on Alice with his little knife and slashed her arm. She bled.

The blood seeped through her sleeve and began to drip onto the floor. The assembled company scrambled towards it, wiping it with their hands, licking their fingers. Alice felt like she was being attacked by rats, and the more she pushed the more they crowded.

Alice was in danger and she knew she had only one chance. She took it. She shouted, 'Get on your knees!'

The company fell back, afraid. Alice repeated her command and, taking the knife from James Device, still standing, she told him to kneel before her. He did so.

Alice Nutter did not hesitate. She pulled open his shirt and scored a triangle in blood opening it out to make a shallow bleeding pentagram on his bare chest. He was trembling with terror.

'James Device, you will answer to me, your mistress, in all that you do, and if you do not, Satan will take your soul. Do you hear me?'

'Yes, Mistress.'

'Feed on him.'

She stood back as the company fell on James as they had on her. He was covered in them, like leeches, like bats. Only Elizabeth and Sarah did not do it.

'You will lead us then?' said Elizabeth.

Before Alice could answer there was a fierce banging at the door. The creatures feeding on James Device stopped their foul meal and pulled themselves up. The banging came again.

'Open this tower in the name of the Magistrate.'

Alice made a gesture with her hand for everyone to resume their places. James tied his shirt at the neck. Alice stood back. Elizabeth opened the door.

Outside stood Roger Nowell, Constable Hargreaves and Tom Peeper.



Confrontation

‘Your riding coat is torn,’ Roger Nowell said as he stood before Alice Nutter.

‘My pony bolted,’ Alice replied, meeting his gaze.

‘A feast, I see,’ said Roger Nowell, ‘and meat too, on Good Friday, when it is the rule that fish should be eaten.’

‘The poor have their own rules,’ said Alice. ‘The poor must eat what they can when they can. There were no alms from the church or from yourself, or from any other person, given to the Demdike this Easter. I came with provisions of my own. That is the purpose of my visit.’

‘Did you bring that sheep?’ asked Roger Nowell.

‘James Device – I am arresting you for the theft of a sheep,’ said Constable Hargreaves.

‘Prove it!’ shouted Elizabeth. ‘The Demdike have known suffering enough from you.’ She turned to Roger Nowell. ‘And from you, good Magistrate of the Law. I’d like to see the pair of you in the stocks in the quick and handy way you fasten up my kind. I’d like to see you being pelted with rubbish and soaked in day-old piss.’

Hargreaves hit her across the face. She spat at him.

Roger Nowell looked at her with disgust. Elizabeth Device was dirty and ugly. The strangeness of her eye deformity made people fear her. One eye looked up and the other looked down, and both eyes were set crooked in her face. Her hair was already white, although she was not yet forty, and her skin had shrunk tight and sallow over her bones. She had been married once, but she and her children had come back to Malkin Tower to live with Old Demdike. Sometime, perhaps nine years ago, she had been raped. The ragged child Jennet Device was the result of the rape.

Elizabeth was fierce. Begging had never helped her. If she could not gain sympathy, she could provoke fear and dislike.

Roger Nowell looked around at the company – threadbare and drunk, stinking and defiant. He said, ‘We have intelligence that a Sabbat is planned on Pendle Hill. You are thirteen in number. Thirteen is a witch number and the number of a covenant to defy the twelve and one that was Christ and his Disciples. You profane the day by eating meat. Your kin has confessed to witchcraft. You will remain under guard at Malkin Tower for questioning and for proving – by whatever means we see fit.’

Alice Nutter stepped forward. ‘And if Sarah Device was dead in the river this morning, would you charge Tom Peeper and Constable Hargreaves with murder?’

‘Putting to death a witch is not murder. It is the law of the Scripture,’ said Constable Hargreaves. ‘“Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” Exodus Chapter 20 Verse 16.’

Roger Nowell looked at Alice Nutter. He was puzzled. ‘I am surprised to find you here, Mistress.’

‘Your number of thirteen includes myself. Am I a witch? It includes that ragged child – is she a witch?’ Jennet Device was darting round the door.

Alice picked up her gloves and walked down the steps from the tower.

‘You letting her go?’ said Tom Peeper.

Tom Peeper and Roger Nowell followed Alice out to where she was untying her pony.

‘Mistress Nutter, I am the Magistrate of the District of Pendle,’ said Roger Nowell, ‘I must take these matters seriously. John Law is on his deathbed. Demdike and Chattox are self-accused.’

‘She takes the witches’ part,’ said Tom Peeper. Without warning, he lunged forward and grabbed Alice’s pony. Alice dashed him across the shoulders with her riding crop but his darting twisted face was triumphant. ‘Search her saddlebag, go on, she knows what she’s got in there, and so do I!’

Alice stepped back. Roger Nowell put his hand in one of the leather bags and came out with a handful of cobnuts. He threw them to the ground, keeping his eyes on Alice as he searched and dipped into the second bag. He drew out the handkerchief, soaked in blood.

‘What in God’s name is this?’

‘It is Robert Preston’s tongue,’ said Alice Nutter.

‘She took it to make a Devil’s poppet!’ shouted Tom Peeper.

‘I took it as evidence,’ said Alice. ‘You threatened Sarah Device with ducking and you raped her.’

‘So she says,’ said Tom Peeper. ‘The young lad was kissing her in sport. It was sport, Master Nowell.’

Roger Nowell held the black and swollen tongue away from him. Then he threw that body part into the bushes. He said: ‘Mistress Nutter, I will ask you to attend me at Read Hall at six o’clock this evening.’

Alice nodded her head, mounted her pony, and turned to go. Then she reined in for a moment and said to Roger Nowell, ‘I provided the sheep.’

Hidden in the bushes, the child Jennet Device had seen everything. As soon as the men were gone she darted out and snatched the cobnuts and went to look for what else had been thrown nearby.

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