

# The Proof

BY JOHN MOORE

The two men who watched her took turn and turn about. Toward evening the tall scowling one came back, and the short fat one who had yawned on the hard bench for two or three hours got up respectfully. "Nothing has entered," he said. Just then a bee buzzed at the open window, and the scowling man, whom she knew as Matthew Hopkins, strode swiftly across the room to examine it. The other followed him, and together they watched the bee intently until it flew away.

"Only a bumble," said the short fat man.

"Nevertheless I have known them to take the form of insects," said Mr. Hopkins. He added sharply: "You have to keep your wits about you in this business."

"Yes, sir."

"Birds and animals are more usual," Mr. Hopkins went on. He quoted some Latin which she did not understand, and she guessed that the short man, although he tried to look very wise, didn't understand it either. Mr. Hopkins, however, translated for his benefit. "Owls and bats and cats are especially favoured, but insects are not unheard of, by any means. Night moths and chafers, for instance. And even slugs."

"Yes, sir."

"Even slugs," repeated Mr. Hopkins darkly. "So remember to keep your eyes open always. You may go now: I will watch. Dusk is their favourite hour." He sat down on the bench and stared with his pale wild eyes toward the window.

Now at last she began to understand what they were about. At first she had been so bewildered and frightened that she thought they had tied her cross-legged to the stool as part of her punishment. Sooner or later, surely, they would let her go and she would creep back to her cottage and shut the door against the gossiping neighbours and try to forget the shame and the indignities which had been put upon her. But now she realized that this new ordeal was merely a continuation of the trial: they were waiting

and watching for her Familiar Spirit\* or something of the kind, to come through the window. Well, they could wait for that till Domesday; for she was no witch, and despite her weariness and her cramp and the pain of the cords which bound her so tightly she still had enough assurance and confidence left to be angry.

"You can wait till Domesday," she said aloud. But the scowling man with the pale eyes took no notice; he did not even shift his stare from the window, and her own words sounded strange in the quiet room. She bit her lip, wishing she had not spoken.

It was best, she told herself, to keep silent; for they twisted your own words against you, as she discovered that morning when they took her before the magistrate and accused her of things which she had never imagined or dreamed of. She had answered with spirit, and Mr. Hopkins had said with a conventional shrug of his shoulders: "You see, sir, how the Devil put these pert replies into the woman's mouth?"

"Confine your answers to yes and no," said the magistrate; and Mr. Hopkins began to cross-examine her again.

"Were you or were you not in love with the young man called Reuben Taylor?"

"Yes," she said at last. It was no use denying it, the whole neighbourhood had known it. Alas, she had worn her heart upon her sleeve!

"And did not his mother oppose the match?"

"Yes."



---

\* Familiar Spirit: a spirit or demon in animal form, thought to be a witch's assistant

"And did you or did you not, on his mother's doorstep, in the hearing of several God-fearing and respectable persons, put a curse upon his mother because she would not let you go in to see him when he lay dying?"

"It wasn't a curse! I knew he was ill, and within the house I could hear him calling for me, and — and I was so distressed I didn't know what I said."

Mr. Hopkins pounced on her like some swift beast.

"So you knew he was ill?"

"Everybody knew."

"Yes or no," said Mr. Hopkins.

"Yes."

"And then he died?" said Mr. Hopkins.

She bowed her head. It was two years ago, and the world had been empty since, yet she never cried until now. She did not easily cry. But suddenly tears came and she hid her face, so that she scarcely heard the things which Mr. Hopkins was saying to the magistrate, nor troubled to deny the meaningless questions he put to her: Was she aware that Mother Taylor's dun cow had died on the first of March 1644 of an unaccountable milk fever? Did she not know that the pied cow had died on the 15th of the same affliction? And the roan cow on the 2nd of April? "Oh, what do I care about cows!" she cried, with all the grief and loneliness of twenty-four months lapping about her. "The milk, sir," went on Mr. Hopkins inexorably, "is said to have curdled in their udders, which thereupon mortified."\*

At last the magistrate said:

"I find a *prima facie*\*\* case. Mr. Hopkins, you may proceed with your examination."

They took her then to another room in the Town Hall, but the crowd followed and clamoured at the door so loudly that Mr. Hopkins had to let them in; and at least a dozen people were pressing about her when the short fat man suddenly pinioned her arms behind her back and Mr. Hopkins lifted her skirt and pressed a pin into her thigh. She scarcely felt it, for she was faint with terror and shame. "Ho, ho, a presentable witch," said a coarse voice in the crowd. "She bleeds, she bleeds," said someone else, and Mr. Hopkins let her skirt fall. "The Devil has many artifices," he said. "It is therefore proper to decide these matters not upon one fallible test, but upon many." He began to make much of a small wart which she had on her wrist, and a mole on her forearm. She could scarcely bear the touch of his questioning fingers on her skin, and she cried out in protest:

---

\* mortified: became infected

\*\* *prima facie*: at first sight; before closer investigation (Latin)

"I have had it since childhood."

"Aye, aye," scowled Mr. Hopkins, "maybe your Master put it as a mark upon ye, as a shepherd burns a brand upon his sheep. We will proceed nevertheless to a further experiment." It was then that they bound her to the stool in the middle of the room, opened the window, and drove out the inquisitive crowd. The Watching began.

The light from the sinking sun now came slanting through the narrow window in a thin beam which fell between her and her watcher. Somehow it reminded her of a flaming sword, and made her think of angels, from which thought she drew comfort for a while, for surely God would not let them find her guilty of these things which she had never done? So she prayed, but silently, lest Mr. Hopkins should hear her and think she prayed to the Devil and not to God. "Make them let me go," she said, and repeated it again and again, so that soon she almost persuaded herself that when night came they would untie the cords and allow her to scurry back to her cottage just up the lane. For a few moments her faith was so strong that she shut her eyes and actually saw herself unlatching the green door and going inside among all her friendly and familiar things, the spinning wheel in the corner, the kettle on the hob, the brown milk-jug on the table. And Tibb would be crying for her milk, for it was past supper-time — Tibb, whose eyes grew as round and as luminous as moons in the rushlight, Tibb jumping onto her shoulder and rubbing a soft head against her face.

The thought of Tibb's purring welcome gave her comfort, for during that last two lonely years she had lavished all her pent-up love on the small black cat. At least Tibb would not shun her as the neighbours had shunned her today, when she was being led through the streets and had called out in vain for someone to come and testify on her behalf. They had turned away, and some of them mocked her; inquisitive heads peering out of windows had been swiftly withdrawn. Once she had heard, or thought she had heard, a bloodchilling cry of "Burn her! Burn her!" She had never felt so alone as she did then, knowing that the only one who would have spoken for her lay in the churchyard at the top of the hill. So now in her loneliness and misery her thoughts turned to the black cat, and behind her shut eyelids she saw Tibb playing the absurd game which they played together every evening, when she would crook her fingers in front of the light so that a shadow fell upon the wall, now of a bird with flapping wings, now of a rabbit with twitching ears. Then Tibb with arched back and hackles raised would mince before the shadows, adding to them the tantalizing reflection of her own tail; to and fro, to and fro, prancing, leaping, scrabbling up the wall in pursuit of the unattachable phantom, her lunar eyes ablaze with the weird

pale light that was neither yellow nor green. And so the game went on, until both were tired and they went up the creaking stairs to bed.

Perhaps she dozed, in spite of her cramped position and the cruel cords; for surely she dreamed that she was in bed, and safe, and felt in her dreams the pressure of Tibb's small body stirring at her feet. But suddenly a queer sound, a dry crackling flutter, startled her and made her open her eyes. The beam from the window was much paler now; it was no longer like a flaming sword, but the specks of dust still danced in it, and through it, as through a piece of thin gauze, she saw her watcher crouch as if he were about to spring. At the same moment a moving shadow fell across the beam, there was a swish of wings, and Mr. Hopkins leaped toward the window. His leap was all the more terrifying because she did not know the reason for it; she screamed, and then the beam was clear once more and she saw the bat for a second as it fluttered away against the pale evening sky. Mr. Hopkins went slowly back to the bench and resumed his watching.

She did not close her eyes again, but sat taut and upright, straining against the cords, with all her nerves atingle. For the first time she fully understood her danger. Her assurance ebbed away from her. It was true enough that she was no witch and possessed no Familiar Spirit—ah, but *what if something did enter the room while they watched her?* What if the bat had blundered in? Or even the bee?

She prayed again, but with less confidence: "Please God, don't let anything come in." Panic came nearer with the gathering darkness, for the beam from the window had faded altogether and the darkness crouched in all the four corners of the room as the blurred figure of Mr. Hopkins crouched on his bench: like him, it waited to spring. The smallest sound made her pounding heart beat faster—even the ping of a mosquito, which Mr. Hopkins scowled upon as if he suspected that even such an atomy\* might conceal the Devil. Outside, the barn owl which lived in the apple tree halfway down the lane began his evening hunting, and because she was still young, and had sharp ears, she could hear what Mr. Hopkins couldn't—the slate-pencil squeaking of the bats as they hawked for flies. She remembered what Mr. Hopkins had said to the short fat man who seemed to be his assistant: "Owls and bats and cats are especially favoured."

*And cats!* Her heart thumped again as she remembered Tibb. By now, surely, Tibb would be hungry and crying for her supper, stalking about the cottage and down the garden path, only a hundred metres away,

---

\* atomy: a tiny organism

looking for her mistress who never failed to feed her before. What if Tibb—? But no, that was impossible, dogs would follow a person—to the ends of the earth, it was said—but cats were different, their strange unfathomable little minds were centred upon a hearth. So she reasoned, and was able to calm herself a little. Tibb would not seek her, nor in any case know where to find her. As for the bats and the owls, they were creatures of the sky; why should she imagine that they might blunder into a room—and through this particular window, of all the windows in the town?

Nothing would come in, she told herself. In the morning they would let her go.

And then she heard the cat mewing. She didn't know which came first—the very faint, distant mewing, or the recollection that she had screamed when the bat's shadow fell across the sunbeam. But as soon as she heard that tiny cry, halfway between a mew and a chirrup, she recognized it as the answer which Tibb always gave when she called her, and she realized that Tibb had heard her scream.

Mr. Hopkins, motionless on the bench, made no sign; and even when the mewing came nearer he did not stir. Perhaps even now Tibb would fail to find her and would go back to the cottage up the lane. She strove to quieten her breathing, and held it until the blood surged and thundered in her ears. When at last she was compelled to let it go, it came in short choking gasps, so loud that Mr. Hopkins turned his head to stare at her.

She saw him stiffen. "Ah," he said. "The Devil begins to manifest himself."

There was a sound so slight that it might have been the stirring of the evening wind and suddenly she saw Tibb on the windowsill, framed against the pale square of sky. For a second Tibb paused there, ears pricked, hackles raised, tail curved over the arched back; and then with a little chirrup Tibb jumped and the duck-egg-blue square was empty again, the cat was on her lap purring and rubbing its head against her, and she was tugging frantically against the cords which bit into her wrists, perhaps to stroke it, perhaps to push it away.

Mr. Hopkins did not leap this time. He rose very slowly from the bench and came toward her. Almost wearily, without triumph and without surprise. "*Probatum est*," he said. "It is proved."