

The
Hartfordshire Wonder,
or
Strange News from Ware.

Being an exact Relation of
one Jane Stretton, visited by
unusual Fits and abstaining
from Sustenance for 9 Months.

HERTFORDSHIRE FOLK LORE.

BY W. B. GERISH, BISHOP'S STORTFORD.

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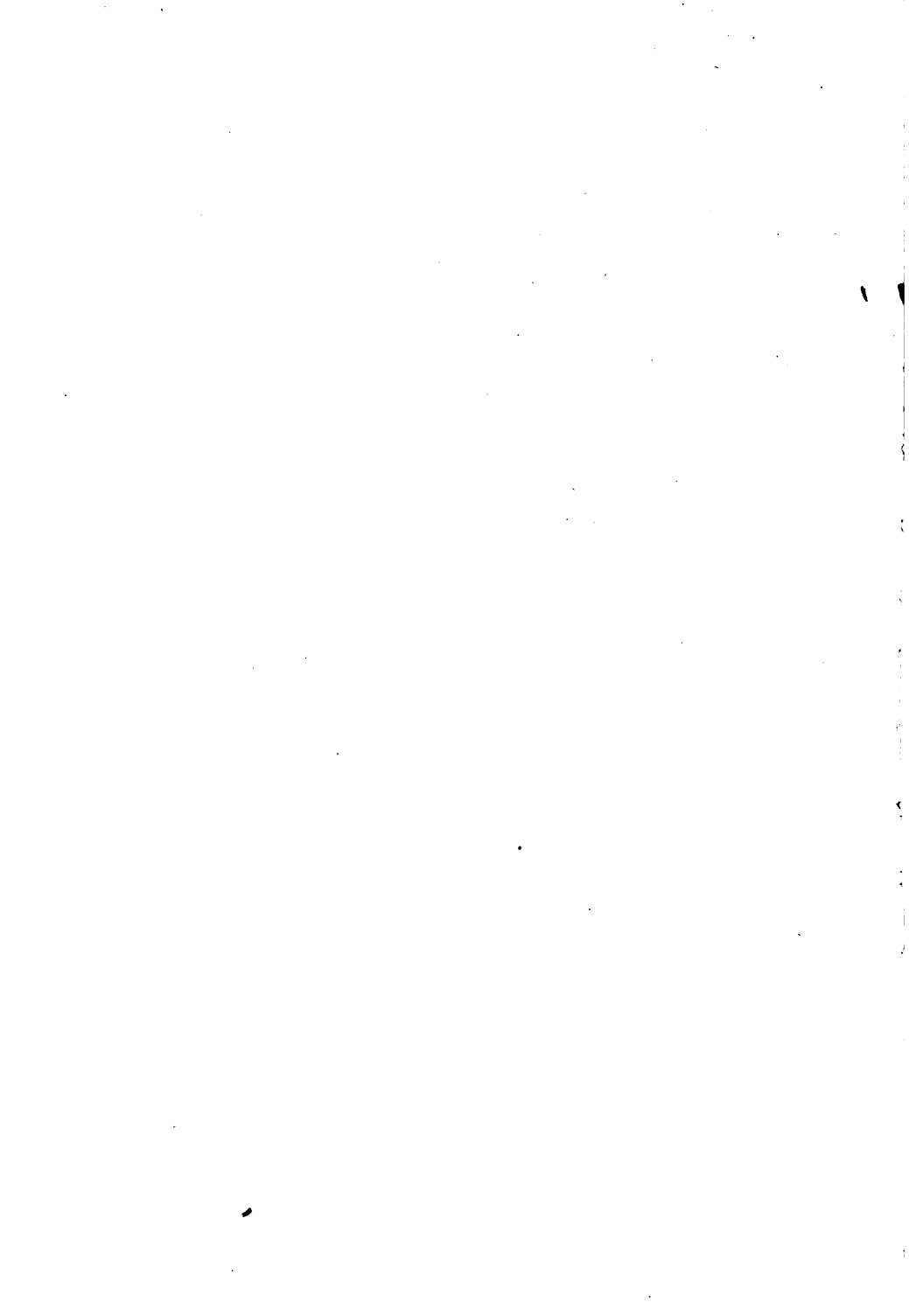
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THE
HARTFORDSHIRE WONDER
OR
STRANGE NEWS FROM WARE.



THE HARTFORDSHIRE WONDER
OR
STRANGE NEWS FROM WARE.

BEING an exact and true Relation of one Jane Stretton the Daughter of Thomas Stretton of Ware in the County of Herts, who hath been visited in a strange kind of manner by extraordinary and unusual fits, her abstaining from sustenance for the space of 9 Months, being haunted by Imps or Devils in the form of several Creatures here described, the Parties adjudged of all by whom she was thus tormented and the occasion thereof, with many other remarkable things taken from her own mouth and confirmed by credible witnesses.

Job i., v. 12.

And the Lord said unto Satan, Behold all that he hath is in thy power : only upon himself put not forth thy hand.

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INTRODUCTORY.

THE story of the fasting girl of Ware does not seem to have spread to any extent beyond the immediate neighbourhood of the town in which she lived ; at any rate I have not been able to find a reference to her case among the number of instances of remarkable abstentions from food which have been recorded. Yet it was an example of combined bewitchment and fasting that should have caused an even greater sensation than the case of Jane Wenham of Walkern*, which it resembled in very many particulars.

The question as to the length of time a human being can abstain from food has always excited the keenest interest, but a volume dealing with the numerous cases of voluntary and involuntary prolonged fasts has yet to be written. Extended abstinences from food are recorded in the Bible ; and Plato, at the close of his " Republic," tells us of Er, the son of Armenius, who was supposed to have been slain in battle, but he revived on the twelfth day when placed on the funeral pyre. Whilst unconscious he had a vision of Judgment and of the Elysian fields. St. Augustine mentions a man who had fasted forty days. In more modern times Cicely Ridgway is said to have undergone a similar prolonged fast in 1357, as a means of proving her innocence of a murder of which she was accused. At St. Mary's, Bury St. Edmunds, is a fine altar tomb surmounted by a corpse in a winding sheet. It is to the memory of John Baret, whose death, in 1463, tradition says, was caused by a vain attempt to imitate Our Lord's fast of forty days. Similar traditions are narrated of effigies in Tenby parish church, the cathedrals at Exeter, Lincoln and Winchester. John Scot, temp. Henry VIII., may be termed a professional faster ; thirty-two, forty, and fifty days are named as the duration of his performances. In 1584 there was the celebrated case of Katerin Cooper of Schmidweiler, who " continued without eating, drinking, or sleeping, the space of nine whole yeeres

* " A Hertfordshire Witch, or the Story of Jane Wenham, the ' Wise Woman ' of Walkern." By W. B. GERISH. 1907.

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compleat, and yet miraculously liveth.”* In the sixteenth century there were at least seven famous fasting girls. In the seventeenth century we have George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends, Martha Taylor, the “Nonsuch Wonder of the Peak” (referred to at p. 11 of this account), Samuel Chilton, the wonderful sleeper, and “the Swedish fasting girl.” The eighteenth century gave us Ann Walsh of Harrogate, Katherine McLeod, Richard Hathaway of Southwark, who “pretended and affirmed that he fasted for the space of ten weeks,” and many others. The nineteenth century furnished the detected impostures of Mary Squirrel, the “Shottisham angel,” of Anne Moore of Tutbury, and Sarah Jacobs, the Welsh fasting girl, who starved herself to death at the age of thirteen rather than confess to an imposture. In 1880, Dr. Henry Tanner’s forty days fast excited great controversy, and in 1888 Jacques undertook a fast of thirty days at Edinburgh, followed by one of forty days in 1890 at London, and a further one of fifty days in 1891. Succi fasted forty days in 1890, but failed in his attempt to endure one of fifty-two days in 1892. Saccho fasted forty-six days at Olympia in 1906.


Of course the limit of time a person can abstain from food is largely governed by physical conditions, but fifty days is generally recognised as the extreme limit under ordinary circumstances. Prolonged involuntary fasting is frequently accompanied by catalepsy, trance, or some other pathological state of coma. Medical literature contains ample data on the subject of protracted fasting and idiopathic sleep.† The case of Jane Stretton was probably one of partial catalepsy, and the narrator’s admission (p. 14) that “her abstinency from all food, for about nine months, *save only some liquid meats,*” while it does not prevent the case from being an extraordinary one, entirely deprives it of the miraculous element which the writer M. J.‡ would perforce give to it. The administration of a small amount of liquid nourishment is sufficient, when there is very little waste, to keep the flame of life burning.

* The Antiquary, Vol. XXXVII., 1901, pp. 269-272, 305-309.

† *Vide* Quain’s “Dictionary of Medicine,” Taylor’s “Medical Jurisprudence,” Neale’s “Medical Digest.”

‡ The author thus conceals his identity. He was, from internal evidence, a local resident, but no further information respecting him is ascertainable.

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With regard to the fits alleged to be caused by her having been bewitched, this was a common belief in cases of epilepsy [the youth suffering from demoniacal possession or having a "dumb spirit," described in Mark ix., 17-26, was probably an epileptic]: and all the symptoms set forth in the account point to this disease of the nervous system. The allusion to the discovery of the saliva in the form of flax, hair, or thread, is easily explained. The poor girl in one of her fits had been chewing a fragment of unbleached linen and spat it out, an act which, by anyone ignorant of the true explanation, could easily have been thus described. We may, I think, regard the emission of flames, in the absence of any trick, as attributable to an overwrought imagination. The discovery of crooked pins, and a knife in the bed are so common a feature in witchcraft trials, that one feels tempted to imagine they were introduced there by the sufferer's sympathisers to give a realistic touch to the case. Some material thing is essential around which superstitious belief may crystallise; what can be better than a crooked pin, one of the rarest things to be met with. Bent pins are common, but who among us has seen one thus  ?

It is not difficult to assign a reason for the presence of the so-called "imps," frogs, toads and mice. Many of the sick poor are accommodated upon the ground floor of the cottages in which they live, and where, in moist, warm weather, the two former reptiles frequently find their way. The latter animals, needless to say, are too common a feature of domestic life to call for explanation.

From the narrative we may judge that, with the incoming of the witch to the sufferer's house, the spell was broken and the maid began to mend (p. 14). We are not told of any punishment being meted out to the person who had been held to be responsible for so much suffering—this is somewhat extraordinary at the date in question, for only five years previous, two poor women were sent to the gallows at Bury St. Edmunds for a precisely similar offence.

Hertfordshire at this time, and later, had an unenviable reputation for cases of witchcraft. Many instances of this are given in "Bygone Hertfordshire," 1898, pp. 214-231, and others may be found in the

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County Records. The belief seems to have died hard. Jane Wenham in 1711 was found guilty of witchcraft by a Hertford jury (she was happily afterwards pardoned), and in 1757 two poor harmless people, John and Ruth Osborn, were ducked with such success at Tring that the woman was drowned and the man died from shock three days later. The chief instigator, Thomas Colley, was justly executed for these barbarous murders, and this seems to have cooled the ardour of our local witch-finders.

It only remains to be said that I believe the account here printed to be, in the main, a record of events which, subject to the explanations I have given, actually occurred. Jane Stretton or Stratton was no fictitious personage, for in the Register of Baptisms belonging to St. Mary's, Ware, we find—

“ 1649. June 24th. Jane Stratton, daughter of Thomas.”*

There is no entry of her death; perhaps she recovered from her fits, married, and, we may hope, “lived happily ever afterwards.”

W. B. GERISH.

BISHOP'S STORTFORD.

* I am indebted for this fact to Miss E. M. Hitch.

PREFACE.

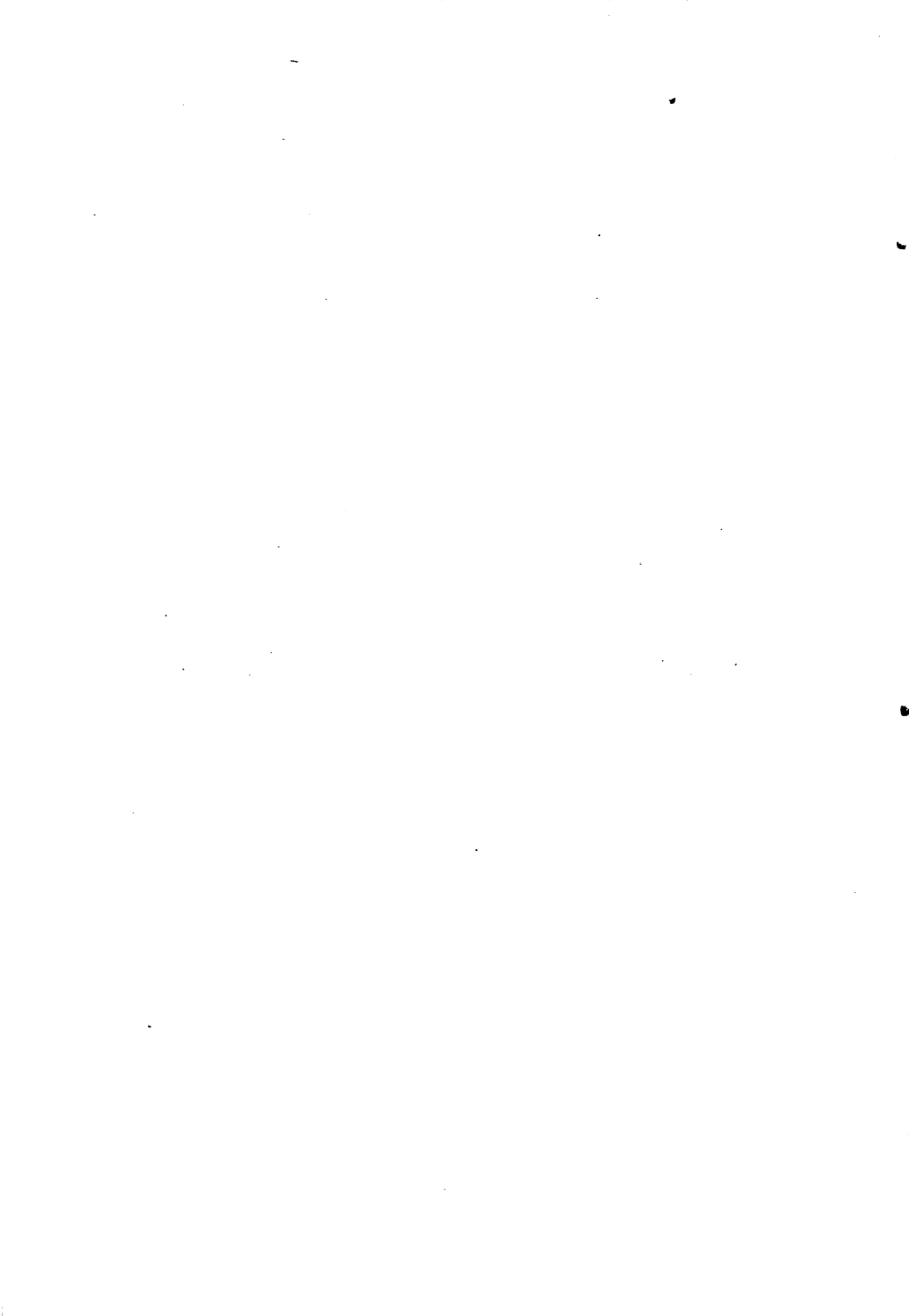
COURTEOUS READER,—

I here present thee with a true modern story which deserves to be inserted in a Chronicle rather than a penny pamphlet, being for the strangeness thereof not easily paralel'd, and were there not sufficient persons both in Ware and London to justify the truth thereof, might not gain credence, though with some of an easie belief, but this thing being so well known I shall not insert any more testimonies for the truth thereof, it being a labour as superfluous as he who took on him to praise Hercules whom no man dispraised.

By this learn not to trust to those who pretend themselves Cunning men, Wizards or Astrologers, for all knowledge that is not from God is vain, wicked and hurtful, not onely to them that practice them but also to those who being in trouble think to gain remedy by them, and remember that saying in the second of Kings, chap. i., v. 3, Is it not because there is not a God in Israel that ye go to inquire of Baal-zebub the god of Ekron. Read remember and avoid, which is the hearty wish of

Thy faithful Monitor,

M. J.



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SOME there be which entitle this the Iron age, because of the stubbornness and Iron-hearted inhabitants that live therein, though I think it may as properly be termed the age of Wonders considering two so eminent wonders which have lately happened, viz., That of the Darby-shire Maid, Martha Taylor, her fasting from all sustenance for so long a space, and this other of one, Jane Stretton, a maid of Ware, in Hartfordshire, no less strange and wonderful than the other of which I am now about to relate.

This Jane Stretton was born at Ware in about the year of our Lord 1649, being the Daughter of one Thomas Stretton, a wheelwright, who with his wife are now living in the same town. It so chanced that this Thomas Stretton lost a Bible which he valued (as everyone should doe the word of God) at high price, and being very desirous to have it again it so fortun'd that he did light into the company with one of his Neighbours who was such a one as the Country people term a Cunning Man, a Wizard or Fortune teller, such of whom the Lord saith in Deutronomy, chap. xviii., v. 10, 11, 12, There shall not be found among you any one that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an Inchanter, or a Witch, or a Charmer, or a Consulter with familiar spirits, or a Wizard, or a Necromancer, for all that doth these things are an abomination unto the Lord. This person thus qualified was by Stretton desired (if his art could reach so far) to tell him who it was that had his Bible, and to which the other answered that he could if he would, Stretton as bluntly replying again that then he must be either a Witch or a Devil seeing he could neither write or read; these words struck home, and a guilty conscience being wounded will soon ranchor, his heart is inflamed with the fire of revenge, but for the present he covers it with the Ashes of dissimulation, he will not rend his malice at present, but, like the Ram, goes backward to return with the greater force: love and friendship is written on sand which every puff of wind will blow away, but malice and envy is engraven in Marble or Adamant, time cannot obliterate or wear it out and that which is worse our Natures are such that one discourtesie shall wash away all the friendship that twenty benefits have implanted in our hearts. But malice sleeps not though it may wink within. A month after the wife of this Fortune teller or Cunning Man, which you please to term him, comes to

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Stretton desiring of this his daughter Jane (who was newly come out of service) a pot of Drink, she being ignorant of what had passed betwixt her father and the other man, willingly does it. Innocence dreads no danger, the child will play with the Bee for his gaudy coat and mistrusts not his sting. Soon after she is taken with violent raging fits, which torment her grievously, yet no mistrust of the cause of her malady from what was too much afterwards apparent to be seen, the Devil is a sly thief and though he keeps his servants poor, yet he endows them with a plentiful stock of malice, revenge and dissimulation.

About a week after the same woman comes again and desires a pin of her, (by small means great mischiefs may be perpetrated) the silly maid mistrusting no mischief as not intending any, bestows one on her when, on a sudden, her fits waxed far more violent than before, her body swells like a bladder puffed up with wind ready to burst, all her members were distorted and as it were put in the wrack, going to the next Neighbours, her head being intoxicated by the violency of her fits, she falls down against the door and beats it open, lying in a deplored spectacle of pitty tormented, any one would have thought enough for the satisfaction of the most inveterate malice. But her misery ends not here, the squib is not run out to the end of the rope, where the Devil has an inch given him, he will take an ell and, as it is said of Rebels, that when they draw their sword they must throw away their scabbard, so wicked persons think that when they once begin they must make an end, their malice is like an imperfect book it has no finis to it, they will willingly loose one eye to put out both of their Neighbours. Her fits increased more violently, the last time the woeman saw this Maid she swoounded away and lay for the time as it were deprived of life. After the recovery of this swoounding fit, her senses being in part recovered, yet her body still remained as infirme as before. In 6 months space she neither eat anything nor voided any excrements, for where the cause is taken away, the effect must needs cease. But such a wonder as this could not be confined, it was strait spread abroad, and as we English are like the Athenians, desirous to hear of News, and to be ascertained of what we hear, so the report of this strange wonder drawes a great concourse of people to the house, to the disturbance not only of the maid, but also of Thomas Stretton himself, wherefore

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to purchase a quietness to himself, he removed her to the house of one John Wood a Neighbour of his, yet not without such provision but that she had continual attendants both night and day by her Friends and Relations, who now at last began to distrust that her sickness proceeds from more than an ordinary cause. Several days and nights was she thus watched, it being a miracle in Nature that corporall body should continue without the assistance of food, when at last to the spectators plain view, there appeared the resemblance of Flax and Hair to fall down upon a white sheet that was laid over her bed, which they narrowly taking notice of, and perceiving her tongue to hang or loll out of her mouth, upon a nearer view found the perfect resemblance of Flax, Hair and Thread points to be on the same which, being by them removed, there presently proceeded from her mouth two flames in resemblance of fire, the one of red colour and other blew, and soon after in some short distance of time eleven pins, in several crooked forms and shapes, some bowed one way, some another. The report of these more strange accidents soon flew about not onely all over Ware but to the adjacent villages and more remote Towns, so that people came in multitudes to see her, some out of pittie, to help and comfort her, others out of curiosity, to be ascertained of the truth of these relations, and some who were diffident of any such thing as Witchcraft, who being fully satisfied in the truth of what is here set down, went home fully convinced of their errors.

In all this her extreme tortures she complained continually of an exceeding pain in her back more than the other parts of her body, as if she were continually slashed with a Knife, or had her flesh cut and mangled, and the people about her, with setting her up in her bed to give her some food, found a naked Knife there, no body knowing how or which way it should come thither. Several things were applied unto her, and as it is usual for the tooth-ache, everyone hath a particular Medicine, so in that concourse of people there could not but be many advisers, some to this thing and some to that, but none that appeared profitable to the Maid, who was more violently tortured still than before. It now being apparent that her distemper proceeded from the malice of the Devil's instruments on whose body God had permitted them to exercise their envy, her tongue lolling out of her mouth in so sad and lamentable a manner as struck

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astonishment in all the beholders, and to convince them that it was done by Witchcraft and such Diabolical Means, they could see the Devil, or his Imps, or what it was we cannot determine, but sometimes it was in the shape of a Toad and at others like a Frog, or a Mouse for, as the Devil can transform himself into an Angel of light to deceive people, so he can turn himself into any beastly shape to torment them.

And now that her Distemper was so evidently known and the Neighbours were informed of the preceeding passage betwixt this Inchanter, Fortune-teller, Cunning Man, or what you will term him, his Wife and the Maid, they adjudged those parties the absolute cause of the Maid's perplexity, resolved by violence to fetch them before her, in the interim, she being in a violent fit, some of the same (saliva ?) from her mouth was put into the fire, there to be burnt, the parties that were gone at that time lighting on the woman and telling her their resolution to carry her before the maid, she made them this answer "That if they had not come she could not have stayed any longer from her." Three several times was this Flax and Hair with the likeness of a Thread point seen upon her, before very credible witnesses who are ready to assert the same upon their Oaths.

The time that she began to be thus strangely tortured is Michaelmas last was twelve months, during which time if we seriously consider every particular we shall hardly find her parallel, viz., her extraordinary tortures by swelling sometimes and other pains, her abstinency from all food, for about 9 months, save only some few liquid Meats, impossible in human reason to have preserved life, her being haunted with Frogs, Mice, Toads and the like, or worse instruments in their likeness, the Knife found in her bed none knowing by what means it came thither, and her pains as it were answerable to that instrument, all which being putt together and considered we may admire that such weak earthly bodies of ours should undergo such unspeakable misery, we being like glass apt to be broken with the least knock of misery, like straw which the least fire of affliction consumes away, a hair being sufficient to choak us, a little stopping of our breath to stifle us, that if we will make comparisons of instability, there is nothing more fit to resemble it than the life of man.

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At present she takes nothing but surrups and such like liquid ingredients, being in such pain yet it is hoped by the blessing of God and the endeavours of those under whom she is in cure that at last she may be eased of her misery, and let none look aversly upon her in this respect, though she can say with the Prophet, Behold and consider if any griefs be like unto mine. Many are the troubles of the righteous but the Lord delivereth them out of all. And when God had permitted Satan to afflict the righteous Job, giving him power over all his substance goods, chattels, and body, yet still there was a reservation : only (said He) thou shalt not touch his life.

Whom God loveth he chasteneth, that, having Hell here, they may have their heaven hereafter, for better it is with poor Lazarus to live at the doors, having the dogs licking our sores, than with the rich Glutton to fare deliciously every day and afterwards to be tormented in hell.

Some are of that belief that stories of witchcraft are but idle Chymeras, but we know that no part of Scripture was spoken in vain and one place thereof saith, Thou shalt not suffer a Witch to live, those who are so, I wish them grace to repent and get out of their damnable estate, and should admonish all persons whatever, not upon any loss or disaster to go to these Sooth sayers, Wizards, or Cunning Men, for as the Scripture saith in one place, Cursed be the image and the image maker, so I say there can be no blessing to those who are either Wizards or go to them for help and Council.

For the truth of this Relation I might, (if there were occasion for it) insert the names of several Eminent persons both in Ware and London who freely offered to assert it, but the thing being so near hand and obvious to our eyes, I count it needless for who will cry out the Sunshine, it being therefore a vain thing to go to prove that which we suppose none will deny, desiring thee to accept my pains herein I take my leave.

