

The Familiar Magistrate

By Colin D. Smith

The magistrate in his black robes and white collar looked down at the witness stand, incredulous. The old farmer in grimy shirt and rolled up sleeves looked back up at him, nervous, but defiant.

“How many?” said the magistrate.

“Twenty, my lord. An’ I saw ’em myself!”

“You say,” the magistrate peered down at him, “that you saw the accused here”—he pointed to a young lady in a long plain dress behind a dark wooden rail—“conjure no less than twenty Familiars before your eyes?” The lady bowed her covered head and cowered sheepishly.

“Aye, my lord. Them was rabbits, kittens, goats, all black as night with evil in their eyes!” He gazed, wide-eyed around the assembled villagers crammed into the candle-lit courthouse. They were all nodding and murmuring.

“And... quiet please!” the magistrate said, waving his hand toward the crowd in an effort to restore order. “And you, Mr. Farthing, say these ‘Familiars’ were responsible for Miss Cooper’s consumption, Doctor Jones’s gout, the death of the Brown child from the pox, and the decapitation of Mr. Nesbitt?”

“Aye, my lord.” Farthing looked over at the lady behind the rail and pointed an accusatory finger. “An’ they was ’er Familyers, doin’ ’er biddin’. All them folks crossed her,

my lord, an' she as good as killed 'em with 'er bare 'ands!" The courtroom broke out into excited murmuring again.

"Silence! Silence!" the magistrate said. He looked over at the smartly dressed gentleman sitting next to the young lady behind the rail. He was gently patting her hand as her body quivered with emotion. "Mr. Cavendish, you have elected to speak on behalf of Miss Thorne, the accused?" The young man stood up.

"Yes, my lord, on account of her delicate nature," he said.

Hisses rang out through the room. The magistrate called for silence again.

"Could you ask Miss Thorne if she wishes to plead guilty to the accusation?"

Mr. Cavendish bowed his head toward the young lady to confer with her. He then straightened himself to address the magistrate.

"My lord, Miss Thorne most assuredly pleads her innocence. If I may add, she is very distraught and I beg upon this court to trouble her no further on this matter." The courtroom rumbled. Some people even laughed mockingly at this very suggestion. Yet again, the magistrate called for order. He smiled sympathetically at the accused.

"May I ask Miss Thorne if she would care to produce these Familiars for us?" There were gasps throughout the room. "Not even all twenty," he continued, ignoring the protestations of the crowd. "One will do."

"Of course she cannot!" Cavendish replied. "She is no witch. She is a God-fearing woman. She is in church every Sunday—Reverend Little attested as much!"

“Ah, but has she not renounced God and our most precious Lord and Christ?” a man shouted from the back of the room.

“Silence!” the magistrate said. “Miss Thorne, I find no substantial evidence against you. As a magistrate of His Majesty’s courts, I acquit you of any and all wrongdoing ascribed to your good name. You are free to go.”

The courtroom burst into a commotion of screams and yells of outrage. Cavendish quickly took Miss Thorne by the arm and led her out.

“Thank you kindly,” she said to him once they were safely outside.

“My pleasure, Miss Thorne,” Cavendish said with a bow. “Will you need an escort...?” He stopped and sniffed the air. “Do you smell burning?”

Cavendish turned and saw the people in the courthouse milling around. They appeared to be organizing themselves. The magistrate was nowhere in sight. When he turned back, Miss Thorne was standing apart from him, cradling a black rabbit which she was gently stroking. He noticed a distinct white band of fur around the rabbit’s neck.

“We will speak again, I am sure, Mr. Cavendish,” the lady said. She spoke with authority, and smiled. His eyes met hers and he felt a chill down his back.

There was a loud explosion behind them, and Cavendish turned to see the courthouse engulfed with flames. He raised his hand to shield his eyes from the heat, and saw people pouring out from the doorway screaming, smoke and fire consuming them as they ran. He made to hurry toward them, to help if he could. But he stopped and looked back. Miss Thorne and her rabbit were gone.