Extract from : The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane

Prologue

Marblehead, Massachusetts

Late December

1681

Peter Petford slipped a long wooden spoon into the simmering iron pot of lentils hanging over the fire and tried to push the worry from his stomach. He edged his low stool nearer to the hearth and leaned forward, one elbow propped on his knee, breathing in the aroma of stewed split peas mixed with burning apple wood. The smell comforted him a little, persuading him that this night was a normal night, and his belly released an impatient gurgle as he withdrew the spoon to see if the peas were soft enough to eat. Not a reflective man, Peter assured himself that nothing was amiss with his stomach that a bowlful of peas would not cure. Yon woman comes enow, too, he thought, face grim. He had never had use for cunning folk, but Goody Oliver had insisted. Said this woman’s tinctures cured most anything. Heard she’d conjured to find a lost child once. Peter grunted to himself. He would try her. Just the once.

From the corner of the narrow, dark room issued a tiny whimper, and Peter looked up from the steaming pot, furrows of anxiety deepening between his eyes. He nudged one of the fire logs with a poker, loosing a crackling flutter of sparks and a grey column of fresh smoke, then drew himself up from the stool.

‘Martha?’ he whispered. ‘Ye awake?’

No further sound issued from the shadows, and Peter moved softly towards the bed where his daughter had lain for the better part of a week. He pulled aside the heavy woollen curtain that hung from the bedposts, and lowered himself on to the edge of the lumpy feather mattress, careful not to jostle it. The lapping light of the fire brushed over the woollen blankets, illuminating a wan little face framed by tangles of flax-coloured hair. The eyes in the face were half open, but glassy and unseeing. Peter smoothed the hair where it lay scattered across the hard bolster. The tiny girl exhaled a faint sigh.

‘Stew’s nearly done,’ he said. ‘I’ll fetch ye some.’

As he ladled the hot food into a shallow earthenware trencher, Peter felt a flame of impotent anger rise in his chest. He gritted his teeth against the feeling, but it lingered behind his breastbone, making his breathing fast and shallow. What knew he of ministering to the girl, he thought. Every tincture he tried only made her poorly. The last word she had spoken was some three days earlier, when she had cried out in the night for Sarah.

He settled again on the side of the bed and spooned a little of the warm beans into the child’s mouth. She slurped it weakly, a thin brown stream slipping down the corner of her mouth to her chin. Peter wiped it away with his thumb, still blackened from the soot of the kitchen fire. Thinking about Sarah always made his chest tight in this way.

He gazed down at the little girl in his bed, watching closely as her eyelids closed. Since she fell ill, he had been sleeping on the wide-planked pine floor, on mildewed straw pallets. The bed was warmer, nearer the hearth, and draped in woollen hangings that had been carried all the way over from East Anglia by his father. A dark frown crossed Peter’s face. Illness, he knew, was a sign of the Lord’s ill favour. Whatsoever happen to the girl is God’s will, he reasoned. So to be angry at her suffering must be sinful, for that is to be angry at God. Sarah would have urged him to pray for the salvation of Martha’s soul, that she might be redeemed. But Peter was more accustomed to putting his mind to farming problems than godly ones. Perhaps he was not as good as Sarah had been. He could not fathom what sin Martha could have committed in her five years to bring this fit upon her, and in his prayers he caught himself demanding an explanation. He did not ask for his daughter’s redemption. He just begged for her to be well.

Confronting this spectacle of his own selfishness filled Peter with anger and shame.

He worked his fingers together, watching her sleeping face.

‘There are certain sins that make us devils,’ the minister had said at meeting that week. Peter pinched the bridge of his nose, squinting his eyes together as he tried to remember what they were.

To be a liar or murderer, that was one. Martha had once been caught hiding a filthy kitten in the family’s cupboard, and when questioned by Sarah had claimed no knowledge of any kittens. But that could hardly be a lie the way the minister meant it.

To be a slanderer or accuser of the godly was another. To be a tempter to sin. To be an opposer of godliness. To feel envy. To be a drunkard. To be proud.

Peter gazed down on the fragile, almost transparent skin of his daughter’s cheeks. He clenched one of his hands into a tight fist, pressing its knuckles into the palm of his other hand. How could God visit such torments upon an innocent? Why had He turned away His face from him?

Perhaps it was not Martha’s soul that was in danger. Perhaps the child was being punished for Peter’s own prideful lack of faith.

As this unwelcome fear bloomed in his chest, Peter heard muddy hoofbeats approach down the lane and come to a stop outside his house. Muffled voices, a man’s and a young woman’s, exchanged words, saddle leather creaked, and then a dull splash. That’ll be Jonas Oliver with yon woman, thought Peter. He rose from the bedside just as a light knuckle rapped on his door.

On his stoop, draped in a hooded woollen cloak glistening from the evening’s fog, stood a young woman with a soft, open face. She carried a small leather bag in her hands, and her face was framed by a crisp white coif that belied the miles-long journey she had had. Behind her in the shadows stood the familiar bulk of Jonas Oliver, fellow yeoman and Peter’s neighbour.

‘Goodman Petford?’ announced the young woman, looking quickly up into Peter’s face. He nodded. She flashed him an encouraging smile as she briskly flapped the water droplets off her cloak and pulled it over her head. She hung the cloak on a peg by the door hinge, smoothed her rumpled skirts with both hands, and then hurried across the stark little room and knelt by the girl in the bed. Peter watched her for a moment, then turned to Jonas, who stood in the doorway similarly wet, blowing his nose mightily into a handkerchief.

‘Dismal night,’ said Peter by way of welcome. Jonas grunted in reply. He tucked the handkerchief back up his sleeve and stamped his feet to loosen the mud from his boots, but he did not venture into the house.

‘Some victual before ye go?’ Peter offered, rubbing a hand absentmindedly across the back of his head. He was not sure if he wanted Jonas to accept his offer. The company would distract him, but his neighbour was even less inclined to idle chatter than he was. Sarah had always allowed that a wagon could crush Jonas Oliver’s foot and he would not so much as grimace.

‘Goody Oliver’ll be waiting.’ Jonas declined with a shrug. He glanced across the room to where the young woman perched, whispering to the girl in the bed. At her knees sat an attentive, dishevelled-looking little dog, some dingy colour between brown and tan, surrounded by muddy paw marks on the floor planking. Vaguely Jonas wondered where she might have carried the animal on their long ride; he had not noticed it, and her leather bag seemed hardly big enough. Mangy cur, he thought. It must belong to little Marther.

‘Come by upon the morn then,’ said Peter. Jonas nodded, touched the brim of his heavy felt hat, and withdrew into the night.

Peter settled again on the low stool near the dying hearth fire, the cooling trencher of stew on the table at his elbow. Propping his chin on his fist, he watched the strange young woman stroke his daughter’s forehead with a white hand and heard the soft, indistinct murmur of her voice. He knew that he should feel relieved that she was there. She was widely spoken of in the village. He grasped at these thoughts, wringing what little assurance he could from them. Still, as his eyes started to blur with fatigue and worry, and his head grew heavy on his arm, the vision of his tiny daughter huddled in the bed, darkness pressing in around her, filled him with dread.