

Winner of the First Prize in the Adult Section

Hoc est Corpus

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'This is just the beginning of what promises to be a very long day,' I muttered to myself as I closed the door. Yes, 'muttered', for that's what I do. 'Old Chattox' I am called by some because my lips move of their own accord and my teeth chatter within, and I am little understood and hard to understand. Like the Priest, Sir Christopher Tricky, with his 'Hoc est Corpus' that sounds like so much 'Hocus Pocus' to us doubters and disbelievers.

I am a witch. Although often called it, I did not know it until that day. Crooked, hunched, one-eyed and wrinkled, I certainly looked the part but until that day I did not become it. My worthless husband dead, and my worthless children grown and fled, I have long provided for myself, cocooned in the lonely world of the beggar, hawker and thief. My reputation now precedes me and my ribbons sell for twice the price a younger crone would dare ask. I am an expert in the dark art of scrying – I gaze at my alabaster ball and tell them what they need to hear. I promise them love and health and I instruct them in all manner of vengeful magic. It is a dangerous business, that of the cunning folk. They pay well for my prophecies and potions but they make me pay well for their continuing petty troubles. Old Man Banks beat me last, and I ache and I bleed.

Yet when Agnes Ratcliff turned me away hungry that morning I somehow knew this day would be different. As I closed the door on her foul mouth, her rich rye bread and creamy milk, I called aloud 'By what charms, by what invocations might my imp be found?' I cried out my hatred of this world and the next, of the Father and the Son, and the cursed life to which I was destined.

When Tom appeared I knew instantly this was no ordinary whelp. A great sleek black dog, his coal-fire eyes fixed upon me. He moved slowly and deliberately along the sunken lane towards me. The dappled morning sun falling between the thin trunks of the outgrown hedge reflected on his long back, rippling from neck to tail. He stood before me, his huge head and heavy jowls threatening violence and commanding submission.

Sometimes he barks, sometimes he speaks in a harsh low voice, and he calls me his and he mine. My blasphemies have bound us as one and he has sworn to tear me into a thousand pieces should I deny him. He suckles me down there and feeds on my blood. I feel no pain beneath my skirts where Tom touches and tastes me.

Poor Tom, he would kill Old Banks if he could but Banks is too much the Christian for that. For his sins Tom has destroyed his cattle and caused his corn to fail but kill him he cannot. That very day however my Tom rubbed himself against Agnes Ratcliff. By nightfall she was sick and mesmeric. She convulsed and contorted for days and named me her witch. Eight men saw her levitate and she claimed my likeness, my red petticoat, soft hide jerkin and broad-brimmed hat, appeared as some diabolical portrait upon her wall. In her final agonies she envisaged a monstrous dog with burning eyes and ragged teeth.

They came for me the following day. Stealing a thatch from my poor home they set it ablaze and thus drew me to them. Agnes Ratcliff's husband scratched and blooded me but too late to lift the witch's curse upon his silly dead wife. The magistrate was called and I was

examined. Molly Crewe, the midwife, served them well. I was shaved, pricked and prodded. They searched me closely for those insensitive places where the Devil had touched me and for the teats upon which my familiar sucked. They found what they were looking for in my secret place.

I was taken to the mill pond to suffer the swimming. Stripped to my shift, my hands and feet were bound and they tossed me into the green water, prevented from sinking by the men who held the two ends of the rope that was passed around my waist. I thought then I would die in my frantic struggle to break the surface and find air. On the banks the people I had shared my sorry existence with jeered and called me hag, whore, witch. Sitting in a small boat upon the water, Sir Christopher studied my ordeal and noted how well I deported myself. They said afterwards the unnatural old woman floated like a cork.

So, here I sit in the dank lock-up awaiting my hangman. Now that they know it all, they let me sleep instead of walking me through the day and through the night. I can hear the babble of my neighbours as they pass by and sometimes the scanty light from the prison grille is dimmed as a brave soul peers in to catch a glimpse of the witch. I hear the flow of the river running beneath the bridge and the occasional clatter of a branch blown against the wall of my cell. I have denied the killing of two nursing children and other calamities – they will have to find another witch for these. More than one neck has been saved by my refusing to name accomplices in the working of my maleficia. Absurd rumours tell of midnight meetings in the heart of the forest, of dancing to a cacophonous pipe, of sodomy with the horned one, and the piercing of poppets.

I have summoned my Tom one last time. He is with me now, larger than before and silent. I can smell him above the human stench of my gaol and his scent is that of wet peaty earth. His slick black coat is strangely changed to the sallow white of a winding shift. He is content now that the pact is fulfilled and he will not assist me more. He has served me well and now I must serve him. In this shaded place I turn my one good eye away from him but he will not be denied and I am absorbed.