

ADDITIONAL READING

Selections from Cotton Mather, ed. Kenneth Murdock, 1926, 1960; *Magnalia Christi Americana, Books I and II*, ed. Kenneth Murdock, 1977; *Selected Letters of Cotton Mather*, ed. Kenneth Silverman, 1971.

Barrett Wendell, *Cotton Mather: The Puritan Priest*, 1891, 1926, 1963; Robert Middlekauff, *The Mathers: Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals*, 1971; Sacvan Bercovitch, "Cotton Mather," *Major Writers of Early American Literature*, ed. Everett Emerson, 1972; Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, 1975; David Levin, *Cotton Mather: The Young Life of the Lord's Remembrancer*, 1978; Babette M. Levy, *Cotton Mather*, 1979; Kenneth Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather*, 1984; Mitchell Robert Breitwieser, *Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin: The Price of Representative Personality*, 1985.

TEXTS

Diary of Cotton Mather, ed. Worthington C. Ford, 1911-12, 1926, 1957; *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, from *The Witchcraft Delusion in New England*, 3 vols., ed. Samuel G. Drake, 1886, 1970; *Magnalia Christi Americana*, 2 vols., ed. Thomas Robbins, 1820, 1855; *Bonifacius: An Essay Upon the Good*, ed. David Levin, 1966; *Manuductio ad Ministerium*, ed. Thomas J. Holmes and Kenneth B. Murdock, 1938 (reproduced from the 1726 edition). Footnotes from these editions are indicated by the editor's name followed by the note enclosed in quotation marks. Typography, punctuation, spelling, and usage have been changed to conform with contemporary English and modern printing practices.

from *Diary of Cotton Mather*

The period excerpted here is February-July 1703. Cotton Mather's first wife of sixteen years, Abigail, died on December 5, 1702. The loss was devastating to Mather, then in his late thirties. Shortly after Abigail's death, Mather began to receive letters from a twenty-year-old gentlewoman, proposing marriage. Thus began a period of trial and temptation for Mather that lasted until he forced himself to break off the relationship to avoid scandal and family censure. In the meantime, he met a widow living nearby (the "lovely person," Elizabeth Hubbard, referred to at the end of this excerpt), and took her as his second wife in August 1703, regaining his equanimity and his family's approval. The *Diary* entries here reveal the astonishing emotional turmoil Mather experienced, compounded of desire, guilt, piety, and not a little sexual frustration. Although Mather never names the "young gentlewoman" of this episode in his *Diary*, biographers have identified her as Katherine Maccarty, daughter of a Boston merchant.

[A YOUNG GENTLEWOMAN PROPOSES TO THE GRIEVING WIDOWER]

February [1703] begins with a very astonishing trial.

There is a young gentlewoman of incomparable accomplishments. No gentlewoman in the English America has had a more polite education. She is one of rare wit and sense; and of a comely aspect; and extremely winning in her conversation, and she has a mother of an extraordinary character for her piety.

This young gentlewoman first addresses me with diverse letters, and then makes me a visit at my house; wherein she gives me to understand, that she has

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long had a more than ordinary value for my ministry; and that since my present condition has given her more of liberty to think of me, she must confess herself charmed with my person, to such a degree, that she could not but break in upon me, with her most importunate requests, that I would make her mine; and that the highest consideration she had in it, was her eternal salvation, for if she were mine, she could not but hope the effect of it would be, that she should also be Christ's.

I endeavoured faithfully to set before her, all the discouraging circumstances attending me, that I could think of. She told me, that she had weighed all those discouragements, but was fortified and resolved with a strong faith in the mighty God, for to encounter them all. And whereas I had mention'd my way of living, in continual prayers, tears, fasts, and macerating devotions and reservations, to divert her from her proposal, she told me, that this very consideration was that which animated her; for she desired nothing so much as a share in my way of living.

I was in a great strait,¹ how to treat so polite a gentlewoman, thus applying herself unto me. I plainly told her, that I feared, whether her proposal would not meet with unsurmountable oppositions from those who had a great interest in disposing of me. However, I desired, that there might be time taken, to see what would be the wisest and fittest resolution.

In the mean time, if I could not make her my own, I should be glad of being any way instrumental, to make her the Lord's.

I turned my discourse, and my design into that channel; and with as exquisite artifice as I could use, I made my essays² to engage her young soul into piety.

She is not much more than twenty years old. I know she has been a very airy³ person. Her reputation has been under some disadvantage.

What snares may be laying for me, I know not. Much prayer with fasting and patience, must be my way to encounter them.

I think, how would my Lord Jesus Christ Himself treat a returning sinner.

I shall shortly see more into the meaning of this odd matter.

[February 12] My sore distresses and temptations, I this day carried unto the Lord; with hope of His compassions, to his tempted servant.

The chief of them lies in this: the well accomplished gentlewoman, mention'd (tho' not by name) in the close of the former year, one whom everybody does with admiration confess to be, for her charming accomplishments, an incomparable person, addressing me to make her mine, and professing a disposition unto the most holy flights of religion to lie at the bottom of her addresses. I am in the greatest straits⁴ imaginable, what course to steer. Nature itself causes in me a mighty tenderness for a person so very amiable. Breeding requires me to treat her with honour and respect, and very much of deference, to all that she shall at any time ask of me. But religion, above all, obliges me, instead of a rash rejecting her conversation, to contrive rather, how I may imitate the goodness of the Lord Jesus Christ, in His dealing with such as are upon a conversion unto Him.

On the other side: I cannot but fear a fearful snare,⁵ and that I may soon fall into some error in my conversation, if the point proposed unto me, be found, after all, unattainable, through the violent storm of opposition, which I cannot but foresee and suspect will be made unto it.

The dreadful confusions which I behold Heaven, even devising for me, do exceedingly break and waste my spirit. I should recover a wondrous degree of health, if I were not broken by these distresses, and grievous temptations. But

¹Dilemma.
²Attempts.

⁴In the greatest uncertainty.
⁵Leap.

these things cause me to spend more time than ordinary, for the most part every day, in prayers and in tears, prostrate on my study-floor before the Lord. Yea, and they cause me by night also sometimes to hold my vigils, in which I cry to God, until, and after, the middle of the night, that He would look down upon me, and help me, and save me, and not cast me off.

[February 18] *Thursday*. This day was kept as a fast, through the province. I enjoyed great assistences, in the services of the day.

As for my special soul-harassing point: I did some days ago, under my hand, vehemently beg, as for my life, that it might be desisted from, and that I might not be killed by hearing any more of it. Yet such was my flexible tenderness, as to be conquered by the importunities of several, to allow some further interviews. But I resolved, that I would make them turn chiefly upon the most glorious design in the world. I did, accordingly, and once especially, I did, with all the charms I could imagine, draw that witty gentlewoman unto tearful expressions of her consent unto all the articles in the covenant of grace, the articles of her marriage and union with the great L[ord] Redeemer. I had abundance of satisfaction in this action, whatever may be the issue of our conversation.

[February 20] *Saturday*. My grievous distresses, (occasioned especially by the late addresses made unto me, by the person formerly mentioned, and the opposition of her enemies) cause me to fall down before the Lord, with prayers and with tears continually. And because my heart is sore pained within me, to think, what I shall do, or what will be the issue of my distressing affair, I think it proper to multiply my vigils before the Lord. One of them I kept this night; and as it grew towards the morning, after I had cried unto the Lord for my relief and succour, under the temptations now harassing of me, I did again throw myself prostrate in the dust before the Lord; beseeching of Him, that if He would not hear my cries for myself, He would yet hear my cries for my flock; and hereupon I wrestled with the Lord for my great congregation, that the interests of religion might prevail mightily among them, and especially in the young people of my congregation.

It was a consolation unto me to think, that when my people were all asleep in their beds, their poor pastor should be watching, and praying and weeping for them.

The Lord, in His holy sovereignty orders it, that I am left unto great vexations from Satan, about this time; who fills me with fears, that I am a man rejected and abhorred of God, and given up to the worst of delusions; and that the Lord will make no more use of me to glorify Him. I am scarce able to live under these doleful disconsolations.

And that I may be left utterly destitute of all human support, my relatives, through their extreme distaste at the talk of my respects for the person, above mentioned, and fear lest I should over-value her, do treat me with unsupportable strangeness and harshness.

"Lord, I am oppressed; undertake for me!"

[February 27] *Saturday*. I set apart this day for prayer with fasting in my study, especially to commend my distressing affair unto the Lord.

As for the ingenious child that solicits my respects unto her, I cry to the Lord, with fervency and agony and floods of tears, that she may be the Lord's; and that her union and marriage to the Lord Jesus Christ, may be the effect of the discourses I have had with her. But I also resign her, and offer her up unto the Lord; and earnestly profess unto Him, that though I set a great value upon her, yet I can deny myself every thing in the world, that the glory of His name, and my service to His name, shall oblige me to part withal. Wherefore, I continually beg of the Lord, that He will show me my duty and bring my distress to a comfortable issue.

[March 3] *Wednesday*. My dreadful distresses continue upon me.

For which cause, I set apart this day, for the duties of a secret fast before the Lord; that I may obtain direction in, and deliverance from, the distresses which do so exceedingly harass and buffet my mind, and break my soul to pieces.

As also, that I may obtain the presence of the Lord with me, in the lecture to-morrow, when I am to do a special service, for His interests.

[March 6] *Saturday*. Though I have kept one fast in my study this week already, yet I must this day keep another.

I am a most miserable man.

That young gentlewoman of so fine accomplishments, (that there is none in this land in those respects comparable to her) who has with such repeated importunity and ingenuity pressed my respects to her, that I have had much ado to steer clear of great inconveniencies, hath by the disadvantages of the company which has continually resorted unto her unhappy father's house, got but a bad name among the generality of the people; and there appears no possibility of her speedy recovery of it, be her carriage never so virtuous, and her conversion never so notorious. By an unhappy coincidence of some circumstances, there is a noise, and a mighty noise it is, made about the town, that I am engaged in a courtship to that young gentlewoman; and though I am so very innocent, (and have so much aimed at a conformity to my Lord Jesus Christ, and serviceableness to Him, in my treating of her) yet it is not easy presently to confute the rumor.

I am now under incredible disadvantages. The design of Satan, to entangle me in a match that might have proved ruinous to my family, or my ministry, is defeated, by my resolution totally to reject the addresses of the young gentlewoman to me; which I do, for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ, whose name, I see, will suffer if I accept her; and I do it cheerfully, though she be so very charming a person.

But then, Satan has raised an horrid storm of reproach upon me, both for my earliness in courting a gentlewoman, and especially for my courting of a person whom they generally apprehend so disagreeable to my character. And there is hazard, lest my usefulness be horribly ruined, by the clamour of the rash people on this occasion, before there can be due measures taken to quiet them; and my civility to the person who has addressed me, will not let me utter what would most effectually quiet them.

I am a man greatly assaulted by Satan. Is it because I have done much against that enemy? or, are the judgments of God incessantly pursuing of me, for my mis-carriages!

My Spirit is excessively broken. There is danger of my dying suddenly, with smothered griefs and fears. I know not what to do, but to pour out my soul unto the Lord, and submit unto His dreadful sovereignty and righteousness; but cry mightily unto Him, that He would yet rescue my precious opportunities to glorify the L[ord] Jesus Christ (the apple of my eye,) from the mischiefs which do threaten them.

[BREAKING OFF: VICTORY OVER FLESH AND BLOOD]

[March 15, Monday] And now, being after all due deliberation, fully satisfied, that my countenancing the proposals of coming one day to a marriage, with the gentlewoman so often mentioned in these papers, will not be consistent with my public serviceableness; but that the prejudices in the minds of the people of God against it, are insuperable, and little short of universal: I set myself to make unto the L[ord] Jesus Christ, a sacrifice of a person, who, for many charming accomplishments, has not many equals in the English America. In making of my sacri-

fice, I have not gone upon any inferior considerations, nor have I minded,¹ but slighted,² the defamatory stories, which have been uttered concerning her, as knowing how little weight there is to be laid upon popular slanders. But I have been acted³ purely by a religious respect unto the holy name of the L[ord] Jesus Christ, and my serviceableness to His precious interests; which I had a thousand times rather die than damnify. My victory over flesh and blood in this matter, was no unhappy symptom, I hope, of regeneration in my Soul. I encouraged myself with hopes, that God would carry me well through my sacrifice, in preserving the person addressing me from any damage by her fondness for me; (but I must continue praying for her!) And that I should one day meet with some wonderful recompenses.

I struck my knife into the heart of my sacrifice by a letter to her mother. [March 27] *Saturday*. Was ever man more tempted than the miserable Mather! Should I tell in how many forms the devil has assaulted me, and with what subtlety and energy, his assaults have been carried on, it would strike my friends with horror.

Sometimes, temptations to impurities; and sometimes to blasphemy, and atheism, and the abandonment of all religion, as a mere delusion; and sometimes, to self-destruction itself. These, even these, O miserable Mather, do follow thee, with an astonishing fury. But I fall down into the dust, on my study-floor, with tears before the Lord; and then they quickly vanish: 'tis fair weather again. "Lord! what wilt Thou do with me!"

[April 3, *Saturday*] I am under singular distresses. What I would on many accounts prefer, as the most eligible and honourable condition, would be to continue all the rest of my little time, in an unspotted widowhood.

But my family suffers by it, in several instances. And yet I could concoct and conquer this inconvenience, much easier than some other circumstances.

My father presses me frequently and fervently, that I would by no means take up resolutions to continue in my widowhood. My flexible temper makes it not easy for me to resist his exhortations.

But I foresee, and already suffer, a worse encumbrance. The applications, which the gentlewoman formerly mentioned in these papers, has made unto me, have occasioned very many misrepresentations of me, among a foolish people. The coarse, though just, usage that she has had from me, will also put her upon a thousand inventions. I shall be continually, every week, persecuted with some noise and nonsense carried about the town concerning me. The persecution of the lies daily invented about me, will be, I see, insupportable. All the friends I have in the world persuade me that I shall have no way to get from under these confusions, but by proceeding unto another marriage.

"Lord, help me, what shall I do? I am a miserable man."

[April 13, 14, 15] *Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday*. The dispensations of heaven towards me, in and since the death of my lovely consort, have been very awful.

I have lately waded through dreadful temptations, and I tremble to think, what may be the next storm that will be raised upon me.

About eleven months having passed since the Lord began to take away from me the desire of my eyes, my friends begin to press my thoughts of returning to the married state. This is a point of terrible consequence. I had need use more than ordinary humiliations, and supplications, and resignations, upon an occasion so full of agony.

Though I have rarely let a week pass me without setting apart a day for prayer

¹Taken into account.

²Discounted.

³Motivated.

with fasting, for now many, many months together; and I have ever now and then had my vigils, for a conversation with heaven; and every day for the most part, I have had one secret prayer more than I use to have, and lain prostrate, in the dust, with tears before the Lord, because of my distresses: Yet I thought it necessary to do something more than all of this. I resolved upon doing a thing, which I do not know to have been done, by any man living in the world. I took up a resolution, to spend no less than THREE DAYS together, in prayer with fasting in my study; and beseech the Lord thrice, knocking at the door of heaven for three days together.

[May 19, Wednesday] I preached both parts of the Lord's day at Salem, and on Monday returned home.

In my absence the young gentlewoman, to whom I have been so unkind many weeks or months ago, writes and comes to my father, and brings her good mother with her and charms the neighbours into her interests; and renews her importunities (both before and after my journey) that I would make her mine. My apprehension of damage to arise therefrom unto the holy interests of religion, fixes me still in an unalterable resolution, that I must never hearken to her proposals, whatever may be the consequence of my being so resolved. I am hereupon threatened by some with exquisite revenges and reproaches from her defeated love, and the hazards of her coming to mischief.⁴ Some set the town into a new storm of obloquy upon me, and threaten me with an horrid encumbrance upon all my intentions elsewhere to return unto the married state.

Satan makes these rebukes of heaven upon me, after all my prayers, and tears, and fasts and resignations, to be an occasion of sore temptation unto me.

However, in the midst of all this temptation, my weeping soul keeps humbly professing before the Lord; that I will not give over seeking Him, though it appears as if I sought Him in vain; that I will always love Him, and serve Him, though He seems as if He would lay me by from serving Him; that though He should not rescue my opportunities of glorifying the L[ord] Jesus Christ, from the fine devices of Satan to hurt them, yet I will continue to glorify Him as much as ever I can all my days; yea, though He should leave me without hopes of arising to glory at the last. While I am thus professing before the Lord, He keeps reviving of my broken, drooping spirit, with comfortable persuasions, that He will not cast me off but that I shall see a blessed issue of all the dark dispensations that are passing over me.

[June 12] *Saturday*. The holy justice and wisdom of God, shines forth, in His awful dispensations towards me.

A lying spirit is gone forth, and the people of the town, are strangely under the influences of it.

I have the inconvenience of being a person, whom the eye and the talk of the people is very much upon. My present circumstances give them opportunities to invent and report abundance of disadvantageous falsehoods, of my being engaged in such and such courtships, wherein I am really unconcerned. But the addresses which I have had from the young gentlewoman so often mentioned in these papers, and the discourses thereby raised among the dissatisfied people, afford the greatest theme for their mischievous and malicious lying to turn upon. When all assaults upon me from that quarter have been hitherto unsuccessful at last, I am unhappily persecuted with insinuations that I had proceeded so far in countenancing that matter, I could not with honour and justice now steer clear of it, as I have done. God strangely appears for me, in this point also, by disposing the young gentlewoman, with her mother, to furnish me with their assertions: "That I

⁴Dangers of her reacting spitefully.

have never done any unworthy thing; but acted most honourably and righteously towards them, and as became a Christian, and a minister; and they will give all the world leave to censure them after the hardest manner in the world, if ever they should speak the contrary." Yea, they have proceeded so far beyond all bounds in my vindication, as to say: "They verily look upon Mr M_____r to be as great a saint of God, as any upon earth." Nevertheless, the Devil owes me a spite, and he inspires his people in this town, to whisper impertinent stories, which have a tendency to make me contemptible, and hurt my serviceableness, and strike at, yea, strike out the apple of my eye.⁵ My spirit is on this occasion too much disturbed. I am encountering an hour and power of darkness. My temptations from the clamour of many people, among whom I hear the defaming of many; the desolate condition of my family, not likely to be provided for; and the desertions which my soul suffers, while I behold the dreadful frown of God upon my prayers, my fasts, my fears, my resignations, and all my endeavours to glorify Him: these things do exceedingly unhinge me, and cause me sometimes to speak unadvisedly with my lips. 'Tis well, if they do not perfectly kill me.

[July 17] *Saturday*. I set apart this day for prayer with fasting in my study, to obtain a good progress and success of the affair which I am now managing; and a deliverance from any further vexation, temptation, or encumbrance by the young gentlewoman that has vexed me with so many of her wiles, and by such exquisite methods been trying to ensnare or trouble me.

The rage of that young gentlewoman, whom out of obedience to God I have rejected, (and never more pleased God than in rejecting of her addresses to me) is transporting her⁶ to threaten that she will be a thorn in my side, and contrive all possible ways to vex me, affront me, disgrace me, in my attempting a return to the married state with another gentlewoman. Instead of using other contrivances to quell the rage of a person, who is of so rare a wit but so little grace, that I may expect unknown damages from her, I carried her to the Lord Jesus Christ. I pleaded, that my Lord Jesus Christ is able to do everything; that He can restrain Satan, and all Satanic influences at His pleasure; that my temptations had already proceeded a great way; and His name would suffer, and His poor servant would sink, if he should permit them to proceed any further; and that I had out of obedience unto Him, exposed myself unto the rage, by which I was now likely to be incommoded. And I concluded still, with a triumphant faith in my Lord Jesus Christ, for my victory over the mischiefs which threatened me.

Behold, within a few days, the gentlewoman without my seeking it, sent me a letter, with a promise under her hand, that she would offer me none of those disquietments, which in her passion she had threatened. I was astonished at this work of heaven; and with the tears of a raptured soul, I offered up a sacrifice of love and praise unto the Lord.

My conversation with the lovely person,⁷ to whom heaven has directed me, goes on, with pure, chaste, noble strokes, and the smiles of God upon it.

And the universal satisfaction which it has given to the people of God, through town and country, proclaims itself, to a degree which perfectly amazes me.

The extreme heat of the weather (with some other inconveniences, by the carpenters making some addition to my habitation) put me by, from keeping a fast this week, as I might else have done.

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⁵Christ.⁶I.e., her rage is inspiring or compelling.⁷A nearby widow whom Mather has met.