

The three alchemical flasks of Oldfield

These alchemical three flasks were bequeathed by an adept, Clement Oldfield, to Queen Elizabeth I, who after some subterfuge sold them to Roloff Peterson of Lubeck. This correspondence is preserved in the Domestic State Papers. I show here the summaries of the contents of each letter from the Catalogue of the State Papers.

Elizabeth Vol. LXXV. 66. [1570?] Note of the contents of the letter to Her Majesty written from J. Peterson, native of Lubeck. On the subject of alchemy: offering to her three wonderful alchemical glasses; and of the undertaking by Robert Smythe, on the peril of his head, to bring 40,000 dollars into the Queen's coffers by their means.

Elizabeth Vol. CCXLV. 130. [Oct. 20. 1593. Lubec.] Roloff Peterson to the Queen. Clement Ouldfield, born in Kent, came to lodge in his house at Lubec, 11 Sept. 1587, and continued there until 6 Sept. 1593, when he died; he studied alchemy night and day, and had brought himself to such perfection that, if the Lord had spared his life six months longer, he believed he should have reaped his heart's desire. The day before he died, he secretly informed the writer that he had at last found out and long kept a secret of such value, and so far exceeding all other, that none but high and mighty Princes should participate, he then delivered to him three glass bodies, containing alchemical preparations, sol, luna, etc. and explained these, and sundry others. After this he told him he had a most wonderful secret, which, in the hands of any man but meanly skilful in this art, would work wonderful things, and wished the writer to make profit thereby, in regard of his kindness; but inasmuch as the great and infinite treasures that might be attained by these means rather appertained to the majesty of kings and princes than to men of his estate, he bound him by an oath to present the same to the Queen of England, and wait her answer six months, before opening the matter to any other, or making profit thereof, which he might then do if she refused; after this he yielded up the ghost. If Her Majesty will send any skilful man to be further advertised, and to see the things, is ready to discharge his trust; but if he has no knowledge within six months, shall esteem himself freed from the covenant, and at liberty to dispose thereof. [2 pages.]

Elizabeth Vol. CCXLVII. 36. [Feb. 2nd. 1594.] Promise by Rob. Smith of Great Yarmouth, that whereas he has delivered into the hands of Sir Thos. Wilkes, clerk of the Council, a letter to the Queen from Roloff Peterson, of Lubec, offering to present three glasses or bodies in alchemy, one of Sol, one of Luna, and the other of Mercury, as the gift of Mr. Ouldfield, born in Kent, and has offered Sir Thomas, at the peril of his head, to bring 40,000 dollars into Her Majesty's coffers for these glasses or bodies, without one penny of expense, if it will please her Majesty not to meddle with the receiving of them; and whereas doubts were moved as to how Her Majesty might consider the virtues of these glasses or bodies, as being without error or deceit, and whether she would accept them or the money; he confirms on his allegiance and life, the first two particulars, and offers to bring Roloff, if he lives, and the glasses or bodies, before Her Majesty, to be examined, after which, if she shall refuse the bodies, he will be bound as before, to procure the money at his own charge.

Elizabeth Vol. CCXLVII. 72. [Feb. 20th. 1594. Hampton Court.] Instructions to Rob. Smith, of Yarmouth, sent by the Queen to Lubec. He having received the Queen's reply to a letter from Roloff Peterson, of Lubec, is to repair thither, deliver the letter, receive the three glass bodies, and bring them to Her Majesty. He is to ascertain from Peterson whether the materials therein were considered by Ouldfield to be brought to full perfection, and if anything is lacking, what it is. Also to recover any books or papers of Ouldfield relating thereto, or other of his books which treat of alchemy; also a secret menstruum, without which the materials aforesaid can hardly be brought to perfection. All these things are to be brought to Her Majesty, in order to ascertain their value, and either detain them, or return them, on the consideration mentioned. [Copy. 1 1/2 pages.]

Elizabeth Vol. CCL. 9. [Sept. 30th. 1594. Greenwich.] Declaration by the Queen, that whereas Clement Oldfield made a bequest, containing certain secrets of alchemy, to Roloff Peterson of Lubec, on condition of their being first offered on composition to Her Majesty, the said bequest shall be delivered unopened to the deputy of the Merchant adventurers at Stade, for Peterson; or if she is pleased to keep it, he shall receive 500 l. for the same within six months. [Copy.]

Elizabeth Vol. CCLI. 57. [March 13th. 1595.] Instructions for Rob. Smith, sent on Her Majesty's service into Germany. You shall repair to where you know the persons remain, with whom you are to confer on the service for

which sent, and speedily bring to Her Majesty's coffers the sum which you promised, for the materials bequeathed to her by Clement Oldfield, deceased. As she has promised the said materials, or 500 l., before 20th April next, to Roloff Peterson, of Lubec, you are, if possible, to inform her before that time, whether you can compass the matter. If unable so to do, you are to tell Peterson that the person to whom the Queen sent for advice as to those materials is ill, and cannot attend before June, and to request a postponement till June 15, when the money or the goods will be delivered him by the governor of the Merchant Adventurers at Stade, who has received orders to that effect. If you conclude with the parties to whom you resort for the promised sum, it may be paid at Stade, part in hand, and part on bond, and the materials delivered, without trouble or alteration, as left by Oldfield, on June 10. All secrecy is to be observed, that it may not be supposed that the Queen has any other interest in the said materials than as a princess to whom, for their rareness and preciousness, they were offered; but that, there being now in the realm some acquainted with them, she has left them to the disposition of a servant of hers, by whom you are deputed to make such benefit as their value allows. Peterson is to be led to suppose that your journey to Germany is to bring to Her Majesty a person who can inform her about the materials. You are to send a speedy report of the result of your mission, that orders may be given accordingly. [2 1/2 pages.]

Elizabeth Vol. CCLI. 58. [March 14th. 1595.] The Council to Alderman Saltonstall, governor of the Merchant Adventurers of London, resident at Stade. We send you three cases, two of wood, and one of black cotton, all sealed, with glass bodies therein, which you are to send to the company, to be safely kept until further orders. If before or about 24th April next, Roloff Peterson of Lubec shall claim, by a writing from Her Majesty, either the said cases or a sum of money in lieu thereof, he is requested to postpone his claim till June 10, since a person for whom Her Majesty sent to judge to quality of the things contained in the glasses could not hitherto come to England because of sickness, but she has now sent into that country a special messenger for him. You are to keep your having the glasses a secret from Peterson, Rob. Smith, and all others, and only to deliver them on order from [Sir] Thos. Wilkes. [1 1/2 pages. Copy.]

Elizabeth Vol. CCLIV. 46. [Oct. 1595.] Protest to be made by the deputy governor of the Merchant Adventurers at Stade. In Sept. 1594, the Queen received from Roloff Peterson of Lubec certain material of alchemy, sealed up in glass cases, and promised that they should be returned safe and unopened in six months, to the Merchant adventurer's deputy at Stade, for restoration to Peterson, or else that he should be paid 500 l. Before the time appointed, the Queen, as she could not obtain information in time of the virtues supposed to be in the materials, returned them to the said deputy, requesting Peterson to wait an answer till Rob. Smith had procured a person from Germany to inform her of their qualities. Peterson promised to wait till Sept. 30, when he declared he could wait no longer, and demanded the 500 l. Sent the Queen word, and received her directions, that as Peterson will not be content to wait till she can procure a skilful person - who is not easily to be found - to test the value of the materials, Her Majesty returns them. Thereupon, I, the deputy, hereby tender to him the three glass bodies, to see that they have been unopened, and am ready to deliver them to him on his delivery of the Queen's note thereon. Peterson having refused to receive the same, I, the deputy, protest my freedom from any charge or damage relating to the said goods, and declare that neither I nor Her Majesty is bound to pay the 500 l., unless she had retained the goods. I think Peterson forgets the high state of the sacred person he deals with, in claiming the money without having intimated his dislike of the delays. [6 pages.]