

The Witch of Cragenstone

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CHAPTER II.

JOSIAH TAUNSTON spent the next day at the market place and having made good bargains and fair exchanges rode up to his home rapidly, with an expression on his countenance more complacent and less severe than usual.

"Ho, there," he called.

To his surprise the door remained unopened, and listening, he heard no sounds of life within.

"Mother, open, an' thou art there," he cried, "for I would have a word with thee before I ride farther to speak w' Simon Kempster on the price o' wool."

At this juncture a man, one of the farm laborers, came rushing from the back of the house.

"The good dame an' thy sister ha' taken their departure long since," he announced, evidently pleased to be the bearer of important tidings. "They did go to the Mayland farm, master, to meet thy cousin, who hath arrived."

With an exclamation of surprise Josiah sprang from his horse, threw the reins to the man and, turning suddenly to hide the dark flush that spread over his face at the first shock of the news, lifted the latch and, entering the house, proceeded at once to his chamber, from whence he emerged an hour later much changed in appearance. The stains and dust of travel had been carefully removed from his person, a fresh linen ruff of dazzling whiteness was about his neck, and in place of his common riding clothes he wore his church going suit of black cloth finely woven and but lately made by the village tailor.

Taking the footpath that led through the meadows, he walked with long strides in the direction of the road that wound its way from the village past the Mayland farmhouse. A slight fear lest his absence from home at the time of his cousin's arrival would be held against him as seeming neglect caused him some anxiety, and he was framing suitable words of excuse and explanation as he walked along when his meditation was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a young woman at the corner of the roadway. She had evidently been running, for over her flushed face and tumbling yellow hair a broad hat of black velvet, with a

sweeping white feather, hung off at the back in reckless abandon, and she held the long skirts of her scarlet riding habit, richly trimmed with silver braiding, high above her quivering petticoat. So excited was she and intent upon her chase that she was quite regardless of appearance or of the fact that the small ankles, neatly covered with red silk hose, were exposed above her low shoes to the cold and disapproving gaze of the man approaching. Just then a small dog scuttled past Josiah breathless and panting from a long run.

"Oh, catch her, good air—catch Biddy!" the girl cried shrilly. "The poor dog will take a fit from fright! That stupid Giles, to let her out in this strange place when I was not about! Move, man! An' thou canst put thy hand on her!"

Thus sharply commanded, Josiah came to his senses and, making a sudden and effective dive, caught the exhausted animal and, carrying it to the young woman, put it into her arms, saying with his customary seriousness, "Margaret Mayland, for as such I recognize thee, I give thee greeting and do declare that thou art welcome to thy home."

At once she extended her hand cordially, and her lips parted in a smile of pleasure.

"An' 't's really Josiah?" she asked brightly. "At first glance, with thy sober face and black suit, good cousin, methought thou wert the preacher."

"And thou wouldst have called to the preacher, a man of God, to catch thy dog, Margaret?" regarding her with a look of quiet reproach.

"Aye, that would I," she answered carelessly. "I faith, in my opinion the better the man the better the deed. But to continue the subject, Josiah, at the second glance I remembered thee at once."

She stepped back a pace or two and, shading her eyes from the slanting rays of the setting sun by tilting her hat well down over her face, regarded him with a part air of critical interest. "After all, thou'rt not much changed except that thou dost look more careworn, and 'tis apparent that thou hast grown older," she said. Then, seeing that the expression in his eyes did not soften, added, "But happen, cousin, thou wouldst be better pleased, as is the fashion of all the men, an' I were to tell thee thou wert grown good looking."

She laughed a low, rippling laugh of amusement.

Josiah, finding her levity not to his liking and having a lurking suspicion that she was amusing herself at his expense, answered resentfully and with an air of offended dignity.

"That thou wouldst so misjudge me as to presume that I would desire praise for my personal appearance I can understand, for after thy years of living in that wicked city of Paris, where all the men are fops or coxcombs, with no thought about decking their bodies with tawdry raiment, willing and eager to bend their backs and

mouth and grin in pleased acknowledgment of a woman's compliment, thou has thought that all men were made in the same fashion."

The young mistress of the Mayland farm, who had listened to her cousin's words with an air of bewildered surprise, now cried angrily: "Oh, fie on thee, Josiah, for a long face! To talk so of my bonny Paris! Forsooth, an thou wert to go there for a spell thou wouldst lose the somber look thou hast caught from all the people hereabout and gain much for thine appearance, I do assure thee."

Although this was said with a smiling coquetry that took the sting out of the words, a red flush mounted to Josiah's forehead.

"Peace, Margaret," he said, "and take not upon thyself—but at best a sinful mortal—to criticize the work of God. That I am made in my Master's image doth suffice for me, and the care—from what I judge at sight of thee—that thou dost give to thy body I prefer to give to the salvation of my soul."

He paused for a reply, but, none coming, he continued: "Ere I met thee I was on my way to thy house. Shall we walk there together?"

Margaret Mayland, looking at the cold, dispassionate face of the man confronting her, with his sharp features and deep-set eyes, felt a slight sinking at her heart, and the smile on her bright face faded, her manners becoming at once less friendly and more distant. Turning to go, she said: "Aye, come with me, Josiah, and welcome. Thy good mother and Hetty have but just left after spending a pleasant hour with me, and already sweet Hetty hath found a place in my heart."

Josiah regarded her soberly, letting his glance rest on her brilliant hued riding dress significantly.

"That my sister hath some trifling faults I do admit," he said. "But she is ever an obedient maid, God fearing, pure minded and modest, setting an example of propriety that would, I wot, be of benefit to many older and more experienced in the world than she."

They had reached the entrance of the driveway that led to the Mayland house. Margaret, stepping inside, hastily drew the gates together after her and, leaning over the railing, said, with an attempt at a smile: "Of a sudden a great weariness hath fallen upon me. Wouldst think me rude and without good manners, cousin, if I were to ask thee to excuse me from further converse today? I find that my strength is greatly spent by the long ride up the mountain, and I would rest awhile. I truth I am overdone," she concluded.

Taunston, concealing his disappointment, said, with a forced air of pleasantness that sat ill upon him: "He who cometh late must take, perforce, what is left, Margaret, and I regret, as one having taken thy place on my farm for so many months, representing thee in all business matters, that I was not here upon thine arrival to give thee a proper welcoming. But as thou'rt away and rest is what thou doth need I will go on my way to leave thee undisturbed. God be with thee, Margaret."

He proceeded a few steps, then paused, addressing her seriously:

"Cousin, at prayer time tonight I shall offer thanks to God for thy safe conduct through a perilous journey."

"Thank thee, and farewell, Josiah," turning hastily, Margaret Mayland went with swift steps toward the house.

Out on the road Taunston continued on his way with slow strides, his head bent over his breast in thoughtful meditation.

"Worse, far worse, than I expected," he muttered. "Much devil's work to be undone! Our cousin hath a comely face enough, and methought after my first words of admonition she appeared more gentle and less hoidenish in her manner, and so silent was she toward the last I doubt not that my speech impressed her. A good example, constant correction and much sound advice is what a woman so young and worldly minded doth require."

Reaching a rising eminence, he paused at the top and looked back at the Mayland estate, with its broad acres stretching far before him in all the glory of their spring beauty, illuminated by the rays of the setting sun. "Ah!" He drew a sharp breath unconsciously of admiration and longing.

"Never before hath my duty to the Lord been placed so fully before me as in this my self imposed task of leading mine erring young cousin into the paths of wisdom and righteousness," he said after a few moments' thought, slowly and with solemn emphasis.

CHAPTER III.

THE next morning the sun rose dazzling in its radiance above the peaks of Cragenstone, shedding a luster over the village. On the Mayland farm all nature was astir. Thrifty robins dotted the green grass, conspicuously displaying their red breasts as they sought their morning meal in the soft damp earth, larks thrilled gayly, and the nightingale poured forth its sweet high notes in joyous exaltation.

Yellow crocus flowers lifted their faces timidly to the sun, and gentle

breezes stirred the branches of the trees. Now were heard the voices of the men and maids as they milked the cows or drove them out to pasture, and the noisy bleating of the sheep and lambs, huddling together and running out through the open gates to spread themselves over the fields, added increasing activity to the early morning scene.

In a room of the Mayland homestead above the broad staircase that led to it Margaret Mayland, exhausted by the fatigue of her long journey, lay sleeping, undisturbed by the noises out of doors.

Through the deep slatted window a ray of sun poured in, then softly touched the closed eyelids; another kissed the arched red lips, and a third, as if it recognized its kind, fell suddenly on the wealth of golden hair on the pillow. One arm was thrown in careless abandon over her head, and her gown of white linen, falling open at the throat, disclosed a finely wrought chain of gold resting upon it, from which was suspended a small cross of the same metal. The cock under the window crowed lustily once, twice. Mistress Mayland stirred, then, sighing wearily, arranged her head more comfortably upon the pillows and slept on peacefully.

The sun had reached a higher point in the heavens, and it was well on in the day, according to the early risers of Cragenstone, when Margaret Mayland, now fully dressed, descended the staircase and entered the dining room, a small, cozy affair that was but a continuation of the long hall, curtained off at the sides with dark tapestries and a huge screen set up in the middle for a partition. Mr. Mayland, the father of the present occupant of the house, having had French blood in his veins through his mother's side, had



"Where thou art, sweet Margaret, I am happy."

not taken kindly to the plain furnishings, high backed chairs, wooden benches and bare white sanded floors of his more simple minded neighbors and had purchased from time to time bright stuffs, works of art and tufted chairs and couches, so that his home presented an air of comfort and elegance not to be found elsewhere on that bleak mountain.

As Margaret entered the only occupant of the room was an elderly woman, having the appearance of being more than a common serving woman, who was spreading a white cloth on a table, idly humming a little tune as she did so.

"A good day, Elisabeth. Prithee, sing!" she exclaimed, with affected astonishment. "Then thou doth like thy new surroundings?"

"An' thou, Margaret?"

"Ah, welladay, I cannot tell thee yet," she answered, with a sigh. "But I own to great depression this morning, Elisabeth, and feelings of strangeness and loneliness lie heavy on my heart."

She walked to the window and, resting her arms on the deep sill, looked out of doors discontentedly, unconscious of the graceful appearance she made in the French morning gown of pink poplin that fitted loosely to her rounded figure and fell in long folds to the floor.

"Hast had no misgivings, Elisabeth, that a life of unusual dullness doth lie before us?"

"Where thou art, sweet Margaret, I am happy," the woman replied gently, "whether 'tis at thine aunt's at Paris, where I sewed thy frocks and cared for thee, or here in thine own home, where thou art come to be the mistress. Ever do I find my best contentment at thy side, for, sweet, hast thou not been mine to watch over since thy mother died?"

Margaret, accustomed to the woman's fondness, made no reply, but came and took a seat at the table in thoughtful silence while Elisabeth busied herself about her, pouring a cup of milk, breaking eggs into a saucer and placing the plate of hot bread within easy reaching distance.

"But for thee, sweet," she observed, "happen the Mayland farm will prove more quiet than thou'lt like."

"And Cragenstone?" exclaimed Margaret. "What doleful people here abide! How long and solemn their faces have grown, and with what serious demeanor they do talk about! Why, Elisabeth, one short walk with my good Cousin Josiah near gave me the megrims! Prithee must we all the time be quoting Scripture or thinking of our prayers?"

"Naught is changed," the woman replied. "I the five years of the different life in Paris thou hast forgotten; that is all. To my mind thine aunt received us with the same cold smile she gave us when we rode away."

Margaret shrugged her shoulders and threw out her hand in a manner that suggested the Frenchwoman. "How gloomy they looked in the plain gray clothes they wore as they stood around the door, erect and solemn, to receive me. But, withal, weary and nervous with the homecoming as I was, my quick eye failed not to see two things—admiring love on the bright face of

my sweet cousin Hetty Taunston and stern disapproval of my crimson riding dress on the countenance of her mother. Mayhap I shall prove too worldly for their quiet tastes. Dost think so, Elisabeth?"

The woman touched Margaret's sunny hair caressingly.

"Thou'rt so bonny, sweet, so fair, so good, that all must love thee who know thee," she said. "And as thy ways are good ways I wot thy neighbors and thy kinsfolk must grow accustomed to them."

Margaret rested her hand lightly on old Elisabeth's shoulder. "And thou lovest me and Godfrey," she said, blushing softly. "I care not for the others. That much is so much that it doth suffice me."

A light footstep was heard in the hallway.

"Am I come too soon?" Hetty Taunston in a black cotton frock, with a white kerchief folded neatly over her bosom, entered the room.

"Methought mother would ne'er be done finding chores for me to do," she said poutingly. "First there was the linen to spread on the grass for bleaching; then the ewers to be filled at the brook; my lesson in embroidery and the Bible teaching. And, oh," with a sigh, "so many other occupations did occur to mother's mind that I grew quite restless, for all the time my thoughts were over here with thee, Margaret."

"Poor, much abused Hetty!" Margaret, arising from the table, pinched her cousin's cheek affectionately. "And so thou hast kept thy word to come early to see what came from Paris! Prithee, cousin, mayhap in some corner of those boxes lieth a gift for thee."

(To be Continued.)

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