

The Witch of Cragenstone

By ANITA CLAY MUNOZ,
Author of "In Love and Truth"

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Her riding whip fell to the floor with a thud as she sank into a chair, covering up her white face with her hands.

"Elsbeth," she said at last to the woman who stood before her in dumb sympathy, "has ever thought that Godfrey, reckless in his haste to see me, did attempt to ride up the mountain in that fearful storm and—God's pity on me!—was lost?"

"Tut, tut, sweetheart!" Elsbeth's voice was gay and full of courage to reassure her. "Sir Godfrey's but detained in Lunnon. Thou must keep in mind what a great lord he is and that mayhap his business there is of vast importance. 'Tis often, I warrant thee, that a man's heart is in one place and performs his body in another. Ha! done grieving, Margaret, and eat a little sup to strengthen thee. He'll come anon."

Her young mistress did not move or raise her head.

"Every night since the storm broke," she lamented, "I have worn my finest gowns to welcome Godfrey—at first with happy heart full of bright hope, then, after succeeding days of bitter disappointment, with less hope and some misgiving. But tonight"—she drew a sharp breath and put her hand over her heart—"I go to dress sick with terror and broken hearted with despair. Elsbeth," she cried, throwing up her head with a little tragic gesture, "I tell thee Godfrey is ill or dead, for so perfect is my knowledge of his unselfish love for me that I know, unless fever did render him delirious or death had stilled his tongue, he would not leave me pining here alone, suffering this frightful apprehension!"

Weeping silently, she prepared to go up the stairs.

Elsbeth was at her side in a moment. "Tut, tut, my bonny maid! Let not such fearsome thought beset thee," she urged earnestly. "Take heart, Margaret. I promise thee—thine old Elsbeth who loves thee doth promise thee—that ere the sun goeth down on another day thy lover 'll hold thee in his arms."

Margaret smiled sadly. "An I could believe thine oft repeated promises, good Elsbeth, my heart would not now have lost its lightness."

At the top of the staircase she paused.

"Oh, Elsbeth, 'tis easy for thee to be

brave when 'tis not thy Godfrey who doth not come!" she said. "But could thou really know what 'tis to wait wearily night after night for the man who has thine whole heart thou wouldst pity me."

"I ha' ever advised thee, Margaret," the elder woman said, putting her arm about the girl comfortingly, "not to fasten too much affection on any man, else he prove not worthy of it and thy joy be turned to sorrow."

Margaret raised her eyes, filled with deep reproach, to Elsbeth's face.

"Such true love as doth exist between Godfrey and me," she said soberly; "such faith, such trust, thou with thine evil suspicions and grim forebodings could have no thought on. What knowest thou of men and lovers, Elsbeth, that thou art always prating of their imperfections? 'Twere not kind of thee to tease me with thy maudlin talk when—the tears in her eyes overflowed on her cheeks—"I am so beset on every side."

"Beset! Margaret, tell me. Who troubles thee?"

"I have told thee of my cousin Josiah's importunities, Elsbeth," she answered. "Thou knowest that his cold, persistent wooing doth fret me, and lately his advances have been so open and determined that, I truth, I have fear of him."

She drew a sharp, shuddering breath.

"Elsbeth, the sight of my cousin strikes a chill to my heart. I know that he is an upright man and godly, but he tells me so plainly of his firm determination to win me at all hazards; there is something so cruel in his eyes and so relentless in his bearing, that he sets me all a-tremble. At night I have evil dreams of him, and my waking hours are filled with bad presentiments. Oh, Elsbeth"—she burst out crying bitterly—"pray God to send me Godfrey!"

"There, there! Take off this riding dress that hangs so heavily about thee"—Elsbeth stroked the bowed head gently—"and don thine azure muslin that Sir Godfrey loved to see thee wear. Dost remember, sweet, one night in Paris when I was brushing thy hair that thou told me that thy lover said thou wert like a dainty flower in that frock—a blue forget-me-not? And the next day he sent thee a bunch of the sweet flowers?"

"Ah, remind me not of those happy days!" she replied tearfully. "Ah, lackaday, that I ever left mine aunt in Paris!"

Elsbeth, assisting her to remove her habit, said, with gentle sympathy, "Tis no wonder thou art nerveless and pining, bonny, in this raw mountain climate that, I trow, doth not agree with thee, an' the sober ways of thy neighbors do pall upon thee."

"Although it doth appear to thee, Elsbeth, that I have lost my bravery and strength, I have still courage to bear the heaviest ills of life, such as separation, poor health, grim poverty, I truth, starvation; but I admit that such agony as the knowledge of harm to Godfrey would be a grief such as would kill me."

"Fie, fie on such grim thoughts! Cheer thee, Margaret," urged her companion.

For a moment the girl struggled with herself, then forcing a smile through the tears said more cheerfully, "The blue frock, Elsbeth, and my lace bertha. Who doth dare say that thou and I have lost hope of brave Godfrey?"

"I give thee good even', cousin." The voice was sudden and loud.

Margaret gave a wild shriek. Her heart and soul eager for the presence of her lover, every nerve strained with listening and waiting for him, expecting him at every angle of the road, she was startled almost beyond hope of composure at this sudden voice. With her hands over her heart, panting, she fell against a tree and rested there.

"I wot I frightened thee," he said, watching her furtively out of his small gray eyes.

"What meanest thou," she cried angrily when she had recovered slightly, "that thou comest like a great panther stealing through the forest? Couldst not give a body warning?"

"Tis my fashion ever to walk easily, Margaret Mayland," he observed, "but I truth I had no wish to frighten thee. Rather would I do that which would draw thee nearer to me so that thou would heed my counsel and listen to words that others far older and wiser than thou have given ear to and"—

Margaret, seeing that her cousin was inclined to be oratorical and having no desire to remain in the forest listening to words of censure and reproach that were distasteful to her, with a quick motion stooped erect before him, interrupting his harangue by saying in a quick, peremptory manner, "I have an errand in the village, Josiah, and would be off my way."

"Margaret, hear me. I do but counsel thee for thy good."

"Why should I heed thy counsel, priffie, and give ear to thee? By what right do thou admonish me? Am I not mine own mistress?" she asked disdainfully.

"It is not part of my plan to anger thee, Margaret, else I would tell thee many things with unvarnished plainness for thy good and for the welfare of thy soul," he said in reply. "An' if

hath brought some news. I'll go, good Elsbeth."

At about this time Josiah Taunston, with his broad brimmed hat pulled well down over his closely cropped hair, wearing his church going suit of black cloth and finely knit gray woolen stockings, came through the forest toward the Mayland farmhouse to make an evening call on his fair mistress. Unusual pallor shone on his stern countenance, and his eyes, cold and steely, looked almost wicked, so full were they of an expression of determination. Suddenly the sound of a light footstep fell on his ears and, raising his head, he discerned through the foliage a glimmer of blue that caused him to draw his breath hard and his heart to stand still.

Not seeing the approaching form on account of a turn in the path, Margaret advanced, her head, crowned by the wealth of hair wound high above it, held proudly, holding her long skirts well off the ground to avoid the briars in her way, disclosing as she walked the big buckles and red heels of her little black shoes.

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"It is not part of my plan to anger thee, Margaret, else I would tell thee many things with unvarnished plainness for thy good and for the welfare of thy soul," he said in reply. "An' if

er a maid needed the firm guidance of an honorable, God fearing man, thou'rt she, cousin," he continued sternly. "For in that wicked bedlam, the French city called Paris, thou didst learn many ways and acquire habits that if allowed to grow uncorrected would lose thee thy soul for all eternity."

Margaret, coming a step nearer, met his glance with open defiance.

"Speak plainer," she commanded.

"What dost thou mean?"

"One thing, thy way of dressing. I ask thee in all reason, cousin, doth it become a modest, virtuous maid to expose her breast and arms to the gaze of men? I do assert 'tis most unseemly."

Margaret's eyes flashed dangerously.

"But," he continued, seeing her displeasure and endeavoring to control his voice so that it would sound less harsh and discordant, "I know that these are errors of education learned from the goddess in that devil's nest where thou in all innocence wast sent by thy father, and that with the firm and loving guidance of a pious husband, combined with constant prayer and repentance on thy part, thou wouldst overcome these ways tending to do thee evil. Margaret, canst thou not see, what is for thy good? Give me mine answer tonight!"

He came toward her with outstretched hands. "Say, Josiah, I will wed with thee."

Margaret, who had grown very white, drew away from him hastily, as if in horror of him, opened her mouth to shriek out her refusal, then suddenly with a strong effort composed herself and, giving her shoulders a little shrug, leaned back against the tree, regarding her companion with a half smile of contempt and derision.

"My good cousin," she commenced calmly, "since my return among my kinsfolk, where of a truth I expected warm greetings and loving attentions, with the exception of sweet Hetty I have received naught but unpleasant correction, constant criticism, unkind fault finding and rude interference with my mode of dress and manner of living. I have borne it all with patience, possibly indifferently, attributing it to thine ignorance and the narrowness of thy living here. 'Tis true my ways are not thy ways. Forsooth, I would change them if they were, so in-supportable are thine to me, for I have ever been taught by the good and loving aunt who raised me that kind words and civil were much to be preferred to harsh criticism and cruel prejudice, and that fair words and good manners were what distinguished a gentleman from the boor. Again I say and in conclusion, "if thou liketh not my ways, I hold thine in abhorrence."

Josiah's thin lips worked.

"Mine answer, Margaret Mayland," he interposed harshly, unable longer to endure the suspense, "cease thy woman's palaver and say me yea or nay."

"Thine answer!" she laughed a light

laugh of contempt. "Here it is. I say it plainly so that thou'lt understand it and so forever cease thine importunities. Josiah Taunston, I will not marry thee. Rather would I throw my body over the crag of yonder precipice and let the carrion feed on it. Now let me go my way!"

(To be Continued.)

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