

The Witch of Cragenstone

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

(Continued from Page 4.)

In submission to his will. An thou hadst thy way, Margaret, the world would be ruled by distaffs, an' all would come to ruin."

In the dull hopelessness that took possession of him at the sight of the detestation now openly expressed on her pale face his voice grew less harsh and his manner slightly entreating as he said: "Mayhap my ways are not so soft and squeamish as those of the wicked worldly men, at heart blackguards, that thou hast met abroad, but thou wouldst find me true, Margaret, and just, and under my direction thou wouldst soon see the value of my ways and follow the good example I would ever seek to set for thee."

"I want none of these nor thine examples," Margaret cried angrily. "And thou must cease thy pestering. Know now for once and for all that I much dislike thee, that I loathe and hate thee, and that I hope our paths will never cross again!"

"An' thou hast no gratitude, woman, for my service on thine estate, for its present value on account of mine endeavors?"

"Thou hast had the yearly stipend that thou didst agree was sufficient," she replied. "Now an' for the last time, let me pass."

Seeing the expression of strength and resolution on her face and her manner so disdainful of him, Josiah sickened as a realization of his absolute inability to control this woman came over him. Almost crazed with despair, he spoke furiously, hardly knowing what he said.

"Hear me once more, an' then thou canst go the downward path thou hast chosen unmolested. The honest purpose of an upright man is as a stench in thy nostrils because, wretched, thou lovest the wicked ways of thy French lover!"

Her blue eyes grew black, then fairly blazed. "Take care," she said. Josiah, unheeding, went on sneeringly, all the pent up hatred and jealousy in his heart coming out of his white lips in taunting phrases.

"Thy French lover, whose sweet enticing ways and gallant bearing thou doth so much admire—he that was to follow thee anon, to press his suit, wed thee an' live restfully on thine estate, spending thy gold for his pleasure until he died—why cometh he not? Whose arms intwine about him, keeping him away?"

"I warn thee to take care!" Margaret cried in deep anger. "Where is thy truant lover? Soft hearted fool! Dost think he can farud forth from Lunnon up these hills to see thee once his eyes fell on the beauty of the maids of that gay city? It angers me to see thee, my cousin, standing there a deceived woman, defending to an honest man the name of a poultron, a blackguard and a libertine!"

With a quick motion she raised her hand and gave him a stinging slap across the face. He looked at her for an instant, not comprehending what had happened, with open mouth and staring eyes. Then as a realization of what she had done swept over him, blood so angry flew to his head that it maddened him. Springing toward her, he caught her in his arms in a close embrace.

"Thou'lt kiss me where thou struck me!" he cried with wild passion, "or else I'll kill thee!" She rocked and swayed in his embrace.

"Josiah, I loathe thee! Let me go!" "Then," he said, with gloating in his voice, "if e'er thy gallant courtier lover happen doth give thee thought enough to ride this way I'll make my boasts on thee! So kiss me, wretched, if not for love then for thy life!"

She felt his hot breath on her cheek, saw relentless determination in the steely eyes above her, and, desperately trying to free an arm, felt herself inclosed as in a vice of iron.

"Godfrey!" she called, now greatly frightened. "Aye, call him! He'll come anon when he doth grow a-weary of the maids in Lunnon," he panted sneeringly.

Both young and strong, they struggled desperately, Margaret trying to reach his face with her clutching fingers, but he held down her hands and laughed at her tauntingly.

"Godfrey, Godfrey!" Her voice rang out strong and clear through the forest. "Doth some one call?" Footsteps were heard running. Josiah loosed his hold slightly, listening.

"'Tis I, Margaret Mayland!" A man burst through the thicket and, with a sharp exclamation, caught Taunston by the shoulders, swung him round with the strength of a giant and with a well directed blow felled him to the ground, where he lay apparently lifeless.

"Godfrey!" Margaret, white faced and fainting, was clasped in the embrace of her lover, who, holding her to his heart, looked at the prostrate figure with fierce glances of anger.

"The scoundrel doth move!" La Fabienne drew his sword. "I'll kill him where he lays!" "Nay, dear Godfrey, have not murder on thy soul," she said tremblingly, with soft compelling. "Tis my cousin, Josiah Taunston, who was wroth and angry that I would not consent to wed with him."

La Fabienne's brow grew dark. "God's pity! There not murder to finish that white livered hound! Rather 't would be a deed of kindness to the world," he answered sternly, sheathing his sword with reluctance. "But to please thee, sweet, an' because I would not add further to thine horrors, I shall not molest him further."

"Come with me, Margaret." She advanced a step or two, then paused, looking back hesitatingly. "Is he dead, Godfrey? I think but of his mother and poor Hetty."

La Fabienne laughed scornfully. "Nay, my love, fear not, but come with me. His kind death not so easily."

As the last sound of their voices died on the breeze Josiah Taunston, his face livid, with blood dripping from his nostrils, staggered to his feet and, clinging to a tree for support, glanced with wild eyes of hatred in the direction the lovers had taken.

"So, he, thou hast arrived!" he panted with quick drawn breath. "Fool, thou didst not die, but art here! If the flesh to use thy persuasions with my cousin against me an' my rightful claims! Insistence an' firmness, had ye not come, would have I the long run won her, an' the farm lands would have been mine."

He stood erect, endeavoring to stanch the flow of blood and muttering promises and threats to himself. "But with that woman dangle's arms about her, Josiah Taunston, thou hast no hope of Margaret Mayland now! So, ho, thou must use thy brain with subtle skill to smooth this complication as best thou canst."

Turning to go, he paused, shaking his finger in the direction they had taken, a sinister, wicked expression spreading over his drawn features. "Happen now if matters fall out not to thy liking, Mistress Mayland, thou'lt recall to mind too late that I offered thee the best a man could offer kindly and in a good spirit until thou didst anger me beyond control. Thou didst flout me an' left me stunned an' bleeding—for all thy knowledge dead—to walk away with thy choice. Fair words, a gallant bearing an' loving attentions," he sneered, then shook his finger menacingly. "Thou hast them now, an', forsooth, something more that thou wot not of—an enemy, a man whose word will be taken here on all accounts an' who can bring thee into much disfavor; one who would have loved thee, but who now hates thee. Thou'lt live to regret this night, mistress, and I to remember it!"

Then he laughed a harsh, grating, mirthless laugh, and, turning suddenly, groped his way down the path that led to the village.

CHAPTER X. JUST out of the forest on a flat rock that topped a rising eminence of land stood Margaret Mayland by the side of her lover, who, taller than she, bent his dark eyes softly upon her face, reflecting in them the happiness shining so brightly in her own. Twilight had now withdrawn its last gray shadows from the earth, and night, warm, black and clear, with soft breezes stirring and the air heavy with the sweet perfume of the flowers, fell on the mountain gently. Gradually the stars came out, first one at a time, timidly; then, as if gathering courage from added numbers, they shone forth rapidly until the black arch of the heavens was a spectacle of dazzling brilliance.

Margaret, with happy confidence, stood close to her lover, who, with one arm thrown about her, stroked her soft hair caressingly. The stars with added luster sparkled in cheerful radiance, the breeze grew fainter, then died away, and the hour was one of intense peacefulness. Suddenly from the forest a dog barked, then a howl, then a howling of a dog—loud and loud, and to the superstitious, ominous howls—but Margaret and La Fabienne, entirely engrossed in each other, talked on happily, unheeding aught but the sound of their own voices and the joy of being together.

"An' so thou hadst the fever with no hands but those of strangers to tend thee?" Margaret was saying sorrowfully. "Tell me, Godfrey, more fully of thy miserable experiences."

"'T would but pain thee, sweetest." "Nay, I would hear the fullest account," Margaret insisted. "Thou and good Gaston came to a house where there was a maid—continue, dear Godfrey."

"Much blame do I take to myself for my carelessness, heart's love," La Fabienne replied, "but for the nonce my anxiety to be with thee put caution and heedfulness out of my mind. As I was telling thee, we came safely to a house below the fork in the mountain, where the two roads lead in opposite directions. At first methought to continue our way on the delfle winding upward to our right, but, glancing at the two dark, craggy roads, difficult of ascent and steep, and realizing what a dire mishap it would be to wend our way on the wrong one, I asked for right direction from a maid at the cottage. Either from ignorance or a desire for mischief she said that Cragenstone lay at the end of the road leading to the left. So, trusting absolutely to her knowledge of the country hereabout, we fared forth on our journey."

"An' did thou meet a man on the delfle of thine error?" Margaret inquired, with gentle sympathy.

"Marry! Not one soul except a poor lad of vacant mind who mouthed and chattered at us as we passed," he replied. "Soon the drizzling dampness changed to steady rain that fell harder and heavier as we progressed, until at last it came down in great sheets of water, blinding our vision, washing rocks and gravel down the rough and dangerous path and almost sweeping our horses off their feet. Such an awful mountain storm, such cloudbursts, we had ne'er seen in France. Brave Gaston was struck with terror, declared we would be lost and entreated me to turn our horses' heads, but I, disregarding him, pressed forward, knowing that thou wert expecting me, and myself seeing with impatience to hold thee in mine arms."

He paused a moment, looking intent from his high place into the dark valley below him, Margaret's upturned face regarding his with anxious interest.

"What then, Godfrey?" "Soon we came upon a stream that ran bubbling and foaming across our path. With many round oaths from Gaston and some sharp imprecations from myself, we contrived to get across it, but so nearly were our horses swept from under us by the swift current of the stream and so difficult was it for

Thou didst have but a rough and unpleasant welcome. And thy lady"—she made him a little, mocking courtesy, with a smile on her lips—"would give thee a greeting more befitting thy station and high rank."

He turned and kissed her where she stood. "The rough forest path or this stone, sweet Margaret, an' thou art on either, is the portal of welcome that best befits my station," he replied. "But I will go with thee gladly, oh, my love, an' thou leadest the way, even to the end of the world."

Just then the moon rose over the horizon, illuminating the mountain so that the lovers could discern the pathway without trouble, and soon they turned the corner of the road, passing out of sight.

CHAPTER XI. IN June the days are longest. The sun, unwilling to remove its warm gaze from the verdant earth, rich in leafy foliage and gay with bright blossoms, roses hanging full and red, distilling with the honeyed sweet odors of the soft air, withdraws its lust rays languishingly, reluctant to give place to gray and somber twilight, that ever stealthily and surely comes following in its wake, bringing the boon to all mankind of a restful hour after the heat and turmoil of a working day.

It was on such an evening that Simon Kempster, having taken the road to the village—the long and less frequented one that ran past the Taunston farm-house—arrived late at the customary lounging place to a gentleman, an English noble, holding high rank at the French court, and in high favor with the king, who had missed his way and lay there ill of a pest. All through the hours of his fever and pain he moaned sorely for his lady-love, who, he lamented, was pining for his presence and whom he feared he would ne'er see again. I sold him one of these heart shapes, an' m'sieurs, the peddler announced triumphantly, holding them high aloft in his hand.

"That day the storm abated, the next he began to mend, and ere many days he fared forth on his journey. And the first thing I saw as I approached your village, good sirs, was this same gaunt riding by the side of a most beautiful lady, both merry an' the light of happy love shining in their eyes. Standing by the wayside, I pulled my hat off to the ground at their approach, an' 'Sir Godfrey La Fabienne'—he said the name proudly—"with kind civility doffed his hat in return an' gave me pleasant greeting."

"With all respect and reverence, my lord," quoth I, "the love charm hath worked."

"The lady blushed, and my lord threw me a gold piece. "Thou chargest not enough for thy valuable wares, good fellow," he quoth, "so I will further compensate thee."

"An' they rode away close together, laughing gently, and so great was the love and happiness on their faces that I watched them with tears in mine eyes until they entered the forest."

Josiah Taunston, who during this recital had grown pale to the lips, with trembling hands clutched the heart shapes tighter. "Who'll buy a m'sieur's Love's magic! Who'er buys a heart performe must be contented with the best."

(Continued on Page 3.)

What wilt thou, m'sieur—a marriage elixir? By our lady, with thy yellow locks and sturdy limbs, I wot thou'd make a bonny bridegroom!"

The idlers about tittered, nudging each other with sly winks, and Simon to cover his confusion fell on his knees on the floor, making a show of examining some trinkets that were in a chamois skin bag.

"Twere fool's work, Simon, to buy the ring unless thou hast thy sweet heart's sure promise," young Hugh Haggott called from his place near the door.

The wary peddler thought to try another tack. Fumbling among his wares, he soon produced a handful of silver heart shapes strung on fine chains, and, selecting one, he dangled it enticingly before Simon's eyes.

"Happen thou and thy maid have quarrelled," he observed, "an' thou would carry one of these to her for a peace gift. 'T would bring thee luck in the courtin'." he added persuasively as he saw a gleam of desire for the gogwags in Kempster's eyes. "Oh, rare luck, m'sieur, I do promise thee, and only 4 shillings! Half the price I paid for them in the principal mart in Paris!"

Forcing the chain into Simon's hands as if it were a settled fact that he had purchased it, the vender turned his attention to the securing of other customers.

"Silver hearts!" he cried lustily. "Sure harbingers of good luck and a successful wooing! Cheap at 4 shillings! Contains a charm which will cause the most trifling or stubborn maid to o'ercome her scruples and name the wedding day."

In those early days, at that time of superstition and a firm belief in signs and magic, the word charm had a strong attraction. Men loitering about the door drew closer to the man displaying his wares and regarded the silver hearts with interest. Simon delved into his pocket and brought out the 4 shillings.

"I truth, I ha' not much faith in what thou doth say of the charm," he said, rising awkwardly, with a hot flush on his face, "but as 'tis a pretty trinket I will take one of thee."

"Now who's next?" cried the peddler. "Is this the only gentleman who is to speed well on his wooing?" He wheeled around suddenly, and, his eyes falling again on Josiah Taunston, who was now looking on with much interest, he cried, with an appearance of sympathy: "Solemn visaged sirs, mayhap thy sadness is due to

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Taunston put down his tankard and lounged over to the man, assuming an appearance of indifference as he handled the trinket.

"An' hast had proof of the value of the charm these contain?" he asked in a low, stern tone.

"Aye, marry," cried the vender, "many more than I can tell. I am known from one end of the country to the other by all languishing lovers! Why, fair sirs, with convincing honesty of tone and manner, 'the nobles buy of me, and I have even been admitted at the court. My love charms are world famed! Step up, m'sieurs, only 4 shillings!' he called."

"By the mass! I had a sure proof of their value within the month," he continued, addressing Josiah, but speaking in a loud voice so that all might hear. "At Sterndorf, over the mountain, I was delayed by the storm and had a room in the tavern next to a gentleman, an English noble, holding high rank at the French court and in high favor with the king, who had missed his way and lay there ill of a pest. All through the hours of his fever and pain he moaned sorely for his lady-love, who, he lamented, was pining for his presence and whom he feared he would ne'er see again. I sold him one of these heart shapes, an' m'sieurs, the peddler announced triumphantly, holding them high aloft in his hand."

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"What then, Godfrey?"

to gain a footing on the steep embankment of slippery rocks on the other side, that, I truth, I thought we would be lost. After much maneuvering and some desperate chances we found shallower water, a little sand, and triumphantly gained the other side.

"Then night came on, and over the unknown road for a distance that seemed interminable we almost felt our way." And he laughed lightly at the recollection. "Gaston's lamentations and curses of thy country, sweet, and cursed mine and so that it was with dejection and rather heavier pleasure that we beheld the first flicker of light from a window ahead of us on the road. Reaching the house, or, rather, cabin that it was, I knocked loudly for admittance. A querulous old voice bade me begone, cried feebly that there was a tavern for strangers a mile down the road, and that we had no manners to disturb a poor sick body at that time of night. So we continued on our journey until we reached a house with signs of life about it that proved to be the tavern."

"A solemn visaged landlord received us, took our order for a good warm supper, called a boy to take the horses, and we entered.

"How great a distance to the Mayland farm? I inquired as he showed us to a room.

"The Mayland farm?" he repeated in stupid bewilderment. "I ha' ne'er heard of it."

"Fool! Churl! I exclaimed, my patience exhausted by the long series