

The Witch of Cragenstone

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

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"For a time she looked out of doors, humming a gay tune lightly, then, leaving the room, ran up the stairs and, bursting into the chamber where Elisabeth was sitting mending linen, stood before her with flushed face and sparkling eyes.

"What frock shall I wear for Godfrey, Elisabeth?" "Sir Godfrey hath come?" The woman laid down her work and looked at Margaret in surprise, who answered petulantly: "Nay, dullard. How could he travel in such awful storms o'er mountain roads he knows not?"

"She drew a piece of paper from her bosom, reading slowly. "Tuesday I shall reach the inn at Hackvon, lay there one night and will be with thee on the morrow, Wednesday."

"She raised the paper to her lips. "Thus reads his missive, Elisabeth. Thou'lt remember that the storm rose wild Wednesday, now six days gone by."

"What thinkest thou, Elisabeth, of my cousin Josiah?" she asked after a time. "He hath the appearance of an upright man and godly," the other replied

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Parisian lady in my silken gown of peachblow hue with feathers waving high above my head, or shall I let him take me to his heart as a simple mountain maiden with smooth hair, gray homespun frock and sober countenance? Whichever way, good Elisabeth, will Godfrey like me best?"

"Elisbeth, enjoying the girl's happy mood, smiled indulgently. "As my opinion were worth the gleaning in such a case," she replied, "me thinks Sir Godfrey will see only the happy light in thy blue eyes and thy red lips when first he cometh."

"Elisbeth" Margaret shook her finger at her companion, laughing lightly. "Thou hast surely had a lover, although thou hast ever denied it, or else how knowest thou so well their ways? Come, I'll wear my peachblow silk, be deck myself in the grandest fashion and receive my Godfrey in the with drawing room with all the honors due."

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definitely settled," he replied impatiently. "I will explain our understanding later, mother, when the noon hour is not at hand and the animals to be fed. Canst not find words to answer my question?" he cried out in harsh tones. "Didst thou see this Frenchman lately? Of what appearance was he?"

With quiet deliberation, which was in direct contrast to her son's excited manner, she commenced her narrative. "Josiah, I ha' told thee of the gallant's sudden appearance at good Brother Haggett's door, of his loud knocking and of how from my place behind the lattice I observed him carefully."

"Aye, thou hast, but naught else," Josiah interposed with eagerness. "His age, mother? Of what age looked he?"

"Methought as I saw him that the knight was getting on to thirty summers, mayhap one or two more," she said. "He was large of stature and finely built, with gray eyes and brown pointed beard worn 'til the French fashion. A round hat with sweeping feathers covered his hair, long leathern riding boots reached to his hips, and his doublet was of ruby velvet, with black satin slashes. Good son Josiah," she laid her hand on his arm with an expression of feeling unusual with her.

"The presentee was a dazzling picture to mine eyes that for the nonce—knowing that off to silly women the sight of rich and tawdry dress doth weigh heavily against piety, honesty and worth of character—a feeling of insecurity, apprehension and alarm for thy prospects so filled my mind that I saw the man who would supplant thee ride bravely away in the wrong direction with exultation and a feeling of gratitude to God for his gracious protection of us, ever his righteous and faithful servants," she concluded in her most devout manner.

"Springing to his feet, Taunston paced the room with nervous strides, occasionally pausing to look out of the window or to stand stern and gloomy before the chimney fire. Suddenly, as he was unable to contain himself longer, he made a sharp exclamation and, going to his mother, who had resumed her spinning, cried desperately: "Mother, I ha' sworn that those lands shall be mine! An' the knowledge that there is an enemy approaching with intent to baffle my desire doth set me on the verge of frenzy!"

"Calmness," she replied in a voice of warning. "Cold calculation and a trust in God were ever better, my son, than hot words and hasty action. Already Abigail's misdirection hath sped thee six days on thy wooing and six days more before the Skollvent stream will be passable, not taking into consideration the knowledge of the pest of measles that spreads so thickly about the town of Skollvent, where our travelers are resting safely there by now."

"She laughed in grim enjoyment. "Happen, lad, we may ne'er hear of them again."

Josiah paused in his restless walking and leaned against the casing of the door, with a gleam of hope in his eyes. "Ha, ha," his laughter rang out harsh and mirthless. "An our gallant courier doth fall a victim to the pest 'twill be a long number o' days before he can recover strength to ride down your rocky mountain road. In that time, with perseverance and determination, much headway can be made!"

He opened his lips to continue, hesitated, then said: "Thou saidst I think that you cavalier's face was not one of much attractiveness, good mother? Not one a woman would remember long?"

Still treasuring in her heart against him the harsh words he had spoken as he rode up to the door, his mother made reply: "Twere a sin to speak words witho' truth, Josiah," she said piously, "so I fain must say that to the worldly minded the gallant's face was one of much manly beauty."

Her son did not reply, but strode hastily out of the doorway, and as he walked bitter hatred filled his heart and blinded his eyes so that for once he did not see the green lands of Margaret Mayland's estate spreading out in all their spring beauty before him. His sister Hetty, dwelling at the brook in the sunshine, filling the evers, spoke to him as he passed, but he did not hear her or appear to know that she was there.

Not so with round faced Simon Kemptner, who came after him whistling merrily, a bunch of figs on his shoulders and a happy light in his eyes as their gaze fell on Hetty, who, having filled the evers, was now raising one to her shoulder preparatory to carrying it to the house.

Simon threw down his figs. "A good morrow, Hetty. Shalt help thee with thy water carrying?"

"Nay, not so, good Simon, for mother, ever watchful from the doorway, would say that we did gossip in working hours," she replied soberly. "Once ere now this morning I ha' felt the severity o' her displeasure."

"Then, by my faith, thy sweet face showeth no sign that thou didst take her rebuke to heart sorely, for thy countenance is as bright—as bright!"

Hetty raised her eyes in pleased anticipation. "As bright as a new brass kettle!" he cried, delighted in that he had found so apt a comparison.

The smile on his companion's face grew quickly into a frown as she turned stiffly to walk away.

"So I resemble a brass kettle this morning?" she said sarcastically. "Next time thou growest sentimental thou wilt probably compare my graces to a hoghead, or mayhap, growling angrier every minute, 'I may remind thee of thy new pigs' trough!"

"She walked away swiftly. "Nay, be not vexed with me, sweet Hetty," Simon exclaimed, running after her in clumsy haste. "Walt, walt! I have betrothed me to a most beautiful verse about thee."

Hetty halted, indecision in her manner, her nose held high in the air and a look of piqued vanity ornamenting her features.

"Thou wert ever slow, Simon. I would be away to assist my mother."

Simon, flushed and breathless, was evidently laboring under great mental excitement. "Prithce, do not speak,



"A good morrow, Hetty." "Hetty, or 'till lose it!" he cried, with great eagerness.

"I went to the brook, an' when I did look I saw a maid, and—"

"There, there! That's sentiment for thee, Hetty."

"Her face softened a little, and she approached a step nearer, asking doubtfully, "Dost think so, Simon?"

"Aye, marry, 'tis a fine verse and o' wondrous sentiment!" he cried convulsively. "I warrant that Will Shakespeare, with all the talk about him, could ne'er ha' done better. Didst ever hear of such perfection in rhyming, Hetty?"

"Perchance, 'tis well for thee to be thought on the minute," she replied, with an indifferent toss of her head. "Ah, welladay, 'tis ill dawdling at the brook o' the morning, with a day's work ahead of one, a-listening to foolish 'mymesters."

Simon watched her wistfully as she walked away from him, with the ever of water gracefully poised on her shoulder. Nor did he take his glance from her until she had entered a woody stretch of country that lay between the brook and the Taunston farmhouse. Then, throwing fear of his displeasure to the winds, he ran hastily and overtook her at the dell.

"Hetty," he whispered, panting slightly, "the sentiment in my verse did please thee, I trow, by the look of approval in thine eyes. Wilt kiss me, Hetty?"

"Nay, silly stupid!" She tossed her head indignantly. "Wast ever such effrontery heard on?"

Then, seeing him abashed and his bright face cloud with regret at his temerity, her eyes twinkled and she laughed a low, sweet, rippling laugh. "There, there, good Simon, point not so dolefully," she exclaimed. "Prithce, since thou hast grown clever and can make verses so aptly perchance thou shouldst have a reward. Thou—a warm dust suffusing her countenance—" "thou canst kiss the back of my hand if thou like," throwing it toward him indifferently. "There, lawk-a-mercy, man, do ha' done! I did not say my wrist an' arm, that I remember! Aye, mother," she cried hastily in answer to a shrill call from her mother in the doorway. "I'm on my way!"

CHAPTER VIII. WITH the slanting rays of the afternoon sun falling full upon her, Margaret Mayland rode up the mountain path that led to the Mayland farm, making with her crimson riding habit and yellow hair a brilliant speck of color against the dark background of the green trees and foliage. Her horse stepped slowly, the rein falling loose on its neck, and Margaret, pale faced and dejected, rode along listlessly. A lark calling his mate sent strong sweet notes across the forest; a busy squirrel disturbed by the advent of horse and rider, ran chattering up the trunk of a tree, and the little spring brook splashed and sparkled in the sunlight; but Margaret, lost in her sad reverie, rode on unheeding with bowed figure and drooping head.

Elisbeth, who for an hour past had been peering anxiously out of a window that overlooked the roadway, spying her young charge at her approach, threw open the door at her approach with a great show of cheerful activity. "Enter, pretty, an' rest thyself," she cried as Margaret alighted from the horse and threw the reins to old Gles. Then, lifting her eyes in mute despair to Elisabeth's face, Margaret came toward the house.

"Thy tea is brewed, and the hot cakes that thou likest are covered, keeping warm for thee on the hearthstone," Elisabeth announced.

Margaret entered languidly, carrying her jeweled riding whip, her heavy skirts trailing after her as she came. "I care not to eat," she said sadly.

Then, as if unable to conceal her disappointment or to contain her suffering, she cried out brokenly: "Elisbeth, another day more gone and Godfrey hath not come. An' wander where I will I can get no word of him. Mine eyes are strained with looking down the road that leads from London, and my heart aches near to bursting with loneliness and apprehension. Three weeks last Sunday since I received his missive."

Her riding whip fell to the floor with a thud as she sank into a chair, covering up her white face with her hands. "Elisbeth," she said at last to the woman who stood before her in dumb sympathy, "hast 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!" Elisabeth'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 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."

Elisbeth, 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. Elisabeth was at her side in a moment. "Tut, tut, my bonny maid! Let not such fearsome thoughts beset thee," she urged earnestly. "Take heart, Margaret. I promise thee—thine old Elisabeth who loves thee doth promise thee—that ere thy 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 Elisabeth, my heart would not now have lost its lightness."

At the top of the staircase she paused. "Oh, Elisabeth, '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 hath 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 Elisabeth's face. "Such true love as doth exist between Godfrey and me, she said so bravely; such faith, such trust, that his and lately his advances have been so open and determined that, I truth, I have fear of him."

She drew a sharp, shuddering breath. "Elisbeth, 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, Elisabeth," she burst out crying bitterly—"pray God to send me Godfrey!"

"There, there! Take off this riding dress that hangs so heavily about thee!"—Elisbeth 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!"

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Elisbeth, assisting her to remove her habit, said, with gentle sympathy, "Tis no wonder thou art nervous 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, Elisabeth, that I have still courage to bear the heaviest life 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, Elisabeth, and my lace bertha, her fair neck and arms bare and ruffled skirts made full and sweeping, walked out of the house and standing before the door looked down the roadway pensively with an air of indecision."

The soft breeze stirred the leaves of the foliage and the monotonous call of the whippoorwill could be heard over the trees of the forest, but no other sounds, such as the galloping of horses' feet, fell on the ears of the waiting, lonely woman.

"Mayhap, an thou'lt walk a little down the road behind the hill, thou'lt meet Sir Godfrey," Elisabeth called from the window.

"Elisbeth, an Godfrey comes not tonight I shall know that he is lying helpless, ill; hath met foul play—or is dead. Tomorrow an he is not here I'll rouse the village, send messengers scurrying in all directions, for, prithce, with a little sob, 'if the truth is what I suspect, I had better die of that at once than linger with this suffering, this slow suspense that is killing me.'"

"What foolish negrims! Nay, cheer thee, Margaret," Elisabeth cried in protest at the dark views of her mistress. "I do protest Sir Godfrey's not the man to be ordained by any villainy. And who hereabout would be his enemy? He'll come anon."

"So thou hast said before," Margaret replied, turning away listlessly, "an' meaneast well, for thou dost love me. While yet it is day I'll stroll through the woody ferever path to the village. Some new arrival at the inn perchance hath brought some news. I'll go, good Elisabeth."

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.

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

"Tis my fashion ever to walk aside, 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 wouldst 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 stood erect before him, interrupting his harangue by saying in a quick, peremptory manner, "I have an errand in the village, Josiah, and would be on my way."

"He stood in her pathway immovable. "Margaret, hear me. I do but counsel thee for thy good."

"Why should I heed thy counsel, prithce, 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'er a maid needed the firm guidance of an honorable, God fearing man, thou'rt she, cousin," he continued sternly. "For in that wicked realm, 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," she 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 thee 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.