

The Free Press Short Story

THE WITCH WALK

MARSHALL HAIRIS

MISS GRAVES looked troubled. "I don't see how you can give the party here," she said. "Your grandmother is recovering so slowly from this heart attack that I really don't think she could stand the noise."

A shadow crossed her daughter's face. Always, ever since Dorothy was a little girl, her grandmother's sick spells had upset family plans. "But I've already asked the guests," she began rebelliously when a memory of the suffering face when a minute above showed the words in her lips. "Oh, but it really doesn't matter," she hastened to add. "Maybe Sue can have them at her house. I'll run up now to see grandma." Is her brother ready?

A minute later Dorothy stood beside the sick bed and watched her grandmother toy listlessly with the daintily arranged tray. Against the pillows her white curls formed a halo around her spiritual oval face. Her clear blue eyes regarded the slim girl by her side affectionately, yet speculatively. "I'm sorry about your party," she said quietly. "Your voices carried to me, you see, and have set me thinking. Couldn't you have it just the same? I really couldn't stand the noise here, but there is a way you know."

"I never thought of the barn, you resourceful Angel. I'll run down to see what mother thinks."

A half hour later Dorothy was busy writing her invitations.

"Can you come to my 'Where there is a will, there is a way' Halloween party? It will be held in our barn from eight-thirty until twelve, Saturday evening, October the thirty-first. Do not wear your best clothes. Dot Graves."

Days of planning and preparation followed. Twenty-four guests had accepted. The barn, in the heyday of its youth, had housed twelve or more equipages, and back of the part set aside for carriages were many stalls for horses and cows. These were seldom used now except in severe winter weather.

The big left, however, was full of sweet smelling hay, and the entire building was in good repair. The interior of the barn downstairs was paneled in stained redwood. This large main part was cleared out, swept, garlanded, and hung with evergreens, lanterns, and pumpkin heads. Long tables and benches were arranged at one end for games, and Halloween festivities.

Dorothy, a few hours before the time set for the party, stood in the doorway and proudly surveyed her work. Melvin Sparks, who had been her chief help in these spare moments, also gave a last approving glance around. "We've certainly worked wonders," he declared heartily, "and we'll have ten times the fun we'll have at the house. Doesn't my witch look appropriate?"

He referred to a bundle of hay he had arrayed in a dashing black and yellow witch costume. It stood upright, wearing a high peaked hat and a long flapping coat.

"I may be late this evening," he continued. "But I'll get here if I break a leg. I've been riding with the sheriff's man from across the Arizona border. Oh! Sue asked me to tell you that she can't come. She's a slight with poison oak—at this season—but she still expects her cousin, Lionel Rogers, from Los Angeles, and if he comes, she'll ship him along just the same. Anything more I can do before I dash off?"

Dorothy shook her head. "Thank you, no. You've been a treasure, and I think we have everything ready."

At eight-twenty Dorothy, dressed in a gay, yellow gown, stood in the barn doorway to receive her guests. The tables were laden with salads, sandwiches, individual apple pies, molasses cake and platters of salted nuts and raisins. Back of her the barn was a mellow glow of light and color.

A figure strode suddenly out of the gloom. A tall young man in a rumpled, smartly cut tan suit came swiftly up the road and entered blithely. "Miss Graves?" he questioned.

"Yes," answered Dorothy "and you must be Lionel Rogers. I am so sorry Sue couldn't come, but I'm sure you'll enjoy yourself anyway. This isn't at all a formal affair."

The young man surveyed the bedecked barn with a rapid glance. "This is great," he exclaimed, a note of warm appreciation in his voice. "Your invitation said 'not our best clothes' so I took you at your word, you see."

She glanced from his clothes to the clear gray eyes above, and smiled. "There was an anxious expression on his face, but he smiled back. "Where there is a will, there is a way," he continued. "That's a great line. It never came home to me that it meant all it does until I read your note."

The arrival of two cars full of young people cut short the conversation. Dorothy introduced the stranger and he was soon one of a gay and laughing group. By the time twenty-three young people had gathered, the party was in full swing. Melvin, however, was late.

"Where's Mel?" asked some one.

"He'll be here. He expected to be a few minutes late," answered Dorothy.

The others were in the midst of a game when Melvin arrived, a bit disordered and tired looking. The guests were seated in a big ring on the barn floor.

nized all the men. It was the sheriff, and his posse.

"We are hunting for an escaped criminal. He crossed the Arizona border and is somewhere around here. We caught him once to-day, in a good car, presumably stolen on the desert. Somehow he got out of jail and made a clean get-away. Some one telephoned us he was here. I'm sorry, Miss Graves; but if you folks haven't seen him, we'll have to search the place."

The merry-makers hung back, surprised, fearful. The man in the left was forgotten. Dorothy said sweetly, "You are at liberty to search, of course, but I am quite certain your prisoner is not here."

"We went through your house and garage," Mr. Meyers told her. "No one there, but there are a lot of stalls here that could hide a fugitive. I'm sorry, though, Miss. Here, you boys take the stalls on the left, and let, you lead on the right and go straight through and out back to search. I'll take the left with Connors and Mulligan."

"I'll help you," offered Melvin, and grabbed up a lantern. He led the way while the sheriff and his posse mounted the stairs. "That is a false alarm, sheriff. I'm real certain the party you want isn't here. I'll take this end so we can make it snappy. You three divide up the rest of the left."

He began throwing his lantern's rays around on the loosened hay that lay about. Would he find the stranger where he had left him, or would he have tried to make his escape? Cautiously Melvin rounded the pile back of which he had hidden Lionel. There he still lay, his face a quivering white, his grey eyes black beneath the lantern's rays. He was about to rise hopelessly when Melvin made a cautious gesture for quiet, and passed on.

A minute later steps receded down the stairs. A few seconds after, with an apology for the interruption, the sheriff and his men left, stating they would thrash the grounds before returning to town.

When they had disappeared, Melvin ushered the guests back to the tables. "I've had heart for the witch game," he said. "What we all need is food without delay. I'll call Lionel down."

"Keep on your witch costume," he whispered to the other a moment later. "Just in case our friends come back, it conceals you pretty well. You see, I was in the party that caught you early this afternoon, so I know you were you. We shall discuss it later. Come and eat."

"I haven't eaten in a day and a half," said the stranger, and he took his place at the table.

Melvin passed the salads, and the laden trays of sandwiches began to circulate, while the scent of hot fragrant coffee filled the air. "Whom are they after, Mel?" young Lloyd demanded anxiously.

"Some chap from Arizona. Escaped in a stolen car. They thought they had found him this afternoon. Picked up some poor fellow out on the desert who answered the description, but he wasn't the right man. The man they're looking for has a nearly useless left arm. Been dead since the man they picked up two years ago. The man they picked up today can use his left arm as well as his right as he has valiantly demonstrated. They picked up our witch friend there, and they were miles off the track."

Excited exclamations broke out among the guests. Dorothy voiced the general tumult. "You mean Lionel?" she asked.

"Well, for pity's sake, why didn't you explain that to the sheriff?"

"Explains it to a pack of wolves!" said Melvin. "Would they listen to him this afternoon? They would not! He's the dead ringer for this other chap—same weight, same height, same coloring. But he's not the man. Nor yet is he Sue's cousin."

"No," admitted the stranger, his face red beneath the witch hat. "When you named me that, Miss Graves, I certainly was indebted to you. I didn't know who I was supposed to be. I just took a chance on mingling with a big party and so escaping detection until my family could come to my rescue. I picked up an invitation of yours that Mr. Sparks had dropped, and when I got out of that jail window I decided it was heaven sent. That 'Where there is a will, there is a way,' certainly hit home. I had to escape and this tided me over. I'm not the man the posse wants, but they wouldn't believe me. I'm Porter Carlton of Pasadena, and the car is my own. I just got stalled on the desert; then my resemblance to the hunted man proved my undoing. My only crime has been masquerading as the missing Lionel Rogers."

From out of the gloom of the driveway a bicycle skidded into view. From it a messenger boy dismounted. "Porter Carlton here?" he demanded. "This wire just came for him, care Miss Graves, Graves' barn," and he handed forth a yellow envelope.

"Yes, I took the liberty," confessed the stranger. "I slipped into the Western Union office and sent off an B O B to my father. That's when I knew I was going to be an unwanted guest at your party. This is his answer," and he read aloud the few words:

"Keep up your courage. Leaving at once. Dad."

His voice broke on the last word. Suddenly he put his head down on his arm and his shoulders heaved. "He's never failed me yet," he said. "You don't know the strain I've been under."

Dorothy slipped from her place and put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "We all know, and we're glad you came to us."

"We sure are," said Melvin, "and I've been a chump. Pasadena isn't so far away that we can't all be friends. Let's rechristen ourselves the 'Where there is a will, there is a way' party as a member. What say, everybody?"

The response was warm and immediate, but Melvin was not yet satisfied. The eyes he had looked into during the tense moment in the left still haunted him. He touched Porter Carlton on the shoulder.

SLATS' DIARY BY ROSS PARQUIAR

Friday—I guess pa is getting about-minded evry day. Last nite after ma had went to bed she sat pa to see if she had left the light on down stairs and pa hunted up his flash lite so he cud see weather the lio was turned on or off.

Saturday—well ma postponed her bridge party today on acct. she dident get no expectences to her bridge party so then this evening she found all the evlanshins in pa's coo pocket & if it was my biddy things it was a pleasant evning here they didnt no much.

Sunday—I am about ready to quit going to sunday school for good I am so imberused. After the lesson the stupt. sat me to get up in front of the skool and tell about the lesson so I got up and telt in my pocket to get my handkercheaf to wipe the chokelet off my mouth and it wasent my handkercheaf a ball it was my shirt.

Monday—Meery all are family is sick tittle on acct. of the supe they eat. I sent a ant in the supe and I sprinkled a litle Ant powder on it. I showed presents of mine and diddnt eat none of it. I cant stand Ants.

Tuesday—Ant Emj was reading in the paper where in New York they are a man hit by a Otto evry fifteen minits. She sed she diddnt see how he cud stand it very long. I gess it is because of the kind of East he eat mebbly.

Wednesday—Jake put a tack on my seat today and when I set down I yellid and the teacher cum back and said she wanted to see where I sat on the tack. she skart me fer a minit but she just wanted to look at the seat.

Thursday—They Durkie says she has purfack control over Jimmie witch is her 3 years Old son. She says she just gve him a good bust in the mouth and then he as smt thing to cry fer at emy tite.

Douglas' Egyptian Liniment is recommended for sore necks, galls, distemper, callosities and sprains. Removes proud flesh and Hoof Rot. Stops bleeding instantly.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I wish awfully we could be friends."

In the warm handclasp that passed between the two men something else passed, too, a feeling of kinship that was to light them down through all the years to come.

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