

Witch In-Grain

By R. Murray Gilchrist

Of late Michal had been much engrossed in the reading of the black-letter books that Philosopher Bale brought from France. As you know I am no Latinist—though once she had been earnest in her desire to instruct me; but the open air had ever greater charms for me than the dry precincts of a library. So I grudged the time she spent apart, and throughout the spring I would have been all day at her side, talking such foolery as lovers use. But ever she must steal away and hide herself amongst dead volumes.

Yesterday evening I crossed the Roods, and entered the garden, to find the girl sitting under a yew-tree. Her face was haggard and her eyes sunken: for the time it seemed as if many years had passed over her head, but somehow the change had only added to her beauty. And I marvelled greatly, but ere I could speak a huge bird, whose plumage was as the brightest gold, fluttered out of her lap from under the silken apron: and looking on her uncovered bosom I saw that his beak had pierced her tender flesh. I cried aloud, and would have caught the thing, but it rose slowly, laughing like a man, and, beating upwards, passed out of sight in the trees. Then Michal drew long breaths, and her youth came back in some measure. But she frowned, and said, ‘What is it, sweetheart? Why hast awakened me? I dreamed that I fed the Dragon of the Hesperidean Garden.’ Meanwhile, her gaze set on the place whither the bird had flown.

‘Thou hast chosen a filthy plaything,’ I said. ‘Tell me how came it hither?’

She rose without reply, and kissed her hands to the gaudy wings, which were nearing through the trees. Then, lifting up a great book that had lain at her feet, she turned towards the house. But ere she had reached the end of the path she stopped, and smiled with strange subtlety.

‘How camest *thou* hither, O satyr?’ she cried. ‘Even when the Dragon slept, and the fruit hung naked to my touch. . . . The gates fell to.’

Perplexed and sore adread, I followed to the hall; and found in the herb garden the men struggling with an ancient woman—a foul crone, brown and puckered as a rotten apple. At sight of Michal she thrust out her hands, crying, ‘Save me, mistress!’ The girl cowered, and ran up the steps and indoors. But for me, I questioned Simon, who stood well out of reach of the wretch’s nails, as to the wherefore of this hurly-burly.

His underlings bound the crone and dragged her to the closet in the banqueting gallery. Then, her squawling being stilled, Simon entreated me to compel Michal to prick her arm. So I went down to the library, and found my sweetheart sitting by the window, tranced with seeing that goblin fowl go tumbling on the lawn.

My heart was full of terror and anguish. ‘Dearest Michal,’ I prayed, ‘for the sake of our passion let me command. Here is a knife.’ I took a poniard from Sir Roger’s stand of arms. ‘Come with me now: I will tell you all.’

Her gaze still shed her heart upon the popinjay; and when I took her hand and drew her from the room, she strove hard to escape. In the gallery I pressed her fingers round the haft, and knowing that the witch was bound, flung open the door so that they faced each other. But Mother Benmusk’s eyes glared like fire, so that Michal was withered up, and sank swooning into my arms. And a chuckle of disdain leaped from the hag’s ragged lips. Simon and the others came hurrying, and when Michal had found her life, we begged her to cut into one of those knotted arms. Yet she would none of it, but turned her face and signed no—no—she would not. And as

we strove to prevail with her, word came that one of the Bishop's horses had cast a shoe in the village, and that his lordship craved the hospitality of Ford, until the smith had mended the mishap. Nigh at the heels of his message came the divine, and having heard and pondered our tale, he would fain speak with her.

I took her to the drawing-room, where at the sight of him she burst into such a fit of laughter that the old man rose in fear and went away.

'Surely it is an obsession,' he cried: 'nought can be done until the witch takes back her spells!'

So I bade the servants carry Mother Benmusk to the mere, and cast her in the muddy part thereof where her head would lie above water. That was fifteen hours ago, but methinks I still hear her screams clanging through the stagnant air. Never was hag so fierce and full of strength! All along the garden I saw a track of uprooted flowers. Amongst the sedges the turmoil grew and grew till every heron fled. They threw her in, and the whole mere seethed as if the floor of it were hell. For full an hour she cursed us fearsomely: then, finding that every time she neared the land the men thrust her back again, her spirit waxed abject, and she fell to whimpering. Two hours before twelve she cried that she would tell all she knew. So we landed her, and she was loosened of her bonds and she mumbled in my ear: 'I swear by Satan that I am innocent of this harm! I ha' none but paltry secrets. Go at midnight to the heath and watch Baldus's tomb. There thou shalt find all.'

The beldam tottered away, her bemired petticoats slapping her legs; and I bade them let her rest in peace until I had certainly proved her guilt. With this I returned to the house; but, finding that Michal had retired for the night, I sat by the fire, waiting for the time to pass. A dock struck the half before eleven, and I set out for King Baldus's grave, whither, had not such a great matter been at stake, I dared not have ventured after dark. I stole from the garden and through the first copse. The moon lay against a brazen curtain; little snail-like clouds were crawling underneath, and the horns of them pricked her face.

As I neared the lane to the waste, a most unholy dawn broke behind the fringe of pines, looping the boles with strings of grey-golden light. Surely a figure, a shape, moved there? I ran. Another moment, and I was in the midst of a host of weasels and hares and such-like creatures, all flying from the precincts of the tomb. I quaked with dread, and my hair stood upright. But I thrust on, parted the thorn boughs, and looked up at the mound.

On the summit sat Michal, triumphing, invested with flames. And the Shape approached, and wrapped her in his blackness.