

Bound by a Spell

By The Hon. Mrs Greene

In the eyes of the villagers of Protogno, Christine Delemont was nothing more or less than a witch, a God-forsaken woman, whose life was appointed to be a bane and a terror to all who came in contact with her or with the range of her ill-omened presence. If one yielded credence to all these stories, one would have to believe tales so dark and strange of the doings at her deserted cottage, that one could not but shudder at the very name of so inhuman a woman; and many people were even found to swear that they had been eyewitnesses of Christine's mysterious and cruel doings: how they had seen her child, little Paul, beaten and dashed upon the floor of the cottage and dragged by the hair of his head about the garden. How, also, flames were seen at night-time issuing from the doors and windows of the house, and direful howlings and groanings were heard both by day and night in the woods around. And strange and appalling as were these stories, few voices were raised to deny them, or other tales as extraordinary, which were freely adduced to darken the history of Christine.

But even these wild reports might have found in the few believers, and have perished for want of evidence, had it not been for other and fresh circumstances which fanned into a fiery blaze the smouldering doubts and suspicions of the village folk.

It was late on an autumn afternoon, when the reapers, who had been toiling all day under a blazing sun, were returning from their work into the little town of Protogno. Many had taken off their broad shady hats, so that the little breeze which had sprung up with the decline of the sun might blow through their hair and cool their overheated heads. As if by one accord they filed down the main street of the town, neither halting at house or shop until they reached the market-place, in front of which stood the Fountain of St Agnes, and whose bright and cool waters had an attraction for their parched lips which only those who, like themselves, had toiled all day long under a meridian sun, could understand. Besides, this fountain was, as it were, the village club. As the hour of six tolled from the high bell-tower of the church which crowned the summit of an over-shadowing hill, not only the workmen from the fields, but artisans, shopkeepers, and, above all, the village gossips assembled round the Fountain of St Agnes, which, with its shady row of trees, and comfortable benches set here and there in every nook and corner, made a most inviting resting-place; and here the village politics, the daily doings, the births, deaths, and marriages of the little town were chronicled with more or less solemnity as the importance of the cases required.

This evening the fountain, with its picturesque and quaint carvings, looked particularly tempting, for the sun, which was setting in a crimson flood of light behind the hill, had caught the market-place with its last and most lovely rays, and the fountain, the trees, and the waters tossing high up into the rose-coloured air, looked more like some painted scene in a theatre than the quiet and every-day resort of the poor and the weary. The benches were speedily filled with those who had already quenched their thirst, their bright sickles lying at their feet on the ground, or hanging from the branches of the trees above their heads. Many were still gathered around the base of the fountain, satisfying their thirst, while a few, who could not find a place by the fountain itself, handed their tin pannikins over the heads of their neighbours into some friendly hands, which returned them again filled with the fresh water their parched throats so much coveted to taste.

But all at once, while the jest and the laugh went round, and Frau Gartmann, the queen-gossip of the town, was quizzing in a covert whisper a handsome couple who stood near the fountain, chatting playfully with each other, there was a sudden hoarse cry of horror and surprise raised amongst the crowd, and, as if to add to the theatrical appearance of the scene, a man suddenly appeared in their midst, whose blood-stained garments, blanched face, and panic-stricken eyes carried a sudden terror into the hearts of all who looked upon him.

It was no other than Silvestro Milano, a reaper like themselves, who had been out all day cutting corn in a distant field near Madeline l'Estrange's Wood. He was a brave and honest-hearted fellow, courageous as a lion, and tender-hearted as a woman, and now he stood among them with his blouse stained with gore, and hanging in ribbons from his bleeding arms; his sickle also had been dipped in blood up to its wooden handle, and he staggered, as he approached the fountain, like a drunken man. He gazed around him at first in a vacant way, and then, pointing towards the fountain, he stretched out his torn and bleeding arm. The neighbours understood his unspoken request, and instantly a score of pannikins running over with clear water were pressed upon his acceptance.

He drank deeply, and then, tottering towards a seat, sank upon it, and remained for some time in a semi-unconscious state, unable to answer the questions of those who pressed around him, and yet looking at them with an anxiety in his eyes which told of a troubled spirit within.

At last he spoke, and so great was the silence that ensued that a grasshopper on a neighbouring tree could be distinctly heard rasping out its evening call.

"I have met the accursed wolf that killed Alexandre Delemont in the forest, and I have slain it. It is now lying cold and dead in the flower-garden where I plunged this sickle into its heart."

At these words a murmur, which had been gradually rising out of the previous hush, now burst into a loud shout or yell of triumph and applause.

"Bravo, bravo, Silvestro! tell us, good friend, how did it all happen?" cried the foremost of the group, as they pressed forwards to catch his gasping efforts at speech.

"Aye, aye; give me time, give me time; for the horror of the thing is still upon me, and I fancy even now I hear the cry of the miserable child."

"What child?"

"Peace, peace! leave me a moment to recall my thoughts. Aye, it was thus that it happened. I had finished my reaping for the day, and I was weary; my back ached and my head was giddy from the long stooping under the most burning sun that ever crossed the sky; so, withdrawing under the shadow of a tree close by the Count's cottage, I sat down to rest, and presently I fell asleep. I do not know how long I slept, but I awoke feeling something soft touching the back of my hand, and then my cheek. I opened my eyes quietly, thinking perhaps a lizard or field mouse had run up my coat-sleeve, when, standing by me, I saw a little child, all dressed in white. I tell ye," cried Silvestro, raising himself up in his excitement, and almost rising to his feet as he spoke, "I tell ye, good folk, I thought it was a vision sent from Heaven. The babe was fair as wax, and beautiful as the child which the Madonna carries in her arms. Its hair, which was of the purest flaxen, hung long over its shoulders, and its eyes gazed into mine as if it sought to gain my love.

"For a moment, awaking as it were from a dream, I thought in my confusion it was our blessed Lord Himself standing once more as a child on the earth beside me—that He had a message, perhaps, to give me; but presently, seeing the boy smile and stretch out his hands to me, I shook off the foolish impression, and I cried out encouragingly, 'Eh, little one, to whom dost thou belong?'

“It smiled again, and with a clear sweet voice it answered me strangely enough, ‘A Dieu.’”

Again a low sympathetic murmur rose around Silvestro, but it came chiefly from the women, and there was the sound of a dry sob not far off, followed by the words, “Go on, go on—what next?” and Silvestro, looking up, saw, through a haze of weakness, the lovely face of Marie Fedele gazing earnestly at him.

“Aye, what next?” he repeated, as if questioning himself, for a faintness was stealing over him and his mind was growing clouded and uncertain; “I cannot just now remember what came next, only I know the child, hearing a sound in the garden, turned anxiously and hurried from me, but it cannot have been many minutes, when crossing the field on my way home I heard a piercing cry. May I never hear such a cry on this earth again!” said Silvestro, as he passed his hand languidly across his forehead. “I stopped, and turning towards the cottage, I listened. There was silence for a space, and I was thinking of continuing my way home, whiner I heard the same cry once more, only this the even more bitter in its anguish, and repeated again and yet again.

“I did not hesitate now, but ran as fast as my feet could carry me towards the spot from which the sound came; and as I drew near to the garden hedge, just where a narrow path leads down across the bridge into the forest, I saw a wolf, dark, large, and terrible to look at, hurrying down this very path with something white in its mouth, which all at once I perceived to be nothing else than the child which had stood before me but a few minutes previously, smiling in the security of its innocent trust and love.

“Yes! but the sight was so pitiful, my very limbs seemed to grow weak with horror, and though I strove to ruin, my legs doubled under me like hempstalks. I know not how I ran, nor how often I stumbled in this nightmare chase, until I came on a hock of fair flaxen hair torn from the little one’s glossy head and caught on a bramble at my side, and then, as it were, the strength and courage of something more powerful than myself seemed to enter into me. I stumbled no longer, but cutting through the thicket I doubled on the beast, and came, for a moment, face to face with its burning eyes and its bristling mane, while the child still drooped from the creature’s mouth, and its white arm trailed along the ground.”

“Ah, say no more; is it not dead?” sobbed Marie Fedele, as she laid her head on her husband’s shoulder and hid her face from view.

“Have patience for a moment. When I am questioned I lose the thread of my thoughts.” Once again Silvestro passed his hand across his eyes as if to hide out some vision of horror, and then he proceeded slowly.

“It turned, the great coward, as I drew my sickle from my belt, and fearing to meet me, it leaped over a low bush, and made back with haste across the wooden bridge towards the house. I saw then what I had to deal with—no common brute such as God Himself places in the forest, but one of those tailless monsters whose existence until now I had never believed in: a wicked were-wolf, with slinking steps, whose every movement filled me with disgust. Full of some strange and ever-increasing strength, I followed after it, gaining each moment on its track, though it hurried forward with ever longer and more sinuous steps. At last, driven as it were almost to bay, it took the direct path towards the cottage, and, slinking through the narrow garden gate, passed in. At ounce I saw my advantage; I closed the gate with a sudden click that sent the hasp straight into the lock, and then, unless it dashed in at the open housedoor, it had no mole or possible outlet for escape. Round and round the garden I hunted it, my sharp sickle ever in my outstretched arm, until at last, with a kind of crying snarl, it dropped the child from its blood-stained jaws, and, turning with a sudden fury towards me, it sprang forward to meet me. It was its last hope, its last chance for life, and verily I gave myself up for lost; but seeing the child

lie in a white heap on the gravel path, the same infant which had stood before me so lately in its purity and love, I thought of Him who carries the little lambs in His bosom, and though the beast leaped on me, and as it were wrestled with me, and though I felt its jaws snap on my shoulder and its claws tear the flesh from my arm, still the good God guided the weapon in my hand so that I struck it right home to its craven heart, and with a kind of human cry it fell backwards upon the flower-beds behind us, and then rolled over on its side, dead; aye, dead." Silvestro paused: "Aye, dead and stiff, as I shall be myself by-and-by."

It was not a murmur, but a loud yell of stunning overpowering applause which followed on the recital of Silvestro's victory; but he motioned to them to be quiet, and taking up his story from where he had left off, he continued—

"When I saw that the beast was dead, and would no more rise to attack us, I leaped over its carcase, and stepping across a bed of roses and lavender, I came to the spot where the child still lay, to all appearances dead. I stooped to raise it in my arms, but as I did so I heard behind me a loud, sharp cry of pain or anger or surprise, and looking up, I saw Christine Delemont rushing out of the cottage towards the child; she pushed me aside with a frantic gesture, and when I would have stretched out my arm to stay her, she rushed past me and herself lifted up the little one, whose head hung quite loosely to one side, and whose white frock was all stained with blood.

"I know not whether it was a wild despair or a fierce anger or a mad fit which had come over the woman, but Christine screamed and beat herself on her breast and tore her hair from her head, and at length she rushed into the house with the boy in her arms, and the door slammed behind her in my face, in my very face! and though I sought to follow after her, she either did not or would not hear me. I waited in the garden and paced up and down the paths till I grew weak from loss of blood. It was all in vain. At last I turned back and tapped at a window, the curtain of which was drawn. I felt too weak to return without a glass of wine or something wherewith to strengthen myself ere I ventured on the long walk home, but I could obtain no answer; only just as I moved aside, I heard a voice inside the room raised as it were in bitter anguish, and crying aloud, 'Speak, speak, in the name of God, speak, child, speak!' And then, like as it were a sigh or a sound of some far-off voice, I heard the words 'A Dieu,' and I knew it was the babe I had seen in the wood, and I offered up thanks that it still lived."

"Now, Heaven be praised!" cried Marie Fedele; "for if ever there was an angel on earth, it is that child."

"Aye," cried Frau Gartmann, "and if ever there was a foul witch, it is Christine Delemont. From the day she entered that cottage until now, death and destruction have followed in her path."

"Yes," cried a third, "she is a witch, and worse than a witch. It is well known that she keeps that miserable child as a decoy to entice those she hates into her power, and afterwards to wreak her vengeance on them. Ah, the wretch! She ought to be shot through the heart herself; the werewolf will not cease to haunt the town till her own heart's blood has been spilled."

"How so, Janette?" cried several voices in the crowd; "Did not Silvestro slay it with his sickle?"

"Aye, aye, he slew the shadow, but the real wolf is bound up in the heart of that wicked woman, and, believe me, she will never cease to revenge herself on all who come within her reach until the sickle is plunged into her own bosom. Let those who do not know what a werewolf is, ask me," cried Janette Chaudron; "I can tell them all about it."

“Then how came it to pass that Christine called on God in her anguish? Didst not thou say so, good Silvestro?” said Marie Fedele, her voice tremulous with anger; but if any explanation was given to her question it was lost in the murmur of the crowd, for Silvestro Milano, while speaking, had suddenly fainted away upon the bench, and as his tall son Pierre and others lifted him up tenderly in their arms, it was noticed how, all the time he had been relating his adventure, a pool of blood had been gathering on the ground at his feet.