

The Witchcraft at Bow Bridge Castle

A Young Folks' Story

By Virginia Woodward Cloud

In Two Parts--II.

"Ay! duck him, duck him!" said one after another, while the voices sunk to an excited murmur; and although Rigarole listened until the group dispersed, he could not discover which was to be ducked in the pond of Bow Bridge Green, himself or the Magri. Now, this, as may be imagined, filled Rigarole with fear and trepidation, for in all his reading he had not come across a knight who had been ducked in a pond for witchcraft; which proceedings, he knew, would forever prevent him from fulfilling his ambition to marry the Lady Fairlocks. Also, if it was the Magri who was to be ducked, he, as an embryo knight, must take some measure to protect the Magri's gray hairs. So musing upon this, and at a loss what to do first, Rigarole stood at the castle window, and suddenly spied a little, bent figure crossing Big Bow Bridge, outside the castle wall. It was an old woman in a scarlet cloak and a peaked cap. She came slowly, leaning on her stick, and bearing, with much difficulty, a heavy basket. Hence, as Rigarole had early learned that the first duty of a real knight was to help those who need assistance, he naturally flew down the stair and through the courtyard to the postern-gate in the castle wall. Closing the gate behind him, he sped down the hill to where the moat was spanned by Big Bow Bridge. There he met the little old woman toiling along, and recognized her as Gammer Gurton, who was called the Wise Woman of Bow Bridge Green.

"Let me take thy basket, mother!" said Rigarole.

"Ay, ay, son! 'tis a tedious hill enow!" spoke the old woman.

"Sit down a bit and rest," said Rigarole, helping her to a stone under the castle wall, "an' I'll bear thy basket."

"Thou 'rt a good lad," quoth the old woman; "a good lad, for all thy yellow locks and fine plumed cap! Art from the castle?"

"Ay, mother;" and then Rigarole could not help but sigh, which made the old woman say:

"Then why so down o' mouth, young master?"

Whereupon Rigarole sat down beside her straightway and told her of all the strange happenings in the castle, from the disappearance of his Lordship's wig and snuff-box to the spiriting of the great clock key and the darkening of the Magri's telescope; also detailing how they were ordered each to clear himself of all suspicion, by pointing out the causer of the mischief that very eve. Also how that the luckless one was straightway to be ducked in the pond of Bow Bridge Green, and, furthermore, that the castle varlets had determined to accuse either himself or the Magri, he knew not which.

The old woman listened in silence, and then sat wrapped in thought, while the Magri's magpie perched upon the wall over their heads, croaking and chattering harshly. Then she spoke.

"Hearken, son! The Magri may or may not know as much o' witchcraft as o' makin' a posset o' starshine—I cannot say. But thou'lt find soon enough that he who thinks he knows the most is not he from whom most wisdom is got. Now give me the name o' every one i' the castle, and his place."

Whereupon Rigarole named each one, counting them on his fingers, while Gammer Gurton tapped them off with her stick.

"There is naught else?" quoth she when he stopped.

"Naught saving her Ladyship's greyhound and the Magri's magpie," said Rigarole. The old woman squinted upward at the magpie chattering above her head.

"An' he's every whit as wise-looking as his master," quoth she. "Well, lad, all things are possible to him who keeps his eye awake and his head clear. If thou wouldst have help i' this matter, first bear my basket down the hill to yonder cottage, and then come hither and let me in at the postern-gate."

So Rigarole sped down the hill with the basket, and

when he had returned he opened the little gate set in the ivy-covered wall, and the old woman slipped within.

"Now," quoth she, "say naught to a soul, but come hither in an hour's time, and thou'lt find me here, sheltered by the bushes."

Thereupon Rigarole went his way, scarce knowing whither to turn, for he might not even go to confide in the Lady Fairlocks. In the kitchen, cooks and scullions were flying hither and thither, preparing wondrous dishes which were to tempt his Lordship's appetite that evening, ever and anon pausing to whisper and wag their heads portentously. Upstairs, his Lordship was too upset even to play solitaire, and sat fretting and fuming in his great chair, while in her bower Lady Fairlocks moped over her 'broidery, dropping tears upon it lest Rigarole should have to go away. Mistress Bess went to and fro from one to the other, flying betweenwhiles to pound upon the Tower door, and entreat or upbraid the luckless Magri.

As soon, therefore, as an hour had passed, Rigarole flew through the courtyard and down to the postern-gate, whither he spied the gleam of Gammer Gurton's red cloak among the bushes.

She arose when he appeared, and leaned upon her stick.

"At what hour, son," quoth she, "will his Lordship summon the household together?"

"At sundown, mother," said Rigarole.

"Good!" said Gammer Gurton. "Now, lad, wilt thou leave this matter in my hands, and do my bidding?"

And Rigarole, having learned that one of the first lessons of knighthood was to respect the word and experience of those older than he, said:

"Ay, surely, mother, an' thou sayest so."

"'Tis well," quoth she. "Go thou, then, and climb the Tower stair, and fetch me what thou shalt find in the great clock."

This Rigarole wonderingly obeyed, and when he had returned, he marked that the old woman held something hidden beneath her scarlet cloak.

Then quoth she:

"My son, just at sundown come hither and open the postern-gate, and bear unto his Lordship that which thou shalt find outside. Now let me hence, and go thy way!"

Straightway Rigarole did the old woman's bidding, marveling greatly, but asking no questions, having learned that sometimes one discovers more by doing as one is bid than by asking all the questions in the world.

Within the castle, excitement pervaded the very atmosphere. All the cooks were vying with one another in concocting dishes, each striving to think of some way to bring himself into his Lordship's notice, lest it should be the last banquet he should serve in the castle. Until by and by, such a feast was promised as had never been seen within the castle walls!

Just at sundown his Lordship appeared and seated himself in the banqueting-hall, accompanied by the Lady Fairlocks. As befitted such a solemn occasion, she was attired in a marvelous court gown, sewn and shimmering with silver stars, but ever and anon she wiped her eyes and gazed vainly around for Rigarole. Mistress Bess, too, had on a momentous head-gear which wagged tremendously as she walked; and last of all appeared the Magri, who had been apparently overcome with weariness while studying the eclipse of the sun, and had forgotten to remove his nightcap.

In the doors peered everyone of the household, from the maids and minions to the Master of the Hounds, scarcely able to subdue their excitement.

"We will first dine," spoke his Lordship, "after which let every one come hither!" But even as he spoke Rigarole appeared, and craved, on bended knee, a moment's grace.

"I am bade to make known to your Lordship," quoth he, "that whereas Gammer Gurton, the Wise Woman of Bow Bridge Green, so called, hath heard of the late mysteries in the castle, she hath set her wisdom diligently to work thereon, and of her own wit hath concocted a magic dish, which she doth crave that your Lordship will try before partaking of aught else, as she doth claim for it a wondrous power—namely, that of opening your Lord-

ship's eyes even to discovering the doer of the witchcraft which hath so disturbed your Lordship."

"Ho, then! bring forth this wondrous dish," cried his Lordship, "and if the so-called Wise Woman be but trying a jest, she shall be ducked together with the guilty thief!"

Whereupon all the cooks and pastry-makers frowned ominously at one another in dismay and consternation lest the new dish be one which should take his Lordship's fancy.

Then straightway two minions entered bearing an enormous pie, which they placed before his Lordship.

"Odds dodds!" thundered his Lordship, "this Wise Woman must deem my appetite a mighty one indeed. I want not a pie the size of a mountain!"

"I beg that your Lordship will but lift the crust," spoke Rigarole; and even as he did so there came so loud and strange a noise from out the pie that his Lordship, in amazement, did quickly lift the crust.

And then—with a hoarse croak the Magri's magpie hopped out on the edge of the dish. He could get no further, for about his neck was hung his Lordship's spectacles, while on one foot dangled the snuff-box, and suspended to the other was the seal ring, and tied to a long string which went about his body was the key of the castle clock.

"Odds bodikins! what's this?" shouted his Lordship.

"The witch, your Lordship," said Rigarole; "and what else he hath spirited is in the dish, even to your Lordship's wig and the starched ruff lost by Mistress Bess!"

"Now, by my haliberd!" cried his Lordship, "didst thou discover this, boy, or is't a trick?"

"Not so, my lord, 'tis no trick," spoke Rigarole. "'Tis all the doing of Gammer Gurton, the Wise Woman. She did set herself to reason upon the matter, and straightway, in watching, she spied the magpie carrying somewhat into the Tower clock. Whereupon she did catch the magpie and send me to look in the clock, where I did discover all which has been purloined saving this, which I but just found in the further end of the Magri's telescope," and he held outward Lady Fairlock's beaded purse.

"Th' eclipse o' the sun, forsooth!" cried Mistress Bess. "By the point o' my bodkin, the sun was eclipsed by three shillings sixpence!" Whereupon the Magri tugged at his beard and hung his head, while the Magpie chattered loudly and Lady Fairlocks clapped her hands in delight. His Lordship clasped his sides and laughed long and loud. "Now, by my sword!" quoth he, "I would fain see this Wise Woman. And as for the thief, disrobe him straightway, and, verily, I'll have him ducked in the pond o' Bow Bridge Green!"

"Nay, not so, your Lordship!" spoke Gammer Gurton, coming forward in her scarlet cloak, and dropping a curtsy. "The bird is a good enow bird. He did but follow his natural bent, as we all are prone to do o' times, e'en to suspecting one another o' witchcraft an' thievery!"

"Well said, dame," said his Lordship. "In truth thou'rt well named. And as thou hast found the thief, what reward wilt have for thy wisdom?"

"Nay, nay, Master!" quoth Gammer Gurton, "it lieth in each to be wise according to his discretion, and I am deserving of no reward for using mine understanding, for so was it given me to use. Hence bestow thy good will on yon stripling page, who doth a'ready crave to be a worthy knight, and give me but the Magri's magpie, an' I'll warrant to duck it, and teach it manners, too!"

At this his Lordship vowed it should be as Gammer Gurton said, and, patting Rigarole on the head, he bade him bid the underlings all hence to call up the fiddlers, that they might dance till sun-up in honor of the Wise Woman of Bow Bridge Green! This was done, amid jollity and rejoicing, each forgetting in a twinkling that he had made ready to duck some one in the pond of Bow Bridge Green.

Straightway also did Mistress Bess strip from the magpie the purloined articles, and, while Rigarole on bended knee did give the beaded purse to Lady Fairlocks, his Lordship put on his gold spectacles, and the Magri made off as fast as his feet could carry him to wind the castle clock.

Then, when they had settled themselves to partake of the banquet, amid harmony and good will, Gammer Gurton did trudge back over the Big Bow Bridge, with the Magri's magpie under her scarlet cloak.