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Virginia Woodward Cloud
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By Virginia Woodward Cloud

"Now who's that at the door this time o' night?" said Aunt Keziah, without stopping her needles.

But we spoke not a word; only Dolly, who sat on the stool beside me, clasped her hands on her blue checked apron, and her eyes looked large and bright in the firelight.

"Well"—Aunt Keziah peered over her spectacles—'why don't you get up 'n' see?"

Then Dolly turned her gaze on me, and I put down the wood I was whittling into a boat and went to the door.

As I unlatched it another knock sounded, and then a gust of wind swung it open and pushed me behind it, and at the same time blew in a queer, witchlike figure, who, with her long cloak flapping about her, seemed swept straight to the fire on the gale. She stood there, her black eyes snapping first at Aunt Keziah, then at Dolly, while I forgot to close the door.

"Why, Mother Sheflo, how did you get across the meadow this night? David, shut the door," said Aunt Keziah.

"With the wind! With the wind!" the little old woman spoke in a cracked voice; and as she reached to stand her stick in the chimney-corner, Dolly shrunk back almost off the stool.

"Well, it's a wonder you don't get your death, that's all," said Aunt Keziah, still knitting. "David, fetch a chair."

Mother Sheflo perched herself on the proffered chair. Her feet did not reach the floor. Her quilted hood showed loose strands of sparse gray hair, and her eyes blinked sharply as she seized my jacket-sleeve with one hand, which I thought looked like a bird's claw.

"Nice boy, good boy!" she said, peering into my face. "He don't throw stones—no, no!"

I flushed hotly with guilt, and refused to meet her piercing eyes, for the day before I had thrown a stone at Captain, Mother Sheflo's cat, as I passed her cottage; and all the village knew that Mother Sheflo's cat was wondrous wise.

"No! no!" she repeated.

"No!" said Dolly, and then put her finger in her mouth.

Mother Sheflo's eyes blinked rapidly. "Bad boys stone Captain, and he knows 'em! Ay, he knows 'em all, every one! He follows 'em about! He knows a bit, does Captain! Nice boy, good boy!" The last words were addressed to me, and she smiled sideways as she released my arm. I drew back, relieved, into the shadow of the chimney. Dolly was twisting her apron into a knot, but her great eyes were on Mother Sheflo. "Get my death,

you say, Keziah Allan? Get my death?" croaked the old woman. "Not this night! There's death out yonder on the sea; there's life on land—life, life!" She began to croon to herself. Her skinny hands were locked together, and her eyes were on the fire.

"You must ha' caught it, then," said Aunt Keziah, "or you'd never ha' got way over here in a wind like this."

"I ride! I ride!" muttered the old woman.

"'Tisn't a broom," said Dolly, putting a plump finger on the cane in the chimney-corner, and drawing it back suddenly.

"Ho, ho! Hear the baby! Would you like to ride some night, my pretty one, up, up, up where the doves whisper in the belfry?"

Dolly shook her head with a frightened look, and drew back nearer me.

"Ah, you're afraid the naughty boys will stone you for a white dove! Naughty boys, not good ones like him!" she pointed a skinny finger at me, and in the shadow I felt her black eyes reading my thoughts, for that very day I had stoned a belfry dove, and the doves belonged to Letty, the parson's housekeeper.

"How they chatter and whisper, the doves that fly through the village, and carry away the words and doings of men! I know 'em! They've told me many a thing o' wild nights when I've gone to see if the lamp was set. Nights like this—the kind that washes 'em in, washes 'em in! Go look"—she nodded at me—"go see if the lamp is set in the belfry."

I went to the window and drew the curtain. A great wind shook the house. I heard the breakers battling far off, as I loved to imagine them in the night, making through the darkness the sounds of drum and cannon. Outside was solid blackness, save for one streak of light which shone straight outward—the light in the belfry tower.

"It's there," I said, returning to the chimney-corner.

"So that's what brought you," spoke Aunt Keziah to the old woman. "I thought as much! Why don't you keep in your bed a night like this? The parson 'll have the light set, never fear!"

"I couldn't lie quiet this night, not this night of Hallowmas, for thinking of 'em being washed in. The other was such as this, and the light went out—the light went out!"

She chanted the words, gazing into the fire.

"What put it out?" I asked, sitting down beside Dolly.

"Spirits! Bad spirits!"

"Humph! Owls and bats, more likely," said Aunt Keziah.

"They don't trouble it, you know that, Keziah Allan! It don't stay set unless I keep my eye on it, for the night they all washed in, it went out! The light went out!"

She crooned the words over and over, with her eyes upon the fire.

"It has gone out more than once when you were the first to notice it, that's the truth," said Aunt Keziah, her needles flying. "I don't believe you ever sleep o' nights!"

"Not nights like this, I can't lay quiet in my bed," said the old woman.

"Why not?" I asked, growing bolder.

"Spirits," she cried, with a sudden flame in her eyes. "They're about such nights, boy, and they move the light, and in the morning they're all washed in—washed in on the sand!"

"Law, Mother Sheflo, there ain't been any wrecks washed in for a long time, and no spirits have been about in my day," spoke Aunt Keziah, soothingly. "I've heard tell of 'em often enough, but they must have left these parts a many a year ago. It's nothin' but the wind and the bats that puts the belfry light out."

But the old woman did not seem to hear her. She looked straight at the fire. Her fingers worked nervously and her lips moved.

"Tell about 'em," I said, and Dolly nodded shyly. Then Mother Sheflo uttered in rapid monotone the words she seemed to have been saying to herself. Her eyes were still on the flames. The wind shrieked in the chimney as she spoke.

"'Twas Becky and Mary Anna Steele and Marthy Allan—your mother, Keziah—"

Aunt Keziah nodded.

"All a-bakin' in the kitchen, a-gettin' ready for the weddin'. Big cakes and little cakes, an' hams, an' pies, an' chickens—rows an' rows of 'em. Marthy Allan a-reddin' up 'n' puttin' spruce and pine over the pictures, an' wipin' chiny, an' me in the winder. All day in the winder, lookin' 'cross the bay. Breakers like them a-roarin' now—Hear 'em! Listen to 'em! That's the kind! They'll wash 'em in! It was John Allan come runnin' up the path. I saw the wind bring him along. He burst in with the wind and spray, an' Marthy Allan dropped the best blue bowl."

"'There's a boat yonder,' he says—'*his* boat!'

"'Hush!' says Mary Anna, noddin' at the winder, an' John Allan throws up his arms and runs out, 'n' I after him, an' Marthy an' Mary Anna comin' behind. Ay, but 'twas gettin' dark, an' a monster sea was roarin'. We all stayed out a-waitin' for the boat. It got mighty dark, dark as night, an' we couldn't see a thing. I got a lantern out o' the kitchen an' climbed the belfry stairs unbeknown to 'em all. Ugh, but the owls and bats hit hard an' screeched like all of 'em was doin' out yonder on shore! They hit my face an' blinded my eyes, but I didn't mind. I set the lamp in the winder an' went down again—down, down. It shone far out to the boat. Ugh, how the breakers fought that night! He always could manage a boat, couldn't he, Keziah?" Aunt Keziah nodded.

"Then all of a sudden the light went out—clean out, Keziah!" The old woman's black eyes flashed.

"So I've heard tell," said Aunt Keziah.

"All were screechin' for light. They might ha' reached 'em. John Allan said so. They wouldn't let me go out 'n the water with one. I'd ha' done it, but 'twas all John Allan a-holdin' me on shore. But they were all washed in with the mornin'. Aha, they couldn't hold me then! 'Don't let her go!' cries Marthy, a-hangin' to me. But didn't I fling her down, an' away I went to meet 'em all a-lyin' on the sand . . . Come early to the weddin'! . . . They wouldn't let me carry him, John Allan wouldn't, but I went along, an' my hair kept blowin' on his face. I put on my white frock, an' my wreath on my hair—pretty hair, Keziah—"

And again Aunt Keziah nodded.

"An' I laughed at Marthy Allan an' Mary Anna a-cryin' an' wringin' their hands. 'Twas a nice mornin'. Go look"—the old woman suddenly turned her eyes from the fire, with a return of reason in them—"go look if it's set;" and again I went to the window, and again saw the line of light streaming from the belfry tower.

"Yes," I said, "it's there."

"Ay, then I'll get home," she muttered, and, reaching her stick, she wrapped her cloak around her and hobbled to the door.

"Are you going to ride in the air?" asked Dolly, whose eyes were heavy with sleep.

"Ay, ay! Hear the pretty baby! Yes, honey, I'll go on a puff o' wind!"

"Maybe you'd best stop here," said Aunt Keziah. But Mother Sheflo was at the door.

"Captain's waitin'," she said; and as I lifted the latch she gave me a tap with her stick. "Nice boy, he don't throw stones—no, no!"

The wind rushed in and swept her outward into the darkness. I heard the breakers lash the beach, and the door slammed.

"Did she really first set the belfry light?" I asked, once more by the fire.

Aunt Keziah nodded.

"Long before my time. They say it's saved many a vessel, too."

"What put it out that night?" again I asked.

"Your grandmother used to say nobody ever knew. Owls or wind, most likely. They say the ship might ha' kept off the Cape Rock if there'd been a light, but before another could be set it went down."

"Oh!" I exclaimed, and thought awhile. Dolly's curly head had drooped forward, and in the firelight her cheek

was the color of the big roses Aunt Keziah kept for her jar of leaves.

"What did she mean by a wedding?" I asked, presently. "Whose wedding was it?"

"Her own," said Aunt Keziah, winding her yarn; "it was *his* boat. That's when her mind went, that night. She set a light in the belfry every night for many a year, till she got so old the parson got her out o' it and had it done. She's got some sense left, but she likes to tell the story over and over. Now go to bed, both o' you!"

But Dolly could not get awake, and I took her in my arms. Her head dropped on my shoulder, and, as I started upstairs slowly, she murmured—

"Goin' to ride up 'n' up with the doves." Resting a minute on the steps, I kissed her rosy cheek, and looked back at Aunt Keziah.

"I wish I had known about it before," I said.

"Why?" she asked.

"Before I threw stones at Captain."

"Oh, yes; the cat's all she's got now."

Aunt Keziah looked up, with the hearth-broom in her hand.

"David," she said, "you'd best remember always that when folks are cranky in this world, there's most times been a heap to make 'em so, only other folks don't think o' that part."