

THE WITCH GIRL

By Virginia Woodward Cloud Author of "Down Durley Lane." "The Widowhood of Mrs. Bunn," etc. *The Ladies' Home Journal* (1889-1907); Aug 1903; Vol. XX., No. 9; American Periodicals pg. 13



DRAWN BY ALICE BARBER STEPHENS

"FAITH DOW HELD HER HAND OUT TO THE GIRL. 'COME!' SHE SAID. BUT LEAH GRETTEL LOOKED AT HER WONDERINGLY"



AT WHAT hour, then, neighbor?"

"To-morrow, being fifth day, at sun-down, Abner Dow, we shall banish this evil-doer from our midst, as was done once before on Gallows Hill. Swift means must be used or a worse spell may be laid by her cursèd arts. To-morrow, neighbor, to-morrow!"

Waving his arms as if excited the speaker passed down the road in the dusk, and Abner Dow entered his cottage where Mistress Plenty Hapgood was talking volubly to his wife. He drew a stool to the table, and his wife placed a bowl of porridge before him; then she took her child from the cradle and sat before the hearth feeding him.

"The calf died," spoke Abner Dow moodily.

"Alack! A spell is surely upon you!" cried Mistress Plenty Hapgood, darting forward as he dropped his knife.

"Nay, let it lie! Look ye! It points to the hill yonder, Abner Dow, and means the Witch Girl. Dost know that she came hither only last night on the stroke of twelve, and did vanish away like a puff o' smoke? Mistress Dolittle, who was up making a posset for the lad who hath the fever, saw it with her own eyes, and hath gone with crossed thumbs all day. And this very dawn corn was found lying in our doorway. Holdfast Hapgood saith that the maid should have a trial first. But Holdfast is overgiven to argument. Why, only a night ago Neighbor Dolittle did grow so irate at reasoning over the matter that he took his pipe and went home in the face of an argument. Furthermore, Holdfast saith that flame cannot hurt a witch, it being their natural drink, and that if she be ducked it will taint the pond with evil and be worse than drought. But there, there! Holdfast is too prone to jest, albeit reared to know that 'tis a sin. I am myself no gossip, but my own mother did see the burning of this maid's granddam, and 'tis in the blood, as Ethan Dolittle has rightly and truly said. We should not permit a worker of iniquity to flourish in our midst."

She bustled outward, and Abner Dow sat with his head resting on his hand. His wife bent and kissed the child in her arms.

"See to't that your heart is not set upon the child to idolatry, Faith!" spoke her husband.

"I was but thinking, Abner, of a time when I may not have porridge to give him," she replied.

"'Twould seem it is at hand. First the drought, then the fever, now famine. Well may we say that it comes from no just cause when our beasts die before our eyes!"

"I cannot help but think, Abner, that one more effort could be made to find the Pirate gold which lies buried hereabouts. Think what it would mean now. 'Tis said that Mistress Plenty Hapgood's grandsire did indeed have sight of it, but, being overfree of speech, spake ere it reached the earth, and it vanished."

She arose and laid the sleeping child in the cradle, adding, "'Tis said, too, there is but one who hath this secret

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—the maid yonder—Leah Grettel, the Witch Girl."

"Have done about the gold!" said her husband with a sudden blaze of excitement in his eyes. "Our minds are wrestling against the evil which is worked in our midst. Ethan Dolittle, who is a cautious man, hath determined with the elders, after prayer and fasting, to trample it out. You know of our intention on the morrow, Faith?"

"Ay, Abner!" she murmured.

"Then see to't you are silent concerning it. It hath been long since we were forced to deal with witchcraft, but endurance is exhausted, and this means is driven upon us. The girl hath the tainted blood of her kind, and, as Ethan Dolittle saith, we must be rid o't forever. There is but one way to wipe out her cursèd sorcery—"

"And that, Abner?" his wife whispered.

"Death!" said Abner Dow, bringing his fist down upon the table. He arose and took a candle from the mantel-shelf and went up a loft ladder at the end of the living-room, and dropped the heavy door behind him.

Suddenly the latch lifted and a woman entered. She took a loaf from under her cloak.

"I came over to fetch this for the child, Faith, lest yours be low. Where is Abner?" she said.

"'Twas a kind thought, Keturah," said Abner Dow's wife, turning a calm face. "Abner is already asleep, being tired with his trying day."

Keturah Dow stood before the hearth, her dark profile stern and forbidding.

"Ay!" she said, "and may want and hunger overtake her who has wrought all the trouble, even as it is overtaking us. Dost know that corn lay in our doorway only this dawn? A snare! A trap of the temptress who consorts with evil! This sorceress hath learned too many means from her granddam."

"But 'twas said that the old woman spake not, Keturah, and held to't she had naught to confess even whilst the fire burned," said Faith Dow with a tremor in her voice.

"Ay, but the young have not the endurance of the old! Mayhap this one will speak." The significance of the words caused a shiver to pass over Abner Dow's wife.

"But—oh, Keturah! Suppose this maid is indeed no witch! She is so young, 'tis said."

"So! Abner Dow's wife would defend one who hath the Evil Eye!"—Keturah Dow took care to cross her fingers as she spoke—"one who hath brought blight upon our crops, who hath corn in plenty whilst ours is dead, who hath water when no water is, who is the cause of driving young Jonathan Dolittle from his home, and is even now causing death among our cattle—"

"Nay, nay, Keturah! I do but ask of you, who are wise in such matters—I, being strange to these parts, do not understand—how so young a maid may have so evil an art! Alas, that she should indeed be proven a witch!"

"Such as she need not the pity of the righteous. She doth but follow the bent of her kind. Her granddam met her end on Gallows Hill, and hath not this maid held herself aloof from all Christian souls?"

"Surely, if they hated me and kept apart, I, too, would shun them," retorted the other; but Keturah Dow went on: "Did she not so fix young Jonathan Dolittle with her wicked gaze that he went clean distraught then and there and vowed to marry her, even rebelling when his father and the elders met to discuss the matter?"

"'Twould have been strange had he desisted then," murmured the other. "I mean, Keturah, because of the rashness of youth, and because 'tis said she hath rare beauty, this maid. Of course, young Master Dolittle needs take passage in the trading vessel, to see to his father's interests, when 'twas forced upon him. Think you she may have the secret of the Pirate gold, Keturah?"

"She and no other, unless it be old Draco, the half-wit, who was in the employ of the Pirates when he was a lad, seventy years ago. 'Twas then the mutiny occurred on this coast, and he got the blow on the head which severed him from his wits. But since then he hath known naught saving to do the bidding of others. Nay, the old man knows naught now"; she turned to the door. "His time is spent, for he hath lain dying these three days. Good-night, Faith."

When the door closed Abner Dow's wife arose, raised her hands to her head and murmured:

"A maid! Only a maid, and to be burned! O God! stay my husband from this deed!"

For a time she paced to and fro in thought. Then she went to the foot of the ladder and listened. Her husband's heavy breathing sounded from above. She then took some of the bread from the table and a portion of milk from a closet, and, wrapping her cloak about her, opened the door and looked out. "'Tis only a step," she said, "and mayhap Abner will not be offended if indeed the old man lies dying, and alone." And Abner Dow's wife went through the darkness toward the cabin of old Draco.

The next afternoon a group of people climbed the hill on the side of which stood the cottage of Leah Grettel, whom they called the Witch Girl. Muttering, calling and threatening, their voices rose in excitement as they drew near.

"The witch! The Witch Girl! Call her forth!"



"Let the Witch Girl show herself!"
"Burn the roof over her!"
Near the top of the hill Ethan Dolittle turned and addressed those behind him: "Neighbors, harken! We have determined after grave converse to extirpate from our midst one who hath worked sore mischief to us and to ours. The time for punishment hath come! Away with all workers of witchcraft and sorcery!"

"She hath been seen sitting on Great Rock at night in the guise of a blackbird, guarding the Pirate gold," said a voice. "Deal with her as with her granddam!" said another. "Ay, burn her! Burn her!"

Ethan Dolittle turned a face livid with excitement. "If there be any one here who hath fear let him turn back ere we set the flame to yon cursed dwelling!"

At these words the voices rose to a hubbub before the cottage. Then the door opened, and a girl stood between the hazel boughs in front of her home. She was slim and very white, saving for the darkness of her eyes and the flame of her hair. Ethan Dolittle stepped forward, his voice ringing harshly upon the quiet air.

"Leah Grettel, you have been accused of practicing sorcery and witchcraft, and it hath been determined to pass sentence upon you now. You are to be reckoned with straightway for the usage of spells that have worked destruction upon our crops and cattle."

Her clear voice sounded strangely upon his hard one. "Then art not afraid lest I practice them on thyself?" "Hark, she doth confess it! She acknowledges her guilt! Seize her! Seize the witch!" cried several.

"Ye have heard this blasphemous confession," spoke Ethan Dolittle. "There is no need of trial remaining. Before meeting the punishment which is your just due, Leah Grettel, you are bounden to acknowledge two things: Firstly, whence comes your corn whilst our own is dead? Secondly, as to the secret of the Pirate gold, of which your granddam knew, yet refused to speak."

The light blazed in the girl's eyes, then she said: "As it pleases you to put me to death I would fain keep what knowledge I possess."

"Then the knowledge is yours?" said Ethan Dolittle. "I said not so," she answered.

"If it be so it shall be yielded up," he cried, starting forward as if to seize her by the arm. But she turned her eyes upon him and he drew back, passing a hand across his brow where the veins stood out like cords.

"Harken the purpose of her intent," he said. "She hath the Evil Eye! She is a witch! Cast her out!"

One after another took up the words, pressing perceptibly nearer. There were a few who halted, startled by the unexpected beauty and gentleness of the girl. Suddenly Abner Dow's wife stepped outward, with a mien all unlike her usually timid one, and spoke:

"Neighbors, I should deliberate about condemning yon maid. We may yet be able to draw from her the secret of the hidden gold. She herself doth not deny the knowledge."

"Faith!" said her husband in stern amazement. But Holdfast Hapgood followed her, saying:

"'Twere well to weigh the words of Mistress Dow."

"Yield not to evil for the sake of gold!" broke in Ethan Dolittle angrily; "the witch shall die!"

But several had come forward at Hapgood's words and stood discussing the possibility of learning aught about the buried treasure. "We have sore need of gold," cried they. "Draw from the lass the secret of it first; then deal with her. There are other means than death."

A scornful smile stirred the Witch Girl's lips, but she caught a warning glance from Abner Dow's wife, who, unnoticed, had come nearer, until she stood face to face with Ethan Dolittle.

Abner Dow spoke beneath his breath: "It ill beseems you, Faith, to be so forward!"

"'Twere time, indeed, for women to speak when strong men seek to kill a maid," she said aloud.

"Dost know you speak of a witch?" said Dow.

"Not so! It hath not been proven," Faith said.

"Harken, all of you! This is but a maid, whose portion hath been neglect and sorrow. As there is a God above us her blood will be upon the heads of those whose hands are dyed in it—" Her voice suddenly broke, and turning to Abner Dow she clung to his arm.

"Oh, Abner, have no part with this terrible deed!"

Before he could answer in his displeasure, Holdfast Hapgood held his hand up and spoke in spite of Ethan Dolittle, who moved here and there, talking excitedly:

"Neighbors, there is some wisdom in Mistress Dow's words. We best not be too hasty. Bid the maid point out, if she knows it, where lies the buried treasure. Then, if we find it not, let her be dealt with in fair trial."

Faith Dow looked up beseechingly at her husband: "Abner, as thou lovest me, harken to this."

In drawing near to speak to his wife Abner Dow had confronted the Witch Girl. She was very young. He had not thought to find her gentle and beautiful. Truly it seemed a rare thing for men to do—to kill a maid. Now, if she were but old and hideous. Something seemed clearing from his brain, as had been the way of late when away from Ethan Dolittle's revengefulness. His wife's hand touched him, and he said:

"Mayhap Holdfast Hapgood doth speak with discretion. Let the maid be questioned first; then dealt with."

Holdfast Hapgood held his hand up again, and spoke:

"We came hither to administer justice, and not to seek gold. Charges have been made against yon maid. If they can be proven we are here to prove them. If they cannot it is time enough to think of gold afterward. Dost agree to this, Abner Dow, Wellbeing Tudor, Daniel Littlehouse?" A murmur of agreement arose from the men, saving Ethan Dolittle, who showed a livid countenance, yet was unable to prevent the action from passing out of his hands.

"Let her be questioned," said Abner Dow.

Therefore, as Holdfast Hapgood was pronounced good at reasoning, he was chosen to come forward. He motioned the girl to step out, which she did. Hapgood then questioned:

"It hath been said that the meeting-house bell is wont to ring of itself at this maid's circumvention. Who makes this charge?"

"Ethan Dolittle," said a voice.

"All have heard it," said Ethan Dolittle sturlily.

"What of it?" asked Hapgood of the maid.

"I know naught of it," she answered; but Abner Dow's wife spoke:

"Master Hapgood, I must tell that which I know. On the last night of such report I myself did see old Draco, the half-wit, climb down from the belfry tower. Who incited him to this action I know not."

Another voice spoke from the crowd: "'Tis said she hath the witch's mark put upon her by her granddam, and that her left elbow is hard as stone."

"What of this?" Hapgood said to the girl.

A flush passed over her face, leaving it paler. She loosened the neck of her homespun gown, and, holding her kerchief together, drew her arm from its sleeve and held it outward for all to see. It was soft and white like the arm of babyhood, with no spot nor blemish.

"For shame!" spoke Keturah Dow; "she doth but strive to work her art again."

"Will Mistress Faith Dow step hither and seek the witch's mark?" said Hapgood.

Faith Dow laid her hand upon the arm held outward in the sunset light.

"Naught is amiss with it, and no mark," she said.

The men began to look inquiringly at each other and half suspiciously at Ethan Dolittle.

"Are there more charges against this maid?" asked Holdfast Hapgood.

A voice began: "Ethan Dolittle saith—" but Dolittle strode angrily forward.

"Not so! I say naught, excepting that enough hath been proven already to hang a score such as she. What of the corn that ripened in the midst of famine? What of the Evil Eye with which she hath bewitched mine own son? What of—"

"Leah Grettel, what dost say?" spoke Hapgood.

"Of your son," said she, turning her eyes upon Ethan Dolittle. "I say naught, saving that I grieve to have been the cause of giving him sorrow, in that he was made to leave his home. It ill behooves me to prate of one who alone of all my kind did show me courtesy. As you well know, I sought him not, nor have I deserved the unreasoning hatred with which you have followed me since I refused to sell to you the small tract of land which is my sole possession."

There was a sudden stir and murmur at this, and Ethan Dolittle clenched his fists and panted audibly. "Of the corn, the secret is little, when told. Back of my cottage there is an old well which, as is known, has never gone dry." There was a slight murmur of assent at this. "It is now very low, but day by day I have drawn water and with my own hands have kept fresh the little patch of corn from the well until it ripened. That is all."

"Hath any one aught to say to this?" spoke Hapgood.

Ethan Dolittle's voice broke out: "Let her say what the corn was doing in our doorways yesterday at dawn."

"You had none. I thought to share what was left. It was not much, and I meant no harm," she replied.

Here several voices clamored to hear of the gold.

"What dost say?" asked Hapgood.

"That which I have said," she replied; "if, because of an unreasoning hatred to me and my kind, I am to die, then do I keep my counsel. If I go my way unharmed, then will I share with you that which I have learned. If naught comes of it, then can I go my way alone and you have naught to fear of me."

A murmur of assent greeted this.

"Neighbors, is this agreed to?" asked Hapgood.

A chorus of voices agreed.

"'Tis well," said Hapgood, "in spite of the charges laid at your door, sufficient hath not been proven as yet to warrant the punishment at first deemed your due."

"Hence I hold the promise of my life from you, Master Hapgood, and Master Dow and his wife?" spoke the girl. Faith Dow touched her husband's arm pleadingly. Ethan Dolittle spoke out angrily, but Abner Dow suddenly raised his eyes from the ground. "It is well," he said; "mayhap we have been too precipitate."

"Neighbors," spoke Hapgood, "we agree to let this maid go unaccused of further misdemeanor, and she, in turn, is to intrust us with the secret of the Pirate treasure. If naught come of it we can deal with her in tolerance and justice afterward. Is this agreed?"

"Ay! Ay!" echoed the others.

"I had no such knowledge from my grandmother concerning the hidden gold," spoke Leah Grettel, looking fearlessly about her. "I can only divulge that which I myself have but just learned. If it be not true I am blameless and in your power. But one thing I know: if my grandmother held aught in confidence for another she died rather than betray it. For she did make my mother promise never to sell the land on this hillside, and my mother, who was sickly and who died suddenly soon afterward, told me the same, and I was left alone. That which I am told I tell you; you will have need of picks and spades for digging."

Hapgood dispatched two men to the foot of the hill. When they returned the girl pointed to the clump of trees behind her cottage.

"I am told 'tis there, sunken in the old well which hath never before gone dry. Dig!" she said.

Hollow sounds of pick and spade came from out the shadow of the trees. It was slow work, and the men took turns going down into the well—all saving Ethan Dolittle, who walked to and fro, talking to himself and gesticulating angrily. Abner Dow's wife alone stood apart, listening to the sounds from the well, her face burning with excitement, lest naught should come of the digging.

"Oh, if naught be found in the well, we ourselves will deal with her hereafter. And I'll warrant 'twill not be in this manner," spoke Mistress Dolittle.

"Harken!" cried Faith Dow, darting forward. There came a call from the well: "Come down! Come down! We have struck something!" Abner Dow let himself down while the others rushed to the well's edge and peered over. There came a metallic echo as the spades struck something. Then Plenty Hapgood leaned over and laid a warning finger upon her lips. All knew what that meant, and only the

sounds of the picks followed. Suddenly Hapgood stood upright and wiped his brow, which was crimson. He motioned for a rope and his wife let it down to him. The men drew themselves up by it. Once landed they began to pull something upward until a dark object appeared at the well's edge and with a final tug was dragged upon the ground.

Then Holdfast Hapgood stood up and wiped his face. "We've got it!" he said aloud. It was moulded and corroded, but evidently a chest of great age.

"Fetch it out to the hillside and prove it is but a sham, an art to work further upon us," said Ethan Dolittle who had drawn near.

"Nay, 'twere a passing heavy art," said Holdfast, rubbing his arms. But Faith Dow, unnoticed, fled sobbing into the cottage. The men carried the chest out into the serene light of evening.

"Set to't!" said Hapgood. They strove to break the fastenings with the picks, but the ancient hinges were made for time. By-and-by they yielded to stroke and tug, and the chest lay open. The top was a moulded mass of rubbish, which Hapgood cleared away, revealing that it were well-nigh full of leathern bags. One by one he laid them upon the grass.

"'Twere well ye did not burn yon maid beneath her roof, neighbors," he said, turning his keen eyes upon them all. "She hath given a secret that means much wealth for one girl. For the gold is hers, being found on her land!"

"Not so, she hath purchased her life with it," spoke Ethan Dolittle's harsh tone; "the gold is ours. There is yet time enough to convict her of sorcery."

Holdfast cut the waxed string around the neck of a bag and poured its contents on the ground. A pile of Spanish gold rolled out.

"'Twere well worth its weight in witchcraft," said Hapgood, feeling bag after bag. "Yon lass could buy us and our land, and our grandchildren after us, if she wills." He dipped his hand in the pile, and several took up a coin to assure themselves of its reality.

"The one who hath worked evil is still in our midst," spoke Ethan Dolittle. "Who can yet prove that this is the Pirate gold?"

"I!" said Abner Dow's wife. She stood before them beside Leah Grettel. Her husband uttered a warning exclamation, but she smiled up at him and spoke clearly. "Neighbors, now that I hold the promise of this maid's life, I have somewhat to make known. Last night I learned that old Draco lay dying, and I went straightway to his cottage with a portion of food, lest he should be alone. But I found one ministering to him." She laid her hand upon the girl's arm. "'Twas this maid. We stayed by him until breath left him, but ere he died he did seemingly regain his wits, for he thought himself to be a lad once more and in employ of the Pirates. Straightway he began to talk of gold, and I harkened. This was what he said." She paused, and every one leaned forward, hanging on her words. "'We'll sink it, masters,' saith he, 'i' th' old well on the hillside, which ne'er runs dry. 'Twill be safe enow i' th' old well in the hazel trees.' And hearing this, neighbors, I knew it for truth, as did this maid here."

"And how comes it that Mistress Dow hath kept this to herself to-day, letting it appear that 'twas the girl alone who had the knowledge?" demanded Dolittle.

"Why, Master Dolittle? For that I likewise learned from this maid that there is one amongst us who hath importuned her incessantly to part with her small tract of land. And why? Was it because he suspected this thing? Also, that upon her refusal to do so he hath so turned to ill account all that hath happened in our midst that the minds and hearts of every one have been incensed against Leah Grettel until a charge of witchcraft was brought, and—oh, shame be it to say the words!—this very eve at sunset her roof was to have been burned above her—a deed which was so horrible to me that I did use the finding of the gold as an excuse to strive to save her life. The life of a lonely girl, neighbors—a girl who hath been shunned by all her kind, but hath kept undimmed in her heart the grace of forgiveness. 'Tis plain why she ye called Witch was down at our doorways at midnight. 'Twas to share with us the last of her store. For this, and such as this, ye would have had her life. Oh, shame, shame, Master Dolittle!"

"Say you she hath wrought no harm, Mistress Dow?" cried Ethan Dolittle, choking with rage. "'Tis speech without warrant. The girl hath not denied the charge of witchcraft; it shall brand her while she lives."

Leah Grettel raised her hand: "As God is over us," said she, "I have worked no spell nor sorcery, nor do I know aught of such matters. Nor would I bring aught but good to you now if I could." Her eyes rested pleadingly upon the faces around her, and Hapgood spoke:

"Well said, lass! Methinks you already bring us luck, for yonder is a cloud arising which surely means rain, and when we take the gold down yonder to Abner Dow's cottage 'twill be divided, and a goodly portion is yours by right. Go slow, Master Dolittle, about branding yon maid as a witch. Her dowry will be a passing heavy one, and should she wed soon it may be when the trading vessel returns." But Ethan Dolittle turned on his heel and strode down the hill muttering.

Holdfast and the men lifted the chest and bore it ahead, followed by the group who were chattering and speculating about the events of the day. Faith Dow was talking earnestly to her husband, and he listened with his head bent as in shame.

"First say that I am forgiven, Abner!" said she. "Albeit I would not have you forward, Faith, I think you spoke under conviction, and that we were blamable in following Master Dolittle, who hath been overhasty."

Faith Dow held her hand out to the girl. "Come!" she said. But Leah Grettel looked at her wonderingly. "You are to come home with us—until the return of the trading vessel, it may be."

"Ay, come, lass!" spoke Abner Dow; "somewhat is due to you."

The girl covered her face with her hands. "Home!" she murmured, "Home!"

Then Abner Dow's wife took her by the hand, and they went down the hill together in the windy twilight.