

The Witchcraft at Bow Bridge Castle

A Young Folks' Story

By Virginia Woodward Cloud
In Two Parts—I.

There was great consternation in and out of Bow Bridge Castle, for strange happenings had taken place for nigh a fortnight, and nobody knew whence they came. The result was that his Lordship grew so fierce, and his gouty foot so painful, that all feared to go anear him, yet feared the more not to do so. His daughter, the little Lady Fairlocks, went about most sorrowfully, with downcast mien and tearful eyes. Rigarole, her page, meanwhile, would forget to play the lute, hiding to peer mournfully at her from behind the arras. Mistress Bess (being the only lady-in-waiting that the castle afforded) spent her time mainly flying hither and thither to surmise or investigate. Ever and anon she peered from a window into the courtyard below, where some of the minions were sure to be gathered in groups, whispering fearfully, or glancing upward at the castle windows; or then would she run to question and upbraid the Magri, who was his Lordship's very Primest Minister and Reliable Referee.

Now, the Magri occupied the same position in the castle as does a row of encyclopædias on our library shelves, with several dictionaries thrown in, only he was not half so convenient. For the Magri would never vouchsafe information on any subject without three hours' solitude and thought.

Now, as the Magri had never been known to go beyond the big Bow Bridge of the castle (or even so far as Bow Bridge Green), he must have been a talented and remarkable man to be able to give information on any subject in the universe, from the basting of a bird over the kitchen spit to the name of the end star in the tail of a meteor. When, therefore, the first mysterious happening occurred at the castle (which was the disappearance of his Lordship's jeweled snuff-box, spirited out of his hand while he was playing solitaire), Mistress Bess made off straightway to ask the Magri whither it had gone. The Magri replied, as usual, that he would make it known in three hours, and shut himself up with the Mammoth Recipe Books and the telescope. But at the end of three hours he had to confess, with a pompous apology to his Lordship, that he was unable to discover the whereabouts of the snuff-box. Whereupon his Lordship waxed wrathful, and Mistress Bess slammed the door in the Magri's face.

The next morning his Lordship's gold spectacles had disappeared in the same weird manner, although they were laid on the stand with the candle and snuffers, beside his Lordship's bed, every night, and put on as soon as he awakened. So, although Mistress Bess thumped on the door of the Gray Tower and demanded the spectacles, and although the Magri shut himself up for another three hours, the spectacles were not forthcoming. His Lordship there-

upon sent for Rigarole, the page, and let loose the vials of his noble wrath so effectually that Rigarole fled in dismay to the shelter of the arras, and gave vent to his grief alone.

On the evening of the same day, Lady Fairlocks's beaded purse, containing three shillings sixpence, disappeared with equal mystery and unreasonableness; and when, the next morning, his Lordship's great seal ring was missing, the atmosphere of the castle became overcharged with excitement and suspicion. No one knew just whom to suspect, hence every one suspected every one else.

His Lordship straightway summoned the Magri to appear at once and give information on the subject. But when the Magri appeared, he was unable, for sheer amazement, to speak.

"How now!" cried his Lordship; "what's the matter?"

"Your Lordship," gasped the Magri, "pardon—but—your Lordship's wig!"

His Lordship threw his hands up to his head. It was as bare as a tennis-ball!

"Odds bodikins!" shouted he. "My head will go next! Speak, Magri, what means this?"

The Magri straightway offered to give the information in three hours, but his Lordship flew into a fearful rage, and vowed that he was neither a yapping poodle nor a lady's cockatoo, to go without his wig for three hours. Whereupon the Magri tore his beard in dismay, and declared that it was witchcraft. His Lordship then demanded the presence of every one in the castle, that all might be questioned.

Mistress Bess, entering straightway, flew out again, returning with an old wig, which she clapped upon his Lordship's head, regardless that 'twas fore part behind, and giving his Lordship the appearance of looking over his own shoulder. Then she turned upon the Magri.

"Get to your tower yonder," quoth she, "and make known the whereabouts of his Lordship's wig! Ye be not worth your weight in crow-feathers! What's the telescope for?"

The Magri had to own sadly that the telescope was also mysteriously affected, as he had discerned naught that day but a mammoth dark object, with a head and two tails, covering the sky, and portending a total eclipse of the sun.

"The books, then! What are the books for, if not for witchcraft and magic, addeplate!" cried Mistress Bess; whereupon the Magri clutched his beard and stalked away to consult the Mammoth Recipe Books for the nine hundred and ninety-ninth time that week.

"Now," quoth Mistress Bess to his Lordship, "while old Know-the-Earth is tickling his nose over those moth-eaten books, we'll investigate!" She straightway bade Rigarole summon every one in the castle, from the steward and the head cook to the master of the hounds and the last scullion. His Lordship also sent for Lady Fairlocks, who established herself on a velvet cushion at her father's right, while perched upon her arm was the Magri's magpie, which she fed with lumps of sugar to keep him quiet.

His Lordship then called each before him in turn to give what information he might about the strange disappearance of the valuables, or to speak the name of the one whom he suspected of having part in the mystery.

But straightway a furious uproar ensued, somewhat after the manner of a game of Shouting Proverbs, for every one shouted the name of another, and the confusion was such that the Lady Fairlocks burst into tears (while Rigarole held the magpie), Mistress Bess put her fingers in her ears, and his Lordship pounded on the floor and roared for silence.

"Out upon ye, varlets!" cried he. "Let each prove that he hath no part in spiriting away the articles, by discovering the thief or the witch ere to-morrow's sun be set! Then shall ye come hither again and speak what ye shall have discovered, and if ye cannot bring forward the valuables or the cause of the disturbance, then shall ye go out from hence, never to return! And if the witch or the thief be discovered, then shall he be straightway ducked i' the pond of Bow Bridge Green!"

Thereupon he ordered them out, one and all, while Mistress Bess went to pound on the door of the Gray Tower and to tell the Magri the state of affairs.

This, then, was the day on which there was such consternation and excitement in the Castle of Bow Bridge.

All day long his Lordship fumed and thundered at one and then another. All day did Mistress Bess fly about like one distracted; listening and peering here and there to glean aught on the subject, meanwhile besieging the Magri for her new starched ruff, which had disappeared from under her very eyes and before her tiring-glass. All day did little Lady Fairlocks pace to and fro in her bower questioning ever and anon of Rigarole, who was likewise disturbed and at loss. All day the scullions whispered together, gathering in groups here and there, and losing all account of time; for, to outbalance all, at noon the castle clock did not strike. Now, never in memory had the castle clock failed to strike. It was outside the Gray Tower, and was reached by a winding stair, up which the Magri went each morning with a mammoth iron key with which to wind the clock. This key never left the Magri's girdle by day, and hung over his head, on a hook, all night. Therefore, when the clock did not strike, Mistress Bess flew to pound upon the Tower door and question the Magri. "The clock doth not strike, and everything is agog!" quoth she, when the Magri had opened the door an inch. "Why doth the clock not strike? And where is my new starched ruff?"

"I know naught of the ruff, and the key was spirited away last night from over my head while I slept!" said the Magri, in a tone of despair. Whereupon Mistress Bess upbraided him severely, and flew to tell his Lordship of the new calamity.

Now, perhaps the one of all the castle who was most disturbed in spirit was the young page Rigarole. He was a thoughtful lad, whose one ambition was to wear a sword and be knighted, and to marry the Lady Fairlocks; hence the idea of being dismissed in disgrace if the thief or the witch was not found disturbed him sorely. So all night long Rigarole brooded over this, and thought of a thousand ways by which the valuables might have disappeared, but in the morning he was just as far as ever from the possible reason. Standing moodily at a window of the castle, Rigarole overheard a conversation which filled him with dismay. The underlings were gathered below in the courtyard, while the head cook leaned out the buttery door talking to the Master of the Hounds. The voices were raised in excitement, and Rigarole could hear every word.

"'Twere well to risk it," the head cook was saying, "for if naught be discovered we go hence on the morrow, willy-nilly!"

"Ay!" quoth the Master of the Hounds, lashing at a yapping cur that snapped at his heels; "an' all for not finding who of us is given to thieving or witchcraft!"

"For all that," spake the steward from the buttery window, "my fine master Rigarole is like as not as much a thief as we who wear not plumed caps and sit not on velvet cushions!"

"Ay, 'tis so!" quoth the cook; "and as for witchcraft, the Magri himself is overfond of magic, we well know! I've sent to him time and again a'ready to-day for the name of a new dish wherewith to tempt his Lordship to-night, but naught can be got out of the Magri. He hath locked the Tower door, and e'en Mistress Bess herself, with threat or cajoling, cannot get therein!"

"M'appen he hath caused the mischief and knows not how to circumvent it," said another from behind the cook; "I ha' heard how the Magri be a wizard!"

There was a murmur of excitement at this, and Rigarole drew the tapestry about him and strove to hear as the scullions pressed nearer, all whispering and gesticulating.

"If there be no other way, there be enough of us to duck him i' the pond!" quoth the cook, after a short conference, wherein all heads were together; "and methinks ducking none too good!"