

# A Witch in the Peak

By R. Murray Gilchrist

It was the evening after old Johnny White's funeral, and Elizabeth sat by the low fire in the house-place, wondering how she could manage to exist for the remainder of her days without him who had never spent a whole day apart from her since their wedding, fifty years ago. The bitterness of her spirit was increased by the knowledge that at the end of the week the little farm must be sold to pay the money which the dead man had owed for standing surety for a dishonest cousin. The original sum had been thirty-five pounds; but the lender, Luke Flint, a shoemaker, who was known as 'the Milton Spider,' from his knack of wrapping a web about such unwary folk as craved aid from him, had stipulated on an interest of fifty per cent. until all was repaid. This interest had eaten up all the profits of the stony acres, and Johnny had died heart-broken because one year's payment was in arrears.

Elizabeth had dismissed all her neighbours. She desired to be left in solitude for such short time as she remained in the house, so that she might recall scenes of bygone happiness. She was quite alone in the world, so that there was none save herself to suffer; but still the outlook was so depressing that the source of her tears was dried.

'I can see yo' again, Johnny lad,' she murmured, 'walkin' wi' me fro' church on aar weddin' morn, as coomly a man as were i' th' whöal Peak But ye' looked just as coomly i' yo'r shroud, wi' all eta pratty gimpings, tho' yo'r cheeks lied lost theer red, and yo'r gowd hair were gone as white as snow. Ay lad, ay lad, I do wish I might hey gone wi' yo'! When I think o' all our good life together; how yo' thowt nowt were too han'some for me, an' as whate'er I did were th' reet thing, I'm like to go mad. An' now I'm to be turned aat o' th' place wheer aar wedlock's bin spent! Et's hard, et's very hard!'

As she lamented, the latch of the door was lifted and the creditor entered. He was a dark, squat man of middle-age, with a bullet-shaped head and blue, close-shaven jowls. His arms and legs were unnaturally long, and his broad shoulders were so much bent as to suggest deformity. He strode forward to the hearth, and without invitation plumped down in the arm-chair which Johnny had always used.

Elizabeth rose in excessive anger. Her thin face flushed crimson, her toothless lower jaw moved oddly from side to side.

'I'll thank yo' to get aat o' that!' she cried. 'Et's always bin set in by a honest fellow, an' I canna see ony other sort use et! Ef yo' mun sit, sit on th' saddle.'

He assumed an air of bravado; but her aspect was so threatening that he rose sullenly and took the corner to which she pointed.

'Yo' needna be so haughty. 'Lizabeth White,' he said, with an unpleasant sneer. 'This spot'll be mine soon, for I'm a-going to buy et, an' happen yo'll coom a-beggin' to th' door.'

'I'd liefer starve nor beg o' yo'. What d'yo' want, a-coomin' rattin'?'

'I on'y want to mind yo' as yo' mun tek none o' th' things sat o' th' place. My papers 'low me to sell all, an' if yo' touch owt—off yo' go to Derby.'

She cracked her fingers in his face. 'I'll be more nor thankful to get sat a' yo'r debt,' she said. 'Et's yo'r cheatin' simple lads like my John as keeps yo' alive. Yo're none fit to be 'mongst decent livers. I do b'lieve as th' law wouldna favour yo'.'

His sallow skin grew white and then purple.

'Yo' try th' law, 'Lizabeth White, an' yo'll find as et canna touch me. Yo'r man signed th' agreement to pay me my money, an' ef be couldna pay et, I were to be at lib'ty to sell th' lend. Th' lend, say I?—et esna lond—newt but three akkers o' stone an' moss, wi' aat a réal blade a' grass! Et wanna fetch thretty pun', an' I'm certain sure as th' furniture esna worth ten. Yo'll still be seem pun's i' my debt. I reckon yo'll hey to go to th' Bastille, an' I may mek' up my mind to loam' some of the good money!'

'I'd go to th' Bastille forty times ower, Sooner nor be behowden to ye' for owt. But as long as I'm stopping i' th' haase, I wanna stond yo'r jaw! Aat yo' go, yo' brute yo'!'

She unfastened the door, and held it wide open. It was a dark night, and the air was heavy with the scent of withered leaves. The prattle of the spring as it leaped from the moor-edge to the trough in the paddock was distinctly audible.

'Yo' owd wretch!' he muttered. 'I'll see as yo' suffer for yo'r brazzenness. Ye' beggar! When yo'r a-hoein' tatur's i' th' Bastille garden, I'll set th' others laughin' at yo'.'

He moved leisurely across the floor; she sharpened his gait by picking up a bosom-stale.

While I'm mistress here, I'll hey none o' yo'. John's paid yo' time an' time again. Be off, yo' skin-a-louse! I beg an' pray God to punish yo' this very fleet. Ef et hadna bin fo yo' theer'ld hey been no buryin' here for mony a year. I'm none one as es gi'en to cumin', but yo' deserve whatten yo'll get.'

He slunk out into the darkness. She closed the door and belted it carefully, and when the clatter of his footsteps had died away, she returned to the chair by the hearth, where a choir of crickets was now singing cheerfully, and delivered herself to the melancholy satisfaction of meditating on past joy and present sorrow.

Meanwhile the Spider walked down the lane in some trepidation, for her violence had unnerved him strangely.

'I do b'lieve hoo's really a witch,' he said. 'Her eyes brenned that red! Ef hoo'd lived i' my greet-gran'-feyther's days hoo'ld hey bin faggotted, sure enow!'

His mumbling was suddenly cut short by some terrible thing catching the hinder-part of his waistband and plucking him up from the ground. When he recovered his senses in some measure he was on a level with the tree-tops. His voice rose in a harsh shriek.

'Help! All a' yo' help! Jack-wi'-th'-Iron-Teeth's gotten howd e' me an's draggin' me to Hell!'

But as it was late, and the Milton folk were abed, none heard. He flew swiftly through the air, his long arms and legs sprawling frog-like. Once he caught hold of the thatch of a barn and clung for a moment, but the rotten wisps came away in his hands. He gave himself up for lost. The demon was dragging him over the moor in the direction of the river.

'o Lord, forgi'e me, forgi'e me, an' I'll tek' advantage o'innocent fowk no more. I'll do my best to set things root as I've set wrong, of only Thou'lt let me off this time!'

He fell with a heavy splash into the marsh of the Wet Withins. For a long time he lay, half-swooning, on a tuasock of bent-grass. Then, when his strength returned, he crawled blindly over the heath to the road.

Instead of making for home, he went straight to Orosslow Farm and knocked feebly at the door. Elizabeth was sleeping in her chair. She had been dreaming blithely of years of good crops. She rose, drowsily, and drew back the bolts. In the dim firelight she looked more like a witch than ever.

'Yo've coom back again!' she said sharply. 'Be off! I wanna hey et said as I let yo' in at this time o' neet!'

He was trembling *like* a paralytic.

'Gi'e me a bit a' paper, 'Lizbeth White,' he stammered, 'an' I'll write a quittance. Yo're a wicked woman, an' I'll hey newt mere to do wi' yo'. Yo're on'y fit to bren!'

'I reckon et's conscience,' she said, as she took paper and pen and ink from the corner cupboard.

'Write whatever yo' like an' go to—'

'Dunna say thatten, for Lord's sake!' he yelled.

He took the paper and wrote:—'*I, Luke Flint, do hereby forgive Elizabeth White her husband's debt as she owed me, and I trust as she will bear no further malice.*'

Then he hastened from the place, as though it held a creature accursed.

Two days afterwards he returned to Crosslow, in a cajoling, lachrymose humour.

'Gi'e me that quittance back again,' he said, with a painful giggle. 'Yo're an honest woman, I reckon. I thowt yo' were a witch, but et were a b'loon hook as picked me up an' carried me to th' wayter-holes. Soom chaps droppin' advertysements for gin an whisky 'ld gone astray an' were tryin' to fix on a spot. Summat bed gone wrong wi' th' machine. Gi'e me et back, wench; yo're a reet-dealin' woman, an' I'm sure yo' wanna do but whatten's just.'

She laid hold of the bosom-stale again.

'I'll brek yo'r back of yo' dunna go,' she cried. 'Yo' thowt I were a witch, but yo' munna think I'm a fool!'