

Weird Tales



March, 1953

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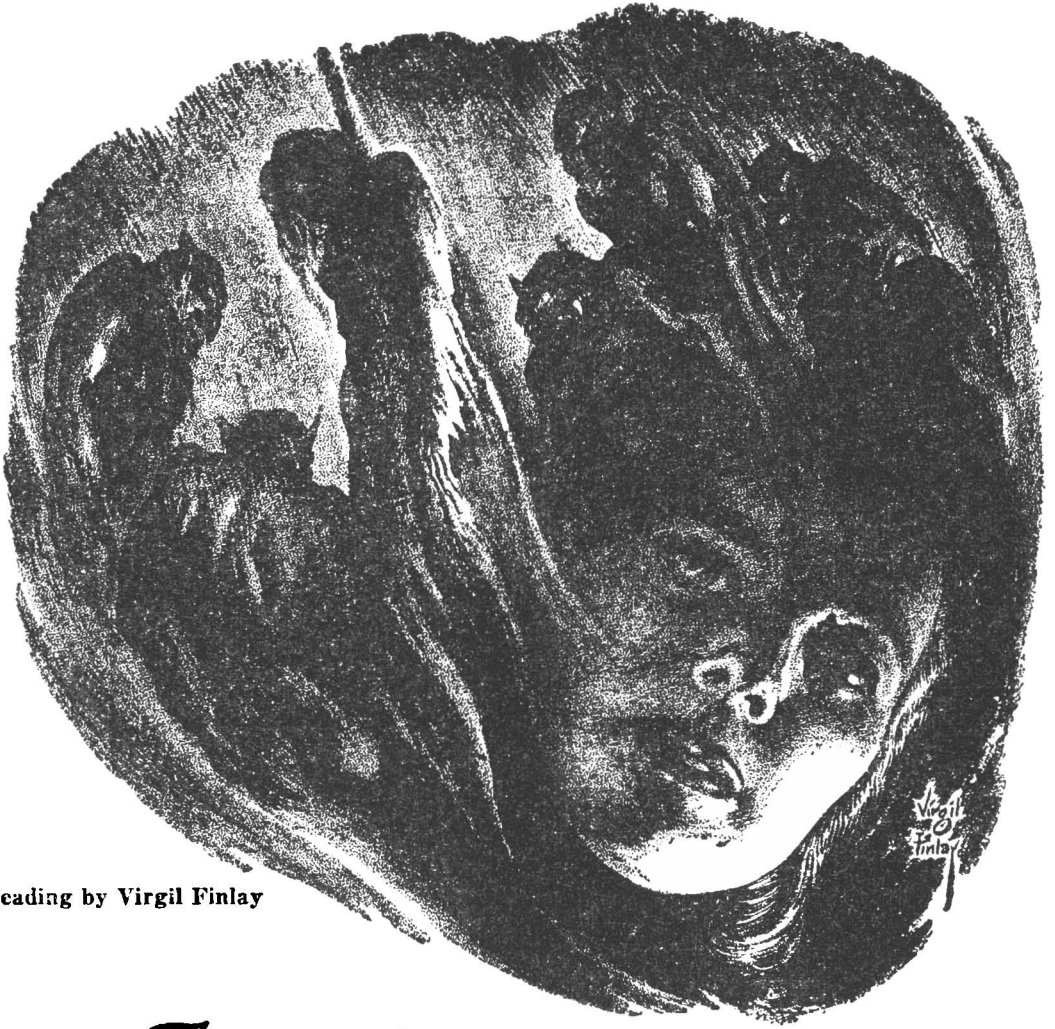
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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

*Because one is too wise to believe in magic, is it wise to
revoke laws against witchcraft?*



Heading by Virgil Finlay

The Supreme Witch

BY APPLEBY TERRILL

THE logs which had just been laid on the fire were wet, and as the powerful yellow flames wrapped them round, long, hissing spurts of steam broke the silence which was in the room.

At the table with its wine bottles, glasses and candles four men sat—Jacobite conspirators; for they were met in the interests of the Stuart King in exile, James the Third

—the Pretender, the government styled him. The four were: the parson, the messenger from King James, Mr. Gartshore the scrivener, and "Old Jem" Lambardiston, the lord of the manor.

Mr. Gartshore was pondering a question of finance, for an answer to which the others waited.

Eventually he spoke:

"Not much above five thousands pounds. Tell his Majesty five thousand guineas."

The messenger made a note; and this concluded the business of the evening. The parson's inclination now was to go. He was ill at ease sitting in Old Jem's house. Nothing short of the Stuart agent's presence in it would have enticed him over the threshold. For not only had he and Old Jem quarreled hotly in the very first hour of their acquaintance, some eighteen months before, rarely speaking since, but Old Jem was reputed to have been a thoroughly bad man all his days, and, in his eighty-seventh year, to be ever ready to gibe at good, to talk with satisfaction of his own misdeeds, and to approve those of others. The only spark in his soul which was not a gleam of evil ('twas commonly said) was a sincere wish that James III could be placed on the throne of his fathers.

So far tonight, the affairs of the exile had fully occupied Old Jem. But with the deliberations finished, it was not improbable that his tongue would turn in malice to themes and assertions which would sharply wound the parson. At least, thus the parson reasoned; and his ears were alert for an attack as he hesitated betwixt remaining and showing discourtesy to the company by taking his leave.

However, Old Jem tended to be silent. Sunken a little in his chair, he watched the messenger fold his papers. Anon he motioned him to fill his glass; and, draining his own, he blinked and closed his eyes, breathing thickly.

The parson, though becoming drawn into converse with Mr. Gartshore, looked at his host. Strive as he would, he could feel no touch of that pity which the old so often stir in one, he could feel only detestation for the aged face in repose. Partly encircled by a tumbled, very white peruke, and now colored high by wine, it was, for all its deep lines, fleshy still. The underlip, tinged with purple, hung loose, the mouth seeming to leer lazily; yet, because of the great puckers about it, 'twas no weak mouth, but ruthless, browbeating.

"There is a lad in Parliament," said the messenger, buttoning his waistcoat over his papers, "a Mr. Faunce, that spoke cleverly

on the witchcraft statutes. We should gain him to our side."

"I have seen to it," said the scrivener. He drank, and put down his glass slowly. "Witchcraft!" he exclaimed, a thrill of anger in his voice. "That is some credit to this year 1736, it hath witnessed the snuffing out of the witchcraft laws—and therefore of witchcraft. For the law, and the law only, made witchcraft. . . . To think that in our day—twenty-five, twenty years back—the law of England was murdering women and little girls for witchcraft! . . . Mr. Parson, sir, I grant you there was witchcraft in Israel. But declare to me, was there ever such in England?"

"Nay, there was not," answered the parson emphatically.

Old Jem's eyes opened. Faded and watery, they nevertheless bent on the parson a strong, unwavering gaze, and the limp underlip stiffened truculently.

"Take back your nay, parson," he said, "for I have been in witchcraft. Ay, I have been in it—head and shoulders in as great a piece of witchcraft as witch ever did—and the place of it no farther off than our town down yonder."

OVER his face a shadow came—the kind of shadow that the parson would least have expected to find there. It hinted that once Old Jem had met with something which had appalled even his iron mind.

"In our town?" said the parson. "I have not heard—"

"Certes you have not. 'Twas away back in King Charles' time—nigh to three score years ago. They who were in it with me are long since dead, and 'twas a thing we had no wish to talk of, and hoped we should forget." Old Jem shook his head, with his lips pursed and his eyes cloudy. "I have forgot no scrap, no jot."

"*Voilà*, then, Mr. Lambardiston," said the messenger, "give us the story."

"No," said Old Jem, taking up his snuff-box. "I would not have spoke this much, but the wiping out of the witch laws by these perky fellows who are too wise to believe in magic hath left me in a fume. And when Gartshore there, and Parson—"

He stopped, surveying the scrivener and

parson in turn. "So ye deem it an empty tale, Gartshore, and you too, Parson?" For a few seconds his lips pressed together tightly, his face ever setting harder, decision growing in his eyes, which smoldered with exasperation. "Very well!" he cried; "ye shall have the tale; and if ye will go to the jail tomorrow ye shall find some records that will savor of its truth." He raised himself and leaned forward with his arms on the table.

The messenger breathed "Good!" Mr. Gartshore muttered something apologetic, and the parson's interest vanquished his inclination to go.

"Now listen," said Old Jem.

His voice was wonderfully powerful for his years; and he gave his narrative with an orderliness and ease that were to be anticipated from one who in the past had been reckoned one of the finest Tory orators in the House of Commons.

"To begin with," he said, "I must go back to the year '67—1667, when I was a lad of seventeen. Witchcraft trials were frequent enough thenadays, as you do know; and at the autumn assize here we had the case of a woman who lived in this very town. Her name was Shafto—Ellen Shafto. She was a widow whose man had been killed in the great Four Days Fight with the Hollander fleet. She had two young children, a boy and a girl, and was of no ripe age herself, say, twenty-eight. And a pretty woman she was, darkhaired, slim, and smiling, with a sweet curve to the jaw and a taking poise of the head—as I had begun to note. But, despite her prettiness and her poverty, she was known as a very honest woman.

"Having been ere she came hither, needlemaid to some modish madame, she kept herself and her children by sewing for the gentlefolk roundabout here.

"Now there was another woman—I forgot how called—who was her neighbor and did work of a like kind; and betwixt her and Mrs. Shafto jealousy and quarreling arose.

"After a while it chanced that this woman's right hand and arm became swelled, so that she sorely pained and could not sew. Old Dr. Peters, the leech, could in

no wise get rid of the swelling and was puzzled to discover a cause for it.

"A bruit spread that Mrs. Shafto had bewitched the arm, accomplishing this by standing at her window with a silk kirtle across her own arm and her eyes held on the other woman's house. At her trial, under threat of torture, Mrs. Shafto pleaded guilty and was sentenced to be hanged.

"Now mark this well. She was to be hanged in the market-place, opposite the Red Bull inn. On the morning a great and savage crowd was gathered there, groaning and yelling and bent to seize her ere she reached the gallows-tree and to give her a rougher death than by the rope. For witchcraft is a crime that oft will drive a populace to a frenzy.

"I was looking on from the Red Bull, ill enough pleased by the scene—being young, and the witch so comely; and close on 9 o'clock, the hour for the hanging, everything appeared the horrid to me because of the strange quality of the daylight. It was November—for the assize had come late. The sun was but little risen, and shone weakly through a gap it had melted in the thick murk which floated over us. The market place was partly shadows and partly a blotch of queer, heavy, yellow light, wherein the faces of those who tiptoed to see if Mrs. Shafto were near—faces with teeth showing and eyes wide open—had the look of waxen masks.

"Of a sudden the bell in the clock-house commenced to ring nine. The multitude was stricken silent on the instant. All were bewildered because Mrs. Shafto was not come. But presently we caught the sound of a huge, angry cry from near the jail. And soon it was known that the sheriff, aware of what the mob intended, had called Ralph Timmins, the hangman, to him and bidden him hang Mrs. Shafto privily, which he did forthwith in her cell, putting the rope over a beam.

"My father, who was in the jail with the sheriff, told me afterwards that neither the sheriff nor he went to see the execution done. They stood with divers others in the passage by the main door, it being wellnigh dark save where a flood of the dull, yellow light fell, this coming to them through the

window of a room whereof the door, opening upon the passage, was swung wide back.

"And anon, my father said, Ralph Timmins walked down the stone stairs to them, and was near to falling at the last step on account of the gloom; and saluting the sheriff, he quoth: 'Sir, I have put the young witch away, as your worship bid'."

OLD JEM stopped to pour some wine. Presently the scrivener asked.

"And the woman's arm?"

"Mended from that day," said Old Jem. "Oh, Ellen Shafto was a witch, doubt it not; and maybe her power was far vaster than she showed. But she is not the witch of my tale—the supreme witch that was more potent than a score of Ellens.

"Now harken again:

"It was, I said, in '67 that Ellen Shafto was hanged. For the next twelve years I came but little to these parts, but, my father dying in '79, I removed hither from London.

"In a short while I learned that Ellen Shafto's children, the lad now aged twenty-one and the girl eighteen, still dwelt near the town; and one day I met this girl in the street. I knew her as soon as I saw her, for she woke my recollection of her mother. She was younger, fresher, even slighter, but she had the same dark curls, the same sweet curve of the jaw, the same alluring poise of the head. Only in the expression of her face did she differ much. The mother had been wont to be smiling, the daughter's lips pouted (though in a pretty fashion) and her eyebrows, with the line of a little frown between them, warned one of a temper.

"I stopped her, asking her name—which she told me was Nora—and inquiring how she and her brother lived.

"Shyl, but giving me no further curtsy than that with which she had halted, she said that her brother had received a gift of money from the lady in London in whose service their mother had been. With this money he had leased a trifle of land, which he farmed, and she dwelt with him.

"I spoke with her for several minutes, and had meant to drop a couple of guineas into her palm; but I noted a stormy sparkle in her eyes when the coins clinked in my pocket, so I let them fall back; and I lifted

not my fingers to her chin as I turned away—from memory of that stormy sparkle.

"But there and then I was mightily in love with Nora Shafto; and I knew that the winning of her was now to be the aim of my life, and that she would fight me hard."

Old Jem's eyes, which seemed growing dimmer and dimmer as he lost himself more surely in the past, half lit for a moment and swept to the parson—who discovered straightway, to the discomfiture of his conscience, that in one thing at least he had estimated Old Jem unjustly.

"I ask your pardon, Parson," quoth Old Jem, "for what I shall say next. But to give you a full understanding of my story I must speak plainly."

His eyes moved from the parson.

"As I said, I was mightily in love with Nora Shafto. I had no thought to marry her—though when 'twas too late I would have wed her a dozen times over if that could have brought her to me. . . . That she was a witch's daughter, and might be a witch herself, was naught to me. I was the sort of man who would have enjoyed to wed a witch for the fun of it—were she a witch of birth. But I was not the sort of man to wed a needle-woman's daughter—were she white souled as an angel.

"And certes, Nora Shafto was that, so far as accepting my love was concerned. She could have loved me. For a brief while, during which she let me speak often with her, I saw her affection for me grow—grow radiant, burn forth. But that was before she knew I meant not marriage. Afterwards—for months afterwards—I followed her, waylaid her, besought her, vainly. The flame which had burned was dead. I offered her what she would—gems by the handful, gold and more gold, till she had the chance to beggar me well-nigh! She answered nay to all; not even a kiss did I get from her save a flick of a one which I snatched.

"That was by the horse-pool below the town, of an evening in the May of '80. I had intercepted my young paragon, and most lovely was she to see, a-stand with her head thrown back and her color bright, holding me at a distance with her look. The frowning line was plain betwixt her eyebrows, her eyes were all anger, and there

were revealed—one near each nostril—two little stern furrows which somehow made her face appear old without taking away its youthfulness—a strange blending that was hauntingly beautiful.

"But of late her tongue and manner had so scathed me that I could keep my temper only by the hardest effort. And this evening, being presently jabbed by a retort from her, I exclaimed:

"'Nora, verily you are a little spite! You answer nothing but bitterness and spite to all I say, and I have never spoke a word to you that was not love and gentleness—till now.'

"She was in no way disconcerted by my new tone. She seemed rather to feel braced and of better self-assurance by reason of it. There was less anger in her face, and a good deal more of bold contempt, which is a thing to make one seethe, coming from a person of low birth.

"'Ay, you were very gentle, Mr. Lambardiston—thinking to fill my ears with toys,' said she, using a common phrase of the time. 'Farthing toys,' she added, her eyes most scornful.

"'Farthing toys is a lie,' I said. 'And that you know well.' I strove to master myself. 'Nora, I promised—I promise, to put round your fingers, round your neck, round your pretty curls, toys worth the ransom of this town. . . . You will do all the gaining, I shall do all the spending—'

"She moved her shoulders quickly, lifting her chin higher and looking deliberately away from me.

"'Ay, that's your sleek prating,' she said in a slow, loathing way, '—you will do all the spending! . . . And you blamed me for a liar! You—that will do all the spending! . . . Oh!' cried she, looking back to me—and I saw in her eyes that she hated me—'Oh, why doth it not choke you—that damned lie? You will spend some bits of gold, but I—I must spend my soul—my soul! . . . Mr. Lambardiston whines to me to buy him a little diversion—with my soul. "Let us two voyage through loveland," quoth he. And I am to pay for his voyage—with my soul! Fough, you blackguard cur!'

"Nora Shafto was ready with words, and her voice was of a betterbred quality than

fitted her station—for after her mother's hanging a lady of the district had taken her into her house and cared for her well until her own death. But this denouncement had more barbed wit than anything she had given me yet—and it smarted me mightily; though I covered this with a laugh, deeming that a kiss would be ample amends for the invective, and determining that this instant I would take it.

"There was a horseman riding slowly up the lane towards us, but I cared not for him, and stepped across to Nora with a word of my intent, I noted that, instead of seeking to dart aside, she put her hand to the basket of flower roots, dug from the hedge, which she was carrying; and then my hands clapped on her shoulders and my lips touched a corner of her mouth as she jerked it past me.

"She stamped swiftly on my foot—I wore but shoes—threw off one of my hands, whirled, and got free, the basket dropping to the ground and emptying forth its plants. From amid these she whipped up a dull, stout knife.

"'So that is Mr. Lambardiston!' she gasped. 'Mr. Lambardiston—of the great gentry that visit the law on poor folk . . . Mr. Lambardiston, that was made deputy sheriff a se'nnight since. An attacker of maids!' She showed me the knife. 'I want you to try again,' she said; 'for yonder comes a gentleman that shall swear I killed you fairly.'

"I had a good mind to try again. But the fellow on horseback had flipped up his nag, and was trotting forward all a-grin; and I had no sword with which to stay him from interference, whereas a very long iron was jogging by his leg. Withal, as Nora had feared, I was deputy sheriff, and could not but cut an unseemly figure in the affair, which by an argument with the arriving knave, might be much noised.

"So I turned from her, limping with my hurt foot.

"'You witch's jade!' I said; 'you have the black temper of a witch yourself.'

"I heard her draw in her breath at that. I heard her move, as though she meditated to cast herself on my back. But then she spoke mockingly:

"'I knew it!' cried she. 'I knew your

brute's mouth would go to my poor mother . . . Oh, ay, I have a witch's temper, Mr. Lambardiston, and witch's craft enough to keep myself out of your hands however you strive.'

"At this last idle saying—as I deemed it—I faced about for a moment and quietly bade her cease from dangerous words of witchcraft. For though I never would have repeated them to her harm, the horseman was now within earshot.

"Having given which warning, I went home.

"TWO days afterwards her brother, Francis Shafto, a big, dour-visaged fellow, placed himself surlily, with extreme impudence, in my path as I was entering the town. He threatened that if I so much as spoke to Nora henceforth, he would so beat me with his cudgel that I should lie abed for many a week; and he added 'twas his belief no magistrate or judge would do other than hold him justified in this.

"It was plain that I must have him cleared out of the place. I wrote that same day to a friend, captain of a second-rate of the navy; and a week after this, half a dozen sailors went to Shafto's farm and impressed Master Francis for the sea—most lawlessly, I confess.

"Hearing that he was taken off, with Nora left swooning from the fury with which she had struggled to tear him from the sailors, I felt I had done cleverly. His release would be an additional bribe to offer Nora. . . .

"I had not done cleverly; I had done fatally.

"The first hint I got of the truth was a report that the seamen, on their road to the coast with Francis Shafto, had been charged into by a vicious bull. Then followed the news that no bull had attacked them, but a black filly, which, bursting suddenly through a gate, had raced straightway upon them and, biting, lashing, trampling, like a fiend, had badly torn one man, broken the leg of another, and killed a third outright. Francis Shafto, whose hands were tied because of a fight he had made at the farm, was the first to be knocked down, but was not harmed by the beast, which presently,

setting her teeth in his coat, began to drag him away; but a sailor, who by now had drawn his whinger, struck her on the shoulder, whereat she dropped Shafto and clattered off fast.

"I was starting forth for London when I had these tidings. Beyond being somewhat pleased that Shafto was unhurt, I was little interested. But, returning hither a few days later to renew matters with Nora, I was prettily astounded to find that she was in jail, accused of having changed herself into the black filly and slain a sailor with the hope to rescue her brother.

"I will tell you what was evidenced against her. The filly, when driven off by the blow from the whinger, was seen again by no man, nor was anyone in the countryside to be found who owned her or remembered to have seen her. At the time of the onset Nora was a day gone from home, having told her friends that she would privily follow the press-party and, it might be, persuade some folk to attack it for her. She came back on the day after the filly's attack. She was very wearied and draggled and white, and in great pain from a cut across her shoulder, which had been done, she said, by striking against a fence in the dark.

"Now the tale of the filly and the whinger was reached here before her; and, everyone knowing of her mother, tongues were already a-wag. It needed but the cut on Nora's shoulder to set the town mad with excitement. Never had there been so clear a case of a child inheriting evil magic! And the strength of this magic in Nora! She was a far more dangerous witch than ever her mother was. The magistrates were clamored at to commit her to prison, and this was done ere she had been home many hours—a crowd lingering about the jail till nearly midnight, roaring and threatening to break in to her, and everyone saying that no man could account himself at all safe while she were alive.

"I know not whether to believe Nora a witch or to flout the notion, but I did know one thing—she should be neither hanged nor harmed, if my influence could shield her; and I was very certain it could.

"Forthwith, using my sheriff powers, I

with her head held back and touching it, she commenced to rage at me, her voice low for the most part, yet often thrown hither and thither by her passion—the palms of her hands now and again beating upon the wall.

"What need to tell you her speech? 'Twas the old tale of hate over again, yet now twice as bitter, with its accusation that I had planned her brother's carrying-off, whereby I was responsible for the pass she was come to.

"For a space she would heed no word of mine. But anon she began to listen to my protest that I would avert all peril from her—obtain her quick release. While harkening, she seemed to cool fast from her rage, her palms lying quite still against the wall, her eyes lacking luster. Her face had become wooden, as the saying is. This I little liked.

"For your favor," she said, on my pausing, 'I am to love you? Is that the compact?'

"Scarce a compact," I answered. 'I am not so mean a man I will not save you unless you shall love me . . . No, no, Nora; yet I shall hope you will change to me; and mark you this—if you do, your brother shall swiftly be libertied from the navy.'

"Ah-h," she said softly, a dreaminess in her eyes—eyes that were much my study when I was with her; they were so fluent of expression, so beautiful. 'Ah-h,' she said; 'in truth—you in all this villain world! For see, you are high-placed, with my poor life and my brother's much in your power; wherefor you should be of stern honor, Mr. Lambardiston—should you not?—that we and such as we could ever trust you. But what are you!' She breathed between her set teeth with a hissing sound. 'If my mother's spirit is here beside me,' she said, 'of which I am very sure, what must she think of you? Have you no whit of shame, striving to break me in the room where my mother doubtless stands?'

"Why doubtless here?" I asked.

"She looked upwards. Following her glance, I saw above us a balk of dark oak spanning the cell. I exclaimed loudly; for I was moved by the cruel thoughtlessness which had caused Nora to be placed in the very room in which her mother was hanged.

"You shall be taken out of this," I said, making a step to summon the turnkey.

proclaimed penalties against any that should make a turmoil outside the jail; and I called out and stationed therein a score of train-bandmen, armed to the eyelids. I used the rough of my tongue to the magistrates who had caused the arrest and detention of Nora, instead of flogging the mob that had clamored against her.

"And then I went to Nora.

"My purpose was to dispel her fears at once, to tell her that I would see she was put on trial at the assize, that indeed I would get her freed ere the week was out. And as I strode with the chief turnkey to her cell I was sure she would read much of this in my face, and, in her relief and gratitude, give me a kinder welcome of late.

"When the fellow had unbarred the door, I bade him begone to a distance, and, swinging back the door myself, I entered the cell.

"Nora greeted me with a gasp of her breath, with stormshine in her eyes. Despite that I came to a standstill, she moved, facing me, to the far wall. Leaning against it,

"But, far from thanking me, she brought me to a halt by declaring she would liefer remain, and would entreat Mr. Palmer, the governor of the jail, to put her back in this cell, did I have her removed.

"The dreaminess had gone from her eyes, but for some seconds it came again. I could not tell whether she spoke chiefly to me or to herself when she said:

" 'I do remember my mother very well, though I had her for so little a time. She was a dear, sweet mother, and I know doth yearn to hearten me now that I am accused as she was . . . I think I am more near to her in this room than I could be elsewhere on earth.' Her voice sank, becoming a moan, soft—scarce unhappy. 'I have wanted my mother. None knows how much! She was all tender love, and the world is loneliness and cruel as stone. I shall be glad to go away to my mother, though I would it were not by the hangman.'

"Then her eyes, meeting mine squarely, lit of a sudden. There was a quick rousing of her mind and body. She started from the wall and bent towards me. 'But rather would I go by hanging, rather by the roastingpost, than come to you—you sneaking dog! Ay, an hundred times rather!'

"It was clear she could not be reasoned with that day. I turned on my heel, wasting no more words; and, walking from the jail, I decided that my best plan would be to seem to abandon her until she had been put in greater fright than she was in at present. I would let her stand her trial, which I doubted not would result in her condemnation; and then I would secure a pardon."

OLD JEM sipped from his glass. Setting it down, he relapsed in his chair, and clasped his hands, without having looked at any of his auditors. His gaze brooded darkly on the wall opposite him.

"She was tried at the summer assize. She pleaded 'not guilty,' and was not threatened with torture to make her alter that. For the judge was old Jack Phillips, no firm believer in witchcraft—as his words to the jury showed. But the jury took only a few minutes to find her guilty; and she was condemned to be hanged in the market place, where her mother was to have been flung off.

"Already I had arranged almost fully about getting the pardon; and after the case Jack Phillips threw in his weight with me; and I had the pardon in my hands with forty hours to spare. But I meant to bring Nora fairly to the ground, with no fight left in her, this time. I had charge of the execution—Holden, the sheriff, being bedridden—and I intended to say naught of the pardon until my pretty one was within a few minutes of being carted forth to the gibbet, and the uproar of the mob, sounding from the market place, should tell her that, outside the prison, she would have no safety, despite her pardon, except she drove forth with me and my train-bandmen and lodged in my house.

"I would forbid any sheltering of her in the jail. And by a gift of drink to the mob I should have inflamed it to an extraordinary ferocity, such as, in her stubbornest hate of me, she could not dream to face.

"Oh, I had Miss Nora in a rare trap from which there was no escape but into my doorway.

"With her pardon under my pillow, I slept complacent of mind through the night which she would deem to be her last.

"I started early for the jail in the morning—the clearest, sweetest July morning I had ever known, with the hills beyond the woods wondrous outstanding and gleaming in the sunlight. I went afoot to enjoy the air, having ordered my coach to be at the jail for my return with Nora.

"Her hanging was to be at 9, opposite the Red Bull. Passing behind the market place, I felt the air a-tremble from the vast confusion of voices coming thence; and at intervals these uplifted in a shout of execration against her that nigh stunned one—which noise reaching me as I paused before the jail to warn a group of persons that I should permit no gathering there, was like the tumbling down of thousands of planks of wood.

"I smiled to think what a tempest would burst when the news of the pardon spread (I had increased my train-bandmen to fifty), and to think what indignation would be shown by sundry gentlemen who were to meet me in the jail—when it was disclosed

to them that the pardon (which they would have expected instant tidings of) was by no means newly arrived. These same gentlemen—Palmer, the governor, Captain Jones and Sir Hugh Gerrow, justices—were prone to take offense at my high-handed acts, as they termed them.

"However, I saw not how the latter two received the tidings; for about half after 8, they being not yet come, I informed Palmer, bidding him tell them, and went up to Nora's cell. On my way I met Ralph Timmins, the hangman, who had put her mother to death by means of the beam in the cell. He was an oldish man now, with his shoulders much bent and his thin beard streaked white and brown.

"'There be a riot of howling in the market-square, your worship,' said he. 'Tis as it was in her mother's time, or worse, I'd affirm.' He rubbed his chin with his knuckles.

"'A queer, sad business, sir—these two. Both so pretty to look on and like as a pair o' pink roses.'

"'You will have no hanging today, Ralph,' I answered; 'she is pardoned. But you shall lose nothing in fees.' Unwilling to stay even long enough to get out some

gold for him, because of my eagerness to greet Nora, I added: 'Wait for me below.'

"THE door of Nora's cell was open, two turnkeys standing by the threshold. I gestured them away, and walked in. I could perceive that Nora had gone white at the sound of my approach. Perchance she knew not my step—thought one was come to take her to the cart. When I confronted her the color began to come again to her cheeks; and the line of the little frown between her eyebrows was deeper than I had ever discerned it.

"She held herself rigid, the fingers of one hand gripping motionlessly, a cluster of her dark curls.

"Well, I showed her the pardon. I lifted my finger, telling her to listen to the outcry in the market place, which was borne to us; and I explained to her that only by taking refuge in my house could she preserve herself from the savage anger of the town. Not until that last did her face lose its stoniness, did her eyes cease from looking balefully into mine.

"She raised them toward the beam; her fingers twitched amid her curls. "Oh, my mother—mother! mother!" she said, her lips so quivering that I believed she would fall to sobbing.

"Now, come at once with me, Nora', I said gently.

"She gave but one sob, a strange, sighing one, and her gaze returned to me.

"What if I ask Mr. Palmer to harbor me here?"

"I will not allow him.'

"I had wagered that—bully of every man!' Then she spoke with greater steadiness. 'You believe you are the winner betwixt us, but I believe I quoth true when I said I had witch's craft enough to keep myself out of your hands.'

"Come,' I said.

"She took her fingers from her curls and pointed to the pardon. 'Until that is given to Mr. Palmer, his warranty to release me, you can not force me to stir, or force any man to stir me, bully whom you shall. And I will not stir except Mr. Palmer comes hither to bid me, or Mr. Drew doth bid me.'



I started immediately to go down to Palmer, beckoning to Drew to accompany me, so that Palmer could send him back for Nora. Then it came to my mind that her boast anent witch's craft might have some subtle meaning. What if she were planning to kill herself!

"At once I swung round and went to the entrance of the cell, whither the second turnkey was advancing. Nora stood much as I had left her.

"I intercepted the turnkey, whispered that he should watch her narrowly. Then, giving one more glance at the sweetly molded face and the eyes balefully following me, I rejoined Drew.

"I found Palmer and Jones and Sir Hugh Gerrow standing in a passage within the main door, with Ralph Timmins a yard or two from them waiting expectantly for me. Within a minute Palmer had dispatched Drew to bring Nora to us, and then I had leisure to note that Jones and Gerrow were even more cholericly silent than I had anticipated. I surmised that they had been examining my motive in taking Nora to my house.

"I let them have my back, and gazed along the passage to the stone stairs, looking for Nora to appear round the bend of them. Anon I recollected Ralph Timmins and gave him three guineas, which moved him to very many thanks. These, however, I scarce heeded, for I was watching the stairs again, exasperation growing in me as I realized that Nora was contriving a long delay.

"'Palmer,' I said presently, 'that girl is making a to-do of sorts—the little ingrate! I beg you go yourself and fetch her.'

"I heard him take a step behind me. But then he spoke to Timmins:

"'Ralph, go you and tell Drew to hasten with her.'

"'Ay, go Ralph,' I said.

"Timmins mounted the stairs at his sharpest pace. My three guineas were spurring him. Yet when full time enough was passed for him to have reached Drew and one of them be back with Nora, no one came.

"'They are seeking her hood or dusting her kirtle, or more like she is swooned with

"Drew was the chief turnkey, one of the two who had been conversing with her. He had been present at her mother's death, and—I suspected—had been pitying to the daughter.

"Frail though Nora's argument was, I made no dispute. I should get her more quickly to my coach by bending to her whim.

happiness,' said Jones, on Palmer himself remarking that Ralph was somewhat long gone.

"'Nay, tell the truth as it is,' said Gerrow. 'The maid is not over-raptured with Lambardiston . . . And, deuce take me!' he added, with his spleen coming to the surface; 'I can not tell why we stand to see the meeting of the child and the gentleman.'

"There was a considerable sneer about the last word which whipped my attention pretty smartly from the stairs. I faced round, and was on the point of retorting hotly, when I was diverted by the casting open of a door beside us. Three of my train-bandman stepped forth from a room. They saluted us, and two of them marched off. The third, a sergeant, paused to shut the door.

"'Nay, leave it,' said Jones. 'We get some daylight thus . . . Faith!' he continued, as the sergeant went away; 'how queerly dark it hath grown in this last minute. A storm is on us.'

"' 'Tis the suddenest thing,' said Gerrow with astonishment. He lifted his cane towards the barred aperture above the main door. 'Not a minute ago the sky yonder was fresh blue, Palmer; I was looking at it. See it now, the smokiest brown I ever beheld'—he broke off with an extraordinary gulp, flicking down his cane and jabbing the end hard upon the paved floor—'I—ever—beheld'—he repeated, sheer amazement in his voice—'save once, a wintry morning nigh thirteen years ago, when I stood in this very passage, and Ralph Timmins was gone up to hang this girl's mother—this girl's mother! . . . Jones, Palmer, do you mark the marvel of it? Here I stood, with Amphlett, the sheriff, and with Harry Lambardiston—Lambardiston's father. And up above there was death for a witch, as there was near to have been for her daughter in this hour—and that up above too, for there would have been dangerous trouble in the market place had she gone thither. List, you can hear the tumult from it. So we heard it then—and through this doorway—'

"GERROW moved athwart the room's doorway, and instantly his spare, elderly face was illumined by a sickly yellow

light, which showed him staring ahead with something akin to fear, with his lips working.

"'Yea, there it is' he cried, pointing shakily through the doorway. 'There is the self-same sky that was over us.'

"Now, having been preoccupied by Nora's tardiness, I had not noticed the change to gloom until Jones' speaking of it. In my surprise at perceiving how deep an obscurity was about us, save in the yellow light's path, I straightway forgot my anger against Gerrow; and, listening while he spoke of that other morning, I found myself remembering much that my father had said anent their standing in this passage. And when the dull, yellow glow swam over Gerrow's face I recalled vividly indeed how my father had spoken of the yellow light pouring through this very doorway—and in an instant, for no reason that I knew of, I felt my heart cold and heavy.

"I went to Gerrow's side and glanced through the doorway to the window beyond; and at that verily I got a shock. The sky was the sky of the morning when Mrs. Shafto was hanged. It was that same November sky—not a similitude made by the overcasting of the July sky. For the sun, seemingly, had fallen back from the height whence it shone as I walked to the jail, and was little risen; and it shone feebly through a gap molten in the thick murk—just as it had when I looked on it from the Red Bull in my boyhood. Its turbid light then had rendered Mrs. Shafto's coming death increasedly dreadful to me; but now, ere I had gazed on it five seconds, there slid over me a horror—on this morning when no execution was to be done!—a hundred-fold worse than that which qualmed me when execution really was to be.

"'Gerrow!' I breathed; and I looked at him.

"He was gripping his chin tightly. His eyes were expanding vacant. His mien was that of one dismayed to stupefaction by something he has discovered.

"' 'Tis thirteen years ago,' he said, slurredly, for his grip was hampering his mouth. 'This day is thirteen years ago—we are in November, '67. . . . How can it be?'

"'Gerrow!' I cried.

"His vacant eyes sought me. A startled glitter sprang up in them. He gaped, taking his hand from his chin and holding it, limp-fingered, towards me.

"'Lambardiston,' he said, 'how like to your father you are! Why—why you are he! Harry—Harry Lambardiston, old friend!'

"His hand dropped in affection on my shoulder. I clasped his arm to push it away, but I heard Jones speak to Palmer, and his words arrested me in the act.

"'Palmer,' he quoth heavily, 'my dear cousin, Ned Olpherts, is dead at last of the wounds the French gave him at Martinique.'

"'Well did I know that Jones' cousin, Olpherts, lingering with wounds received in battle when fighting under Admiral Harman at Martinique, had died in November, '67.

"Palmer replied not, except to mumble of the fort at Tangier, and of the Moormen—seeming to believe himself in Africa, where once he had served.

"And then from the clock-house began to ring forth the hour of 9.

"I clutched hard on Gerrow's arm; for, though the sounds were not very near us, each stroke seemed to club my senses; and, what with the horrid yellow light, I was become giddy—helplessly giddy. And bemused too was I, in the strangest fashion, during a space. For, having reeled against a wall, pulling Gerrow with me, I leaned there thinking that my weakness and unaccountable dread were disgraceful to me who had gained such a repute for stout courage at the fight on Long Marston Moor; and full a minute must have passed ere I remembered that it was my father who fought at Long Marston—six years before I was born.

"I thrust Gerrow's arm from me. Still leaning, I noted that the others stood very quiet, their faces set in a wholly bewildered expression, yet their eyes restless, in a lethargic manner, dwelling now on mine, now on each other's.

"FOR a space we stayed thus without a word; each man, I should say, striving to adjust the disorder which he knew his

thoughts were in, and wondering if all were as distraught as he.

"Then we were aroused—even as I perceived that the yellowness was going from the light and the passage brightening somewhat—by a footfall on the stone stairs.

"Ralph Timmins was descending alone. He came from step to step slowly, and despite the gloom that remained, and his distance from me, I saw that there was yet in his face a far greater confusion than had ever been in my companions. Confusion! It was the completest astoundment. Save that his pale blue eyes were wide open, as though from some waxing torment of his mind, he was in a stupor. He seemed a man midway between a dream that was terrible and an awakening that was more terrible.

"Above his streaked beard his cheeks were marble-white.

"Slowly he moved down. At the last step he tripped, nearly pitching on his head.

"It was then that Gerrow's voice rose in a very wail. 'Oh, see that!' he cried. 'What means it? What witch's craft is on us!'

"I had seen, with my father's saying of how Ralph Timmins had stumbled at the bottom step darting like a sword blade through my brain. That stumble, and Gerrow's final words, discovered the truth to me.

"I knew—ay, I knew what Timmins, coming drag-foot straight to me with his eyes now on my face, desperately questioning me, was going to say.

"I knew! My poor, wondrous little Nora, who deemed she had witch's craft enough to keep herself from me! How supremely had she wrought with her magic!

"Timmins stopped, and saluted me.

" 'Sir,' he said, 'I have put the young witch away, as your worship bid.'

"Knowing, I had waited petrified. But his words stung me to like—to madness. I shrieked twice or thrice, making the passage echo—Timmins crouching and wilting before me. With both hands I seized his neckcloth, tearing it off him as I strove to smash him against the wall. I struck him on the face. I wrung out my sword, cursing him, promising him every agony that man can inflict on man. Then—I can not tell

why, save that I was bereft of reason—I shouted:

“‘Bring her! Go, bring her down to me!’—menacing him with my point.

“He moved his hands hopelessly.

“‘Your worship, she is dead.’

“‘Bring her!’ I screamed.

“He turned and went to the stairs. He mounted and was gone behind their bend; and once more I was watching those empty stone stairs. I felt a hand patting my arm. ‘Twas Jones; for Gerrow, some way behind me, was saying: ‘Look, blue sky and clear sunlight! . . . Man, open that door, I am nigh swooning.’ And the main door grated open, which would be done by Palmer’s hand.

“I took not my eyes from the stairs. I listened strainedly; and at last the sound of slow steps, the steps of someone descending sideways, with a burden, came to me from beyond the bend. And then appeared Nora’s little feet in their gray hose—extended in the air, the shoon fallen off. I saw her kirtle edge; I saw her knees, swathed in her kirtle, half arched upon Timmins’ arm. In another second I should have seen her face. But I could not endure that much. I leapt round with fresh and frantic screams and ran out to my coach.”

OLD JEM put his hand over his eyes, remaining very still for a while.

“After the rain yesterday,” he said, his voice gone wan and low, “I went walking, and came home by the horse-pool. I halted in the lane, thinking much on Nora. This is December month, but ‘twas May to me in the lane; and how clear I could see Nora with her sweet, angered face, her poor little basket of flower roots—and her old knife, which I would, with all my heart! she had drove through and through me . . . Nora, dead these six-and-fifty years!”

He flung down his hand, raising his chin.

“There then,” said he, “is my answer to you gentlemen who are so mighty scornful of witchcraft. Why Nora changed not into a bird or moth to escape me, why she spelled me not blind or cripple, I can not say. But in what she did, showed she not the supremest witchcraft that could be? She changed the sky, she threw back the

year to thirteen years before; and while we in the passage were but half under her magic, which was enough for her, she so spell-bound Ralph Timmins and Drew, the turnkey, that without ado they hanged her from the beam in the cell, believing they were hanging her mother. . . . I made no endeavor afterwards to punish these fellows. Think you I would have spared them if the circumstances were not just as I have told you?"

OF THE listeners it was the parson who spoke. The hints of great sorrow which had come from Old Jem had not been without effect on him. So that, hateful though the picture of his host in early manhood was, he was no longer void of pity.

"Mr. Lambardiston," he said, and his tones were gentle, "I hold your story of this awful happening to be true in every word—so far as that happening was understood by you and others. But I deem you have erred as to the real nature of it . . . I can not believe it was any witchcraft of Nora Shafto that took her from you."

"Could aught save witchcraft have done it?" exclaimed Old Jem with rising anger.

"Yes," answered the parson. For a moment he was silent, then: 'Mr. Lambardiston, this is to be a reply to your question, 'Could aught?' 'Tis no attempt to interpret—I would not dare so to interpret—the happening . . . Of poor little Nora Shafto you have used the word 'supreme.' Bethink you, is not that word often given to a Veritable Power far asunder from witchcraft? The Supreme Power which stayed the sun upon Gibeon and the moon in the valley of Ajalon, which thrust back the shadow on the sundial, could with equal ease have transmuted the years for you that were in the jail—decreeing that thus should Nora, who, for all her childish vauntings of witchcraft, was truly 'white-souled as an angel'—" The speaker paused. "Decreeing that thus should Nora go to her mother," he ended mercifully.

For the color had ebbed from Old Jem's cheeks, the very purple of his lips was mud-hue, and consternation and growing despair were in his face.

THE SUPREME WITCH

"I had not thought of that!" said the old man whisperingly. "If that should be the right answer to all of it, Parson!" Then a new expression crossed his face, and during an instant his voice was firmer. "For Nora's sake I hope it is, for that means heaven for her! . . . But if it is the answer, Parson—what is ever going to become of me?"

"I believe such things as that hope for Nora's sake do make some little plea for us," said the parson quietly. "Also—"

The courtly king's messenger nudged the scrivener with his knee.

The two got up and lit their pipes at the far end of the room, noting that the parson left his chair and took one beside Old Jem.

And not until they perceived these two clinch some matter with a long handclasp, did the smokers go back to the table.