

## A Witch's Touch

### Part 1.

The Welsh hills spat hard rain at their backs driving them across the border to safety in the Welsh town of Wrexham. Leaves danced about, bows bent and creaked over the track brushing the heads of the weary travellers, as the little cart rocked and rumbled over a stony path of a dark gorge.

'Hurry, man, will you, or she'll have the babe's right here if you're not careful.'

Another jolt from a protruding rock brought a cry from a young woman in birth pains.

'Be careful up there, will you!'

The man led a stout, wet pit pony by the halter, meandering left and right for the smoothest course he could find. Up ahead a dim light shone a welcome sight of warmth inside. Then he said 'I can see the town's chimney smoke. It won't be long now, just a little while longer.'

Soon they'd entered a room in a large house, with bare stone walls. Shadows stretched and danced, dark and misshapen, from a large flickering fire. Hanging from the ceiling was an oil lamp. Its dim worthless light struggled through smoky glass. A pretty maid with yellow hair took their wet coats, helped the mother into a bed and left the room saying 'I'll be back to trim the lamp soon. I'll bring some hot drinks.'

Outside, the rain eased almost to a stop, and the lightning now illuminated far distant hills as the thunder faded. The older woman attending the mum to be prepared hot water, clean linen and warm blankets. 'Have you made this place secure?' She turned and looked at the man, awaiting a reassuring answer.

'Best I could,' he replied. 'But those stories are all bullshit and bollocks. Surely you don't believe in all that stuff? Old wives tales, that's all.'

Her disappointment showed on her face, but she repeated her question.

'Yes, yes, woman, I've done what I can. All the guards are local; I know their families, and there are no new faces. It's as safe as I can possibly make it.'

'Just one touch from her and they will be doomed,' she snapped.

'So you keep telling me.'

There was a soft knock on the door and the maid returned with a tray of drinks. She lowered the lamp, blew out the flame, cleaned the glass, trimmed the wick and raised it again. The fresh light was welcome.

'Thank you, Megan,' said Edlyn the elder midwife, and then she asked her. 'Do you believe that a gwrach could get to her tonight?'

Not wanting to add more tension or take sides, Megan replied, 'I don't know ma'am.' She nervously looked over to the man.

Then Edlyn also cast her eyes over to him. He was standing by the fire, staring into the flames, his hand on the mantelpiece. Wisps of steam rose from his rain soaked breaches as they absorbed the heat of the fire. She was about to speak when the young mother cried out in pain, and diverted her attention.

Through an open window the sky had cleared and the stars glimmered like flecks of Welsh gold.

Somewhere in the distance an owl called out in hope of a reply. Through the opening fluttered a large moth, it swirled, dipped and dived, fluttered and danced around the lamp, head-butting it with a faint 'tink', time after time.

The man raised his hot cup to his lips and took a long swallow. He watched the moth circle the bright lamp, saying 'It's all bullshit, you know that, surely? Just one touch! Why in hell can't you be a rational woman? It's only a myth. Folk tales and poppycock. She'll be fine, honestly!'

'You want to take that risk with your own grandchildren?' she barked at him. The faint tink, tink on the cleaned glass made them all focus on the moth as it fell and rose, dipped and climbed and circled again. Unexpectedly it disappeared, and they waited apprehensively for it to reappear. Suddenly, the older woman let out a scream and pointed to the expectant mother's swollen belly. 'The gwrach, it's there, look! Kill it quick!' she yelled.

The man put his cup down and marched across the room. The moth had landed on the mother's distended abdomen, in a space between where her hands lay. He gently took the moth in his great fist, cupping it gently, so that it fluttered within his fingers.

'Kill it now, while you have it in your grasp. Quick, into the fire with it!'

'Behave, woman. It's nought but a moth!' He crossed the room and tossed it out of the open window, back into the night.

## **Part 2.**

Nearly sixteen years later Oswestry has grown and matured, swelling with people plying many trades and commerce. At its heart it was conventional at being normal.

It was a bright early morning, cloudless, sunny, clear and crisp. A man neared the end of his overnight journey, yet his heart was burdened by the task ahead. As he entered the small castle, his footsteps echoed around the walls as he took an unhurried pace across the courtyard to the cell. Inside, already chained to the wall and, indeed, her fate, was a woman. Outside the weighty door stood two armed guards, one of whom unlocked it with a chunky key and swung it open.

The man stepped inside, the door closing behind him with a foreboding clunk. The room was dark as a coal seam at midnight, as damp as breath on a wine glass. An opening in the ceiling provided the only light: a brilliant ray, like a golden knife cutting through the room. The sound of dragging chain's met his ears.

'Have no fear, woman, I've not come here to hurt or condemn you. I just need some answers.'

Again, chains rattled, and the sound of breathing came from the darkness. In a voice just above a whisper she replied, 'I have little to say, and little time for such as thee.'

The sound of the man's boot could be heard turning on the stone floor.

'Then I'll make good use of what you do say. But – is there anything you need?' There was no reply. 'Very well. I don't know about you, but I need a drink.'

He signalled for the door to be opened, and mumbled a few words to the guards. With the door closed again, her silence returned.

'I want you to know, it was not my actions that led to your being incarcerated.'

Sighing, he shifted his weight from one leg to the other and then paced to and fro in the near-darkness. There was a simple stool in a corner, and he sat down.

'I know this is an absurd question, but have you been treated well?'

There was a low chuckle from the woman. 'Treated like any that's done what they say I'd done.' She sniffed, a sharp intake of breath through nostrils.

'So, what do you think you've been accused of?'

'Ask that of your wife. It was she who pestered me with her maligned accusations.'

Her voice echoed, absorbed by the stone walls, and as the sound died away the man let out a mournful sigh. His head hung low, like a dog missing its master. 'In all that's holy, if that were only possible: she passed two years ago.'

'I'm not saddened, 'twas your loss, not mine.'

The door opened, letting in more light, and a guard brought in a tray with a pitcher of water and cups, which he placed on a table by the man. The door creaked shut. The sound of water being poured was pleasing. The man took a cup and stepped towards the woman, raising his hand into the shaft of light.

Her chains dragged and clanked noisily, as into the light came fingertips, long, old and dirty, split and gnarled, calloused and pale. Her hand shook as the chain lifted from the ground, yet in the light the hand became youthful, smooth and slender, girlish and delicate. Was this a deception of the light, his mind playing tricks on him? The hand moved towards the cup he held out, but then stopped. The slender fingers closed slowly, hesitating.

'You don't trust me?' he said. So he stepped into the light and the crown of his head revealed short cropped grey hair. His features hidden in shadow, he put the cup to his lips and drank, and as he did so his face was revealed, then back into darkness. He held the cup to the light and the pitcher and the water glistened as it was poured.

The hand reached out decisively and took the cup from him. She gulped the water, and sighed in appreciation, then held out the cup. 'More!' she said. The pitcher and the cup met for a third time and the cool water flowed again.

'So, you have the thirst of a mere mortal, that's good to know. The people call you a gwrach, but I'm no believer in such things. Poppycock, folk law and old wives' tales. I want to know your given name.'

'I've been called many things' she replied.

'Of that I have no doubt. But as a child you were named, what was it?'

### **Part 3**

There was silence, no reply, no attempt at an answer.

'If you do not speak, or do not reply, it may be taken as a guilty plea. You must defend yourself, I cannot do it for you. They will execute you in the most brutal way, and I'll be unable to stop it.'

'Some of them need a death, some need a victim. They have to have an end to it. My time will come, be it now, or tomorrow.'

'Then let me know your name.'

'It's been such a long time since I was called by my given name. So long ago, I've almost lost the memories.'

'Then tell me while you still can.'

'What good will it do? I crave no marker over my grave.'

'You don't have to die.'

'We all do.' She held out the cup and shook it again. 'More!'

He picked up the pitcher and said 'This time I'll join you,' and in the light he filled the two cups.

'You're the only one that's shown any kindness to me,' then she said angrily, 'but I'm still in chains!' She rattled them to reinforce her point.

‘What about my grandchildren, what is your interest in them? I’m not a country bumpkin, I don’t believe in folk tales, fairy stories. To me it’s poppycock and bullshit.’

‘I was wondering when you’d ask about them,’ she gave out a chuckle. ‘Well, you shouldn’t believe everything you hear, but some things you should!’

His forehead and nose entered the shaft of light. ‘I make you a promise, though I do not believe,’ he said, ‘If my grandchildren are harmed by you in any way, I will dispatch you myself.’

‘Tis not I you have to fear.’

The muted sound of orders being shouted leaked into the cell, the heavy stamping of feet in unison beat rhythmically past the door, and then faded away. She gulped the cool water.

‘You showed me a kindness once, and you have again this day. I’ll not forget it.’

A boot turned slowly in the dark. ‘Our paths have never crossed to my knowledge.’

‘Short is your memory. But it was a fleeting event.’

‘You’re toying with me now, when there are more serious issues at hand: your life.’

He turned towards her in the semi-darkness, hoping to see a shadow, a glimpse of her face. But there was none.

‘I remember you, all those years ago. Hands of a man who worked the land. Tough, calloused and soiled. The hands of an honest man, someone who raised a decent family through his own toil. You lost a son, but gained twin granddaughters, sweet souls.’

‘You know all this about me? But I, nothing of you!’

‘Look at your hands now. Tell me what you see.’

‘In this light I see nothing but a patch of floor, but I can tell you my hands have grown soft through good living, age and good fortune.’

‘Your touch is still as sweet and soft now as it was then,’ she added.

The man sat on the stool, elbows on his knees and stared at his hands in the dark.

‘What have my hands to do with the kindness I showed you? I’ve done many a good deed, and, in truth, also some cruel and much needed things, when called for.’

‘Cast your mind back: do you see a stormy night, entering a grand house, a large room with a bed and a great roaring fire, a young woman in pain?’

The man stood up quickly and the stool tumbled and rolled away from him. ‘Then! That’s impossible, I secured that place as if it were my own home!’

'Aye that you did. But the storm passed and the trimmed wick was bright. Cupped me in your hands, you did, gently. Set me free, saved me from the fire.'

'Then it's true, you are indeed a gwrach! What did you want with them, with the innocent unborn? What was your business there?'

'I'm the last, so they say of my kind. The rest are dead now, and we are soon to be a dying memory of the living. I wanted to pass on all that I know, all the secrets, the quiet incantations, the power. I was born barren. No heirs of my own.'

'So you thought that you'd bequeath your evil ways on my granddaughters?'

'Evil? What makes you think that it would be an evil thing!? How could I hurt them now, after you saved me? I don't forget a kindness.'

'If you are the last, I'd like to know your name.'

'You will have it when I'm free of this place. Time is short.' She shouted angrily. 'But I won't be in chains when I die.' She pulled at the chains and they shed some of their rust. Old hands appeared again in the light, becoming youthful just for a moment.

'My strength is almost gone, time is near for me. If you have a means to free me, do it before sunset or any prophecy I have made will present itself!

The man sat on the stool, stooped forward and rubs his head in frustration. 'There are guards outside this door, at the main gate and others patrolling the grounds. If I could get you out of this cell, there'd be many willing to kill us.'

Nothing was said, but in the dark he looked down at his hands again. 'You said I held you once, under my calloused fingers?' He smiled to himself in the dark.

'I'm too weak for that little trick now.' She chuckled with a sense of bleakness and fading optimism.

'If you could do it, what would it take?' He waited for her answer from the gloomy shadows.

'Honey would help! But as you can tell, I have no beekeeper.'

The man crossed the room and banged heavily on the door; the guard answered, angered words were uttered, and the guard hurried away. In a few minutes he was back with a large pitcher of ale, leaving it in the cell.

The man cleared the table and said 'Drink, drink, drink all you can, it's all I can get at this hour.'

'You wish me drunk for some reason?'

'No woman. There's honey in this mead, a lot of it. And you don't have much time, look at the light; it's fading.'

He poured the mead and she drank. Then another, and then another. In a little while the pitcher was nearly empty, and then she held out her cup with two youthful hands. As he poured the last he asked 'how long will it take?' She did not answer.

All he could hear was her laboured breathing. Suddenly, a noise of crashing chains: in the dark he searched the floor with fingertips only to find them empty. He clutched them to his breast, hoping that his actions would free his granddaughters. All was silent, except the wing beats of a large moth that danced in and out of the fading shaft of light. In his ears he heard the word *Cinnabar* as she disappeared through the window into the warm evening...