

THREE'S A CROWD

An old woman sat silently, staring blankly into the gloom. She sensed an impending storm. A sudden thunder clap startled her. A brilliant lightning flash momentarily illuminated the contents of the room - an ancient table, a stone hearth, a candelabra, a painting of a Scottish moor, a photograph of three sisters, a mirror on the wall, a grandfather clock and shelves lined with beloved books.

Soon the tempest raged. The land was plunged into darkness and disarray. She raised herself slowly from her chair and lit a candle. In the flickering light she saw her reflection in the mirror. With stooped shoulders, black, beady eyes and long pointed nose she was hardly a beauty. People often felt uneasy in her presence. They derided her. They feared her. From school days the Witchard girls had been called the weird sisters. Though her sisters were gone, she was not alone.

She called out "Grimalkin come!" The familiar form of her sleek grey cat slinked from the shadows. "There you are my precious baby. Don't be troubled by the storm." The cat approached Miss Witchard with a gift.

"You are a devil Grimalkin. What have you brought me?" she said, spying the body of a mouse protruding from the mouth of her companion. Grimalkin dropped his tribute at her feet. She recited the words "Wee sleekit, cowerin, tim'rous beastie, O, what panic's in thy breastie!" in a thick Scottish brogue and cackled before her countenance took on a grave appearance. She picked it up by the tail before dispassionately dashing its head on the cold stones of the hearth. "At least wee beastie you are not troubled with the past or the future."

Miss Witchard found that as her days on earth dwindled, the past returned in vivid flashbacks. She recalled her father known as Old Nick. He had brought the family from Scotland after the war to ply his trade as an undertaker. He was a severe, humourless man - particularly after the sudden, unexplained death of his wife, but he had left the legacy of poetry to his strange daughters and an admiration of the Bards of Scotland and England.

Events from the past had been foremost in her mind in the days before the storm. For many years she had found employment as the librarian at Cawdor Grammar school. It seemed an odd choice for someone whose own schooldays had been traumatic but the imposing bluestone library building became her sanctuary. It suited her desire for knowledge and control. She ruled her domain with an iron will. The students may have mocked her behind her back, calling her "The Witch" but never a word was uttered to her face. They were too frightened.

A chain of events that had first gripped and traumatized Cawdor thirteen years before remained to be played out. Miss Witchard had noticed the couple in a corner deep in discussion. Normally she would have demanded silence and exited them from her library but their conspiratorial conversation was intriguing. They were discussing their parts in the school play. They were deadly serious as if possessed by spirits of the characters.

The young man was known for his athletic prowess and acting aspirations. The young lady had arresting, dark eyes and an ethereal presence. They seemed born for the roles of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. The part of the King of course was to be performed by the school captain.

In the weeks prior to the performance of the Scottish play the couple consulted respectfully with the Librarian sensing her deep knowledge of and affinity for the drama.

The young man in awe and gratitude presented Miss Witchard with a poem he had written for her from the perspective of the protagonist. She had kept it since in a leather- bound copy of the complete works of Shakespeare. The words of the first stanza came to her mind.

When darkest eyes sear my soul
Lightning strike and thunder roll
Struck by witchcraft's darkest art
Like a dagger through my heart
Like a dagger through my heart
Where the place?
Inside my soul
Lightning strike and thunder roll

The play was a triumph. The audience was spellbound. The young actors were later praised in the school magazine for the intelligence and intensity of their performances. Below the article was a simple notice - Vale Duncan King, school captain.

Only weeks after the play Duncan had slipped while bushwalking on a school camp and fallen to his death in a rocky gully. At the funeral service the new leader described the tragedy and the horror he felt when he discovered the body of his friend. The dark eyed girl by his side had bravely attempted first aid on his fractured, bleeding skull but to no avail. It was a thoughtful, poignant performance.

As he left the stage Miss Witchard sensed that his gaze had fixed on her as if seeking her approval. She looked away and left the church as quickly as possible.

She heard nothing of the two from that time until recently reading an entry in the death notices. The dark lady had passed away, finally succumbing to the mental illness that had haunted her. There was a heart-felt message from her partner to the lady with eyes that saw inside his soul. No children were mentioned. Miss Witchard recited the last verse of the poem the young man had given her.

When darkest eyes see the spot
Rub the stain that can't be cleaned
Memories of unborn child
Bloody babe that won't be weaned
Bloody babe that won't be weaned
Where the place?
Inside her mind
Bitter, Broken, Barren, Blind.

Miss Witchard sat silently pondering the past with a growing sense of foreboding. It was the eve of Samhain - the ancient Celtic pagan festival, the precursor to Halloween. In Scotland the season of darkness was commencing. Death and the afterlife were close at hand. In a heightened state of anxiety and awareness she heard a faint rustling noise.

“Is that you Grimalkin?” The precious cat appeared by her side, grazing gently against her leg, purring contentedly. She picked up her only companion and softly caressed its fur. “My lovely one. You never judge me. You never let me down. Where would I be without you?” she whispered.

At that instant the grandfather clock struck midnight. Grimalkin meowed loudly and jumped to the floor. A moment later Miss Witchard heard three loud knocks at the door.

