

THE TANGLED SKEIN

BY
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Did she guess what a dainty picture she made?

DEDICATION
TO MY LITTLE SON JACK
AND
TO HIS SCHOOLMATES AT
"RAMSBURY"
BIRCHINGTON-ON-SEA

DEAR BOYS,

It was amongst you all that I wrote the last chapters of this romance. To you, therefore—to your growing manhood, your pretty, budding thoughts of chivalry and honour, which I so loved to see developing in the tender atmosphere of your dear little school-home by the sea—I inscribe and dedicate this record of a noble and good man's life.

EMMUSKA ORCZY.

BIRCHINGTON-ON-SEA
FEBRUARY, 1907

PART I
MIRRAB—THE WITCH

CHAPTER I

EAST MOLESEY FAIR

Even Noailles, in his letters to his royal master, admits that the weather was glorious, and that the climatic conditions left nothing to be desired.

Even Noailles! Noailles, who detested England as the land of humid atmospheres and ill-dressed women!

Renard, who was more of a diplomatist and kept his opinions on the fogs and wenches of Old England very much to himself, declared enthusiastically in his letter to the Emperor Charles V, dated October 2nd, 1553, that never had he seen the sky so blue, the sun so bright, nor the people of this barbarous island more merry than on the memorable first day of East Molesey Fair: as all who will, may read for themselves in Vol. III of the Granvelle Papers:—

"Aulcungs ne pourroient contempler ciel plus bleu soleil plus brillianct ni peuple plus joieult."

Yet what have we to do with the opinions of these noble ambassadors of great and mighty foreign monarchs?

Our own chroniclers tell us that East Molesey Fair was the maddest, merriest, happiest time the goodly folk of the Thames Valley had had within memory of the oldest inhabitant.

Was not good Queene Marye, beloved daughter of the great King Henry VIII, crowned at last? crowned in Westminster Abbey, as all

her loyal subjects had desired that she should be, despite His Grace of Northumberland and his treasonable faction, whom God and the Queene's most lawful Majesty would punish all in good time?

In the meanwhile let us be joyful and make merry!

Such a motley crowd as never was seen. Here's a sheriff from London City, pompous and dignified in dark doublet and hose, with scarlet mantle and velvet cap; beside him his lady trips right merrily, her damask kirtle held well above her high-heeled shoes, her flowered paniers looped in the latest style, with just the suggestion of a farthingale beneath her robes, to give dignity to her figure and value to the slimness of her waist.

Here a couple of solemn burgesses in velvet cloaks edged with fur, and richly slashed doublets, are discussing the latest political events; whilst a group of Hampton merchants, more soberly clad, appraise the wares of a cutler lately hailed from Spain.

Then the dames and maidens with puffed paniers of blue or vivid scarlet, moving swiftly from booth to booth, babbling like so many gaily-plumaged birds, squabbling with the vendors and chaffing the criers.

Here and there the gaudy uniform of one of the liveried Companies will attract the eye, anon the dark cloak and close black mask which obviously hides the Court gallant.

Men of all ranks and of all stations have come out to East Molesey to-day. Merchants, shopkeepers, workers, aldermen and servants, all with their womenkind, all with pouches more or less well filled, for who would go to Molesey Fair but to spend money, to drink, to eat, or to make merry?

Then there were the 'prentices!

They had no money to spend, save a copper or so to throw to a mountebank, but nevertheless they contrived to enjoy themselves right royally.

Such imps of mischief!

No whipping-post to-day! Full licence for all their pranks and madcap jokes. The torment of all these worthy burgesses out on a holiday.

Oh! these 'prentices!

Hundreds of them out here this afternoon. They've come down from Esher and Hampton, Kingston and Westminster and London City, like so many buzzing insects seeking whom they can annoy.

Now on the ground, suddenly tripping a pompous dame off her feet; anon in rows, some half-dozen of them, elbow to elbow, head foremost, charging the more serious crowd, and with a hoot and a yell scattering it like a number of frightened goslings. Yet again at the confect booth, to the distraction of the vendors of honey-cakes, stealing sugar-plums and damson cheese, fighting, quarrelling, screeching, their thin legs encased in hose of faded blue or grey worsted, their jerkins loose, their shirt sleeves flapping in the breeze, a cool note of white amidst the dark-coloured gowns of the older men.

Heavens above! what a to-do!

A group of women be-coiffed, appalled in best kirtles and modish shoes, were pressing round a booth where pantoufles,

embroidered pouches, kerchiefs, and velveted paniers were laid out in tempting array.

Just beyond, a number of buxom country wenches, with round red arms, showing bare to the grilling sun, and laughing eyes, aglow with ill-concealed gourmandise, were gaping at a mighty display of pullets, hares, and pigeons, sides of roebuck and haunches of wild boar, ready spiked, trussed, and skewered, fit to tempt Her Majesty's Grace's own royal palate.

Sprigs of sweet-scented marjoram, thyme, and wool-blade tastefully disposed, further enhanced the attractions of this succulent show. 'Twas enough to make the sweetest mouth water with anticipatory delight. A brown-eyed, apple-cheeked wench in paniers of brilliant red was unaffectedly licking her pretty lips.

"This way, mistress, this way!" shouted the vendor of these appetizing wares. A sturdy fellow, he, with ginger-coloured pate, and wielding a long narrow-bladed knife in his fleshy hand. "This way! a haunch of buck from the royal venary! a hare from Her Liege Majesty's own chase! a pullet from——"

"Nay, thou gorbellied knave!" responded a vendor of drugs and herbs close by, whose stall was somewhat deserted, and whose temper was obviously suffering—"Nay! an thou speakest the truth thou art a thief, but if not, then thou'rt a liar! In either case art fit for the hangman's rope!"

"This way, my masters! this way!" came in loud, stentorian cries from a neighbouring booth; "this way for Peter the juggler, the greatest conjurer the world has ever seen!"

"This way! I pray you, worthy sirs!" this from yet another place of entertainment, "this way for John the tumbler!"

"Peter the juggler will swallow a cross-bow of steel before your very eyes!" shouted one crier.

"John the tumbler will climb Saint Ethelburga's steeple without help of rope or ladder," called the other.

"Peter will show you how to shoe a turkey, how to put salt on a swallow's tail, and how to have your cake and eat it!"

"John will sit on two stools without coming to the ground!"

"Marry! and ye both lie faster than my mule can trot!" came in hilarious accents from one of the crowd.

"And Peter the juggler will show thee how to make thy mule trot faster than thou canst lie, friend," responded Peter's crier unabashed, "and a mighty difficult task 'twill be, I'll warrant."

Laughing, joking, ogling like some fickle jade, the crowd passed from booth to booth: now dropping a few coins in Peter the juggler's hat, now watching the antics of John the tumbler; anon looking on amazed, half terrified at the evolutions of a gigantic brown bear, led by the nose by a vigorous knave in leather jerkin and cross-gartered hose, and accompanied by a youngster who was blowing on a mighty sackbut until his cheeks looked nigh to bursting.

But adsheart! who shall tell of all the attractions which were set forth on that memorable day before the loyal subjects of good Queene Marye?

There were the trestles where one could play at ball and knuckle-bone, or chance and mumchance; another, where evens and odds and backgammon proved tempting. He who willed could tilt at Weekie, play quoits or lansquenet, at ball or at the billiards, or risk his coppers on such games as one-and-thirty, or at the pass ten; he might try his skill, too, at throwing the dart, or his strength at putting the stone.

There were mountebanks and quacksalvers, lapidaries at work, and astrologers in their tents. For twopence one could have a bout with the back-sword or the Spanish tuck, could watch the situations and conjunctions of the fixed stars and the planets, could play a game of tennis or pelitrigone, or be combed and curled, perfumed and trimmed so as to please a dainty mistress's eye.

And through it all the loud bang! bang! bang! of the big drums, the criers proclaiming the qualities of their wares, the jarring notes of the sackbut and the allman flute, the screechy viol and the strident nine-hole pipe, all playing against one another, each striving to drown the other, and mingling with the laughter of the crowd, the yells of the 'prentices, the babble of the women, formed a huge volume of ear-splitting cacophony which must have been heard from one end of the country to the other.

All was noise, merriment, and laughter, save in one spot—an out-of-the-way, half-hidden corner of the fair, where the sister streams, the Ember and the Mole, join hands for a space, meet but to part again, and whence the distant towers and cupolas of Hampton Court appeared like those of a fairy palace floating in mid-ether, perched high aloft in the shimmering haze of this hot late summer's afternoon.

CHAPTER II

THE WITCH'S TENT

There are many accounts still extant of the various doings at East Molesey Fair on this 2nd of October in the year of our Lord 1553, and several chroniclers—Renard is conspicuous among the latter—make mention of the events which very nearly turned the gay and varying comedies of that day into weird and tragic drama.

Certainly the witch's tent was a mistake.

But what would you? No doubt the worthy individual, who for purposes of mystification called himself "Abra," had tried many means of earning a livelihood before he and his associate in business took to the lucrative, yet dangerous trade of necromancy.

He was tall and gaunt, with hooked nose and deep-sunk eyes; he had cultivated a long, grey beard, and could call forth the powers of Mirrab the Witch with a remarkably solemn and guttural voice.

As for Mirrab herself, no one was allowed to see her. That was part of the business. She was a witch, a dealer in magic potions, charms and philters, a reader of the stars, and—softly be it spoken—a friend and companion of the devil! She only appeared enveloped in a thick veil, with divining wand held lightly in her hand, the ends of her gold tresses alone visible below the heavy covering which swathed her head.

It was the mystery of it all—cheap devices at best—which from the first had irritated the country-folk who thronged the Fair.

The tent itself was unlike any other ever seen at East Molesey. It stood high upon a raised wooden platform, to which a few rough steps gave access. On the right was a tall flagstaff, with black flag emblazoned with white skull and cross-bones, fluttering lazily in the breeze.

On the left a huge elm tree, with great heavy branches overshadowing the tent, had been utilized to support a placard bearing the words—

**"Mirrab! the World-famed
Necromancer!
Sale of Magic Charms and Love
Philters
Horoscope Casting and Elixir of
Life!"**

Perched on the platform, and assisted by a humbler henchman, armed with big drum and cymbals, the worthy Abra, in high-peaked cap and flowing mantle covered with strange devices, had all day long invited customers to his booth by uttering strange, mysterious promises.

"This way, this way, my masters," he would say with imposing solemnity; "the world-famous necromancer, Mirrab, will evoke for you the spirits of Mars, of Saturn, or of the moon."

"She will show you the Grand Grimorium. . . !"

Now what was the Grand Grimorium? The very sound of the words suggested some agency of the devil; no Christian man had ever heard or spoken of the Grand Grimorium.

"She will show you the use of the blasting rod and the divining wand. She will call forth the elementary spirits. . . ."

Some people would try to laugh. Who had ever heard of the elementary spirits? Perhaps if some of the more enlightened town worthies happened to be nigh the booth, one or two of them would begin to chaff the necromancer.

"And prithee, friend wizard," a solemn burgher would suggest, "prithee what are the elementary spirits?"

But Abra was nothing if not ready-witted.

"The elementary spirits," he would explain with imperturbable gravity, "are the green butterfly, the black pullet, the queen of the hairy flies, and the screech owl."

The weird nomenclature was enough to make any one's hair stand on end. Even the sedate burgesses would shake their heads and silently edge away, whilst their womenkind would run swiftly past the booth, muttering a quick *Ave* to the blessed Virgin or kissing the Holy Scapulary hung beneath their kerchiefs, as their terrified glances met the cabalistic signs on the black flag.

The humbler country-folk frankly spat upon the ground three times whenever they caught sight of the flag, and that is a sure way of sending the devil about his business.

The shadows now were beginning to lengthen.

The towers and cupolas of Hampton Court Palace were studded with gold and gems by the slanting rays of the setting sun.

It had been a glorious afternoon and, except in the open space immediately in front of the witch's tent, the fun of the fair had lost none of its zest.

The witch's booth alone was solitary—weird-looking beneath the spreading branches of the overhanging elm.

The tent seemed lighted from within, for as the evening breeze stirred its hangings, gleams of brilliant red, more glowing than the sunset, appeared in zigzag streaks between its folds.

Behind, and to the right and left of it, the gentle murmur of the sister streams sounded like ghostly whisperings of evening sprites, busy spreading their grey mantles over the distant landscape.

As the afternoon wore on, the crowd in the other parts of the Fair had grown more and more dense, and now, among the plainer garb of the burgesses and townfolk, and the jerkins and worsted hose of the yokels, could be seen quite frequently a silken doublet or velvet trunk, a masked face perhaps beneath a plumed bonnet, or the point of a sword gleaming beneath the long, dark mantle, denoting the Court gallant.

Now and then, too, hooded and closely swathed forms would flit quickly through the crowd, followed by the inquisitive glances of the humbler folk, as the dainty tip of a brodered shoe or the richly wrought hem of a silken kirtle, protruding below the cloak, betrayed the lady of rank and fashion on gay adventure bent.

Most of these veiled figures had found their way up the rough wooden steps which led to the witch's tent. The fame of Mirrab, the Soothsayer, had reached the purlieu of the palace, and Abra,

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