

ENCOUNTER

It was impossible to see Miss Lambert's house from the road. It lay shrouded in its shrubbery with a paddock on one side and our neglected weatherboard on the other. When I was about six, my brothers, Will and Thomas, tried to push me through the wrought-iron spears which marched along the inner edge of the footpath. I was given strict injunctions to spy out the land for them, but because of the shape of my head, their efforts were unavailing, and I had to be yanked free by my pig-tails.

Since then, various unsuccessful assaults had been launched against Miss Lambert's stronghold. On one occasion the black-berry bushes ejected us, torn and bleeding, from the paddock. On another, Will and Thomas could scarcely sit down for two days after the whipping Dad gave them for disobeying orders and reducing to ruins the trellis supporting his prized Nelly Kelly passion-fruit vine. The fourth side had been abandoned from the outset because it divided Miss Lambert's property from the back yard of Kincarra's only hotel which was situated on the main street, and even if we had spotted an open side entrance, we were forbidden by family law to stop or even loiter near its alcohol-laden precincts.

We were not particularly interested in Miss Lambert herself except as the owner of the last unexplored garden in the township. We knew all the others inside out and, longing for pastures new, would peer between the scrolls on the iron gate and try to imagine what lay away to the right where the overgrown path lost itself in a tantalizing shambles of bushes and shrubs.

"What does she want with a garden?" grumbled Will. "She never even uses it."

"And why," I asked, imitating his annoyance, "does she keep her old gate locked?"

"Because she's a witch." said Thomas. "And witches don't like children. They only like cats and mucking around with spells and toads and things." I knew he was making it up. Still, a nasty little shiver ran down my spine, and the next time I saw Miss

Lambert's black, elderly figure emerge from the store, which also served as our milk-bar, I scuttled across the road and decided I did not really want a Choc-o-Frost after all. The shiver had grown into a good-sized scarey feeling so I ran home and hung around Mum who didn't work at the hospital on Saturdays. She and Dad were sitting on the front verandah enjoying the morning sunshine and a cup of tea when Mum said, "Miss Lambert came to the hospital yesterday."

"Oh yes." said Dad from the depths of The Sporting Globe, and letting his tea get cold as usual. "Anything wrong with the old witch?"

"Geoffrey." scolded Mum, but she giggled and I forced myself to join in although it wasn't easy, with Dad's words like icy fingers plucking at the strings of my fear.

"Is she going to die?" I asked tremulously, looking up at them from my seat on the sunwarmed boards. Dad hooted as he turned to the Best Bets page. "Old witches never die," he sang. "They only fade away." And he put his hand on his heart as if waiting for applause.

"Geoffrey." said Mum, primly this time, "It's bad enough having Will and Thomas put ideas into Katie's head without you starting." She bent down and put a kindly hand on my shoulder. "No, dear. Miss Lambert's not going to die. But she suffers a lot and comes along for special treatment when she's had a bad spell."

"A bad spell!" I quavered and now I knew that Thomas had not been joking and that, from this day on, whenever I saw Miss Lambert or even heard her name mentioned, the tight snake within me would uncoil and strike terror straight into my heart.

I got up and went down to the park the long way, even risking a lunge from the alsatian who lived behind the cyclone fence round the petrol depot, but by the time I reached it, my brothers and the other kids had gone. I sat on one of the swings and tried to give myself a lecture the way Miss Ferrier did.

"You're eight years old now, Katie Stewart and you should know that witches belong to fairy tales." But it was no good. Even thinking about witches set my heart beating like a tom-tom. I toyed with the idea of confiding my fears to Mum, but knew that sooner or later, my brothers would find out and tease

me mercilessly, the way they had done when I slept one night on the verandah and the mouse which scared me turned out to be the sound of the meter. No. This was something I had to suffer in silence, even though the motto on the class-room calendar behind Miss Ferrier's desk advised, "A trouble shared is a trouble halved." One day I'd lifted the page to read the next month's words of wisdom and now they sounded in my ears like a clarion call.

"Do the thing you fear."

I started working the swing higher and higher, the way Will and Thomas did when they were showing off. I had always screamed blue murder when they pushed me harder than a gentle sway, but now I gritted my teeth and forced my legs and body up and down, backwards and forwards, through an ever lengthening rush of air, with my stomach twisting in great sickening lurches and my hands aching to let go and test the precepts of Sunday school and Miss Ferrier's calendar.

It was Bertha Macavoy who managed to tug me to a halt. She shoved me off unceremoniously and planted her kid brother on the seat while she sat herself on the other and began reading a paperback. Normally I would have shouted, "I'll tell my brothers on you!" because we carried on a fierce but enjoyable feud with the Macavoy's, but today I had other things on my mind like making my knees function properly and coming to grips with Miss Lambert. All the way home I persevered doggedly, even reaching the stage where I was able to jump off and on the footpath chanting, "Who's afraid of the big, bad witch, the big, bad witch, the big, bad. . . ."

The words trailed off in a whining, cowardly manner at the sight of Miss Lambert's open gate. I stood, unbelieving and paralysed by the unexpectedness while the snake thing inside me uncoiled and slithered venomously, turning my heart into a sledgehammer. "Will?" I croaked. "Thomas?" But I'd heard their voices earlier, far down in the dried creek bed where the kids took their bikes. I could see our own entrance and part of the child-worn lawn which Dad mowed hopefully every three weeks, but still I stood while the open gate seemed to smile an evil, gap-toothed invitation, promising unspeakable revelations.

I'd never seen Miss Lambert's gate open before except on a Sunday and then only for a split second while she unlocked and

locked it again before hobbling down the road to church. Through the week she only used her rear entrance which led down the side of the hotel. It was almost a sin to gaze unrestricted into that forbidden, mysterious garden. One minute I was trembling on the footpath with the autumn sun on my shoulders and the next ploughing through some hideous nightmare from which there was no escape. I was sobbing as I drove myself relentlessly through a sea of damp, rotting foliage with branches clawing at my face and hair, aware that I'd already lost the path and was doomed to wander for ever in a dark, eerie world into which even the sun itself dared not penetrate. I felt like a fly caught in a spider's web at the centre of which crouched the black, witch-like figure of Miss Lambert. This way and that way I pushed and struggled although I knew it was a hopeless battle and here was something more than a child's courage could conquer.

It came then as a shock to be suddenly face to face with the most beautiful boy I had ever seen. He was standing on a crumbling pedestal and I felt the branches retreat and the leaves overhead fold themselves back to allow a shaft of sunlight to fall on his gentle smile. He was completely 'starkers' as Thomas would have said, but that only added to his charm for his limbs were so softly rounded and his attitude so gracefully poised, that it seemed he had been formed especially to delight and comfort me. I stood, completely entranced, allowing the sweetness of his expression to still my throbbing heart.

"So," I thought, "the calendar did not lie. I've done the thing I feared and this is my reward." I stepped into the disused fishpond surrounding him and smiled into his eyes and touched his cheek and stroked his hair. He held a kind of horn in his arms and although it was empty, I could plainly hear the water which must have once trickled and tinkled on the backs of little golden fishes. It struck me how clean and well-preserved he was compared with the cracked pedestal and the moss-covered fishpond. Someone had cared for him. Someone had loved him.

"Well, Katie Stewart, so you've come at last."

It was Miss Lambert, coming slowly down the stone steps beyond the clearing, trailing her black skirt and wearing a shawl like a pink fluffy cloud over her shoulders. Her white hair glinted as brightly as the carved ringlets beneath my fingers. I had not

realised the house was so near and felt myself stiffen.

“Did you cast a spell on him?” I asked coldly.

She stopped at the foot of the steps and gave a funny little laugh.

“Good gracious, no, Katie. Only a witch could do that, and I’m no witch, only a lonely old woman.”

“Then why did you keep your gate locked?” I demanded. “That’s no way to make friends.”

The pink shawl moved up and down as she sighed.

“Because of him, Katie. I was afraid if the children came running around they might break one of his fingers or a toe.” The very thought of it made me wince, but I still had one more question, perhaps the most important.

“Why is your gate open now?” I slid my hand on to the boy’s foot and we were both leaning slightly forward.

“Didn’t your mother tell you, Katie? I called round about an hour ago but you were out. Then I waited at the gate but you didn’t come. You see, he’s going away today because I’m getting too old to look after him and keep him clean. He’ll be safe where he’s going and people will be able to go and look at him. You too. I just wanted you to see him in the place where he really belongs . . . so that you will remember, Katie.” I nodded because I didn’t know what to say and for a brief moment laid my hot grubby face on the boy’s foot. Far away I could hear the faint, monotonous patter of a racing commentary and had a sudden longing to be with my family. In a matter of seconds I had rounded the wide circle of the path to the open gateway and was sprinting up our drive.

Dad had already finished his lunch and was following the races. Mum and Will and Thomas were still at the table and Will said, “Where on earth have you been? You look as if you’d been dragged through a hedge backwards.” But Mum scarcely looked up and just said, “Wash your hands.” And as I went out I heard her say in a low voice, “Better not tell her yet.”

I could only manage a small piece of bacon-and-egg pie and the boys, who had been sitting, waiting, pounced on the remains. I went out and hung over the fence and after a while a van turned in next door and forced its way under the low branches. I put my fingers in my ears so that I would not hear the scratching on the paintwork and maybe other sounds. It seemed ages before

the van appeared again, going very slowly with its precious burden. I removed my fingers and was glad to find my brothers standing close behind me.

"They're taking away the boy," I told them and my face felt stiff and cold as marble.

Thomas drew in a deep breath.

"Rubbish," he said. "They're taking away Miss Lambert."

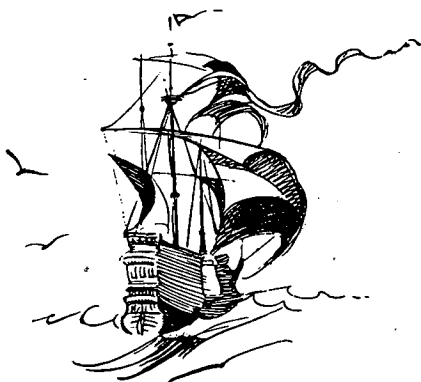
THE SHIP OF HEAVEN

A MUSICAL FANTASY IN THREE ACTS

BY

HUGH McCRAE

With Illustrations by the Author



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