

# OCTOBER NIGHT

By Elizabeth Sanxay Holding

## A Little Old House Hidden in Trees—Strange People Living in It, One a Student of Witchcraft—an Excellent Background for Weird and Fearful Happenings

A WILD, gray morning, with the rain dashing against the windows and the trees rocking in the wind.

"Nick won't come today," said Lou to herself. That was a good thing. It would be better if he never came, if she never saw him again. He was a young third officer on a passenger steamer, with no likelihood of immediate promotion and she was a girl with an expensive and useless education, left alone in the world now, with no money but her salary as Mr. Deal's private secretary. It was the first job she had ever had, and she was never likely to get another as good as this.

"We could manage," he was always telling her. "You could have practically all my pay. We could get a little flat."

And she was to stay in the little flat, and do the best she could with his pay, and he would be home with her three days every month.

"I'm sorry, Nick," she told him, "but I'm just not like that."

"You mean you don't care enough?"

"I'm afraid that's the way it is," she had said a little unsteadily. "Not quite enough, Nick."

Not enough to be poor and anxious and lonely. But she did care, more than he was going to know.

Mr. Deal was taking a long time over his breakfast this morning. Certainly she didn't much relish her work: the very thought of his precious book, "Some Aspects of Colonial Culture," filled her with boredom; but it was better to work than to think about other things. . . .

Millie, the nice little housemaid, came into the library with her dustier.

"Good morning, Miss Craigie. Isn't it a miserable day?"

"Better not disturb Mr. Deal's papers, Millie." "I hate to go near 'em, Miss Craigie! Those pictures he's got of them witches . . ."

"But you don't believe in witches, Millie!"

"O, no, Miss, 'course I don't. Only, a old house like this—there's such queer noises at night . . . Look, Miss! The way that rug's going up and down . . .!"

"It's the wind coming under the door, Millie."

"I know, Miss. But it looks like something alive was under it, don't it, Miss?"

"Not to me."

"And Mrs. Craw . . . She's so kind of gloomy, Miss. Waiting all the time for a telegram that her brother-in-law's dead . . . if it wasn't for you, Miss Craigie, I don't think I could stand it here. It gets on my nerves like . . ."

MR. DEAL was coming now, and Millie hurried away. And Mr. Deal was strangely excited. A little elderly man he was, with plump cheeks like a chipmunk.

"A most interesting letter, Miss Craigie! You recall, perhaps, Professor Welcome's book on Witchcraft? An authority—the authority. He wishes to set me right on one or two minor points. He proposes to come over here this afternoon by the 4:40 train, and if I don't telephone him to the contrary, he will stop over Sunday."

Stupid to feel a sort of pity for Mr. Deal, because he was growing old, alone, in this old house. He had money; no doubt he got what he wanted from life . . .

"I believe you were to have a holiday this afternoon, Miss Craigie . . . But in the circumstances . . . A visit from a man of such distinction . . . If you would defer your holiday, I should greatly appreciate it . . ."

His appreciation wouldn't take the form of proposing any extra pay. Very careful of his inherited money, was Mr. Deal. There was no reason why she should give up the first holiday in a month just to oblige him.

"Very well, Mr. Deal!"

"I really appreciate this, Miss Craigie! And you'll go to the station to meet Professor Welcome? In this weather, my throat . . ."

"Certainly, Mr. Deal."

The perfect secretary, Miss Craigie; a slender girl, a little pale, with long, dark blue eyes and ash-blond hair, smartly dressed, intelligent, marvelously self-possessed.

"We must organize matters, Miss Craigie. First, I should like all my notes on the witchcraft chapter typed before Professor Welcome arrives."

The subject charmed him; he dictated with zest. She read his notes back to him; he revised them. Lunch hour came and he was still full of it. He sat at the head of the table, eating the meager and unappetizing food Mrs. Craw, his housekeeper had provided, and he continued.

"No" . . . he said. "Witchcraft was not a delusion. Indeed, I should not hesitate to declare that there are witches alive in the world at this moment."

Millie dropped her tray with a crash, and glancing at her, Lou saw that the girl's face had grown white.

The rain was dashing against the windows. The old room was shadowy and dim and chilly. Millie stood motionless by the sideboard.

A bluish flame shot up in the grate, and a cinder fell through the bars with a rattle. And Millie gave a violent start.

He was unmanageable today. Even questions about his cherished aneroid barometer could not deflect him from the subject of Professor Welcome's visit. "Anyhow, it's a relief to get him off the Witches' Sabbath." Thought Lou, "Millie wouldn't have stood much more."

"He must have the west room," said Mr. Deal. "A fire can be lit there to supplement this not entirely adequate furnace. And blankets . . . And it occurs to me that possibly the window curtains . . ."

"I'll see Mrs. Craw . . ."

Mrs. Craw was in the little dining room off the kitchen, her own private domain; a black cotton stocking was drawn over one hand which showed through the web like a ghostly window.

"I'm expecting a telegram at any moment,"

said Mrs. Craw. "My brother-in-law's just lingering . . . Just lingering . . ."

It seemed to Lou that there was a horrible relish in Mrs. Craw's tone. She was very anxious to hear no more.

"I'm so sorry . . ." she said, with polite sympathy, and at once began to speak of blankets, curtains and food for Professor Welcome. Mrs. Craw evinced a professional interest. She made a long, slow list of catables. Even this list, somehow, was tinged by Mrs. Craw's somberness; mutton, rice, candles . . .

Mutton, rice, candles . . . The words made a dismal refrain in Lou's mind as she sat in one corner of the big car; there was something a little horrible in them.

She stopped in the little town and did her shopping, according to Mrs. Craw's list, a big and unseemly package was stowed in the front seat beside the wooden chauffeur. Then they went on to the station.

It was dark as night now. The overhead lights shone down upon the empty platform where the rain went dancing in a sort of mist. Two or three taxis stood there, their headlights illuminating the muddy road. A train whistle sounded, dismal beyond measure.

It seemed to Lou her duty to get out and welcome the important guest. The train came in. Two or three people descended. One of them, directly in front of her, had an appearance which seemed to her what might be expected of Professor Welcome: a slight little man with a big, drooping black mustache and a most extraordinary plaid overcoat. He looked, she thought, like an old tintype come to life.

"Professor Welcome?" she asked.

He took off his derby hat, revealing a head of very black hair, parted in the middle.

"From Mr. Deal?" he asked. "His secretary, I take it? He has mentioned your assistance in the most flattering terms . . . Most flattering . . ." He smiled gallantly, revealing glittering gold teeth. "My bag," he said, indicating an enormous cowhide portmanteau which the conductor had set down on the platform. "I don't like . . ."

The rest of his words were lost in the noise of the train pulling out; waiting politely to hear the rest, Lou glanced about the platform. And a few feet from her directly under the light, she saw Nick, his soft hat pulled down over his forehead, the collar of his overcoat turned up. He was looking at her, a steady, unsmiling, miserable look.

"The car's over there, Professor Welcome," she said. "I'll tell the chauffeur to come and get your bag. And will you excuse me just a moment? Some one I know has come on the train . . ."

"Certainly, my dear young lady!" said Professor Welcome gallantly, and as Weeks, the chauffeur, approached in obedience to her gesture, she turned to Nick. He came to meet her, hat in hand, and now he smiled.

"Hello, dear!"

"Hello, Nick . . . Nick, I'm so sorry . . . I didn't think you'd come in this weather . . . Mr. Deal's got this cherished professor and I said I'd help to get him installed. I didn't think you'd come."

HIS disappointment was plain enough; for three weeks he had been looking forward to this day. He had come all the way out here and for nothing. She could not blame him if he reproached her bitterly . . .

"Lou," he said, "any chance of seeing you later in the evening? After you've got this fellow installed?"

"I don't know, Nick. Perhaps. But don't waste your time on the chance. There's a down train in ten minutes. Take that and look up some one you know. Do please have a good time this evening! If you don't, I'll feel—like a brute!"

"I couldn't have a good time without you, Lou," he said. "Now, look here! I'll go out to that hotel across the road, and if there's a chance later on of your getting off, ring me up there."

She turned and saw Professor Welcome talking to a taxi driver.

"He's going astray!" she said, and Nick, out her hand, "Anyhow, I'll call you up, Nick!" He held her hand tight for an instant, then she left him and hurried up to the professor.

"Mr. Deal's sent his car for you, Professor."

"He should have known better!" cried the professor in a high, furious voice. "I told him . . . I refuse to get into that car!"

"But—"

"I shall take a taxi. And I shall have the top down. This driver is singularly obtuse . . ."

"I am prepared to pay within reason," said the professor. "I insist upon fresh air. I will not enter that closed car."

"We can have the windows open," said Lou. "No!" he cried, stamping his foot. "Nothing will deter me. Lower the top!"

"But you'll be—"

"Don't argue!" he cried. "My decision is final. If you wish to take my bag with you, very well . . ."

The driver got the top down with difficulty, the professor entered the cab, closed the door with a slam, and on they went into the down-

pour. For a moment she stood looking after them, puzzled and uneasy; then Weeks appeared at her side and took the professor's bag.

She glanced back to see if Nick were still there. But the platform was empty; it was hard to believe he had ever been there. Weeks held open the door of the big black car for her.

She thought of Professor Welcome driving unprotected through the wind and rain. She thought of the sombre Mrs. Craw, of Mr. Deal and his witches, and she thought of Nick, with a queer emotion that made her throat contract. Was she glad that he had come, after all, or was she sorry? Sorry—for everything . . . Sorry that he cared too much, and she not quite enough . . .

The car stopped with a jolt, and leaning forward she saw by the headlights an overturned truck lying across the road, completely blocking it; no light, no people, not a sound. Weeks began backing the car.

"But you must see if any one's hurt!" she cried.

"Better not," said Weeks. "With these here hijackers and all, better not to get mixed up."

He turned and drove back along the road, turned again into what seemed a dripping forest. When the car stopped again she was startled. "What is it now?" she asked.

"We're home," said he.

IT WAS part of the queer nightmare evening that they should say they were "home" when he could see nothing but a stretch of muddy road gleaming in the headlights.

"Got no lights in the house," he observed without interest.

"I guess the wires are down in the storm."

He opened the door of the car and taking the

side of the house to the back and there, in the kitchen, she saw a dim light. Her relief gave the measure of her fear, her knees trembled, she gave a long sigh and hurried to the window. And as she stood on tiptoe to look in she looked directly into a strange face pressed against the inside of the window.

It startled her immeasurably. She drew back taring with dilated eyes. Who was this, this old woman with strangely white hair and dark eyes that glittered? This old woman with a room in her hand?

"Here," she said aloud, "don't be quite such a fool. I shan't know who she is or how she got here. But that's Mr. Deal's kitchen and she's a human being . . ."

Approaching the window again, she smiled, but the old creature only glared at her. Then she went to the back door and knocked, banged, rattled the handle with a mounting terror.

"I will get in," she cried. "Let me in."

She ran back to the window and there stood the woman glaring at her. She rapped at the window and the old woman raised her broom menacingly.

"Stop it!" cried Lou.

She sprang back, her foot slipped in the muddy path, and she fell. When she rose to her feet she felt tears warm on her cheeks.

"This won't do," she said aloud with a sob. "I'm not going to lose my nerve. I'll go and get Weeks."

The garage was dark, too, and locked. She knocked loudly on the door, but she expected no answer.

Her foot struck against something on the path and for a moment her heart seemed to stop. This was the supreme horror, the unbearable thing . . . Some one was lying there . . .



Who was this old woman with strangely white hair?

bundles, went leisurely after her as she ran along the path and up on the veranda where he set them down.

"Good-night, miss!" he said, and was off. She rang the bell and waited, wondering why they hadn't lit a lamp.

"It's idiotic!" she cried to herself with a strange little outburst of anger. And why didn't some one come to the door? She rang again and heard the bell sound shrilly in the house. But no footsteps.

The rain drummed loud on the roof of the porch, the wind went rushing past. And the old house stood dark and still.

She knocked on the door, banged on it. And no one came.

"It's just impossible," she told herself. "All those people in the house and not a sound. No one to open the door."

She knocked once more on the front door, once more rang the bell and, getting no response, went down the veranda steps to the path.

The rain was cold as ice driving in her face and did her good. She followed the path round

Her groping hands touched a man's short hair, soaked by the rain. Weeks? Her fingers moved slowly down a cold, wet face. No—that was not a uniform . . . What she felt was the soft roughness of a heavy overcoat. An overcoat like Nick's . . . She reached for the hands, flung out in the mud. They were ungloved. That was Nick's seal ring.

NOTHING was impossible any more. Everything that used to be real had gone now: light and warmth and human voices. Nick was lying here, cold, soaked by the driving rain. Perhaps he was dead. One went on. There was no one else to help Nick now.

"I'll have to telephone for a doctor," she said aloud. "And I'll get something to cover you with, Nick. I shan't be long."

She climbed in at the open window. It had been broken, a jagged splinter of glass tore her hand. She tied it up in her drenched handkerchief, to keep the blood from dripping so. The telephone was in the library. She went through the kitchen into the hall and found it black as

a pit. She turned the switch but nothing happened. She groped her way to the library and the door was locked. She knocked and hammered on it, but in this nightmare world all doors were locked, no voices ever answered. She could not reach the telephone, she could have no light, there was no one else alive in this house.

"If I'm any good at all," she said to herself, "I'll keep my nerve and get help for Nick. There's nobody but me. It doesn't matter if I can't understand."

She had to wait a moment, her knees trembled so. Then she felt her way toward the stairs. In her bureau drawer there was an electric torch. She would get that. She would take the steamer rug from the shelf in the wardrobe to cover Nick and she would walk to the village if there were any village.

A board creaked. If some one were very quietly coming up the stairs behind her? If some one were waiting at the head of the stairs . . .? Mr. Deal and Mrs. Craw and Professor Welcome and Millie must all be somewhere . . . What if they had all gone mad . . .? What if Mr. Deal had changed himself into that staring little old woman—that witch.

Here was the top of the stairs. There was the wall of the passage, this the knob of her own door. One door that was not locked . . . She mustn't run to the bureau . . . Of course the torch wouldn't work . . . But it did. A beam of light shone now upon familiar objects.

She crossed the room and unlocked the wardrobe door. The light of the torch shone directly into Professor Welcome's face. He was standing there with his eyes closed. He toppled forward and in his fall bore her to the ground. Some one shrieked horribly—she fell through the floor, through the earth and all her breath rushed out of her body . . .

A bright light shone in his eyes . . . Who was saying, "Lou—!" Whose arms?

"Nick . . . ?"

"Here, Lou!"

"Nick, are you dead . . . ?"

"No, dear girl, I'm here."

Light, bright light, and Nick sitting beside her. "Nick, I forgot to put my hand to my head and say: 'Where am I? I'm not acting according to precedent . . . I think I've had a nightmare . . . I dreamed I came here and it was dark.'"

"The wires were down. Telephone wires, too. The chauffeur drove into the village to report."

"So that's where Weeks went . . . Then, one of it is real . . . But there was a witch in the kitchen, Nick."

"She gave me a crack on the head with her broom," said Nick.

SHE reached for his hand. "That's not the right answer, Nick. You ought to say: 'There aren't any witches . . . Because if she's true, then Professor Welcome was true.'"

His fingers tightened over hers.

"Want me to tell you, dear girl? The doctor will be along presently to see you. He's in the house now . . . Perhaps you'd feel better if I told you . . . You see, the housekeeper got a telegram as soon as you'd left. Some one was ill. And when she went she stopped in the village to get a friend of hers to take her place. An old woman, called Mrs. Angel. And the housemaid didn't like her. Mrs. Angel's deaf and dumb, but the housemaid had another idea. She was afraid of Mrs. Angel and she left."

"Mrs. Angel's that witch, Nick?"

"That's what the girl thought. So, she cleared out and Mr. Deal was badly upset. So, he got a taxi and went to the village to get another housemaid from an agency. His cab ran into a truck. He wasn't hurt, but he was delayed. And when Professor Welcome arrived, there was no one here but Mrs. Angel."

"I rather wish that part wasn't true, Nick."

"Real things are better than nightmares, Lou."

"Go on!"

"You'll have to remember that the poor old woman couldn't hear a word he said, or speak to him, and she'd never seen him before. He is a queer looking bird, too. He was very much annoyed when he got here. He was wet through, wanted to change and she couldn't even tell him which room was meant for him. She told Mr. Deal, he can read her fingers, that she thought he was a foreigner, and when he wandered into your room, looking for his own, she thought he was a thief. So she opened the wardrobe door and beckoned him over and shoved him in, and locked the door."

"And he smothered . . . ?"

"He's alive, dear girl. He'd have been all right if it hadn't been for the trouble he has. I've forgotten what the doctor called it . . . Fear of small, enclosed places."

"Nick, you were really here? Lying out in the rain?"

"Yes. You see, I tried to ring you up and the telephone was out of order. And—I don't know how it was—I didn't like the looks of that professor fellow. I didn't like your going alone. I came after you in a taxi. I couldn't get into the house, and I thought you were in it. . . . And Mrs. Angel didn't help much. . . . I smashed the kitchen window and she thought I was certainly another thief and she gave me a crack on the head with her broom. Knocked me out for a while. . . ."

"You worried me a little. Nobody would like to find a friend lying on the garden path—in the rain. I'm afraid I was . . ."

She raised herself on her elbow and he put his arm about her shoulders.

"Lou . . . I've always known you were the only thing that matters . . ."

"Nick, I must tell you what I said that you didn't hear . . . Nick, darling . . . I can't go on without you. . . ."

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