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The Crimson Ribbon

Written by Katherine Clements

Published by Headline Review

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The Grimson Ribbon

Katherine Clements

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First published in 2014
by HEADLINE REVIEW

An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 4722 0419 6
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 4722 0420 2

Typeset in Aldine 401 BT by Avon DataSet Ltd,
Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable
products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging
and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the
environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

An Hachette UK Company

338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

Part One

Ely

May Day 1646

Chapter I

Sometimes death comes like an arrow, sudden and swift, an unforeseen shot from an unheeded bow. Sometimes death comes slowly, like the first small sparks of a green-wood fire, smoking and smouldering for the longest time before the kindling flares and the heart of the blaze glows with fierce, consuming heat.

Sometimes God chooses to end a life before it is even begun.

Born on May Day, Esther Tuttle's baby should be a blessing, a symbol of fertility and hope bestowed upon the harvest to come. In these hard years of famine and war, God knows how much we need it. Instead, Annie Flowers, my mother, attending at the confinement, pulls from Esther's body a misshapen thing, slick with blood, bruised blue and purple.

The child's head is swollen, one eye unformed, leaving a gaping black hole, showing skull. Its tiny legs flop this way and that, as though the bones are gone. Its face reminds me of the graven gargoyles that watch over us from Ely's great cathedral. It does not cry. It does not breathe. A tiny coiled sprig nestling between its legs shows that it would have been a son, had it lived.

A dead baby is a bad omen, for the family, for the town, for my mother and me. The birth of a monster is even worse.

In these bleak, blighted days, when the crops fail, new lambs die of the rot and travellers report malevolent spectres wandering

the Fens, we are used to bad news. But this child is unlike any other my mother has brought into the world. This creature in her arms is more than just another bad birth. I know it straight away, just as she knows it.

I clap both hands to my mouth, stopping a cry.

My mother stares at the body in her arms.

‘Where is my child?’ Esther, sweating and split from the birthing, struggles to sit.

My mother takes the thing and covers it with a cloth so that Esther cannot see what she has borne.

‘Bring him to me.’

I go to Esther and try to soothe her. She must be calm if we are to stop her bleeding.

‘Why does he not cry?’

Her eyes question, then cloud with blackness, like ink spilled across a page. She clutches at my hands. ‘Ruth, where is my child?’

My mother moves to her side, bringing a dose of valerian root. I recognise its sweet, earthy scent above the meaty stench of women’s blood.

‘Bring him to me,’ Esther demands. ‘I must see him. It’s a son, is it not? A boy?’

‘Esther, my dear, you must rest now,’ my mother says. ‘Your work is done.’

Esther’s face turns white beneath the blooming veins in her cheek. She huddles against the wall.

‘No . . .’ she whispers, kicking away the stained coverlet and drawing her knees up to her chest. ‘No . . . No . . .’

My mother uses the purring tone she saves for those in her care. ‘I’m so sorry, my love, but you must rest. You are very weak. This will calm you and take away a little of the pain. Come, drink.’

Esther cowers on the bed, hunched in a ball, rocking back

and forth, eyes wide and wild. As my mother leans towards her she hisses, like a cornered cat. 'Keep away from me!' Spittle, touched with flecks of crimson, flies from her lips. 'Bring me my baby!'

'My dear Esther, your child is with God now.'

Before either of us can comfort her, Esther is on her feet and across the room, dragging the filthy linen behind her. She stumbles as her wet shift clings to her legs. She goes to the trestle, where my mother has laid the child, and pulls back the cloth to see the thing lying there.

My mother moves quickly, reaching for Esther's waist to stop her fainting. But Esther is mad with grief. She picks up the child and cradles it, making an unearthly moaning in her throat. Then she spins around to face us. 'Do not touch me, witch! I see what you have done!'

'Esther . . .' I say, but she backs towards the door, snarling, showing teeth. She staggers out of the cottage and into the street, taking her baby with her.

We follow, pleading with her to return to the house, to give the baby up, but it is as if she cannot hear us, or does not care to. She lurches, barefoot and bleeding, down High Row towards the cathedral, a wild woman, leaving a trail of scarlet. Those few about the streets as dusk comes down stop and stare.

She heads for the marketplace and the Dolphin, where I know Isaac Tuttle waits for news of his first-born. There is shouting and commotion as the men outside the tavern see us coming.

I catch at Esther's arm. 'Please, Esther, come home with us. You are sick.'

'Let me go, Ruth!' Her eyes are fierce, her mouth twists. She bears no resemblance to the mousy, mild-mannered girl we attended at daybreak.

People spill from the alehouse, Isaac Tuttle at the fore. He is drunk, swaying, eyes unfocused. He is a big man, hardy from

labouring in the Fens. It takes a lot of ale to make him that way. But it is May Day and, though we have not had maypoles and dancing for all the long years of war, old habits die hard in these parts. The men have been sinking their drink since noon.

Isaac's cronies gather, bringing their tankards, eager for some new distraction.

'Wife?' Isaac gawks at the bloodied woman before him.

Esther trembles. Her gaze darts madly; her hair is loose and tangled. She holds out the baby in her arms. 'Here is your son!' she cries. 'Here is the evil thing that *she* brought forth from me.' As she flings out an arm to point at my mother, she loses her grasp on the child. Slippery as it is with gore, it slides across the ground like an eel and lands in the dust at Isaac's feet.

There is a pause, an intake of breath, a moment of dawning understanding. Then, horror, catching hold like flames in a haystack. I watch a puddle of crimson bloom on the ground between Esther's feet.

'She did this!' Esther says. 'Just as she killed Goody Woodrun and her boys, just as she cursed the Taylors.'

'The Woodruns died of a fever,' I say, but no one is listening.

'Help me, Isaac . . . I swear she lies with the Devil. She uses me as his vessel. She brings forth his foul offspring from me – and now she means to kill me with her potions and her spells . . .'

Esther sinks to her knees.

My mother goes to her and tries to put her arm around Esther's shoulders but Isaac will not have it. Dim-witted and lumbering with the drink, he bats my mother away with one swing of his arm, thundering, 'Do not touch my wife, whore!'

I hear a crack like splintered wood as my mother falls. She clutches at her ankle, the colour draining from her face.

I run to her side, feeling the crowd bristle. Her ankle is broken. I need no potion or charm to know that. Already it is swelling

and turning blue, just like the bloated body of the poor child that lies discarded like a scrap of offal.

Esther is babbling to Isaac: 'I didn't want her with me, but you asked her to come and now see what she has done. I told you she was bad. I didn't want her in my house and yet you left me there alone . . .'

I can see she is fading, the strength going from her fast. Someone picks up the dead child and brings it to her. She whimpers and hides her face against Isaac's chest. He waves the tiny body away, holds his wife and pulls down her shift to keep her decent as blood pools around them.

There is muttering from the crowd. More have gathered now, onlookers and tipplers from the inn, throwing poisonous looks our way, among them our neighbour Samuel Ward, a mean, brutal man who has never been a friend of ours.

I know that this is dangerous. I know that we cannot ignore them and walk away, as I have been taught.

'Ruth . . .' my mother whispers, clasping my hand. I see fear in her eyes and it pierces my heart, making it thump, making my skin prickle and my ears ring. Suddenly my body is not my own. I cannot control my breathing, which comes shallow and fast, just as Esther's own breath gives out.

Esther dies, there in the street, in Isaac's arms, her ungodly offspring in the dirt at her feet, all the time spitting hatred and lies at the one woman who might have saved her life.

Cradling my mother, I search about me for help. Among the gathering are many who come to us for cures and remedies when their families are sick. There are faces I know from the market square, fellow servants, quick to gossip but even quicker to ask for my mother when their children are ailing or their wives struggle in a difficult confinement. They all know her skill with the old wisdom. More than one may owe his life to her.

But they all turn from me now. None will meet my gaze.

Martha Featherstone, a thin, watery-eyed girl I know from my time at the free school, begins a high keening.

‘Will someone help me?’ I beg.

Isaac looks at me. His skin is red-raw and his eyes are glazed with something more than drink. ‘Help?’ he says. ‘You have cursed my child and put my wife in the earth, and now you ask for help?’

He stands, leaving Esther’s limp body on the ground. He steps over her, making a trail of red footprints as he comes towards us. The other men push and jostle behind him, leaving the women to deal with Esther and the child.

‘She has broken a bone,’ I say, stroking my mother’s head. ‘She cannot walk.’

My mother is faint but somehow gathers strength enough to wave Isaac away. ‘Let us be,’ she says.

The men surround us.

‘You must answer for your sins,’ Isaac says. ‘I will have justice for this.’

‘And justice for the Woodruns,’ Samuel Ward says.

‘And the Taylors.’

‘And my husband,’ Edith Cobbett adds. It is no secret that she blames her widowhood on my mother.

‘Dead, one and all,’ Isaac says, ‘all tended by you, Annie Flowers. Esther was right. You are a curse upon this town.’

His eyes speak of the turmoil of grief. The veins in his forearms bulge like ropes as he swings his fist and knocks me aside with a single blow.

I sprawl in the dirt, spitting out dust, my jaw a lightning bolt of pain. He has hold of my mother’s hair, fingers tangling with the red ribbons bound into her dark curls. He yanks her head back hard.

‘What have you to say, witch?’ he snarls into her face. I can

smell the drink on him even from a distance. My mother's eyes show white, like a frightened animal's, her words caught in her throat.

'This town is plagued by evil and unnatural things!' Samuel cries. 'Sickness and death rain down upon us, ever since the Cromwell household came here.'

There are murmurs of agreement.

'Our crops fail, year after year.'

'She consorts with the Devil.'

And then I hear Edith Cobbett's voice raised up: 'She lay with my husband and cursed him when he would not pay her for it. She is the reason he is dead!'

'She's a whore,' Edith's son, Will, says. 'Cromwell knows it better than any!'

'She brings the Devil's work to Ely!'

'We must cast her out!'

Isaac drags my mother to her feet. She cries out and crumples as she puts her weight on her broken ankle. 'We will settle this!' he roars. 'You will swim, witch!'

Will Cobbett pulls me up and pins my wrists behind my back. He is not much older than I, barely a man, but I cannot escape the strong grip of his farm-boy hands. My head throbs and my vision blurs. I am pushed forwards, following the hulk of Isaac Tuttle, who takes my mother towards the river. Will kicks at my legs, making me fall, then beats me until I walk again.

My mother claws and scrabbles, her hair coming out in clumps as Isaac tears at it. He punches her jaw and I see her swoon with the shock, as I had done. All the time he yells at her, 'Whore! Witch! Devil!'

We reach the Ouse and Isaac wastes no time. He drags my mother away from the quay to where the muddy bank slopes into the water and heaves her into the deepest part of the flow.

I battle against Will, but he holds me fast.

‘Stop! Please stop!’ I beg, only to be silenced by a thump in the stomach that winds me and makes the world turn blinding white.

She splashes and struggles, pale limbs flailing, caught up in strands of riverweed.

‘She floats!’ someone cries. ‘See how she floats!’

Isaac watches and waits as my mother’s head remains above the water.

It is all done in seconds. The mob, mad with the horror in their midst, cannot be stopped. I scream. I yell. Will knocks me to the ground and pins me down until Samuel grinds my face into the dirt with his boot.

‘She is a witch!’ comes the cry.

A rope is brought and Isaac wades into the river until it is up to his waist. He flings the rope to my mother, who grabs hold of it, clutching at it as if it is her last chance of life. It would be better if she did not. As soon as Isaac has hold of her, I know what he means to do.

Samuel pulls me up to my knees and breathes liquor fumes into my face, making me retch. ‘Now you’ll see what happens to witches.’

Isaac has my mother by the hair and wrenches her arm behind her back, forcing her up the path. He tears at her sodden clothes, slashing at her stays and exposing her breasts for all to see. I think for one moment that he means to defile her. But instead he shouts, ‘Here is Satan’s whore! Who here would see an end to her evil? Who here will see justice done?’

The crowd bays its consent. A lone voice calls, speaking for all, ‘Aye! Let it be done!’

A couple of the men loop the rope over the low branch of a willow that stands at the water’s edge.

I begin to wail. I can barely hear the poisonous things whispered in my ear.

‘Have mercy,’ I plead. ‘She is all I have! She is all I have ever had!’ But they have no pity.

As they drag her to the tree and tie the noose around her neck they call her witch, harlot, devil-wife. They spit upon her with their stinking alehouse breath and one man opens his breeches and pisses upon her naked skin. She fights for her life but Isaac and his men are too strong, lost in drunken rage, eager for retribution – this is God’s work after all. Martha Featherstone comes forward from the crowd and drops to her knees, calling upon the angels to take the witch back to Hell where she belongs.

And there in the shadow of the great cathedral, with their God watching, they hang my mother by the neck.