

SECRET WITNESS

Anna and Sir Robert had been friends since childhood. As they grew up their friendship turned to love. Anna was a kind sweet girl who had known nothing but love and happiness all her life. Sir Robert was a tall, handsome, honourable young man and loved Anna with all his heart. They were to marry in spring when Anna would be eighteen. Their love was so strong and they longed for the day they could be together forever.

Her father looked on Sir Robert as a son and knew his precious daughter would be loved and taken care of for the rest of her life.

Now Sir Edmund who owned the adjoining estate was totally the opposite. He was cruel and treated his workers and staff very badly. In fact he was hated by everyone who knew him. He had set his heart on making Anna his wife. He spent hours thinking of ways to turn Anna against Sir Robert.

One day he encountered Sir Robert on his way to visit Anna. He stood in his way. 'You sir' he snarled 'are not worthy to marry Anna. You are just a boy' Sir Robert tried to walk on but Sir Edmund blocked his path. 'I challenge you to a duel' shouted Sir Edmund and threw down his gauntlet. 'The winner claims the hand of the lady Anna'.

Poor Sir Robert, he knew he was no match for Sir Edmund but not wishing to appear a coward he accepted the challenge and hoped good would prevail. 'By the river, dawn tomorrow' snapped Sir Edmund and stood to one side letting Sir Robert go on his way.

Sir Robert made his way to the house but told nothing of the encounter or duel to Anna or her father. He tried hard to be cheerful as they discussed wedding plans. Anna was so excited but his heart was heavy with the thought of the duel tomorrow.

Dawn the next day, the two men faced each other, sword in hand. Sir Robert fought valiantly but he was no match for the older stronger man. His sword was whipped from his grasp and Sir Edmund sank his blade deep into Sir Robert's heart. Sir Edmund went to walk away, then stopped, turned to his manservant and with an evil smile said 'Strip him, take his money and rings. Everyone will think he was set upon by robbers'. With that he was gone.

Henry the old gardener found Sir Robert dying. He knelt down and cradled the young man in his arms. With his last breath Sir Robert whispered 'Tell Anna I am sorry'. His life blood poured from his wound sinking into the earth beneath him.

Henry rushed to the house as fast as his old legs would carry him. He told Anna and her father the awful news. On hearing of Sir Robert's death Anna sank to her knees sobbing. Henry said 'It looks like some ruffians killed him and robbed him. He must have put up a fight because I found his sword nearby.'

'Get him brought to the house' instructed Philip Anna's Father. Sir Robert had no family so Philip arranged the funeral and said Sir Robert was to be laid to rest in their family crypt.

The months went by, Anna's heart was broken. She spent her days walking by the river where her brave Robert had died. Henry had planted an oak tree on the spot where Robert's blood had been spilt.

Her Father, already in poor health, suffered a heart attack and died. This left her alone and lost.

It was at this time Sir Edmund took advantage of the situation. He called on her to offer help and support. Anna was just glad to have help running the estate. She came to rely on him. She knew of his reputation but he seemed so kind perhaps people misjudged him. When he proposed marriage a year later, although she did not love him she thought it might grow in time so she foolishly accepted.

Once married she soon realised her mistake. He took over her estate and joined it with his. He got rid of all her staff except Nanny, Henry the gardener and his son. He forbade her to see her friends and she became a prisoner in her own home. Her only solace was walking by the river or sitting by the oak tree which was growing tall.

One day heavy with her first child she sat by the oak tree her eyes closed, a leaf fell and caressed her cheek as it danced in the breeze. For a moment it felt like the touch of her beloved Robert's fingers.

The day she gave birth a loud scream could be heard from the house 'It is a girl. A girl, I wanted a boy, bellowed Sir Edmund. The oak tree shuddered but no one saw it.

Five times this happened. Five times the oak tree shuddered. Luckily for Anna her sixth child was a boy. He was named Edward and as soon as he was old enough his Father took him from his Mother to bring up and follow in his footsteps. Anna, Nanny and the girls were moved to the west wing and Sir Edmund rarely saw them.

They spent their days walking by the river or sitting under the oak tree which was now very tall and gave them shade and shelter. Anna and Nanny taught the girls to read, write and sew and helped them become five lovely young ladies.

As Edward grew older he would visit his Mother and his sisters in secret. He was not like his Father. He was kind and gentle but also bright enough not to show this side to his Father.

Anna spent hours alone under the oak tree silently sobbing as she thought of her wonderful Robert and how different life could have been. The breeze through the branches seemed to whisper 'I love you' as the leaves fell lightly touching her cheek. It was as if Robert was there beside her.

Then one stormy night as Sir Edmund was doing his nightly prowling round the estate, he took shelter under the oak tree. A flash of lightning, a crash of thunder, a loud crack and the largest branch was hit and fell with tremendous force crushing him into the sodden ground. They found him the next morning cold, wet and dead with the branch piercing his heart. This time Anna did not grieve as they could all be together now. Her son, now twenty, took charge of the estate and the girls found husbands and were happy.

Anna sat under her Robert's oak tree happy and content. That is where they found her one morning at dawn. Henry the old gardener had long since passed away. His son Sam did as he had been asked and took a lock of Anna's hair and placed it in the hole in which he planted a young oak in her memory next to Sir Robert's oak.

Now many years have passed by and as people shelter under the oaks they will see their branches have intertwined. Sir Roberts, having been a secret witness to the life and sadness of his true love now enfolds her forever in his embrace.

Written by Pat Smith.

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