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# Folks Used to Believe

by ALVIN F.  
HARLOW

## The Familiar



**B**AILEY'S Dictionary, published in 1751, defines a Familiar as "A Spirit or Devil supposed to attend on Witches, Wizards, etc." The belief that every sorcerer or person in league with the Evil One had a familiar spirit prevailed all through the centuries from ancient to modern times. The Jewish King Solomon, because of his wisdom, was for ages reputed to have been a necromancer who had always two demons, one male and one female in attendance, ready to carry out his wishes.

Only occasionally do we hear of the familiar being a good spirit. A man in France in the Sixteenth Century was said to have one which had attended him for thirty-seven years. He never saw it, but it awoke him in the morning, touched him upon the right ear if he did well, upon the left if he did wrong, and gave other evidences of its reality.

The commonest manifestation of the spirit was in the form of an animal which served a witch or wizard, who often received it when they agreed to sell their souls to the Devil, who usually appeared to them as a man in black. When the new witch had signed the agreement or made her mark with her blood, the Devil, according to an old writer, "delivers to her an imp or familiar; which in the shape of a cat or kitten, a mole, miller-fly, or some other insect or animal, at stated times of the day sucks her blood through teats on different parts of her body."

The commonest picture of a witch known to us today shows her with a broom and black cat. It was on the broomstick that she flew through the air to midnight witch meetings, while the black cat was her familiar. The familiar was seen in numerous other forms—dogs, birds, frogs, mice, and strange, hideous animals unlike any others known. If the animal was a small one, it was usually kept in a box or earthen pot on a bed of wool.

A woman at a witch trial in England testified that she called at the home of the alleged witch, but the latter was out. The caller then peeped through the bedroom window, "and espied a spirit to look out of a potsharde from under a cloth, the nose thereof beeing browne like unto a Ferret." Elizabeth Bennet, another Sixteenth Century witch, "acknowledged that shee had two spirits, one called Suckin, beeing blacke like a Dogge, the other called Lierd, beeing red like a Lion. Suckin, the examinant said, is a hee and the other is a shee. Many times they drinke of her milke bowle."

These familiars not only did harm to persons against whom the witch had a grudge, but to religious people whom the Devil ordered her to work evil upon. In 1588 in Essex, England, an old woman confessed that "she had three spirits: one like a cat which she called Lightfoot, one like a toad, which she called Lunch, the third like a Weasill, which she called Makeshift. . . . The Cat

would kill cows, the Weasill would kill horses, the Toad would plague men in their bodies." The familiar of a witch named Margaret Waite was "a deformed thing with many feet, blacke of colour, rough with hair, the bigness of a cat." Another woman had a familiar "in the shape

of a bird, yellow in colour, about the bigness of a crow—the name of it is Tewhit." A man witness testified that a witch named Margaret Moone had twelve imps. She told him their names, but he could remember only six of them—Jesus, Jockey, Sandy, Mrit, Elizabeth and Collyn.

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