

# Weird Tales

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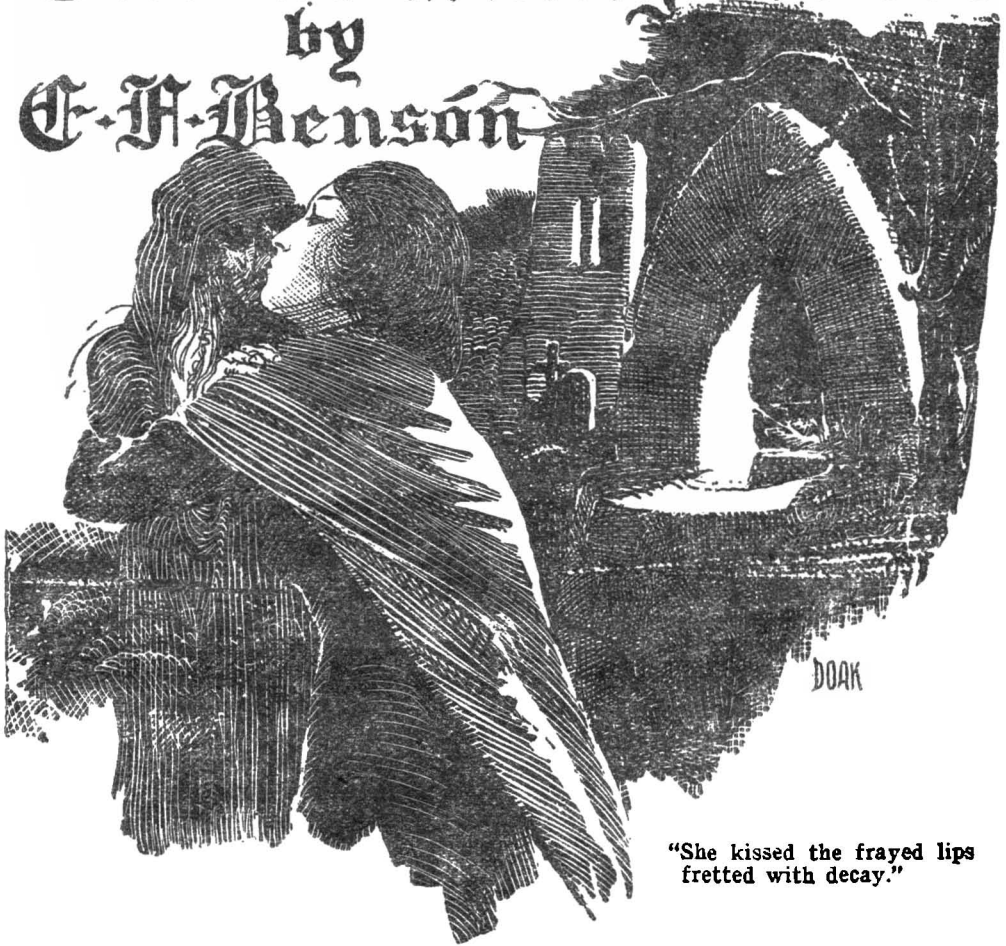
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# The Wishing-Well

by  
E. H. Benson



"She kissed the frayed lips  
fretted with decay."

**T**HE village of St. Gervase lies at the seaward base of a broad triangular valley which lies scooped-out among the uplands of the north Cornish moors, and not even among the fells of Cumberland could you find so remote a cluster of human habitations. Four miles of by-road, steep and stony, lie between it and the highway along which in tourist-time the motor-busses pound dustily to Bude and Newquay, and eight more separate it from rail-head. Scarcely once in the summer does an inquisitive traveler think it worth while to visit a village which his

guide-book dismisses with the very briefest reference to the ancient wishing-well that lies near the lich-gate of the churchyard there; the world, in fact, takes very little heed of St. Gervase, and St. Gervase hardly more of the outer world. Seldom do you see man or woman waiting, at the corner where the road from the village joins the highway, for the advent of the motor-bus, and seldom does it pause there to set down one of its passengers. An occasional trolley laden with sacks of coal or cargo of beer-barrels jolts heavily down the lane; for the rest the farms of the

valley and the kitchen-gardens of the cottagers supply it with the needs of life and its few fishing-boats bring in their harvest from the sea. Nor does St. Gervase seek after any fruits of science or culture or religion save such as spring from its soil, which furnishes its wise women with herbs of healing for ailing bodies, and from its tradition of spells and superstitions of a darker sort to be used in the service of love or of vengeance. These latter are not publicly spoken of save in one house at St. Gervase, but are muttered and whispered in quiet consultations, and thus the knowledge has been handed down from mother to daughter since the days when, three centuries ago, a screeching, handcuffed band of women were driven from here to Bodmin, and, after a parody of a trial, burned at the stake.

It was strange that the vicarage, which might have been expected to be unblackened by the smoke of legendary learning, was the one house where magic and witchcraft were openly and sedulously studied, but such study was purely academical, the Reverend Lionel Eusters being the foremost authority in England as a writer on folk-lore. His parochial duties were light and his leisure plentiful; for a couple of services on Sunday were, to judge by the congregation, sufficient for the spiritual needs of his parish, and for the rest of the week he was busy in the library of the creeper-covered vicarage that stood hard by the lich-gate that led to the churchyard. Here, patient but unremitting, he worked at his great book on witchcraft which had engaged him so many years, occasionally printing some subsection of it as a pamphlet: the origin of the witch's broomstick, for instance, had furnished curious reading. He was a wealthy man with no expensive tastes save that for books on this subject, and the big library he had built on to the vicarage had now few empty shelves. Twenty years ago, when ill health had driven him from

the chill clays of Cambridge, he had been appointed to this remote college living, and the warm soft climate and the strange primitive traditions that hung about the place suited both his health and his hobby.

Mr. Eusters had long been a widower, and his daughter Judith, now a woman of forty years old, kept house for him. The time of her more marriageable maidenhood had been spent here in complete isolation from her own class, and though sometimes when she saw the courtships and childbirths of the village the sense of what she had missed made a bitter brew for her, she had long known that St. Gervase had cast some spell upon her, and that had a wooer from without sought her, he must indeed be a magnet to her heart if he could draw her from this secluded valley into the world that lay beyond the moors. In a few visits she had paid to relations of her father and mother, she had always pined to be home again, and to wake to the glinting of the sun on the gorse-clad hills, or even to the bellowing of some westerly gale that threw the sheets of rain against her window: a stormy day at home was worth all the alien sunshine, and the sandy beach of the bay with the waves asleep, or toppling in foaming and thunderous, was better than the brilliance of southern seas. Here alone her mind knew that background of content which is brighter than all the pleasures the world offers; here every day the spell of St. Gervase was like some magic shuttle weaving its threads through her.

Since her mother's death Judith's days had been of uniform monotony. Household cares claimed a short hour of the morning, and then she went to the library where her father worked to transcribe his words if he had a section of his work ready for dictation, or to look up endless references in the volumes that lined the room, if he was preparing the notes which formed the material of his dictation.

Some branch of witchcraft was always the subject of it, some magical rite for the fertility of the cattle, some charm for child-bearing, some philtre for love, or (what had by degrees got to interest her most) some spell that made the pastures wither and the cattle die, or one that caused the man on whom a girl's heart was set, but who had nought for her, to wither in the grip of some nameless sickness and miserably to perish. Month by month as her father pushed his patient way forward through the ancient mists, these Satanic spells that blighted grew to be a fascination with Judith. Just now he was deep in an exploration into wishing-wells, and there she sat this morning, pencil in hand for his dictation, as he walked up and down the library, glancing now and then at his memoranda spread out on the table.

"These wishing-wells," he said, "are common to the whole of early European beliefs, but nowhere do we find that the power which supposedly presided over them was at the beck and call of any chance person who invoked their efficacy. Only witches and those who had occult powers could set the spell working, and in origin that spell was undoubtedly Satanic, and not till Christian times were these wells used for any purpose but that of invoking evil. The form of these wells is curiously similar, an arch or shelter of stone-work is invariably built over them, and in its sides are cut small niches where, in Christian days, candles were placed or thank-offerings deposited. What they were previously used for is uncertain, but they were beyond doubt connected with the evil spells, and I conjecture that the name of the person dedicated to destruction was scratched on a coin, or written on a slip of linen or paper and hidden there to await the action of the diabolical power. The most perfectly preserved of these wishing-wells known to me is that of St. Gervase in Cornwall; its arched shelter is

in excellent condition, and the well, as is usual, very deep. The local belief in its efficacy has survived to this day, though its power is never invoked, as far as I can ascertain, for evil purposes. A woman in pregnancy, for instance, will drink of the well and pray beside it; a girl whose lover has gone to sea will scratch his name on a silver coin and drop it into the water, thus insuring his safe return. The village folk are curiously reticent about such practises, but I can personally vouch for cases of this kind. . . ."

He paused, fingering the short Vanduyke beard that grew grayly from his chin.

"My dear, I wonder if that is quite discreet," he said to Judith. "But after all it is highly improbable that any copy of my work, published by the university at a guinea, will find its way here. I think I will chance it. . . . Dear me, the bell for luncheon already! We will resume our work this evening, if you are at leisure, as I have much ready for dictation."

JUDITH smiled to herself as she paged the sheets. She knew so much more about her father's parishioners than he; for he, scholar, recluse and parson, only lived on the fringe of their lives, whereas she, in chatty visits to the women who sat and knitted at their cottage doors, had got into real touch with an inner life of which he knew little. She knew, for instance, that old Sally Trenair, whose death less than a week ago had been a source of such relief to her neighbors, was universally held to be a witch, and Sally was always muttering and mumbling round the wishing-well. None who crossed her will prospered: their cows went dry or threw still-born calves; their sheep wilted; the atrocious henbane, fatal to cattle, appeared in their fields; so the prudent wished Sally a polite good-day, and sent her honey from their hives and a cut of prime bacon when the pig was killed.

But from some vein of secretiveness, Judith did not tell her father of such talk, whispered to her over the knitting-needles, which would have inclined him to modify his views about the surviving association of the wishing-well with evil invocations. It was idle gossip, perhaps, for if you had challenged her to say whether she believed such tales of old Sally, she would certainly have denied it. . . . And yet something deep down in her would have whispered: "I don't only believe, I know."

Today when luncheon was finished, her father returned to his desk and Judith started to walk a couple of miles up the valley to the farm of John Penarth, whose family from time immemorial had owned those acres. For the last eight years he and his wife had lived there alone, for their only son Steven had gone out to America at the age of sixteen to seek his fortune. But its coming had tarried, and now, when his father was growing old and his health declining, Steven was coming home with the intention of settling down here. Judith remembered him well, a big handsome boy with the blue of the sea in his eyes and the sunshine in his hair, and she wondered what sort of man he would have grown into. She had heard that he was already come, but though she was curious to see him, the motive for her visit was really the same as that which so often drew her to the Penarth farm, namely, to have a talk with Steven's mother. There was no one, thought Judith, who was so learned in what was truly worth knowing as Mrs. Penarth. She could not have pointed you India on the big globe that stood in her parlor, have answered the simplest board-school question about Queen Elizabeth, or have added five to four without counting on her fingers, but she had rarer knowledge in the stead of such trivialities. She had the healing touch for man and beast: she stroked an ailing cow and the next day it would be at

pasture again; she whispered in the ear of a feverish child, plucking gently at its forehead, and pulled the headache out so that the child slept. And she, alone of all the village, had paid no court to Sally Trenair nor sought to propitiate her. One day as she passed Sally's cottage, Sally had screamed curses on her, yelling, half-way to the farm. Then suddenly Mrs. Penarth had turned and shot out her finger at her. "You silly, tipsy old crone!" she had cried. "Down on your knees and crave my pardon, and then get home and don't cross my path again." Sure enough, Sally knelt on the stones, and slunk off home, and thereafter, if Mrs. Penarth was down in the village, she would make haste to get into her cottage, and shut the door. Mrs. Penarth, it seemed, knew more than Sally.

Judith swung her easy way up the steep hill, hatless in spite of the hot sun, and unbreathed by the ascent. She was a tall woman, black-haired and comely, her skin clear and healthy with the blossom on it that only sun and air can give. Her full-lipped mouth hinted that passion smoldered there; her eyebrows, fine and level, nearly met across the base of her forehead; her eyes, big and black, looked ever so slightly inward. So small was the convergence that it was no disfigurement: when she looked directly at you it was not perceptible, but if she was immersed in her own thoughts, then it was there. Most noticeable was it when her father was dictating to her some grim story of malign magic or witchcraft. . . . But now she had come to the paved path through the garden of the farmhouse, set with flowers and herbs in front of the espaliered apple-trees, and there was Mrs. Penarth, knitting in the shade of the house during these hot hours before she went out again to chicken-run and milking-shed.

"Eh, but you're a welcome sight, Miss Judith," she said in the soft Cornish speech. "And you hatless in

the sun, as ever, but indeed you're one of the wise who have made sun and rain their friends, and 'tis far you'd have to search ere you found better. Come in, dear soul, and have a glass of currant-water after your walk, and tell me the doings down to St. Gervase."

Judith always fell into their mode of speech when she was with the native folk.

"Sure, there's little to tell," she said. "There was a grand catch of mackerel two days ago, and yesterday was the burying of old Sally Trenair."

Mrs. Penarth poured out for her a glass of the clear ruby liquor for which she was famous.

"Strange how the folk were scared of that tipsy old poppet!" she said. "She had nobbut a few rimes to gabble and a foul tongue to flap at them. A tale of curses she blew off at me one day, and I doubt not she hid my name in the wishing-well, though I never troubled to look."

"Hid your name in the wishing-well?" asked Judith, thinking of this morning's dictation.

Mrs. Penarth shot a swift, oblique glance at her. There were certain things she had noticed about Judith, and they interested her.

"Aw, my dear, you've sure got too much sense and book-learning to heed such tales," she said. "But when I was a girl my mother used to talk of them. Even now I scarce know what to make of some of them."

"Oh, tell me of them," said Judith. "My father's just set on the wishing-wells and the lore of them. He was dictating to me of them all the morning."

"Eh, to think of that! Well, when I was a girl there were a many queer doings round the well. A maid would tell an old crone like Sally if she fancied a young man, and get some gabble to con over as she sipped the water. Or if a fellow had an ill-will toward another he'd consult a witch-woman

and she'd write the name of his enemy for him, and bid him hide it in the well. And then, sure as the coming of morning, tribulations drove fast on him as long as his name bided there. His cows would go dry or his boat be wrecked or his children get deadly dwams or his wife break her marriage vows. Or he himself would pine and fail till he was scarce able to put foot to floor, and presently the bell would be tolling for him. Idle tales, no doubt."

Judith had been drinking this in as eagerly as the thirsty earth drinks the rain after drought, or as a starving man sets his teeth in food. Her mouth smiled, her blood beat high and strong; it was as if she was learning some news of good fortune which was hers by birthright. Just then there came a step in the passage and the door opened.

"Why, 'tis Steven," said Mrs. Penarth. "Come, lad, and pay your duty to Miss Judith; maybe she remembers you."

Tall as she was, he towered over her: he had a boy's face still, and the sea was in his eyes and the sun in his hair. And on the instant Judith knew that no magnet of man would avail to draw her from St. Gervase.

**T**HERE was dictation again for her up till supper-time, and when after that her father went back to his books, she strolled out, as she often did on hot nights like this, before going to bed. Never yet had she felt so strong an emotional excitement as that afternoon when Mrs. Penarth, talking of those old beliefs of her girlhood, had somehow revealed Judith to herself. All that narration about the wishing-well was already familiar to some secret cell in her brain: she needed only to be reminded of it to make it her own. On the top of that had come Steven's entry, and her heart had leaped to him. Some mixed brew of these two was at ferment within her now: sometimes a bubble

from one, sometimes from the other rose luminous to the surface. She felt restless and tingling with stored energy, and she paused for a moment at the gate of the garden uncertain how to spend it.

The night was thickly overcast, the road that led down to the village a riband of gray, scarcely visible, and as she stood there she heard a step brisk and active coming along it, and there swung into view, recognizable even in the deep dusk by his height and gait, the figure of Steven on his way to the village. Dearly would she have loved to call to him and walk with him, but that could not be; besides, another desire tugged at her, and when he was past she turned in at the lich-gate to the churchyard. The white tombstones glimmered faintly in the dusk, and she looked up beyond them toward the grave by which she had stood two days ago at the burying of old Sally. Then her breath caught in her throat, for she could see the mound of new-turned earth gleaming whitely. She made her way to it: the dark earth certainly was luminous with some wavering light, and on the moment she was conscious that Sally herself, not the mere bag of bones that had been put away in the earth, was close to her. So vivid was this impression that she whispered, "Sally! Are you here, Sally?" No audible response came, but the answer tingled in every nerve in her body, and she knew that Sally was here, no pale wandering spirit, but a power friendly and sisterly and altogether evil. It was trickling into her, growing warm in her veins, as by some transfusion of blood. She went to the wishing-well, and kneeling on the curbstone of it drank of its water from her cupped hands.

Something stirred beside her, and turning she saw at her side, illuminated by some pale gleam, a little bent figure shrouded in clean grave clothes, and the brown wizened face, which she had last beheld in the com-

posure and dignity of death, was now all alive with glee and with welcome. Judith's flesh was weak, for in a spasm of terror she sprang to her feet with arms flung out against the specter, and lo! there was nothing there but the quiet churchyard with the headstones of those who slumbered there, and at her feet the black invisible water of which she drank.

Despising herself for her fright, and yet winged with it, she ran stumbling from the place, not halting till she was back at the vicarage, where the light shining from the library window showed that her father was still pursuing his academic researches into the world of things occult and terrible of which the doors were now swinging open to admit her in very truth.

For some days the horror of that moment by the well was effective, and she threw herself into the normal ways of life which lured her with a new brightness. She often saw Steven, for it was he who brought the milk of a morning from the farm, and she would be out in the garden by the time of his early arrival, cutting roses for her vases or more strenuously engaged in weeding the borders. At first she gave him just a nodded "good morning," but soon they would stand chatting there for five minutes. She knew she made a fine, handsome figure: she saw he appreciated her healthy splendor, he looked at her with the involuntary tribute a man pays to a good-looking woman. Fond wild notions took root in her mind, spreading their fibers beneath in the soil, and anchoring there. . . . Another morning she heard him singing as he clattered down the road in the milk-cart, a big, rough, resonant voice, and of high pitch for a man.

Judith played the organ in church, conducting a choir-practise every Saturday for the singers, and next week Steven was sitting among the men while she took them through the canticles and hymns. Women and girls took alto and treble parts; the chief

chorister was Nance Pascoe, a maid of twenty, and she was like a folded rosebud just bursting into full flower. By some blind instinct Judith began to dislike her: she would stop in the middle of a verse to tell the trebles they were flat, which meant that Nance was the culprit. Again she would ask the tenors singly to sing some line over which they had bungled, and had a word of praise for Steven. Or she would go to the farm for a chat with Mrs. Penarth, and by some casual question learn that Steven was hedge-clipping near by in the meadow. Then she would remember she wanted a chicken for next day, and go to tell him: it was but a step. In a hundred infinitesimal ways she betrayed herself.

Mixed with this growth of longing which had so firmly rooted itself was another of more poisonous breed. There was a power eager to help her, and like a frightened fool she had fled from its manifestation. But she knew she was making no way with Steven, and now she bethought herself again of it, and found that her terror had withered, and that her thirst for commerce with those dark enchantments was keen not only for the help they could give her, but for her own love of them. Once more in the evening, when her father was back at his books, she set out for the wishing-well.

HER step was noiseless on the grass of the churchyard, and she was close to the wishing-well, still screened by bushes that grew there, when she heard from behind them a man's ringing laughter, and a girl's voice joined in.

"Sure, she's terrible set on you, Steven. It makes me bubble within when she says at the choir-singing: 'Yes, very nice, Mr. Penarth,' and what the poor soul means is 'Aw, Steven, doo-ee come and give me a hug.'"

Steven laughed again. "I'm fair scared of her," he said, "though

Mother laughs fit to burst when she's come up to the farm to see and order one egg or a sprig of mint. And every morning when I take the milk, the old girl'll be weeding and hoeing, showing off like, as if she was the strong man at the fair."

"Eh, I declare I'm sorry for her," said Nance, "for I know what it is to love you. Poor empty heart!"

"Nance, we must put our banns up," said he. "I'm scared, but give your lad a kiss to strengthen him and I'll pluck up and ask Parson to read us out next Sunday."

There was silence.

"Eh, Steven, don't hug so tight," whispered Nance. "You'll get your fill of me ere long. Just a drink from the well for us both, and then I must get home."

Judith stole back along the grass, and from behind the curtain in the parlor window saw the two, arm-entwined, pass down the road. No thought was there now in her mind of any love-philtre; no longer did she want the help of a friendly power to get Steven. He had mocked at her, he was scared of her, and soon he would have good reason for that. Of Nance she hardly thought: it was not for Nance that her heart was black as the water in the wishing-well. She felt no hysterical rage of longing or revenge: it was a hellish glee that fed her soul. Quaint and pleasant was it, she thought, as she wrote on a slip of paper the name "Steven Penarth," that it should have been his mother who had taught her that. And Mrs. Penarth had "laughed fit to burst" at her, so Mrs. Penarth must learn not to laugh so much.

She went forth again with the inscribed slip. The power she courted was flooding into her, wave on wave. Now she was back at the well again, and there she knelt a moment drinking in like a thirsty field the dew of power with which the air was thick. She felt in the darkness for one of those fern-fringed niches in the wall,



and deep among its fronds she hid the paper.

"Master of evil and of me," she muttered, "send sickness and death on him whom I here dedicate."

Something stirred beside her: she knew that the presence which had terrified her before was manifest again. She turned with hands of welcome, and there beside her was the shroud-wrapped figure and the wizened face, but now the shroud was white no longer but spotted with earth-mold, and the flesh was rotting from the face. Judith put her arms close round the specter, and kissed the frayed lips fretted with decay, and she felt it melting into her. She shut her eyes in the ecstasy of that union: when she opened them she was clasping the empty air.

**S**HE was down early next morning, full of youthful fire and fitness, and presently the milk-cart clattered up to the gate. But it was not Steven who drove it, but Mrs. Penarth.

"'Tis I who've come with your milk today, Miss Judith," she said; "for Steven's got a terrible bad headache, and I bade him lie abed. But he charged me to ask Parson to put up his banns come Sunday."

"Oh, is Mr. Steven to be married?" asked Judith. "Who's the maid?"

"Just Nance Pascoe whom he's played with since he was a lad."

"Then he's lucky," said Judith, "for she's pretty as a picture. I'll tell my father about the banns. And I'm so sorry Mr. Steven's not well. But he'll mend quick."

The days passed on, and soon it was known that Steven lay stricken with some sore fever to which neither his mother's healing hands nor the doctor's potions brought relief. Every morning Judith learned from Mrs. Penarth that he was no better, and every morning she felt herself the object of some keen, silent scrutiny. She was not one who prinked before her glass, but one day, after Mrs. Pen-

arth had gone, she ran upstairs and questioned her face. It certainly had changed: it was sharper in outline, and that cast in her eye was surely more pronounced. But she liked that: it seemed an outward and visible sign of her power. Every night now she sat by the wishing-well concentrating on her desire. The news of Steven had been joyfully bad that day: his fever burned more fiercely, consuming the flesh on his bones and drinking up his strength. Twice now had his banns been called, and it was likely that the next visit to church would not be that of a bridegroom.

The moon was soon to rise as Judith got up to go home: she fancied she heard something stir in the bushes by the well, and called "Sally, Sally," but no response came. Her limbs were light with joy; she danced along the strip of turf, leaping high in the air from the very exuberance of her soul. . . . As soon as she had turned out of the lich-gate Mrs. Penarth stole out of the bushes. She had a dark lantern with her, and she searched the walls of the wishing-well. She spied the paper Judith had hidden there, and she drew it out and read it. She tore it in half, and on the blank piece she wrote another name, and put it back exactly where it had been. That night Steven slept well and long, and in the morning, even as Judith had surmised, he was "mending quick."

**J**UDITH was not in the garden at the milk-hour to hear the favorable report, and later in the day Dr. Addis was called in; he found her suffering from just such an attack of fever as he had been attending for the past fortnight. It puzzled him, but his treatment of his other patient was proving successful, and he assured her father there was no cause for alarm: fevers ran their course. And Judith's fever ran its course ever more fiercely.

She was lying in her bed facing the window some ten days after she had

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# The Wishing-Well

(Continued from page 34)

been taken ill. She knew that the power she had absorbed into her when she embraced that spectral horror by the wishing-well was being drained out of her by some vaster potency, which, vampirelike, was drinking up her own vitality as well. She had been quite conscious all day, but often she had seen, waveringly, like the flame of a candle blown this way and that in the draft, the dim semblance of the shrouded figure round which she had cast her welcoming arms. It seemed to be still attached to her by some band of filmy whiteness and to be incomplete, but about the hour of sunset she saw that the specter stood by her bed, fully formed and severed from her. The face was now deeply pitted by corruption, and it floated away from her and drifted out of the window. She was left here, human once more, but sick unto death.

She remembered how she had written Steven's name, and dedicated him to the power of the wishing-well. Yet what had come of that? For the last week now Steven had brought the morning's milk, hale and handsome, with inquiries about her from his mother. Could it be, she questioned with herself, that she had failed in some point of the damnable ritual, and that what she had written was active not for his doom but for hers? It would be wise to destroy that slip of paper, if she could only get to it, not because she had ceased to wish him evil, but from the fear that it was her vitality that was being drained from her on that fruitless purpose.

She got out of bed, giddy with weakness, and managed to get into a skirt and jersey, and slip her feet into her shoes. The house was quiet, and step by step she struggled downstairs and to the door. The wholesome wind off the sea put a little life into her, and she shuffled along the strip of turf down which she had danced and ca-

pered, which lay between the lich-gate and the well. She passed round the screen of bushes, and there, on the stone bench, was Steven's mother. She rose as Judith appeared and curtsied.

"Aw, dear, why you look poorly indeed, Miss Judith," she said. "Is it wise of you to come out? To the wishing-well, too: there have been strange doings here."

"Oh, I'll be mending soon," said Judith. "A drink from the wishing-well was what I fancied."

She knelt down on the curb, leaning one hand against the wall of the well, while with the other she felt among the ferns that fringed it. There was the slip of paper she had hidden, and she drew it forth.

"Take your drink, then, Miss Judith," said Mrs. Penarth. "Why, whatever have you found? That's a queer thing to have gotten! A slip of paper, is it? Open it, dear soul: maybe there's some good news in it."

Judith crushed it up in her hand: there was no need for her to look, and even as she knelt there, she felt a sweet lightening and cooling of her fever come over her.

Mrs. Penarth shot out her hand at her.

"Open it, you slut, you paltry witch!" she screamed. "Do my bidding!"

Judith opened it, and read her own name written there. She tried to rise to her feet; she swayed and staggered and fell forward into the wishing-well. It was very deep, and the sides of it were slippery with slime and water-moss. Once she caught at the step on which she had knelt, but her fingers failed to grasp it, and she sank. Once after that she rose, and there came a roaring in her ears, and to her eyes a blackness, and down her throat there poured the cool water of the wishing-well.