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TWO FOR A BARGAIN

by DOROTHY QUICK

● **Elsbeth had reason to hate the world—and she wanted to hurt that tight, hard New England colonial town. So, naturally, she wanted to be a witch, tried hard to be—**

Illustrated by M. Isip

I LOOKED at the patchwork quilt. It turned the old-fashioned four-poster bed into a thing of glory fit for a king. The

varicolored materials shimmered in the light from my bedside lamp, and the strange runelike embroidery that held the patches together glowed like sunlight on moving waters. It didn't seem that anything so beautiful could be sinister.

Yet Aunt Amabel had told me odd tales of it; that a witch had made it, and that each patch had power to take you back into time to relive the story of

whoever had been associated with that particular piece of material.

I was still skeptical, although I had fallen asleep one night with my hand on a piece of blue and silver brocade, and been catapulted through space into a weird and terrible part of French history. Later I went back even further to Babylon and weird events in which I had lived a past life of my own, proving to myself, at least, that there was such a thing as reincarnation.

I regarded the quilt; it was innocent-looking enough, and yet the embroidery seemed to be trying to spell out something, and when I touched the golden threads, it was like touching a living thing.

According to Aunt Amabel, a man had slept with his hand on one of the patches and the next morning he had been mad. According to her maid, Hester, a woman had slept with her hand one one of the patches, and the next morning she was dead!

Neither Aunt Amabel nor Hester knew which patch brought madness, which destruction, but they begged me to take no chances—not to use the quilt again.

But I had to. I didn't believe there was a patch that could hold an experience that would bring me either madness or death, but there was one strange, triangular piece of parchmentlike material that looked like human skin. I had to know what it was—what story it held—and my curiosity was stronger than my fear. Besides I wanted, more than anything in the world, to see if I could meet again in an adventure the man to whom, in my last vision, I had pledged myself for all time.

I climbed into the high bed, sank deep under the covers, pulling them tight

about my neck, for the Scotch air sweeping in from the moors was very cold. Then I located the patch I wanted—that hard, leathery patch that looked like human skin—and put my left hand on it. I shivered a little, for it was like touching another hand. Then quickly, before I could change my mind, I turned out the light.

I waited in the dark, my hand on the patch, my mind curiously alert. I wanted to go to sleep to begin the adventure, if there was to be one, but nothing happened. There was only the cold air blowing about my face and the strange sensation that my hand rested on another hand, a feeling that no amount of reasoning could banish from my mind.

Suddenly I realized that I was no longer touching the patch that looked like human skin. Instead my hand was actually touching skin, real skin—another hand! Once more an adventure of the quilt had begun.

I LOOKED DOWN at two hands with thin nervous fingers interlacing themselves. They were the most repulsive hands I had ever seen, cadaverous-looking, with long pointed nails that curved at the ends like a bird's talons.

Heretofore I had gone through horrible happenings, but the bodies in which the spirit of Alice Strand had been imprisoned by the quilt's magic had been attractive. After regarding those revolting hands I knew it couldn't be so this time. I dreaded seeing the rest of the person of whom I was now a part.

It was a woman. I knew that by the white apron and the full black, woolen skirt that fell about scrawny ankles and the bodice of the same material, but I

couldn't see of what age or type. The woman was standing on the edge of a wood. All about her and behind her towered great trees of an impenetrable blackness. Dressed in black as she was, she must have been almost invisible as she stood there practically fused with the landscape. Before her stretched sunny fields; a little distance away there was a stone wall and steps that climbed over it and down its other side.

I had never seen such a sharp contrast of darkness and light—the shining, cultivated lands and the dark somber woods. I wondered if death could be like that—coming out of darkness into light.

Just then the woman began muttering to herself. "He will come . . . he will come." Her voice sounded young. Perhaps it wasn't a woman after all; perhaps it was a girl. The hands—those repulsive hands—gave no indication of age. The skin was firm, not wrinkled. Now my curiosity made me wish for a mirror. If I had a mirror, I could get some idea of the person with whom I was so closely linked. But there was none, nor anything near in which I could see a reflection.

A gay song suddenly filled the silence. A man's voice, rich and mellow, singing something about love and springtime announced that someone was coming.

The hands stopped their weaving and I felt a wild joy surge through the veins that were temporarily mine. It seemed odd that I could not read her thoughts, but I knew by previous experience that I could not, except on rare occasions of great emotional stress. Although all feelings of whosoever body I inhabited were mine, it was only as they were being lived that I knew them. I understood the woman—or girl—was full of joy. I assumed it was at the approach

of the singer, but I didn't know it actually until she cried, "Johan!"

Now I saw a man climbing the far side of the steps. His head appeared first, then his body, bit by bit, until finally he stood on the top of the fence and waved his arm. "Elsbeth, are you there?"

"Yes, Johan, yes . . . here on the edge of the woods." Eager the voice, eager the heart that was beating furiously inside her bosom.

Johan hurried down the steps and across the field. He was strikingly handsome in a blond, Norwegian way. Light-blond hair helmeted his head and hung about his shoulders; even at a distance his eyes were zircon-blue. In ancient Greece he would no doubt have been a hero of the Olympic games—he had the perfect build and muscular equipment for one. His mouth was firm and kind, his nose straight. He was dressed in brown homespun with wide collars and cuffs of white. His legs were incased in knitted stockings, his shoes had silver buckles, and the hat which he carried in his hand was broad-brimmed with a silver buckle in front.

The entire costume was strangely familiar. I had seen it before—often—in the papers and on cards celebrating Thanksgiving Day. One of the Pilgrim Fathers actually stood before me in the flesh. I was in America in the days of its beginning.

The man came near.

"Good day, Elsbeth Farquar. I give thee greeting in the name of Our Lord."

"As I do thee, Johan Rider."

"Come out of the dark, for I can hardly see thee, and I have much to tell."

Shrinkingly Elsbeth moved toward him, holding her hands under her apron.

It was evident that she was sensitive about them.

When she had come a little way he flung himself down on the grass and motioned her to sit near.

"Elsbeth, do you remember what I spoke of last?"

Elsbeth's heart beat even faster, as the wings of a moth flutter and accelerate themselves against the light.

"I do remember."

Johan waited for her to sit beside him and put his hand upon her shoulder.

"Well, rejoice with me. The Elders have agreed that I am come to marriageable age and have given their consent to my taking a wife."

"Oh, Johan . . . Johan!" Elsbeth's voice quivered with emotion.

"I knew you would rejoice for me, Elsbeth, but truly I did not guess that you would be so affected." Johan's tones were clear and undisturbed as a woodland pool. "Now you must wish me Godspeed for my journey to Boston town."

"To Boston town?" she exclaimed. "Why do you go there?"

"What for but to ask the hand of Priscilla Damen and bring her back to Anesfield as my wife."

IF each word had been a knife thrust into Elsbeth's heart, the effect would not have been more devastating.

"Your wife?" she muttered. "But I cannot hear you aright. You do but jest to plague me."

Johan was surprised. "Why should I, Elsbeth? I wanted you to be the first to know the realization of my dreams as you were the first to hear the dreams themselves."

Almost as though she were speaking in a trance Elsbeth cried, "But I thought

. . . I thought you told me those dreams because I had a part in them . . . that it was I—" she broke off abruptly.

Johan began to laugh. "You thought that I loved you? That I would marry you? Oh, surely not. Have you never looked in your mirror?" he laughed, and laughed. "Now you jest with me, Elsbeth, and it is a goodly joke."

"It is a jest, but not the one you think, Johan. This joke is on no one but Elsbeth Farquar . . . that, because you were kind to me and did not mock my ugliness as the others did I thought you loved me, is a jest," she laughed—but her laughter was high-pitched and bordered close to madness. "I was a fool, and yet . . . and yet . . . you were so kind to me—" Her voice broke and she buried her face in her hands.

Johan stopped laughing.

"Truly, Elsbeth, I meant no harm. You were my friend . . . nor did I guess you would think differently. I told you all my thoughts, but it never occurred to me that you would take it personally when I spoke of love . . . nor did I ever guess that you would think of love at all. You always seemed to understand that you—" He broke off, not wanting to hurt her further.

Elsbeth removed her hands from her face. Slowly, deliberately, she spoke.

"You thought because I was so ugly I would not dream of love. Well, I would not have, but that day when the Raynall child was mocking me and you slapped him for a naughty boy and said that beauty came from within, not from without, I thought that you had penetrated the shell of this hateful body and seen my soul all beautiful and shining in its love for you. It seemed too good to be true, but then you sought me out and talked to me, and I believed that you were different from the rest. I

worshiped you, and each time that I met you I loved you more. When you reproved people who made fun of me, I could have wiped your feet with my hair. And now you tell me all of this was friendship . . . pity . . . not love . . . and that I should have known it couldn't be love by looking in my mirror!"

"Truly, I am sorry, Elsbeth."

"Truly, you should be. And you will be sorrier still—you and your fancy bride from Boston town." She reared her head back as though she had been a snake ready to strike. "Go now, Johan Rider, and never speak to me again until you come to beg my mercy!"

"Please, Elsbeth, you are overwrought."

Both Johan and Elsbeth continued to use the "thees" and "thous" of their time, but in my own mind I substituted the more familiar pronouns.

Johan got up and held out his hand.

"I would remain your friend, Elsbeth."

She shook her head.

"Between us there can be no friendship. I loved you with all my heart, with all my soul, but I do not love you now. Instead I hate . . . yes, hate . . . you, Johan, for using me as a buffer against your loneliness and longing for another maid. You pitied me . . . yes . . . and you were kind to me, but that was because you needed someone to talk to of love . . . which is a forbidden topic in Salem unless the Elders give consent. Well, I risked the stocks to hear your dreams. I was a fool . . . an ugly fool. But not now. Go and beware of me, Johan, for they say a woman scorned is much to reckon with. I will have my revenge on you as well as those others who see only ugliness.

I will show you all what true ugliness is!"

Johan reasoned with her a little while but she was adamant. He pleaded but she remained unchanged. Finally he left reluctantly, quite bewildered by the havoc he had wrought. Her threats he took lightly enough—that was plainly written in his face—but that he was genuinely sorry for all that had happened was equally plain.

Elsbeth watched his retreat. When he reached the top of the stile he turned and waved. Elsbeth got up from the grass where she was still sitting and, turning her back on him, walked steadfastly toward the woods. When she reached their leafy shelter she fled behind a great elm. Only then, when she was safe from observation, did she look back.

The green fields stretched their pleasant acres over the landscape but there was no sign of any living person in their verdant domain. Johan Rider had gone.

ELSBETH began to run deep into the woods. As she went dry sobs racked her body and her nails cut into the palms of her hands. She ran until she reached a clearing where a little pool caught sparks of sunlight and transmitted them into a liquid gold. She sank down on the moss beside it and leaning on her elbows propped up her face with both hands and looked steadfastly into the crystal waters.

She had found her mirror and for the first time I saw her face. Never in all my life, and the lives I had lived vicariously through the quilt, had I seen such ugliness.

The mouth was large like a clown's, with a funny upward quirk in the corners. The nose would have made

Cyrano de Bergerac's inconspicuous. It was long, thin and narrow, humped in the middle, widened at the end with a straight upward slant and enlarged nostrils. Her chin was pointed, her cheekbones high. The skin itself was mottled and puffy. She had great masses of wiry black hair thrust under a white linen cap from which it escaped coarse and thick. Only her eyes were beautiful—great tortured wells of chestnut brown—but they were half-hidden under beetling brows and lashes of the same thick, wiry hair.

For the first time I understood Johan. It seemed incredible that such a creature could have, for an instant, supposed any man could think of her and love. I had resented Johan's behavior but I did so no longer. Of course he would have felt free to talk to her of his dreams and love, secure in the knowledge that she was set apart from such things, while she— Oh, it was pathetic. Poor Elsbeth!

And she was young—young with a body that Diana, the moon goddess, might have envied. Surely the gods must have been jesting when they took a perfect torso and gave it a head, hands and feet that were caricatures and did not match. What a terrible burden for a girl to bear, especially in the days when there were no beauty parlors. Still looking at the reflection in the pool I had to admit that here was a countenance not even modern methods could improve.

Elsbeth was realizing it, too. Tears trickled down her cheeks.

"No hope . . . there is no hope. Why was I cursed like this . . . why? Have I not prayed . . . prayed— There is no use in prayers. The Lord has deserted me, plagued me, cheated me. There is no hope for me in prayers

. . . unless—" She looked at her hands, and a clear image stamped itself on her mind—a little dog-eared brown book. "I found it in my father's chest after he had died," she whispered, "'The Witch's Litany' . . . only once I looked in it and then thrust it away for fear of sacrilege, but it said that Satan could grant all things. That much I saw before I buried it deep. My father was a scholar . . . he knew hidden lore. Perhaps the book is right. I will study it . . . I will become a witch. Yes, here and now I will pray to Satan."

She paused, aghast at her own words. But then a firm determination took possession of her. She bathed her face, that loathsome countenance, with water from the pool. Then she knelt and raised her hands in supplication.

"O Satan, lord of the underworld, I pray to thee and beg that thou wilt take me into your fold, give me of your bounty and wisdom so that I may vanquish my enemies . . . yes, that I may bring Johan Rider groveling to his knees before me and make a thing worse than nothing of that Priscilla whom he loves. Let me have my revenge on them and all those who have mocked me. In return I renounce forever my former ways and consecrate myself to thee, Lord Satan, forever and ever. Amen."

At first her voice had been low and hesitating, but at the end it was strong and defiant, unashamed of its own blasphemy.

Nothing happened—nothing. The sun still poured down on the pool and Elsbeth remained unchanged. She waited, obviously expecting a thunderbolt, or at least the appearance of Lucifer himself, but nothing happened. She bent her head to the ground, cried aloud,

"Satan, Satan, I call to thee. Take my soul and in return make me a witch and grant my desire so that I can ever serve you," over and over.

Then she waited.

Still nothing happened.

At last, wearily, she got to her feet.

"Perhaps it may be he has heard . . . or perhaps I did it wrong. I will go home and consult the book, for I must be a witch . . . nay, I *am* a witch." She held her head back proudly, then she walked slowly out of the woods.

As Elsbeth approached the village she met one of the Elders who smiled a greeting at her. She inclined her head. Politeness to the Elders was a law and she had no wish to sit in the stocks in the boiling sun. To her surprise the Elder, Cyrus Finchley, stopped her.

"Good evening, sister; you have been to the woods again."

"Yes, Father Finchley."

"The Elders have spoken of you in the council. We feel that it is scarcely safe for you to venture so far. In fact had you been other than yourself it would be forbidden."

"True, father, my face is its own protection." As she said the words Elsbeth gasped. A few hours ago she would have died rather than admit her ugliness. Now she was glorying in it. Satan must have heard and answered her prayer.

Cyrus Finchley was surprised. "I said not so, daughter. The town is grateful to you for your skill with herbs and so would not keep you from the places where they may be found. Your tea saved the life of the sister of the governor, so we are beholden to you. Because of this we have appointed a protector for you, and when you go to

find your remedies old Fithian Grey will see that you are safe."

"I truly thank you all but I need no watching. The Indians are friendly. There is nothing else to fear."

"Still we would prefer Fithian and his rifle guarded you."

"Then it shall be so." After all, Fithian was old and senile. If there was anything she wanted to do that he shouldn't see, she could easily manage old Fithian.

"One more thing, daughter. It had slipped our minds until Schuyler van Warden remembered . . . your father, a very learned man, had many books. Now some of them may not be fitted for a maid. The council would examine these books. Such as we deem fit will be returned to you . . . the others we will keep or burn."

Now Elsbeth *knew* Satan had heard her prayer. He had sent her this warning so she would not lose the book that was to be the key to her becoming a witch. She smiled secretly.

"There is a box I have not opened. I do not care for reading. I do not do it well enough." These were the first lies she had ever told and they slipped through her lips as easily as though she were Ananias himself.

"Good, daughter. I will come tomorrow with my serving man and we will open the chest, and whatever doubtful books there are I will take to the council. Good day, Elsbeth Farquar."

"Good day, Cyrus Finchley." Elsbeth dropped a little curtsey and hurried on.

Surely, surely Satan must have heard her prayer to have sent her this warning. Halfway down the street she had further confirmation. A group of children were plaguing a poor, scrawny little black kitten. Just as Elsbeth

came even with them the kitten broke away from its tormentors and, making a wild lunge for freedom, leaped into Elsbeth's arms, the nearest refuge from the children who pursued it.

"Give us back the kitten," cried the eldest of the boys.

"Nay," Elsbeth cuddled the poor, frightened animal, "you shall not torture so poor a thing."

"The widow Aylesford threw it out. She said a black cat was only fit for witches. We could do with it as we would."

A fire of exultation leaped up within Elsbeth. She had heard whispered tales of witches and their familiars. The devil had sent her a familiar; that meant she was practically a witch. She would guard the kitten with her life if need be for it was like her new life. She addressed the children fiercely.

"Everything that breathes has a right to live. This kitten has done no harm. I will care for it. Go home to your mothers and beg forgiveness for your cruelty. See"—she held up the kitten's paw which was raw and bleeding—"what mischief you have wrought."

One by one they slunk away. As they went the oldest boy gained courage. "Witch cat, witch cat!" he called back. The boy, Thomas, expected Elsbeth to drop the kitten at these dire words and was amazed to see that instead she held the little black thing closely and smiled joyously as though she had unexpectedly found a treasure.

THE FIRST THING Elsbeth did when she reached her tiny shingled house was to attend to the kitten. She bathed its injured paw and bound it up with a bit of white linen. Then she gave it a dish of milk, which the little thing lapped up greedily. When it had finished, it came over to Elsbeth, walking gingerly on its bandaged foot, leaped

into her lap and licked her hand as though it had been a dog instead of a member of the feline race. Then, just as deliberately as it had come, it went back to the cushion she had put near the dish of milk where it curled up and promptly purred itself to sleep.

Elsbeth sat looking at the hand the kitten's tongue had kissed as though it had been suddenly metamorphosed into a thing of beauty.

"It has accepted me. The emissary of Satan has put his seal of approval on me." Surely enough there was a red mark where the cat's tongue had touched.

A feeling of exultation surged through her. In that instant she changed. She had in the course of a few hours gone through a gamut of emotions—from a girl in love to a woman filled with hate. From a shy, retiring maiden, who lived a simple life, wanted to help everyone, and who believed in good, she had turned into a bitter, caustic person who believed in evil and wanted to have revenge—not only on Johan, but everyone else.

A wave of energy swept through her, coupled with a grim determination. She could hardly wait to be a witch. She must find the book. She slipped the bolt on her door and lit another candle. Taking the second candle she carefully shielded it with her hand and ascended the stairs to the attic.

Once there she put the candle on the floor and made a sort of cover for it out of an old pillow so that it would not betray the fact to a passerby that she was in the attic. Then she found her father's chest, pulled it out and went feverishly through its contents. Most of the books were scholarly tomes which interested her not at all. Finally at the very bottom she found the book

she sought. Bound in queer, parchment-like material, the title page said, "The Witch's Book."

Elsbeth wanted to begin reading it there but she didn't want anyone to suspect she had been in the chest and, too, she was a little bit afraid of the light being seen. After she had tumbled the books back as nearly as she could in the way they had been, she locked the chest. As a final touch, Elsbeth took a large spider web that was in one corner and draped it over the lock. The spider itself was in the center of the web and as she moved it over it crawled across her hand. Ordinarily the mere contact with a spider would have sent the cold shivers up and down her spine, but now she looked at it quite coldly.

"It is my friend," she said.

THE REST of the night she spent in a closet reading the book. According to the book Elsbeth should appear in a coven as a postulant and be initiated into the gathering of thirteen beings consecrated to Satan. That she couldn't do. There might be covens near Anesfield but she had no way of knowing where they were nor who would conduct them. The probabilities were, she thought, that her master—for already she thought of Satan as her master—would, in his own good time, lead her to one, but in the meantime she was sure she was in his fold. She had in her own way abjured her former faith and sworn herself to Satan and she was sure he had accepted her—for had he not sent the black cat to be her familiar?

The only thing that was left, according to the book, was the baptism. That, she realized, was a very important part of the ritual, but she thought she could even manage that.

When it grew light enough for her to see she extinguished her candle, crept out to where the kitten was and with its wounded paw she traced the sign of the cross upside down upon her forehead. Then she heaved a great sigh of relief. She was now a witch!

That morning when she started to change her dress she began searching for a witch mark and when she found, just below her waist, the tiny wartlike thing which she had never noticed before, she was sure that everything had been done just as it should be.

Now she was ready to try one of the spells that the book set forth. She would try an easy one first, then she could work up to one of the more complex ones whereby she could have revenge upon Johan.

But not now. There wasn't time. Elder Finchley might come almost any time and she must put the house in order.

She hid the book under a loose board in her bedroom and set about doing the chores of the day as though nothing extraordinary had happened.

Soon Elder Finchley came for the books, took away several histories and Latin writings, which he said were not for her eyes. He regarded the black cat with dislike and said she would do well to turn it out. When Elsbeth told him how she had rescued it he said, "How like your kind heart, daughter," and went his way not noticing her sneering smile.

THAT AFTERNOON Elsbeth went out to the woods to gather the ingredients necessary for her spell. While there she gathered mandrake and was especially pleased to find one that looked for all the world like a representation of Beelzebub himself; there were even

traces of tiny horns on the brow. Elsbeth took this for an omen and searched diligently for the other things she needed.

She found them all—slips of yew, leaves of bittersweet, a rare herb the book had mentioned and a flower that, fortunately, was in bloom. All these she wrapped in her handkerchief and hurried home because she was in great haste to try her spell.

Johan Rider had that very morning ridden for Boston, so Cyrus Finchley had told her, and the knowledge had been like salt put in an open wound. For vengeance on Johan himself she was not ready yet but she fully intended to work evil on something of his and had selected the cows, patiently standing in his barn, which he had left in charge of his man of all work.

She returned to her house and barred her door. The kitten leaped up on her shoulder and stayed there all the while she pored over "The Witch's Book," its black tail making a shadow on the printed page.

Elsbeth studied the charm carefully and then she began. According to directions she boiled her ingredients, adding a little of her carefully hoarded salt—for salt in those days was a rare commodity, and portioned out in small quantities among the people. As she stirred the mess she spoke the words that the book had put down and when all was finished and the pot had cooled she kneaded the contents into a ball. This she tied around with a long hair from her own head.

Then she chanted:

*"As this ball grows withered, small,
Pain and ill will come to all.
On his cows I put this curse—
Good to bad, and bad to worse."*

When she had finished she hung the

ball up in her chimney. She knew that the heart from the fire would dry it quickly and she was impatient for her ill-doing to bear fruit.

A FEW DAYS LATER, for the first time in her life, she struck a child, little Patience Maitland, a chubby, golden-haired girl of seven. Heretofore Elsbeth had played with Patience, and often amused the child by the hour when her mother was churning or devoted to some other homely task.

When Patience saw Elsbeth hurrying in her direction she thought that Elsbeth was coming to play with her. She had no idea that Elsbeth was walking past the Rider farm hoping to see or hear something to satisfy her curiosity about the cows. Little Patience ran out and threw both arms about Elsbeth's waist.

"Good day, Mistress Farquar," she said. "I have a new doll to show you that Master Rider gave me before he left for Boston."

If Patience hadn't mentioned Johan and Boston, Elsbeth might have forgotten her hatred, for she had loved the child. But the innocent remark was like spark to tinder.

"Go away. I have no time for dolls," Elsbeth said rudely, and pushed the child from her. She evidently had more strength than she knew for the child cried out with pain. Elsbeth did not stop to comfort her. She walked on.

Patience ran after Elsbeth.

"Mistress Farquar, Mistress Farquar, if I hurt you I beg your pardon. Please, please come back and see my doll."

The poor little thing thought she must have done something wrong. She couldn't comprehend Elsbeth's being

other than kind. She clutched at Elsbeth's apron trying to stop her.

Elsbeth raised her hand. "Go away . . . go away."

"Please . . . please—" the child was sobbing hysterically.

Elsbeth lowered her hand, hitting Patience smartly on the cheek.

"Let me be." She wrenched her apron away and went on heedless of the fact that the child was overbalanced by the sudden release of the apron to which she had been holding and had fallen with her foot crumpled under her. The ankle was sprained and she fainted with the pain.

Her mother ran out and, bending over the child, was crying out, "My little lamb!"

The sound of the mother's anguish was pleasant to Elsbeth, but at that moment came another cry—from Johan Rider's stable—the cry of a tortured animal, which was like celestial music in Elsbeth's ears.

She stood there listening, rejoicing in her new found power. She could see a great deal of activity around the stable, people rushing back and forth, and she smiled to herself, "Bad to worse, bad to worse—"

The cries ceased. Elsbeth was even happier. That meant the cow had died. She hoped it was the Jersey that Johan set such store by.

Just then Johan's hired man came out of the stable. Elsbeth walked to him.

"Are you in trouble here?" she asked.

"Nay, Mistress Farquar, we have cause for rejoicing. The Jersey cow has calved. Two bonny heifers—twins! And from his favorite cow. Master Rider *will* rejoice!"

A wave of faintness swept over Elsbeth. Her charm hadn't worked! She

muttered something and turned about, making for her home. She must see the ball in the chimney! She must consult the book again.

As she passed the Maitland house, Patience's brother ran out.

"You are wicked," he cried. "You have hurt my sister."

"It was her own fault. A bad child deserves punishing."

"Nay," a soft, sweet voice interrupted. "My Patience deserves only good. I know you did not mean to hurt her, Elsbeth Farquar. Will you not come in? The little thing cries for you. She loves you so." Mrs. Maitland put out her hand to Elsbeth.

"How she could love that face I know not, but she does," whispered the boy.

Elsbeth heard.

"My face is my own, Thomas Maitland, but as it displeases you I take it elsewhere." She shot a venomous look at them and made off, mumbling curses on the boy as she went. She heard Mrs. Maitland call, but paid no heed.

When she got home the kitten ran to her giving every evidence of being glad to see her. Elsbeth caught it to her breast.

"You and I are one," she said solemnly, and the kitten purred happily.

WHEN the door was bolted Elsbeth looked at the ball in the chimney. It was dried and shriveled to one half its former size. By all rights at least the major portion of Johan's herd should be ailing. Elsbeth got out her book. So far as she could see she had done nothing wrong, except she hadn't gathered the mandrake root under full moon at midnight. Of course—that was it. Well, she would try another spell, and

this time make sure she had all the proper ingredients.

She was a witch. She would have the attributes of one. She would go over Johan's house and call down curses on him and his. "Bad to worse" it should be on his cows, his land, his bride, on Johan himself. She would do other spells from the book.

Though the mere idea of some of the ingredients would have ordinarily made her shudder, she now thought quite calmly of procuring them. She slipped out of her house that night with the kitten tucked under her arm. She was afraid to leave it at home for fear it might cry in her absence. Wrapped in a dark cloak she was practically invisible.

In the graveyard she found what she sought, and went relentlessly about procuring the things the book spoke of.

My every sense revolted from what she was doing. I, Alice Strand, hated Elsbeth and the dark she had made her own. I pitied her, too, for I, better than anyone, knew her soul had been warped by Johan, and yet I could not truly blame him. I was afraid, too, of what might come. Would Elsbeth descend into the utter blackness of Satanism and drag me with her? I knew there *was* magic in the world—and witches. I would not be living Elsbeth's life were it not for a witch's magic quilt. Would Elsbeth master the black arts? What would happen to me? Here in this eerie cemetery I was full of fear.

Elsbeth was not afraid. She completed her loathsome tasks with steady fingers and when she left the graveyard the black cat was not all that she carried.

To return she passed through the

woods where she had made her covenant with Satan. She remembered and stopped long enough to kneel and pray to her master. In the same place she also dug some more mandrake root and hen's bane.

As she came back into town, the moon swung low in the skies. As she passed the Maitlands' she noticed there was a light burning in the window. A little farther on she bumped into someone.

"How now, Mistress Farquar—what do you here? Has Mistress Maitland sent for you, too?"

It was Dr. Prouty. Elsbeth caught her breath and forced her mind to work quickly.

"No, my home was so warm I felt I must have air, and so I took a walk. Is Mistress Maitland ill?"

"Sorrow never comes singly. But this afternoon Patience suffered a badly wrenched ankle and now young Tom had fallen down the cellar stairs and broken his arm. I go to set it. Will you not come, Elsbeth, you, who are good at healing?"

"I was not sent for, nor do they need me when you are there. Besides I am very weary." She could go to no house with the grisly burdens under her cloak.

"Go home, then, Mistress Farquar, and roam no more at night. It is not seemly."

"I will obey you."

"Good . . . then of this time I will not speak. Farewell, Elsbeth Farquar."

"Farewell." She ran all the way home, hugging the shadows and not until she was within the house, and the fruit of her night's work safely bestowed did she dare to relax and get her breath.

THE NEXT DAY when one of the children made a face at her and called out something about her ugliness, Elsbeth

answered back, "If you think my face is ugly, it is nothing to what yours will be some day!"

The boy was surprised to silence, and hurried off. He had not gone far when Elsbeth heard a cry and saw him lying in the road, his face bleeding from a cut. He had fallen on a sharp, jagged stone, and a flap of skin hung dangling down his face. Elsbeth knew he'd bear a scar from it till his death.

She laughed. "Did I not say my face was nothing to what yours would be?"

The child did not shrink from her; instead he begged her to help him, pointing to the flap of skin.

She pulled it off and thrust it into her pocket thinking it might come in useful for a spell sometime. She leaned over the boy.

"Let this be a lesson to you not to mock me again or else I will curse you further."

The boy, holding his wide cuff against his face, smiled at her through tears.

"I beg your pardon for my mockery. You are so kind to take away that dangling thing. I thank you."

Elsbeth ignored his apologies.

"I will curse you more . . . I will curse you!"

Cyrus Finchley's voice broke in.

"Peace, daughter. I heard the ill thing this boy said of you." He turned to the lad. "Go to the doctor now, and see you mock no more."

"I cursed him and look what happened," Elsbeth cried. "If I should curse again—"

"You are overwrought, daughter. 'Vengeance is mine,' saith the Lord—and truly His wrath was expeditious. You are not a beauty, Elsbeth, but you are kindly and sweet, which counts for more."



Somehow, she'd failed—she was falling, the spell unsuccessful—

"I am neither kind nor sweet and I have been patient far too long!" Anger and bitterness edged her voice.

"In truth you have been tried." Cyrus regarded that grotesque face and the horrible hands pityingly. "So we will forget it, but predict no more, daughter, lest people say you are in league with evil. Will you go to Mistress Finchley? She is ailing and would like one of your healing brews."

ELSBETH WENT to Mistress Finchley. The older woman was ill and fatigue had put great circles around her eyes. She was glad to see Elsbeth and asked immediately, "Will you give me some of that tea you gave me two months ago, Elsbeth? It helped me mightily."

"I will go now and find the herbs," Elsbeth smiled, "and bring it back to you within the hour."

"Good, and then I will tell you of Johan's bride, Priscilla. Johan brought her back this morning. My good man tells me they are wondrous happy and Johan brings her here to see me, as I am not strong enough to go to her." Mistress Finchley lifted a fragile hand. "Is it not wonderful, Elsbeth, that Johan is wed so happily and so well? She brought him a large dower and wagon loads of well stocked chests. But these mean nothing to Johan. He is so in love he can see nothing but her blue eyes. I mean to be very kind to Priscilla Rider and help her. She is young."

An icy sheath formed over Elsbeth's heart, and hate flowed through her as it had that day in the fields when she talked to Johan. Now this hate encompassed Mistress Finchley. She should be made to suffer, too. She would brew her a tea—yes, indeed—but not quite the tea she expected.

Mistress Finchley would not be able to help Priscilla, the blue-eyed doll. The words pricked Elsbeth's mind. There was a charm in the book, a charm that might—

She left Mistress Finchley and later brought back a bottle.

"You must drink a little each day," she said. There was no hint in her voice that the mixture was not the benevolent herbal one that Mistress Finchley knew.

Mistress Finchley was full of talk of Johan and his bride.

"She has hair like spun gold, so full of curls it will not stay beneath her cap, and eyes like corn flowers. Her skin is white and her little face is round and fresh as an apple blossom. One cannot wonder that Johan loves her so," she went on and on.

While she was talking a glint of gold on the floor caught Elsbeth's eye. She looked down and there on the handwoven rug lay a long golden hair!

Truly Satan was looking after her, Elsbeth thought. The one thing she needed for her charm! While Mistress Finchley was raving on, Elsbeth surreptitiously leaned over and picked up the golden hair, tucking it in her long sleeve. This was better luck than she thought to have. It distinctly said in the book that one must have some part of the person themselves to complete the charm—a bit of skin, a paring of nail or a hair from the head. Elsbeth had expected she would have to wait months for one of these things and now here it was ready to her hand with no effort on her part!

ELSBETH GOT AWAY from Mistress Finchley's as quickly as possible. That night she worked long and arduously. First she melted the wax of two candles,

with it she mixed a little human fat—one of the things she had procured in the graveyard. When it was all melted and cooled, she began to mold a little figure. She fashioned it carefully until under her fingers it actually assumed the outlines of a young girl. She even modeled the face as nearly as she could to Mistress Finchley's description. Inside of it she placed the golden hair and a bit of mandrake root, which was said to be powerful in magic of all kinds. Then she closed up the figure, and when it was quite hard, hid it away. It was all ready now except she must find something that Priscilla had worn to dress it in. Then she could really commence action.

The little black kitten came and put its head into her hand and rubbed itself against her as though it were trying to congratulate her.

"I have been successful with everything but Johan's cow," she told the kitten, speaking seriously as though the cat were a person. "Tom Maitland broke his arm, and the other boy's good looks were ruined by my curse. It seems I am better at curses than at spells. But I will find something of Priscilla's and then I will curse long and well!"

It was almost a week before she found something of Priscilla's—a week in which she had to watch the happiness of the bride and groom. She tried to keep the hate she felt from showing in her face. She even was nice to Priscilla when they eventually met, but she did not shake hands with the girl. She could not bear to touch Priscilla's lovely white fingers, so she said her wrist had been sprained.

Priscilla was very solicitous about this injury. It was as though the devil

had put the idea in Elsbeth's head, for through it she attained a handkerchief belonging to the girl. Priscilla said that if Elsbeth's wrist were bandaged tightly it would mend quicker. She had seen her father's do so. So Elsbeth let her bind it and exulted in the fact that Priscilla used her own kerchief for the bandage.

That night Elsbeth dressed the doll in the kerchief, leaned over it chanting magic words, then she took sharp pins and drove them into the doll, saying as she did so:

*"As these gore deep into your flesh
I capture you within a mesh.
Pain and pain and pain will come
Until you are forever numb."*

Then she got down on her knees and prayed.

"Oh Satan, my master, lord of all, grant that my spell will not fail. Send pain and misery and all the horrors you are ruler of to Priscilla Rider. I ask it in your name—I, Elsbeth Farquar the witch, one of your most humble servants who lives only to serve you. See, I write it in letters of blood on human skin." She took a little knife and, pricking her finger often, wrote on the flap of skin from the boy's face which she had long treasured.

"Elsbeth Farquar covenants with Satan, giving him her soul in return for the powers of witchery."

She signed her name, and as she did so the little black cat jumped on the table, licked her finger from which the blood still ran and then the edge of the flap of skin, leaving a reddish smear which looked exactly like a signature.

Elsbeth waved the skin high over her head, dancing about the room with glee.

"I am a witch . . . a witch! Satan has signed the covenant. Beware, Pris-

cilla, beware, for now your life is in my hands."

She had not put a needle where the doll's heart should have been. She did not want Priscilla to die at once. She wanted her to suffer so Johan would suffer. She could always put in the last needle that did mean death.

THE DAYS passed and Elsbeth watched Priscilla with hawklike eyes, but Priscilla's rose-and-white complexion remained unaltered. She did not grow pale, she did not grow ill, she seemingly had no pain. Her happiness was a joy for everyone except Elsbeth to see, and Johan's was as great.

Once more Elsbeth was faced with the realization that her spell was not working. She stuck the needle in the doll's heart, mumbled more incantations, and yet Priscilla went on her blithe, happy way. Not only was Priscilla undisturbed, but Mistress Finchley, who, by now, according to Elsbeth's calculations, should have been very ill, was stronger than ever before. Of course Elsbeth had no way of knowing that the herb, which she had considered a deadly poison, was just what Mistress Finchley, whose heart required stimulation, needed.

All these things convening together made Elsbeth more bitter than ever before. She was nasty and hateful. She snapped at everyone. Every time little Patience came near her she pushed her away. But the child kept persisting in showing her affection, and nothing Elsbeth said or did made any difference.

The boys, mindful of what had happened to their companions, kept out of her way, and the scarred face of the one who had mocked her was a constant reminder to them to beware of her.

Priscilla, who had tried to be nice to her, prodded on by Johan—who still felt upset over the mischief he had wrought—soon realized that she might as well try to cultivate a stone, but still she kept trying. It seemed as though the more hateful Elsbeth became the nicer everyone tried to be to her. Even the Elders went out of their way to be pleasant, and her healing broths were in more and more demand as Mistress Finchley grew stronger and better each day.

Once when Cyrus Finchley thanked her for his wife's health, Elsbeth said boldly, not caring what happened, "Why should I not make cures? I am a witch." Her words carried no conviction, for in her heart she was beginning to doubt.

Cyrus laughed. "I am glad to hear you jest. For anyone else the subject would be a dangerous one, but for you whom we all know well and love, it is safe . . . for we know you could not be a witch."

Elsbeth ran away, crying, "I am, I am, but no one will believe . . . perhaps that is why my spells no longer work."

LATER, Elsbeth calm again, sat in front of her fire. On a little table before her was the witch's book and the grotesque doll which looked like a travesty of a pincushion. There was something frightening about it, for Elsbeth had spared the doll nothing. Pins were sticking in it at odd angles, through its mouth, eyes and ears. In fact there was hardly an unpierced spot upon it. The rude semblances of feet were melted and blackened. At one time in sheer desperation Elsbeth had tried burning the doll, with no success as far as its living counterpart was concerned,

though the result on the reproduction was drastic enough.

The kitten lay on Elsbeth's lap regarding the things on the table with indifference. Its green eyes were placid; it was utterly unmoved by the turmoil that its mistress was in. Elsbeth, for the first time since the day in the woods when she had prayed to Satan, was looking facts squarely in the face.

"I am not a witch," she said to herself. "Satan did not hear my prayer. The kitten is only a kitten, the things that happened to the boys only coincidence. None of my spells has worked, not one of the charms—though I have done everything the book said. I have robbed graves in the dead of night, tried to make Mistress Finchley ill to pay her back for being sweet to Priscilla. All these things and more I have done and I am no nearer to my revenge on Johan Rider. There is no use. I will have to give up the thought of vengeance on Johan, although it irks me to do so."

Just as she said these words there came a knock on the door.

"Open, Elsbeth Farquar."

She started. She couldn't let anyone come in—not with the book and the doll in full sight, and those other grimmer relics hidden under her floor.

"Who is there?" she called.

"Cyrus Finchley's man. Come quickly. We need your help. Mistress Finchley is ill indeed."

"In a moment I will come." Quickly Elsbeth put the doll and book into their hiding place where the piece of skin already lay. She caught her black cloak around her shoulders and tried to keep the exultation out of her eyes. Satan *had* heard—there *was* power in her spells, only she had been too impatient to give them time to work. She fol-

lowed the manservant thrilling with excitement. Just as they reached the Finchley house a woman came running out with tears on her cheeks.

"Oh . . . oh . . . the good lady is dead. But now she was laughing, telling the master not to worry, and then suddenly she clutched her breast, gave a loud cry of agony and fell down dead. Alas . . . alas!"

Cyrus Finchley, white and drawn, came to the door.

"You are too late, daughter, too late. Yet I am grateful to you. Only today my wife spoke of your ministrations and how much better she had been."

"But now she is dead." Elsbeth spoke unthinkingly, "I have killed her." There was triumph in her voice. At last her spell had worked, the spell she had said when she put the nightshade in the draught. At last she was sure she was a witch and that she would yet have her revenge on Johan. She lifted her head and laughed long and hard.

The man and woman looked at her strangely. Cyrus Finchley, however, smiled sadly and patted her shoulder.

"Grief is like that sometimes," he told the man. "She loved Mistress Finchley. See that she gets home safely. Good night, Elsbeth. You must not brood. You did not kill my wife; you helped her and gave joy to her last days. It was the Lord who called her home." He went inside and shut the door.

His man took Elsbeth's arm.

"I will see you to your house again as the master bade me."

Elsbeth went willingly enough. She wanted to be home; she had things to do.

ONCE inside her own house with the door bolted fast Elsbeth began to work.

First she took the doll from its hiding place. She held it for a moment then began to chant:

*"The doll is Priscilla—
Priscilla is the doll,
The powers of evil I invoke,
As this doll goes up in smoke,
So Priscilla's soul will go,
Beyond the reach of man to know,
And I add this further spell
She shall soon with Satan dwell,
Nevermore in death or life
Will Johan possess his wife.
Priscilla is the doll—
The doll is Priscilla."*

Concentrated hate flowed through her veins as she threw the doll into the heart of the flames.

She watched it burn. Her eyes lost nothing of the changes it went through—the flare of the burning linen, the sizzling of the fat, then the flames dying lower as the outlines melted into nothing and finally went up the chimney in a puff of smoke.

"I am a witch," she told the kitten solemnly, "a mighty witch. This is my night of nights. I must do yet more while my master is helping me. While Priscilla screams out her soul in agony I will ride—yes, ride over her roof top and hear her cries. The flying ointment! I will make that and ride on my broomstick as a true witch should. I have been too timid to try before, but now I am no longer afraid."

Quickly, as though the devil were standing beside her egging her on she set about making the ointment. Once more the pot was hung over the crackling logs and she began boiling a most loathsome mess, saying at the same time, magic words which the book claimed were infallible. When she had finished it all and the paste had cooled, she

slipped off her dress and rubbed the ointment over her body. Then she put her dress back on again because habit was strong in her and even though she would be riding on a broomstick high over the houses she couldn't bear the thought that anyone would see her unless she were properly dressed.

ALREADY Elsbeth had a strange sensation of movement. It seemed, as she walked around the room, she had a feeling of flying. She felt as if she were floating and she knew the moment had come for her to mount her broom. She got it out of its corner and was just about to straddle it when she realized there was not space enough for her to sail through the windows. They were all too tiny to permit the passage of her body. She must do better than that.

A thought came to her. There was a trapdoor in the attic that was wide enough. She ran up the attic stairs and opened the trapdoor and climbed on its rim. The kitten had followed her and was now perched on her shoulder, its favorite place. Elsbeth did not mind; she was glad to have the company of her familiar on her jaunt. She looked up at the sky. From where she stood it seemed so close.

This was a marvelous taking-off place. The sensation of flying quivering over her was even stronger than it had been. She mounted the broomstick and, turning the tip end toward Johan's farm, without the slightest hesitation, lurched herself forward into space. For a second she felt the exhilaration of sailing through the air, but in its wake came a sickening sensation.

For one horrible moment she realized the charm hadn't worked. She was falling. She screamed with all her strength,

then with a terrible thud her body hit the ground.

Everything blurred. A little moan brought her back to her senses. The kitten—it lay under her, its moans growing fainter. She tried to move to help it but found she could not move at all. She heard the kitten moaning until its moans grew fainter and died away as a little bubble of air in water. She began to hear activity—doors opening, people running, the things they were calling, "Someone is hurt!" "It was from here!" "This way—" She tried to call to direct them but she couldn't speak.

The flying ointment had failed her. She had done something wrong. What?—she wondered lying there unable to move, but with no pain of any sort. Well, it didn't matter; so long as the spell for Priscilla was successful nothing else mattered. Even if she died she didn't care. She would have Priscilla's company in the devil's abode. Had she not sent her there herself? Had not the doll, that was Priscilla, burned?

She could see the people now. They had found her and were gathering around. Even Cyrus Finchley was there kneeling beside her. She looked at him with her great eyes.

"Daughter, daughter, what happened?" he whispered.

"She must have been cleaning her attic. See, the door is open and her broom is here." Elsbeth recognized Mistress Maitland's voice. "She must have leaned out to shake the broom and fallen. My Patience will be so upset; she loves Elsbeth."

Elsbeth tried to tell Mistress Maitland she was wrong but found she could not speak.

"Hush, she is conscious. I can tell by her eyes," Cyrus Finchley cried.

More people had come; she was glad to see that Johan wasn't among them. Of course Johan couldn't come; Priscilla was probably dead by now. If Elsbeth could have chuckled, she would have.

Dr. Prouty arrived, made a hasty examination.

"Completely paralyzed—she'll never move again," he whispered very low to Cyrus but Elsbeth heard. It didn't matter to Elsbeth—not even when he said, "There are internal injuries too . . . and her heart—"

ELSBETH didn't hear the rest. She didn't care. She had accomplished all she wanted in her revenge on Johan. She only wished they could know she had been a witch. The things people were saying now about her sweetness made her want to laugh but even that didn't matter. She had had her triumphs—Tom Maitland, the other boy, Mistress Finchley and Priscilla. Her revenge on Johan was all that really counted and she was sure of that—as sure as she was of being the cause of Mistress Finchley's demise. There was a light of triumph in her eyes—rejoicing as she thought of her revenge on Johan.

Cyrus Finchley leaned over her.

"You understand what I say, daughter?"

She looked at him.

"Yes, I know she does," Cyrus told the doctor. "Tell her, friend, about my wife. She said early tonight she was afraid she'd killed her. We must set her mind at rest."

Once more Elsbeth wanted to laugh, regretted she could not. Afraid she'd killed Mistress Finchley—when she knew she had!

The doctor knelt by her.

"Do not worry about that, Elsbeth. Mistress Finchley was marked for death. Her heart was very bad. It's a wonder she lived as long as she did. It was undoubtedly your potion that helped keep her alive. I have studied the ingredients you used these past days and find that they are most beneficial. I shall use the draught myself."

A poison helpful? Why did they misunderstand so? Elsbeth wanted to scream out the truth, but she could not.

More people coming and then Priscilla's voice.

"Oh, Elsbeth, Elsbeth . . . we came as soon as we knew . . . Johan and I—"

Priscilla! Priscilla looking as she always looked—beautiful and serene. Sorry for Elsbeth, pitying her, but still full of the inner peace that only happiness and love can bring.

Johan had it too—that inner peace. His voice broke as he looked at Elsbeth.

"Poor, poor Elsbeth . . . she was my friend."

Priscilla leaned down and kissed Elsbeth's forehead. At the same time Johan kissed her inert hand.

The triumph died out of Elsbeth's eyes. It was driven away by the mental anguish. She was facing the knowledge of her failure. She had not succeeded in anything!

All around her people whose consciences were suddenly smitten because they hadn't been kind to her and had disliked her ugliness began singing her praises, and each word was like a stab in Elsbeth's heart. She hadn't wanted to be kind; she'd wanted to be hateful and mean. She had tried to be but it was as though a conspiracy had existed

against her. People had refused to notice her nastiness. She had wanted to be a witch, she had prayed to Satan, signed a blood covenant with the lord of evil to win revenge on Johan, but she had had no revenge, no satisfaction. What was Johan saying?

"See, she is suffering there is pain in her eyes."

"She cannot feel pain," the doctor pronounced solemnly.

"Then she suffers for us . . . because we grieve." Priscilla's eyes were full of tears. Johan took his wife's hand; as their eyes met, Elsbeth could see their love for each other.

She made a gigantic effort—it was as though the bitterness in her must find an outlet.

"No . . . no," she screamed. "I hate you all! I am a witch . . . I . . . I—"

Her voice died away in a frightful gurgle.

"She is out of her head," Johan said pityingly. "As though Elsbeth could possibly be a witch!"

His words were the final straw to her misery. Elsbeth moaned a little as the kitten had done. It made her remember the kitten—her one friend—and she had killed it. Utter frustration swept over her along with a merciful blackness.

I, ALICE STRAND, awoke gasping as my hand fell away from the patch that looked like human skin. It *had* been human skin. I knew that now. A pathetic fragment somehow saved down the ages—all that was left of Elsbeth Farquar, and the tortured, frustrated soul that had been hers. I knew if I could see its other side, Elsbeth's writing would be there. Sitting up in the great four-poster bed in Aunt Amabel's guest room I shuddered.