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A WITCHERY KIT.

In a cradle fashioned from a rough-hewn log, slept a fairy-faced child. One tiny hand, more slender and shapely than a baby's hand should be, lay lightly over the coarse coverlet. On her face rested that ineffable calm and innocent peace which comes only to sleeping children and to angels.

A kitten sprang into the cradle and curled itself in a fluffy, black ball on the pillow beside the child's fair head; but the baby's sleep was undisturbed.

After a while a young woman, clad in homespun severely plain, entered the room through a door from whence came the sound of a spinning wheel. She glanced solicitously toward the cradle and smiled softly when she saw the fluffy black kitten nestled close to the white, pure baby face.

Without, a stern looking man in somber garb was passing the house. The woman noticed him through the open window and beckoned to him. He came and stood by the window leaning against the wall the heavy matchlock that he carried.

"I have something to show thee, neighbor Jonas," said the young mother. "See, is it not a pretty sight?" She pointed to the cradled child and the nestling kitten.

The gloomy seriousness of the man's face was unchanged.

"I like it not, friend Hannah," he said. "It bodes no good to the child that a witchery kit come so to her. It is an ill omen."

"Fie! For shame, neighbor! Thou art always seeing ill omens. As if a kitten could bewitch a sleeping child! I say it is a pretty sight, though thou canst see naught but ill in it."

"It hath proven an ill sign aforetime," returned the man sullenly, as he took up his gun and went away.

The woman returned to her spinning and the black kitten lay by the head of the sleeping child purring at her ear. The child was yet too young to know her mother's speech, but she felt the strange, wild things that the kitten purred, though she slept, things of the forest and the hant and of the spirit of the untamed ones who love night.

For a long time the child slept in the rough-hewn cradle with the black kitten purring at her ear.

She had grown up more as the wild children of the forest than like a Puritan maiden. Her mother had died almost before the child had learned to know her, and her father had dwelt always a little nearer the borders of the wilderness than his less adventurous neighbors, who builded their homes close beside the meeting house, which was the center of the settlement.

She loved the wilderness and the people. She often spent long hours in the forest, alone save for one companion. Always a great black cat was with her. Ever since she was a baby it had been about her—her one constant playmate.

The other children of the settlement were wont to avoid her. The minister had once called her an "uncanny witch child," and had preached a sermon on the evil influence of black cats, and ever since the mothers had forbidden their children to play with her. But she heeded this little—less than a child should. She had made the forest her playground and the wild things her playmates. Sometimes with the cat she had strayed whole days in its solitude, and once was gone some weeks with a band of strolling Indians. That was after her father died, and she was left in the care of an ancient grand-dame.

"She is an ill child," said Jonas

Hooker. "The devil hath a hold on her."

"She must have religious care and instruction as beseemeth a Christian, Goodman Hooker," the minister returned. "And the black cat should be slain, being a disguise of the devil working mischief in our midst."

After that she was taken into the care of Jonas, who was the town constable. But the black cat disappeared so that no one was able to find it, whereupon all were agreed that it was assuredly the devil.

The girl little liked the harsh instructions of the constable's wife and the minister's tiresome catechism. She ran away into the forest, and with her was the black cat. Goodman Branscome saw them wandering in the woods and discharged his matchlock at the cat. The bullet, he swore, passed through its body, but injured it not at all; and when he sought to catch them, girl and cat vanished as if by magic.

It was shortly after this that there came rumors of witchcraft widespread through the colony. Already certain witches had been discovered and hanged in the town of Salem. Now several of the townspeople were ill of a fever when these rumors came, and the minister believed them bewitched. So quest was made thereabouts for witches and the ancient grand-dame near the forest's edge was brought by certain godly tortures to confession of witchery, whereupon she was executed.

But evils continued unallayed, in the settlement. A fire destroyed the meeting house, and a daughter of Goodman Branscome, who had shot at the cat in the forest, died of the fever. After that there was no doubt as to who was the witch working the ill.

And one day she came back—back from the wilderness with the cat. She went first to the house by the forest but the grand-dame, her foster-mother, was not there. Then she went to the house of Jonas Hooker, the constable.

"It is the hand of the Lord," said Jonas, "delivering the evil one to just punishment."

She was tried for witchcraft. She was only a child yet, and half wild. She did not understand the charge. Nay, she acknowledged that she well might be a witch if that meant to love the forest. The indictment was long and particular, abounding in scriptural quotations, and accusing one Catherine Carewe of willful neglect of God's service and commandments; of baneful association with witches and devils and the performance of ungodly rites and enchantments, thereby causing disease and disaster to fall upon her townspeople; of wandering in the forest and there conjoining with the devil in the shape of a black cat, and bringing about the death of a Christian maiden by spells and witcheries.

She was only a child. There was none to defend her. She was condemned to be burned.

Scarce yet did she realize it when she was brought from the prison house where the gloomy minister had vainly labored with her for her soul's sake. She saw the people crowding about, silent and stern—the men and the women. She saw the heaped faggots and the post where she was to be tied. Then she trembled and cast about her wild, fearful glances—appealing glances that mutely and vainly asked for aid.

She made no sound—no moan or cry, when Jonas Hooker, the constable, bound her fast; only in her eyes shown that terror, that despair which one sees in those of a captured wild thing.

She was lithe and slender, and her face was rarely beautiful. Partly a child's face, partly a woman's it was; but on it also was an expression that belongs seldom to a human countenance—a strange expression born of the wilderness and the seeing of strange