

CHAPTER XXIV. THE BEWITCHMENT OF PAT

We were all in the doleful dumps--at least, all we "young fry" were, and even the grown-ups were sorry and condescended to take an interest in our troubles. Pat, our own, dear, frolicsome Paddy, was sick again--very, very sick.

On Friday he moped and refused his saucer of new milk at milking time. The next morning he stretched himself down on the platform by Uncle Roger's back door, laid his head on his black paws, and refused to take any notice of anything or anybody. In vain we stroked and entreated and brought him tidbits. Only when the Story Girl caressed him did he give one plaintive little mew, as if to ask piteously why she could not do something for him. At that Cecily and Felicity and Sara Ray all began crying, and we boys felt choky. Indeed, I caught Peter behind Aunt Olivia's dairy later in the day, and if ever a boy had been crying I vow that boy was Peter. Nor did he deny it when I taxed him with it, but he would not give in that he was crying about Paddy.

Nonsense!

"What were you crying for, then?" I said.

"I'm crying because--because my Aunt Jane is dead," said Peter defiantly.

"But your Aunt Jane died two years ago," I said skeptically.

"Well, ain't that all the more reason for crying?" retorted Peter. "I've had to do without her for two years, and that's worse than if it had just been a few days."

"I believe you were crying because Pat is so sick," I said firmly.

"As if I'd cry about a cat!" scoffed Peter. And he marched off whistling.

Of course we had tried the lard and powder treatment again, smearing Pat's paws and sides liberally. But to our dismay, Pat made no effort to lick it off.

"I tell you he's a mighty sick cat," said Peter darkly. "When a cat don't care what he looks like he's pretty far gone."

"If we only knew what was the matter with him we might do something," sobbed the Story Girl, stroking her poor pet's unresponsive head.

"I could tell you what's the matter with him, but you'd only laugh at me," said Peter.

We all looked at him.

"Peter Craig, what do you mean?" asked Felicity.

"Zackly what I say."

"Then, if you know what is the matter with Paddy, tell us,"
commanded the Story Girl, standing up. She said it quietly; but
Peter obeyed. I think he would have obeyed if she, in that tone
and with those eyes, had ordered him to cast himself into the
depths of the sea. I know I should.

"He's BEWITCHED--that's what's the matter with him," said Peter,
half defiantly, half shamefacedly.

"Bewitched? Nonsense!"

"There now, what did I tell you?" complained Peter.

The Story Girl looked at Peter, at the rest of us, and then at
poor Pat.

"How could he be bewitched?" she asked irresolutely, "and who
could bewitch him?"

"I don't know HOW he was bewitched," said Peter. "I'd have to be

a witch myself to know that. But Peg Bowen bewitched him."

"Nonsense!" said the Story Girl again.

"All right," said Peter. "You don't have to believe me."

"If Peg Bowen could bewitch anything--and I don't believe she could--why should she bewitch Pat?" asked the Story Girl.

"Everybody here and at Uncle Alec's is always kind to her."

"I'll tell you why," said Peter. "Thursday afternoon, when you fellows were all in school, Peg Bowen came here. Your Aunt Olivia gave her a lunch--a good one. You may laugh at the notion of Peg being a witch, but I notice your folks are always awful good to her when she comes, and awful careful never to offend her."

"Aunt Olivia would be good to any poor creature, and so would mother," said Felicity. "And of course nobody wants to offend Peg, because she is spiteful, and she once set fire to a man's barn in Markdale when he offended her. But she isn't a witch--that's ridiculous."

"All right. But wait till I tell you. When Peg Bowen was leaving Pat stretched out on the steps. She tramped on his tail. You know Pat doesn't like to have his tail meddled with. He

slewed himself round and clawed her bare foot. If you'd just seen the look she gave him you'd know whether she was a witch or not. And she went off down the lane, muttering and throwing her hands round, just like she did in Lem Hill's cow pasture. She put a spell on Pat, that's what she did. He was sick the next morning."

We looked at each other in miserable, perplexed silence. We were only children--and we believed that there had been such things as witches once upon a time--and Peg Bowen WAS an eerie creature.

"If that's so--though I can't believe it--we can't do anything," said the Story Girl drearily. "Pat must die."

Cecily began to weep afresh.

"I'd do anything to save Pat's life," she said. "I'd BELIEVE anything."

"There's nothing we can do," said Felicity impatiently.

"I suppose," sobbed Cecily, "we might go to Peg Bowen and ask her to forgive Pat and take the spell off him. She might, if we apologized real humble."

At first we were appalled by the suggestion. We didn't believe

that Peg Bowen was a witch. But to go to her--to seek her out in that mysterious woodland retreat of hers which was invested with all the terrors of the unknown! And that this suggestion should come from timid Cecily, of all people! But then, there was poor Pat!

"Would it do any good?" said the Story Girl desperately. "Even if she did make Pat sick I suppose it would only make her crosser if we went and accused her of bewitching him. Besides, she didn't do anything of the sort."

But there was some uncertainty in the Story Girl's voice.

"It wouldn't do any harm to try," said Cecily. "If she didn't make him sick it won't matter if she is cross."

"It won't matter to Pat, but it might to the one who goes to her," said Felicity. "She isn't a witch, but she's a spiteful old woman, and goodness knows what she'd do to us if she caught us. I'm scared of Peg Bowen, and I don't care who knows it. Ever since I can mind ma's been saying, 'If you're not good Peg Bowen will catch you.'"

"If I thought she really made Pat sick and could make him better, I'd try to pacify her somehow," said the Story Girl decidedly.

"I'm frightened of her, too--but just look at poor, darling

Paddy."

We looked at Paddy who continued to stare fixedly before him with unwinking eyes. Uncle Roger came out and looked at him also, with what seemed to us positively brutal unconcern.

"I'm afraid it's all up with Pat," he said.

"Uncle Roger," said Cecily imploringly, "Peter says Peg Bowen has bewitched Pat for scratching her. Do you think it can be so?"

"Did Pat scratch Peg?" asked Uncle Roger, with a horror-stricken face. "Dear me! Dear me! That mystery is solved. Poor Pat!"

Uncle Roger nodded his head, as if resigning himself and Pat to the worst.

"Do you really think Peg Bowen is a witch, Uncle Roger?" demanded the Story Girl incredulously.

"Do I think Peg Bowen is a witch? My dear Sara, what do YOU think of a woman who can turn herself into a black cat whenever she likes? Is she a witch? Or is she not? I leave it to you."

"Can Peg Bowen turn herself into a black cat?" asked Felix, staring.

"It's my belief that that is the least of Peg Bowen's accomplishments," answered Uncle Roger. "It's the easiest thing in the world for a witch to turn herself into any animal you choose to mention. Yes, Pat is bewitched--no doubt of that--not the least in the world."

"What are you telling those children such stuff for?" asked Aunt Olivia, passing on her way to the well.

"It's an irresistible temptation," answered Uncle Roger, strolling over to carry her pail.

"You can see your Uncle Roger believes Peg is a witch," said Peter.

"And you can see Aunt Olivia doesn't," I said, "and I don't either."

"See here," said the Story Girl resolutely, "I don't believe it, but there MAY be something in it. Suppose there is. The question is, what can we do?"

"I'll tell you what I'D do," said Peter. "I'd take a present for Peg, and ask her to make Pat well. I wouldn't let on I thought she'd made him sick. Then she couldn't be offended--and maybe

she'd take the spell off."

"I think we'd better all give her something," said Felicity.

"I'm willing to do that. But who's going to take the presents to her?"

"We must all go together," said the Story Girl.

"I won't," cried Sara Ray in terror. "I wouldn't go near Peg Bowen's house for the world, no matter who was with me."

"I've thought of a plan," said the Story Girl. "Let's all give her something, as Felicity says. And let us all go up to her place this evening, and if we see her outside we'll just go quietly and set the things down before her with the letter, and say nothing but come respectfully away."

"If she'll let us," said Dan significantly.

"Can Peg read a letter?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. Aunt Olivia says she is a good scholar. She went to school and was a smart girl until she became crazy. We'll write it very plain."

"What if we don't see her?" asked Felicity.

"We'll put the things on her doorstep then and leave them."

"She may be miles away over the country by this time," sighed Cecily, "and never find them until it's too late for Pat. But it's the only thing to do. What can we give her?"

"We mustn't offer her any money," said the Story Girl. "She's very indignant when any one does that. She says she isn't a beggar. But she'll take anything else. I shall give her my string of blue beads. She's fond of finery."

"I'll give her that sponge cake I made this morning," said Felicity. "I guess she doesn't get sponge cake very often."

"I've nothing but the rheumatism ring I got as a premium for selling needles last winter," said Peter. "I'll give her that. Even if she hasn't got rheumatism it's a real handsome ring. It looks like solid gold."

"I'll give her a roll of peppermint candy," said Felix.

"I'll give one of those little jars of cherry preserve I made," said Cecily.

"I won't go near her," quavered Sara Ray, "but I want to do

something for Pat, and I'll send that piece of apple leaf lace I knit last week."

I decided to give the redoubtable Peg some apples from my birthday tree, and Dan declared he would give her a plug of tobacco.

"Oh, won't she be insulted?" exclaimed Felix, rather horrified.

"Naw," grinned Dan. "Peg chews tobacco like a man. She'd rather have it than your rubbishy peppermints, I can tell you. I'll run down to old Mrs. Sampson's and get a plug."

"Now, we must write the letter and take it and the presents to her right away, before it gets dark," said the Story Girl.

We adjourned to the granary to indite the important document, which the Story Girl was to compose.

"How shall I begin it?" she asked in perplexity. "It would never do to say, 'Dear Peg,' and 'Dear Miss Bowen' sounds too ridiculous."

"Besides, nobody knows whether she is Miss Bowen or not," said Felicity. "She went to Boston when she grew up, and some say she was married there and her husband deserted her, and that's why

she went crazy. If she's married, she won't like being called Miss."

"Well, how am I to address her?" asked the Story Girl in despair.

Peter again came to the rescue with a practical suggestion.

"Begin it, 'Respected Madam,'" he said. "Ma has a letter a school trustee once writ to my Aunt Jane and that's how it begins."

"Respected Madam," wrote the Story Girl. "We want to ask a very great favour of you and we hope you will kindly grant it if you can. Our favourite cat, Paddy, is very sick, and we are afraid he is going to die. Do you think you could cure him? And will you please try? We are all so fond of him, and he is such a good cat, and has no bad habits. Of course, if any of us tramps on his tail he will scratch us, but you know a cat can't bear to have his tail tramped on. It's a very tender part of him, and it's his only way of preventing it, and he doesn't mean any harm. If you can cure Paddy for us we will always be very, very grateful to you. The accompanying small offerings are a testimonial of our respect and gratitude, and we entreat you to honour us by accepting them.

"Very respectfully yours,

"SARA STANLEY."

"I tell you that last sentence has a fine sound," said Peter admiringly.

"I didn't make that up," admitted the Story Girl honestly. "I read it somewhere and remembered it."

"I think it's TOO fine," criticized Felicity. "Peg Bowen won't know the meaning of such big words."

But it was decided to leave them in and we all signed the letter.

Then we got our "testimonials," and started on our reluctant journey to the domains of the witch. Sara Ray would not go, of course, but she volunteered to stay with Pat while we were away. We did not think it necessary to inform the grown-ups of our errand, or its nature. Grown-ups had such peculiar views. They might forbid our going at all--and they would certainly laugh at us.

Peg Bowen's house was nearly a mile away, even by the short cut past the swamp and up the wooded hill. We went down through the brook field and over the little plank bridge in the hollow, half lost in its surrounding sea of farewell summers. When we reached the green gloom of the woods beyond we began to feel frightened,

but nobody would admit it. We walked very closely together, and we did not talk. When you are near the retreat of witches and folk of that ilk the less you say the better, for their feelings are so notoriously touchy. Of course, Peg wasn't a witch, but it was best to be on the safe side.

Finally we came to the lane which led directly to her abode. We were all very pale now, and our hearts were beating. The red September sun hung low between the tall spruces to the west. It did not look to me just right for a sun. In fact, everything looked uncanny. I wished our errand were well over.

A sudden bend in the lane brought us out to the little clearing where Peg's house was before we were half ready to see it. In spite of my fear I looked at it with some curiosity. It was a small, shaky building with a sagging roof, set amid a perfect jungle of weeds. To our eyes, the odd thing about it was that there was no entrance on the ground floor, as there should be in any respectable house. The only door was in the upper story, and was reached by a flight of rickety steps. There was no sign of life about the place except--sight of ill omen--a large black cat, sitting on the topmost step. We thought of Uncle Roger's gruesome hints. Could that black cat be Peg? Nonsense! But still--it didn't look like an ordinary cat. It was so large--and had such green, malicious eyes! Plainly, there was something out of the common about the beastie!

In a tense, breathless silence the Story Girl placed our parcels on the lowest step, and laid her letter on the top of the pile. Her brown fingers trembled and her face was very pale.

Suddenly the door above us opened, and Peg Bowen herself appeared on the threshold. She was a tall, sinewy old woman, wearing a short, ragged, drugget skirt which reached scantily below her knees, a scarlet print blouse, and a man's hat. Her feet, arms, and neck were bare, and she had a battered old clay pipe in her mouth. Her brown face was seamed with a hundred wrinkles, and her tangled, grizzled hair fell unkemptly over her shoulders. She was scowling, and her flashing black eyes held no friendly light.

We had borne up bravely enough hitherto, in spite of our inward, unconfessed quakings. But now our strained nerves gave way, and sheer panic seized us. Peter gave a little yelp of pure terror. We turned and fled across the clearing and into the woods. Down the long hill we tore, like mad, hunted creatures, firmly convinced that Peg Bowen was after us. Wild was that scamper, as nightmare-like as any recorded in our dream books. The Story Girl was in front of me, and I can recall the tremendous leaps she made over fallen logs and little spruce bushes, with her long brown curls streaming out behind her from their scarlet fillet. Cecily, behind me, kept gasping out the contradictory sentences,

"Oh, Bev, wait for me," and "Oh, Bev, hurry, hurry!" More by blind instinct than anything else we kept together and found our way out of the woods. Presently we were in the field beyond the brook. Over us was a dainty sky of shell pink, placid cows were pasturing around us; the farewell summers nodded to us in the friendly breezes. We halted, with a glad realization that we were back in our own haunts and that Peg Bowen had not caught us.

"Oh, wasn't that an awful experience?" gasped Cecily, shuddering. "I wouldn't go through it again--I couldn't, not even for Pat."

"It come on a fellow so suddent," said Peter shamefacedly. "I think I could a-stood my ground if I'd known she was going to come out. But when she popped out like that I thought I was done for."

"We shouldn't have run," said Felicity gloomily. "It showed we were afraid of her, and that always makes her awful cross. She won't do a thing for Pat now."

"I don't believe she could do anything, anyway," said the Story Girl. "I think we've just been a lot of geese."

We were all, except Peter, more or less inclined to agree with her. And the conviction of our folly deepened when we reached the granary and found that Pat, watched over by the faithful Sara

Ray, was no better. The Story Girl announced that she would take him into the kitchen and sit up all night with him.

"He sha'n't die alone, anyway," she said miserably, gathering his limp body up in her arms.

We did not think Aunt Olivia would give her permission to stay up; but Aunt Olivia did. Aunt Olivia really was a duck. We wanted to stay with her also, but Aunt Janet wouldn't hear of such a thing. She ordered us off to bed, saying that it was positively sinful in us to be so worked up over a cat. Five heart-broken children, who knew that there are many worse friends than dumb, furry folk, climbed Uncle Alec's stairs to bed that night.

"There's nothing we can do now, except pray God to make Pat better," said Cecily.

I must candidly say that her tone savoured strongly of a last resort; but this was owing more to early training than to any lack of faith on Cecily's part. She knew and we knew, that prayer was a solemn rite, not to be lightly held, nor degraded to common uses. Felicity voiced this conviction when she said,

"I don't believe it would be right to pray about a cat."

"I'd like to know why not," retorted Cecily, "God made Paddy just as much as He made you, Felicity King, though perhaps He didn't go to so much trouble. And I'm sure He's abler to help him than Peg Bowen. Anyhow, I'm going to pray for Pat with all my might and main, and I'd like to see you try to stop me. Of course I won't mix it up with more important things. I'll just tack it on after I've finished asking the blessings, but before I say amen."

More petitions than Cecily's were offered up that night on behalf of Paddy. I distinctly heard Felix--who always said his prayers in a loud whisper, owing to some lasting conviction of early life that God could not hear him if he did not pray audibly--mutter pleadingly, after the "important" part of his devotions was over, "Oh, God, please make Pat better by the morning. PLEASE do."

And I, even in these late years of irreverence for the dreams of youth, am not in the least ashamed to confess that when I knelt down to say my boyish prayer, I thought of our little furry comrade in his extremity, and prayed as reverently as I knew how for his healing. Then I went to sleep, comforted by the simple hope that the Great Father would, after "important things" were all attended to, remember poor Pat.

As soon as we were up the next morning we rushed off to Uncle Roger's. But we met Peter and the Story Girl in the lane, and their faces were as the faces of those who bring glad tidings

upon the mountains.

"Pat's better," cried the Story Girl, blithe, triumphant. "Last night, just at twelve, he began to lick his paws. Then he licked himself all over and went to sleep, too, on the sofa. When I woke Pat was washing his face, and he has taken a whole saucerful of milk. Oh, isn't it splendid?"

"You see Peg Bowen did put a spell on him," said Peter, "and then she took it off."

"I guess Cecily's prayer had more to do with Pat's getting better than Peg Bowen," said Felicity. "She prayed for Pat over and over again. That is why he's better."

"Oh, all right," said Peter, "but I'd advise Pat not to scratch Peg Bowen again, that's all."

"I wish I knew whether it was the praying or Peg Bowen that cured Pat," said Felix in perplexity.

"I don't believe it was either of them," said Dan. "Pat just got sick and got better again of his own accord."

"I'm going to believe that it was the praying," said Cecily decidedly. "It's so much nicer to believe that God cured Pat

than that Peg Bowen did."

"But you oughtn't to believe a thing just 'cause it would be more comfortable," objected Peter. "Mind you, I ain't saying God couldn't cure Pat. But nothing and nobody can't ever make me believe that Peg Bowen wasn't at the bottom of it all."

Thus faith, superstition, and incredulity strove together amongst us, as in all history.