

In Nether Spaces

By Madeline Yale Wynne

The Witch sat rocking her body back and forth while she crooned:

“I launched two ships on a scarlet sea,
One for thy soul and one for me.
Perchance sometime we dead may be,
And I fain would know of the mystery.
Black Cat, hearest thou me?”

“These ships they tossed on the blood-red sea.
Thy ship was staunch and mine sailed free.
The winds blew shrill and the night was dree;
Thine made for its port; but mine, ah, me!
Black Cat, come near to me.”

“The scarlet waters hissed in glee,
While the shuddering, bat-like soul of me
Went lurching down to eternity
In the trough of the blood-red, crawling sea.
Black Cat, laugh with me!”

Then the voice of the Witch and her cat went round the world in an unholy shriek; on its way it rattled the shutters of the sleeping folk. The child cried, though it waked not. The priest crossed himself. The nun shivered as she prayed. The wolf growled; his mouth was wet with the longing for the lamb.

“What was it that thou wert singing, dear Witch?”

“That, my dear Cat, was witch-broth, afflatus, a riddle.”

“Was it Poetry?”

“Poetry? No; that word has no meaning.”

“What does Poetry mean, then?”

“It does not mean anything. Can't you understand that when something is something that isn't anything else, it is called poetry; is that clear to thee? Of course, there had to be some way to express that idea, so they thought up a word and called it poetry.”

“Can you make it, dear Witch?”

“Make it!” she screamed. “He-he-he! It *can't* be made; it grows, it grows in the soul of a poet.”

“Oh,” purred the sleepy Cat, “it grow-ow-ow-ows, it grow—ow—ow—”

The Witch touched him with her foot.

“Wake up, beauty-black; thou sleepest out of season; night was never made for sleep. I would have thy waking company. I like thee best when thy green eyes glow in the darkness. Wake up, my beauty; thou art drowsed by the sweet, warm breath of hell; wake, else I will transport thee to a colder place. All hells are not warm.”

“Dear Witch, dost thou fly to-night? Art thou going to ride thy broomstick?”

“Truly, soul of mine, twixt twelve and three I shall ride abreast of the winds on the track of the lightning. I will take thee, too, my sweet singer; for I know a palace where a prince will be born ere morning; we will celebrate his coming with a song. There are back yards to palaces, aye and

high fences, too, where thou canst slink along, and then, black as midnight, and stealthy as death, thou canst creep till thou art under the window, then raise thy voice aloft in shrill natal praises. Sing now, flower of my heart, that I may hear thy voice in my outer ear.

The Cat sings, and from the world rolling through darkness are heard the echoes of the song.

“That was well done, amazingly well done; but rest thee now lest thou dull the shrill edge of thy matchless voice. I promise thee a fine chorus of gray singers to-night. Thou wilt like that, my velvet-throated creature.”

“Not to-night, dear Witch; I prithee not tonight; for I, too, know something of import. I heard thee say to thyself that a poet also was to be born to-night, in a gray house on a hill, by a wood.”

“What then! What if a poet be born also! May not a prince and a poet hear the same song?”

“Nay, I think the poet, he who is to be a singer himself, should hear other music than mine.

“And why not thine, melodious one?”

“Why, I thought they, the poets, were children of—”

“Hush—sh—sh.”

“Well, then, are they not under the care of the white ones?”

“Not always, no, not always,” chuckled the Witch. “Not always, black friend of mine; thou jumpest to a conclusion as thy brethren on the earth jump at a mouse.”

“*Are* poets then, dear Witch, of thy people?”

“What foolish questions thou askest: they *are*, and then again they are *not*; but they are good game; yea, rare good game. I will tell thee, then, Black Cat, about poets.

“Poets are born into that wonderful borderland where black spirits and white may hunt. Ah, it is the keenest sport I know to go a-poet hunting. White wings and black wings filling the air. The poet sits, his eyes looking inward; he hears the flutter of wings, black wings and white wings, fluttering, fanning, turning, swirling. White wings, black wings, wings fluttering all about his soul; oh, that is sport. Sometimes it is a close game.”

The Witch wagged her head.

“Yes, it is worth while to go a-hunting for a poet’s soul, and you can’t tell always in a poet’s lifetime whether he belongs to the black or to the white wings.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, it all seems to lie in the parentheses. You see the recipe for a poet runs thus:

“Pure light 4 parts (flame may be substituted).

“Sense 1 part (this may be altogether omitted).

“Non-sense 1 part (essential, no substitute).

“Love divine 2 parts; Love human 1 part (self-love may be used in whole or part for these three portions).

These be the nine parts that go to the making of a poet. If a poet be made by strict rule he belongs to the white ones. When the substitutes are used we have a chance to get him. It is not often a poet is made by strict measure, and it is a long time before flame can be distinguished from pure light; not till it begins to scorch his own soul by its heat. Pure light has no power to burn the soul—that part of man that is called soul.”

“Ah, I see now; and can you have a hand in the making of a poet, dear Witch?”

“Only indirectly. But I think we may safely count on the poet that will be born to-night. Thou canst sing to that end.”

“I will sing; but, dear Witch, what are these gray things that fly around and flap in our faces? They are as stupid as June-bugs.”

“Those be mistakes, my velvet love; they be born of ignorance and inertia. Poor things, they cannot even die, not being living things. That big one there, tumbling round near the ground, that is a new one; he has just been made by a statesman. Oh! he is a big mistake, a great stupid mistake!” and the old Witch cackles with low glee. “I could tell you more,” she said, “if I had time.”

“Time? Why, is there such a thing as time at the mouth of hell?”

“Oh, as to that, it is all as you look at it. I am a pretty spry old body. I am pretty busy. Can’t you see what I am doing? I am weaving ropes of hell-fire.”

“What are they for?”

“Oh, nothing in particular; they are handy to have around. I like best to do things for no special purpose, that is what keeps most folks busy, witches as well as world-folk. All busy, busy, busy, doing nothing. I hate a butterfly; methinks they are much too light of wing.”

“I like butterflies,” said the Cat, licking its jaws.