

“The Witch of Dedham,” by D.B. Jackson

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By D.B. Jackson

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Ethan Kaille first heard people speak of the Dedham witch early in the spring of 1764. By then, of course, it was too late for him to save her life.

It was April and Boston was in the midst of an early thaw. Already bright sunshine and warm winds off the harbor had coaxed crocuses from the soil. Fork-tailed swallows had returned to the skies over the city, darting and swooping like winged sprites, and eagles, handsome in white and chestnut, constructed great nests along the water’s edge.

The smallpox epidemic that had paralyzed the city for much of the winter seemed at last to be abating. Ethan had managed to avoid the dreaded disease, as had most of the people he knew. But across the city, many hundreds had taken ill; nearly two hundred had died. Talk in the Dowsing Rod, the tavern Ethan frequented, had centered on the epidemic for so long, he could hardly remember people there speaking of anything else.

And so the night he overheard two men talking about a woman in the small town of Dedham, to the south and west of Boston, Ethan assumed that the disease had spread to the countryside. The more he heard, however, the more he realized that these men weren’t speaking of smallpox.

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“She’s just a young thing,” one of the men said, speaking around a mouthful of bread. “But she’s old enough to do her mischief.”

“And old enough to swing, I’d wager,” said the man’s companion.

“Aye. Certainly that, after what she’s said to have done.”

Ethan had become a regular in the Dowsing Rod in large part because he and the tavern’s widowed owner, Kannice Lester, had been lovers for several months. Her usual patrons, though, were far less accepting of Ethan than she was. They thought him untrustworthy; some believed he was dangerous, and had told Kannice as much. Ethan could hardly fault them for their judgment of his character. He had spent the better part of fourteen years laboring as a prisoner on a sugar plantation in the Caribbean, punishment for his part in the infamous Ruby Blade mutiny. Moreover, he had been the subject of rumor ever since his return to Boston. Some said that he was a conjurer, that he communed with the shade of an ancient spellmaker, and that it was only a matter of time before he himself was hanged as a witch. Ethan didn’t relish the idea of people talking about him, but he couldn’t deny any of it. The first two points were true, and the third seemed quite likely.

Whether they believed these rumors, or merely thought him an unrepentant mutineer, Kannice’s patrons almost never spoke to him; they rarely dared to make eye contact. Which may explain why the two men at the adjacent table started so violently when Ethan turned to look at them.

“Who are you talking about?” he asked, his tone more severe than he had intended.

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The men stared at him, eyes wide, mouths agape. They shared a glance; one of them wet his lips.

“There’s a woman,” this one finally said, his gaze meeting Ethan’s for just an instant before sliding away. “In Dedham.”

“Yes, I heard that much. What of her?”

“She’s a witch,” said the other man. He appeared to have recovered from his initial fright. There was a note of challenge in his voice and his hard glare didn’t waver.

“At least, that’s what some are saying.”

“A witch,” Ethan repeated. “What makes people think she’s a witch?”

“From what I hear, she admits as much,” said the bold one, reaching with a steady hand for his flip.

“And what mischief is she supposed to have done?”

“Near to killed a man. Least aways, that’s what they say.”

“Is that what you heard, too?” Ethan asked the other one.

This man also reached for his drink, but then stopped himself. Ethan could see the tremor in his hand. “All I know is that she worked her devilry, and got caught at it. I never heard what it was she did.”

“She’s a witch,” the bold one said. “That’s all that matters. She admits as much. And two days from now, she’ll swing.”

Ethan felt his body sag, as if he had taken a fist to the gut. “Two days?”

“Aye.”

“Do you know her?” the timid man asked.

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“No,” Ethan said.

“I thought maybe--”

The man’s companion laid a hand on his arm, silencing him.

A thin smile tugged at the corners of Ethan’s mouth and vanished as quickly as it had come. I thought maybe all of you witches knew each other. Likely, the man had intended to say something of the sort.

“Allow me to buy you a round of ales, gentlemen,” Ethan said, forcing himself to smile again.

Another glance passed between them. After a moment, the bold one nodded. “All right.”

Ethan raised a hand, catching the eye of Kelf Fingarin, Kannice’s mountain of a barkeep. He raised two fingers and then pointed to the men. Kelf nodded and began to fill a pair of tankards.

The men resumed their conversation in low voices, their heads lowered and close together.

“Do you know how old she is?” Ethan asked, drawing their attention once more.

“One of you said she was young. How young?”

“Fifteen,” said the bold man, as Kelf arrived at their table bearing their ales.

“Anythin’ for you, Ethan?” the barkeep asked.

“I’ll have another, as well. Thanks.”

He leaned back in his chair and watched Kelf lumber to the bar. His thoughts churned.

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Fifteen. And she had confessed to being a witch. She might as well have thrown herself off a bridge, or taken a blade to her breast. And what of her parents or her husband if she had already married? Had they allowed her confession? Or had they shunned her, casting her from her home, siding with those who had no doubt accused her of consorting with the devil?

Kelf returned to the table carrying a full tankard, which he placed in front of Ethan. The two men seemed to have moved on to some other topic of conversation; they paid no more attention to him. That was fine with Ethan. He drank his ale, and he brooded.

Conjurers in the New World and also in England, had for centuries been condemned as witches by small-minded people who didn't understand the workings of spells. Men and women in Boston still spoke of the witch trials that took place in Salem late in the previous century, but though those condemnations had since come to be seen as a travesty, accusations of “witchery” still occurred with some frequency in the Province of Massachusetts Bay. Stephen Greenleaf, the Sheriff of Suffolk County, had long accused Ethan of dabbling in black magick and had threatened to have him hanged, though thus far he had been unable to prove anything. But while Ethan had been fortunate, he and other conjurers lived in constant fear of being the next “witch” to die with a noose around his neck, or at the hands of a mob whipped to a frenzy by an overzealous preacher or sheriff.

And now came word from Dedham that a woman -- a girl, really -- had chosen such an end for herself.

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After some time, Kannice emerged from the tavern kitchen and, seeing Ethan, stepped out from behind the bar and walked to his table.

“When did you come in?” she asked, smiling. She bent down and brushed his lips with hers. Her auburn hair smelled of lavender, and her breath carried the scent of whiskey.

“I’ve been here for a while,” he said.

“What’s wrong?”

“What makes you think that anything is wrong?” he asked, trying to keep his tone light.

She pulled a chair around from the far side of the table and sat beside him.

“What’s wrong?” she asked again, her eyes, periwinkle blue, locked on his.

He contemplated his ale. “Have you heard about the woman in Dedham?”

“Aye,” Kannice said, sighing the word. “Kelf told me earlier today. A couple of boys from Roxbury mentioned it to him.”

“She’s fifteen. They’re going to hang her, and she’s fifteen years old.”

“I know.”

“I’m going to Dedham,” he said, making up his mind in that moment. “I’m going to speak with her. If I leave early enough in the morning, I can walk there and be back before nightfall.”

“Ethan--”

“Maybe I can help her.”

“Or maybe you can get yourself hanged alongside her!”

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Conversations around them faltered. The men at the next table sent furtive glances their way.

“I’m sorry,” Kannice said, lowering her voice once more. “But don’t you think that by going to see her you’ll be announcing to everyone in Dedham who and what you are?”

“Well, if I take you along, you can do it for me.”

He grinned and so did she, though she sobered quickly.

“I’m serious,” she said. “It’s too dangerous. You shouldn’t go.”

“I’ll tell anyone who asks that I’m just a friend who wants to visit with her before she dies.”

“And that will work right up until the moment you . . .” She glanced around the tavern before going on in a whisper. “You break her out of the prison.”

“Is that what you think I intend to do?”

“I have no idea what you intend,” Kannice said, sounding exasperated. “I don’t believe you do, either. And so yes, I think it’s possible that you could wind up doing something you’ll regret.”

He looked away. “Why shouldn’t I help her? A girl that age . . .” He broke off, shaking his head.

She reached across the table and took his hand in both of hers.

“Why would you do this? What do you think you can do for her?”

“Honestly, Kannice, I don’t know. But I do know that I need to see her, to hear from her why she would confess to being a witch.” Ethan faced her again. “I won’t do anything stupid. I promise you. But I am going.”

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Kannice lifted her shoulders slightly. “All right.”

“All right?” Ethan repeated. “You have nothing more to say?”

“You’ve made up your mind. I’ve no interest in pounding my head against a wall.”

She lifted his hand to her lips and kissed the back of it. Then she stood. “Will you be staying the night?”

“That depends. Are you willing to share your bed with a man as foolish as me?”

She shrugged again. “I was last night, and the night before that. I suppose I still am.” She flashed him a quick grin before returning to the bar.

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Early the following morning, Ethan woke to the sound of a chaise rattling past on the cobblestone lane outside the Dowsing Rod. The first murky light of dawn seeped around the shutters covering Kannice’s bedroom window, barely illuminating the chamber. Ethan slipped out of bed; Kannice stirred but didn’t wake. He dressed quickly, let himself out of her chamber, descended the stairs to the tavern’s great room, and stepped out into the cool morning light.

A thin mist hung over the city, and the air was heavy with the smells of fish and brine. The strident cries of gulls echoed from the harbor; a dog barked somewhere up toward the West End. Ethan struck out southward, following Sudbury Street to Treamount and then cutting east to Marlborough and following that toward Boston’s Neck, the narrow strand of marshy grassland that led eventually to the Town Gate.

A man of the watch opened the gate at Ethan’s approach and watched wordlessly as he walked out of the city and onto the causeway that crossed the Roxbury Flats. With

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the tide low, the sour stink of the mudflats made Ethan’s eyes water. Herons stood motionless in the foul ooze, warily eyeing a pair of clammers digging nearby.

Once over the causeway, Ethan followed the lane across the Salt Marshes to Roxbury and then took what was commonly called the Middle Road toward Dedham. He would have preferred to hire a carriage for the journey. He walked with a pronounced limp, the result of a severe injury to his left foot suffered during his years as a prisoner, and already he could feel the strain of this walk on his bad leg. But while he had enjoyed some small success as a thieftaker in Boston, he was not a man of means. And even if he had been, arriving at Dedham’s prison in a carriage might well have drawn unwanted attention to his visit. Walking the nearly ten miles seemed a more prudent choice.

As the sun climbed into the morning sky, the air warmed. Before long, Ethan removed his coat and slung it over his shoulder. The pain in his leg worsened steadily, until his face was damp with sweat and he grimaced with every step.

Still he made good progress, coming to the village well before the sun reached its zenith. Though Dedham was small, its lanes bustled with artisans and merchants, with women carrying small children or leading them by the hand, or both. He passed a farrier’s shop and a smithy, saw at the far end of the town a small church with a white spire that gleamed in the sun. He halted at the sight of a solid looking courthouse and after a moment’s hesitation entered Fisher’s Inn, which stood directly across the main street.

As Ethan stepped to the bar, the barkeep nodded a greeting.

“We’ve just had a meat pie out of the oven,” the man said. “That and an ale?”

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“Thank you,” Ethan said. He dug a shilling out of his pocket and placed it on the bar.

The barkeep grinned. “You must be from the city. Around here, that will buy you at least another ale or two.”

“That’s all right. Maybe you can answer a question for me and keep the extra pence.”

He might as well have asked the man to consent to Ethan marrying his sister. The smile fled the barkeep’s face, leaving his expression stony. He reached for a tankard and began to fill it, but he didn’t so much as glance Ethan’s way as he said, “I’ve nothing to say to strangers.”

“You don’t even know what I was going to ask.”

The barkeep set the tankard down smartly in front of Ethan, slopping some ale onto the bar.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, and stepped into the kitchen.

He emerged again moments later bearing a plate of food. But after placing this beside Ethan’s tankard, he retreated to the far end of the bar and began to polish the wood, steadfastly avoiding Ethan’s gaze.

Ethan ate in silence. The pie was good, although not nearly as fine as anything Kannice served in her tavern. When he finished, he stood and glanced once more at the barkeep. The man still refused to look his way. At last Ethan walked out, leaving the shilling on the bar.

Out on the lane once more, he glanced northward, back the way he had come, but

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then set out toward the church at the south end of the village. Upon entering the sanctuary, Ethan spotted a minister sitting in the chancel beyond a simple wooden pulpit.

“My pardon, Reverend sir,” Ethan called to the man.

The minister set aside his bible and stood. He was a young man, slight and pale. He appeared quite frail, despite his youth. “Who is that?” he called, squinting slightly.

“My name is Ethan Kaille,” Ethan said, walking past the dark wooden pews toward the pulpit. “I’ve come from Boston. I wish to speak with the young woman accused of being a witch.”

“Not accused,” the minister said. “Confessed.”

“Aye. So I had heard.”

“Are you a friend? A relation?”

Ethan thought about lying, as he had promised Kannice he would. But though he wasn’t a religious man, he couldn’t bring himself to lie to a minister inside the man’s own church. He shook his head. “I don’t even know her name.”

“And yet, you’ve come from Boston to see her,” the minister said, his voice as grave as his manner.

“Aye.”

“Why would you do that? Why would a witch in Dedham draw the notice of a man of the city?”

“You’re the second person to ask me that, Reverend sir. I have no answer for you. But I rose with the sun this morning, and I walked all the way here. I would ask that you

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allow me to speak with her.”

“She’s in the gaol,” the minister said, “at the rear of the courthouse. But even so, it is not my place to give you leave to speak with her. If she chooses to speak, she may. If she refuses, you’ll have no recourse through me.”

“Very well.” Ethan hesitated. “Can you tell me what happened to make her confess such a thing?”

The young man shook his head. “That’s not my tale. Either she’ll tell you or she won’t.” He paused, rubbing his brow. “I will say this, though. I must root out evil in my congregation, no matter the form it takes. I’m sworn to do so. But this . . . this is a dark business.”

“What do you mean?”

The minister shook his head again. “I probably should not have said as much as I have. Ask her. I hope she chooses to speak with you, Mister Kaille. Truly, I do.”

He sat and took up his bible once more, and he didn’t look at Ethan again. After a few moments, Ethan walked up the aisle toward the sanctuary’s entryway.

Just as Ethan reached the door, however, the minister said, “Her name is Mary Crenshaw.”

Ethan turned. The minister’s voice had been so low that for an instant he wondered if the man had actually spoken at all, or if he had imagined it. As far as Ethan could tell, the minister still was engrossed in his reading. At last he turned once more and let himself out of the church.

He made his way to the courthouse and walked around the structure to a small,

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stone building in back. It had no windows on its front façade, just an oaken door with a heavy cast-iron lock. He knocked once.

After a few seconds the door behind him, the rear door of the courthouse, was pulled open from within. Ethan turned to find a burly man in black breeches, a black coat, and a white linen shirt looking him over through narrowed eyes.

“Who are you?”

“I’m here to see Mary Crenshaw.”

“You a friend of hers?”

“I’ve walked many miles to see her,” Ethan said, approaching the man. “I would be crazy to do such a thing if I weren’t her friend. Wouldn’t you agree?”

The burly man scowled and closed the door, leaving Ethan to wonder if he had been dismissed. A few seconds later, though, he heard the muffled jangle of keys. The door opened again and the man stepped past him, muttering “This way.”

Ethan followed the keeper to the austere oaken door, and waited as he found the correct key. The man opened the door and gestured Ethan inside.

“Knock when you’re done,” he said, and pulled the door shut.

The hollow echo of the door’s close jarred Ethan like a blow to the head, bringing back memories of his own imprisonment. It had been eighteen years since first he had heard that sound from this side of the door, and yet he found himself trembling, a trickle of sweat on his brow.

“Who are you?”

There was only one cell in the gaol: a tiny square set off by stone and iron and

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another heavy wooden door, this one with a small barred window at eye level. The face that peered out at him was that of a child, not a woman. She was plain -- round cheeks, blue eyes, a small, upturned nose and a generous sprinkling of freckles.

“Are you a prisoner, like me?”

“No,” Ethan said, finding his voice. “At least not anymore. I was a prisoner once.”

He eyed the door, the lock, the hinges. If she was a conjurer, and if she wanted to escape, there was nothing holding her here that a spell or two couldn’t overmaster.

“Are you a messenger, then?”

“What?”

“A messenger. I prayed to God to send me guidance, and I’m wondering if He sent you.”

Ethan considered lying to her. Yes, God sent me to command you to protest your innocence, to fight for your freedom! It would have been so easy to say. But again he couldn’t bring himself to speak the words. Not about this. He had lost his own faith long ago, in the hell of his prison labor; he would not use this girl’s faith to mislead her.

“I’m no messenger,” he said. “I’m a conjurer. I would assume that you are, too.”

She opened her mouth, closed it again.

“Veni ad me,” he said in Latin. Come to me.

The glowing figure that winked into view beside him wore chain mail and a tabard bearing the insignia of the Plantagenet kings. He was tall, lean, dour; his hair and beard were closely shorn. This ghost, whom Ethan had named Uncle Reg, after his mother’s splenetic brother, helped him to access the power that dwelt between the living

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world and the realm of the dead. He was a guide of sorts for Ethan’s spellmaking and as such he appeared whenever Ethan used his conjuring powers. Every living conjurer communed with a specter like Reg, though not all the ghosts were as glum as Ethan’s.

The girl staring out at him from the small cell glanced briefly in Reg’s direction, but she didn’t start or gasp. Only someone with conjurer’s blood in her veins could have seen the old ghost, and only someone who was accustomed to spellmaking would have shown so little surprise at his sudden appearance.

“So you are a messenger,” she said, her tone icy. “You were sent here by the devil.”

“I was not sent by anyone, or anything. I came to see you because . . . because you can’t do this. You can’t allow them to hang you.”

She regarded the shade again, then said to Ethan. “You shouldn’t have come.” She turned and walked away from the door.

Ethan and Reg shared a quick look.

“Dimmitto te,” Ethan said softly. I release you. As the ghost started to fade from view, Ethan whispered, “I’m sorry to have summoned you.”

Reg said nothing. Ethan had never known him to speak. But as he vanished, his glowing eyes, which could be so expressive, remained fixed on the cell door.

Ethan walked to the door and look through the small window. Mary sat on a straw pallet in the far corner. There was a single brown woolen blanket bunched up beside her. A waste bucket sat at the foot of the bed. Otherwise, the cell was empty.

She wore a plain linen dress and a shawl, which she pulled tight around her

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shoulders upon seeing Ethan at the door. Her wheaten hair was pulled back in a plait; her feet were bare.

“It’s a sin, you know,” the girl said, her tone matter-of-fact. “Even just magicking that spirit here the way you did. You could hang, just as I will.”

Ethan shook his head. “I don’t believe it is a sin.”

“Mister Haven says it is.”

“Mister Haven?”

“The rector of our church.”

“Ah,” Ethan said. “Yes, I’m sure he does say that. But I believe he’s wrong. I live in Boston, where I work as a thieftaker. My spells help me find property that has been stolen, so that I can return the property to its rightful owner. How can that be a sin?”

She dropped her gaze.

“I can heal with a spell,” Ethan said, his voice low and gentle, as if he were speaking to a small child. “I’ve saved people’s lives with my conjuring. Is that a sin?”

“If I could save one life by taking another,” she said, “then I might do some good, but I would still be committing a sin.”

He frowned. “I don’t take a life when I conjure.”

“I know that. What I mean, though, is that even if we do some good, a sin is still a sin.”

“What have you done with your conjurings, Mary? Surely you’ve cast spells that helped others.”

She shook her head, looking away again. “I’ve done terrible things,” she

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whispered. “You should go.”

“What terrible things? Is this why you told them you were a witch? Is this why you want to hang?”

A tear rolled down her cheek, and then another. “Please go.”

“Not until I understand.”

“Why did you come here? Why should you care if I live or die? You live in the city. You don’t know me; you don’t care about me.”

“I came because when one conjurer is executed, we all suffer. The hanging of one accused witch raises fears everywhere. If you hang, it will be more dangerous for conjurers in Roxbury and Newton and Dorchester, and yes, even Boston.”

“So, you came to save yourself,” the girl said.

He started to respond, but stopped himself. He had given her the first answer that came to mind, an answer that wasn’t true.

Why had he come here? She was the third person to have asked him this -- first Kannice, then the minister, and now Mary -- and though he knew that there was as much myth and superstition surrounding spellmaking and so-called witchery as there was fact, he could not deny that there was power in numbers. Having been asked three times, Ethan felt compelled to answer. More, having heard the question for a third time, he finally understood his own mind.

“No,” Ethan said. “I didn’t come to save myself. I’m not even sure that I came to save you.”

“Good. I don’t want to be saved.”

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“Why not?” Ethan asked.

“Because living with this evil inside of me, is worse by far than what awaits me on the hangman’s gallows.”

He nodded. “I understand that. I understand hating your powers so much that you would rather deny they exist. When I was a younger man, I used spells in a mutiny aboard a privateering ship. The mutiny failed and I was put in prison.”

“Why weren’t you executed?”

“During the mutiny, I actually changed my mind, and just barely in time. The man who led the mutiny took control of the ship briefly, and he proved to be worse by far than our captain. He was cruel and merciless and reckless. When I saw this, I freed the captain and helped him retake his ship. When we returned to port, I was court-martialed, but my life was spared.

“After my trial, I swore that I would never conjure again. I despised myself. I had been foolish, and I blamed my spellmaking, since my powers were what made the mutineers recruit me in the first place. I’d lost my freedom, I’d lost the one love I’d ever known. It seemed to me that I had lost everything that mattered.” Ethan paused, leaning against the door. Mary watched him from her pallet, unmoving, unblinking. “For fourteen years I denied who and what I was. I refused to conjure; I saw my ability to cast spells as something black and evil. It was like living with a cancer on my soul.”

“What made you start casting again?” Mary asked in a whisper.

“I watched as a man was beaten, and I knew there was no one there to heal him but me.” He paused, searching for the right words. “I decided to come here when I heard

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that you had confessed to being a witch. I had a feeling that there was no one else who could help you.”

“I told you: I don’t want help. I don’t need saving.”

“Don’t you?” Before she could answer, he asked, “What terrible things have you done?”

All the color drained from her cheeks. “Why won’t you just leave?”

“I believe actions are evil only when we intend them as such,” Ethan said. “I don’t believe you’ve done anything evil. I think maybe you did something you hadn’t meant to do, and someone got hurt.”

She was crying again, staring at him, seemingly unable to look away.

“Is that what happened, Mary?”

The girl mouthed the word “Go,” but she didn’t move, not even to break eye contact.

“Did you try a spell, and it didn’t work the way you thought it would?” Ethan asked. “That happens to all of us, more often than you might think. Once when I was--”

“No,” she said, her voice echoing like a hammer blow. “The spell did exactly what I wanted it to do.” She stood, her glare still fixed on him. Then she began to pace the small cell, wringing her hands. “Sarah -- that’s my younger sister -- she’s twelve now, and fair as can be. Not like me and Heather, my older sister. We’re the plain ones, like our brothers. But Sarah . . . well, I suppose some would call her simple. She’s kind and generous. She wouldn’t hurt a soul. But even at twelve, she cannot take care of herself. She has her garden, and she sews during the cold months. But she doesn’t understand

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the world. She is too trusting, too good in a way. I fear that she’ll never be able to leave home. She needs Mother too much.”

Mary halted, glaring toward the door. “She’s not stupid. And she would never lie.”

“I believe you,” Ethan said.

“Papa loved her very much. She might have been his favorite.” A smile flickered across her features. “None of us begrudged her his attentions. We all dote on her a little bit. Except Daniel, that is.” Her voice went cold at her mention of the name.

“Who is Daniel?”

“When Papa died, he left my mother the house, and a good deal of land. And barely six months later, Daniel began coming by, claiming that he had done business with Papa. We all knew, though, that he was courting Mother, hoping to marry his way onto our land.

“All of us, that is, except Mother. Daniel is handsome and three years younger than she. I think she was flattered. She never doubted his motives. And she didn’t notice when Sarah started to shy away whenever the brute came near.”

Ethan felt his stomach clench.

“I noticed,” Mary said. “So did James and Thomas, my brothers. They don’t have my . . . my talents. And so it fell to me to stop him.”

“Lord have mercy,” Ethan whispered, though he wasn’t a praying man.

“No mercy,” the girl said. “None at all.”

“What did you do?”

She shrugged, then crossed her arms over her chest. “I cast a spell. I put it on

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Sarah. That seemed to be the safest way. It did nothing to the rest of us, but if Daniel touched her again . . .” Her smile this time was grim. “It burned him,” she said.

“His hands?”

She shook her head. “All of him. The rest of us were working the field, planting. He said he was going to get firewood, but he went searching for Sarah instead. And when he came staggering around from the back of the house, with his hair and clothes and skin burning like the fires of Hell, we knew. Even Mother knew.”

“Is he dead?” Ethan asked, barely managing to speak the words.

“No. Hideously scarred, but very much alive.”

Ethan shook his head. “No one can blame you for this, Mary. You were protecting your sister. Surely others can see that.”

“At first no one did blame me. Daniel said it was Sarah who did it to him. He said that she was a witch, that all this time she hadn’t been simple at all; it was just that the Devil had put his mark on her mind. They were going to hang her. So, I told them the truth: that it was me all along.” She took a long, ragged breath, fresh tears rolling down her cheeks. “Don’t you see? I did this to protect her, and in the end it almost got her killed. That’s why I confessed. I couldn’t bear the thought of saving her just so that she could be put to death.”

“But you did what you had to do,” Ethan said. “You shouldn’t be punished at all.”

She regarded him as if he were the simple one.

Ethan understood why. What he had said was hopelessly naïve. Conjurers were feared throughout the New World, and with Daniel having been burned so severely,

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people in this village would be terrified. Someone had to bear the blame.

“You could conjure yourself out of here,” he said, his voice dropping once more.

“Shatter the locks; break the hinges. Destroy the walls if you have to.”

“To what end? If I flee, blame will fall on my family, most likely on my sister.

That’s precisely what I’ve hoped to avoid.” She smiled. It had to be forced, and yet it brightened her face, making her look rather pretty, and even younger than she was. “I’ve chosen my fate. I’m at peace. Let me be, mister thieftaker. Please.”

“My name is Ethan,” he said.

“I’m grateful to you for coming, Ethan. I mean that. But there is nothing you can do for me. That is, unless you would care to pray for me.”

He almost told her that he didn’t believe in God, that it had been years since he had prayed for himself, much less for anyone else. But this had been a strange day, and her tale had moved him. In end he merely nodded and said, “Yes, of course I will.”

“Thank you.”

She seated herself on the pallet once more. She seemed more composed now. Her eyes were dry, her hands folded in her lap.

“Farewell, Mary Crenshaw.”

The girl gazed at him, but offered no answer. After another moment, Ethan turned and knocked on the prison door. Almost immediately he heard the jangle of keys and the creak of hinges as the door swung open to reveal the burly gaol keeper.

Ethan blinked against the glare, glanced one last time at the door to Mary’s cell. He had thought -- hoped -- that she might come to the window again. She hadn’t.

“The Witch of Dedham,” by D.B. Jackson

“She say much to you?” the keeper asked as he led Ethan around toward the front of the courthouse.

“No.”

“She don’t say much to anyone. But she’s a witch all right. Saw what she did to Daniel Bard -- the aftermath anyway. There’s no denying she’s a witch.” He shook his head. “Never thought I’d see the day, not here in Dedham.”

“Thank you,” Ethan said as they reached the street. He started northward toward the city. He had a long walk ahead of him.

“Aren’t you going to stay for the hanging? It’s just tomorrow, you know.”

“I can’t stay,” Ethan said over his shoulder. “I’ve got to be getting back to Boston.”

“Boston!” the man repeated. “Long way to come for a few minutes conversation.”

Ethan said no more, but raised a hand in farewell. He walked slowly, his bad leg still aching from the journey to Dedham, his feet already sore. There was a part of him that wanted to return to the village and rail at the girl until she changed her mind and tried somehow to win her freedom. There was a part of him that wished to tear the gaol apart, stone by stone. But of course he did neither.

He walked toward his home. And along the way, for the first time in so many years, he whispered a prayer.