

THE
WITCHES' BREW

E. J. Pratt

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[Frontispiece]

(Three water witches of the East)

THE WITCHES' BREW

BY
E. J. PRATT

With Decorations
BY JOHN AUSTEN

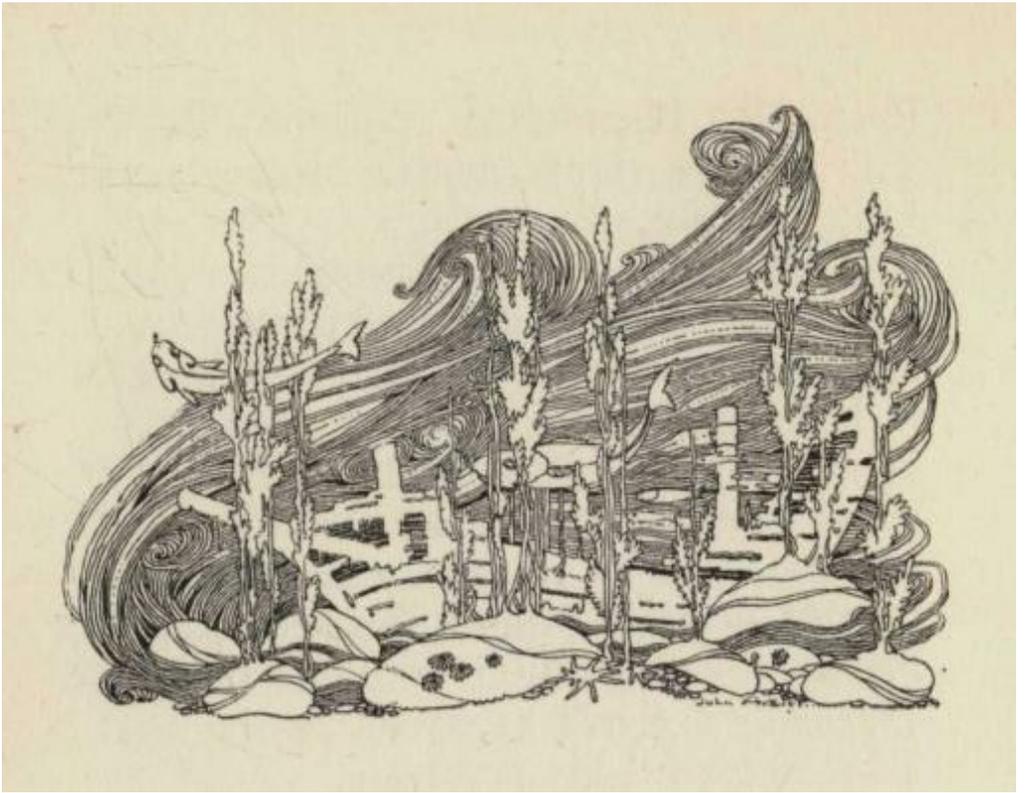


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TO MY WIFE



THE WITCHES' BREW

E. J. PRATT

Perched on a dead volcanic pile,
Now charted as a submerged peak,
Near to a moon-washed coral isle,
A hundred leagues from Mozambique,
Three water-witches of the East,
Under the stimulus of rum,
Decided that the hour had come
To hold a Saturnalian feast,

In course of which they hoped to find
For their black art, once and for all,
The true effect of alcohol
Upon the cold, aquatic mind.
From two Phoenicians who were drowned,
The witches three (whose surnames ran
Lulu, Ardath, Maryan)
Had by an incantation found
A cavern near the coast of Crete,
And saw, when they had entered in,
A blacksmith with a dorsal fin,
Whose double pectorals and webbed feet
Proved—while his dusky shoulders swung—
His breed to be of land and water,
Last of great Neptune's stock that sprung
From Vulcan's union with his daughter.
The sisters' terms accepted, he,
Together with his family,
Left his native Cretan shore
To dig the witches' copper ore
Out of their sub-aquaceous mines
In the distant Carolines,
And forge a cauldron that might stand,
Stationary and watertight,
A thousand cubits in its height,
Its width a thousand breadths as spanned
By the smith's gigantic hand,
So that each fish, however dry,
Might have, before the Feast was through,
His own demonstrable supply
Of this Pan-Oceanic brew.
A thousand leagues or so away

Down the Pacific to Cape Horn,
And Southwards from Magellan lay
A table-land to which was borne
This cauldron from the Carolines,
For here, as well the sisters knew,
The Spanish conquerors of Peru
Had stored their rich and ancient wines,
About the time the English burst
Upon their galleons under Drake,
Who sank or captured them to slake
A vast Elizabethan thirst.
With pick and bar the Cretan tore
His way to the interior
Of every sunken ship whose hold
Had wines almost four centuries old.
Upon the broad Magellan floors,
Great passage-way from West to East,
Were also found more recent stores,
The products of a stronger yeast.
For twenty years or thereabout,
The Bacchanals of Western nations,
Scenting universal drought,
Had searched the ocean to find out
The most secluded ports and stations,
Where unmolested they might go
"To serve their god while here below,"
With all the strength of their libations.
So to the distant isles there sailed,
In honour of the ivy god,
Scores of log-loaded ships that hailed
From Christiania to Cape Cod
With manifests entitled *ham*,

*Corn beef, molasses, chamois milk,
Cotton, Irish linen, silk,
Pickles, dynamite and jam,
And myriad substances whose form
Dissolved into quite other freights,
Beneath the magic of a storm
That scattered them around the Straits;
For this is what the blacksmith read,
While raking up the ocean bed:—
Budweiser, Guinness, Schlitz (in kegs),
Square Face Gin and Gordon's Dry,
O'Brien's, Burke's and Johnny Begg's,
Munich, Bock, and Seagram's Rye,
Dewar's, Hennessey's 3 Star,
Glenlivet, White Horse and Old Parr,
With Haig and Haig, Canadian Club,
Jamaica Rum, and other brands
Known to imbibers in all lands
That stock from Brewery or Pub.
All these the Cretan, with the aid
Of his industrious progeny,
Drew to the cauldron, and there laid,
By order of the witches three,
The real foundation for the spree.*

OTHER INGREDIENTS

To make a perfect fish menu,
The witches found they had to place

Upon this alcoholic base
Great stacks of food and spices too.
Of all the things most edible
On which the souls of fish have dined,
That fish would sell their souls to find,
Most gracious to their sense of smell,
Is flesh exotic to their kind:—
Cold-blooded things yet not marine,
And not of earth, but half-between,
That live enclosed within the sand
Without the power of locomotion,
And mammal breeds whose blood is hot,
That court the sea but love it not,
That need the air but not the land,—
The Laodiceans of the ocean.
So in this spacious cauldron went
Cargoes of food and condiment.
Oysters fished from Behring Strait
Were brought and thrown in by the crate;
Spitsbergen scallops on half-shell,
Mussels, starfish, clams as well,
Limpets from the Hebrides,
Shrimps and periwinkles, these,
So celebrated as a stew,
Were meant to flavour up the brew.
Then for the more substantial fare,
The curried quarter of a tail
Hewn from a stranded Greenland whale,
A liver from a Polar bear,
A walrus' heart and pancreas,
A blind Auk from the coast of Java,
A bull moose that had died from gas

While eating toadstools near Ungava,
One bitter-cold November day;
Five sea-lion cubs were then thrown in,
Shot by the Cretan's javelin
In a wild fight off Uruguay;
With flippers fresh from the Azores,
Fijian kidneys by the scores,
Together with some pollywogs,
And kippered hocks of centipedes,
And the hind legs of huge bull frogs
Raked by the millions from the reeds
Of slimy Patagonian bogs.

Then before the copper lid
Was jammed upon the pyramid,
The sisters scattered on the top
Many a juicy lollipop;
Tongues from the Ganges crocodile,
Spawn from the delta of the Nile,
Hoofs of sheep and loins of goats,
Raised from foundered cattle-boats—
Titbits they knew might blend with hops,
Might strengthen rum or season rye,
From Zulu hams and Papuan chops
To braided rat-tails from Shanghai.
Now while volcanic fires burned,
Making the cauldron fiercely hot,
Lulu with her ladle churned
The pungent contents of the pot,
From which distinctive vapours soon
Rose palpably before the view.
Then Ardath summoned a typhoon

Which as it swooped upon the stew,
And swept around the compass, bore
To every sea and every shore
The tidings of the witches' Feast.
And from the West and from the East,
And from the South and from the North,
From every bay and strait and run,
From the Tropics to the Arctic sun,
The Parliament of fish came forth,
Lured by a smell surpassing far
The potencies of boiling tar,
For essences were in this brew
Unknown to blubber or to glue,
And unfamiliar to the nose
Of sailors hardened as they are
To every unctuous wind that blows
From Nantucket to Baccalieu.
The crudest oil one ever lit
Was frankincense compared to it.
It entered Hades, and the airs
Resuscitated the Immortals;
It climbed the empyrean stairs
And drove St. Peter from the portals.

DEFENSIVE MEASURES

According to the witches' plan,
All life whose blood did not run true
Must be excluded from the brew;

Each earthly thing from snail to man,
And every mammal of the sea
Was for that night an enemy.
And so the smith from ocean hoards
Had gathered masts and spars and boards
Of ships, with cutlasses and swords,
And countless pikes and spears, and made
With them a towering palisade.
And to the top thereof was sent,
To guard the brew, a warrior,—
The bravest of the ranks of war,
And deaf to bribe or argument.
To neither shark nor swordfish fell
The honours of the sentinel,
For of all fighters there, the star
Was Tom the cat from Zanzibar.

THE SEA-CAT

It's not for us to understand
How life on earth began to be,
How forms that lived within the sea
Should leave the water for the land;
Or how—(Satan alone may trace
The dark enigma of this race)
When feline variants, so far
Removed as tabs and tigers are,
Preferred, when they had left the shore,
The jungle and the kitchen floor—

That this uncouth, primordial cat
Should keep his native habitat.
Yet here he was, and one might find
In crouch and slink and instant spring
Upon a living, moving thing,
The common genus of his kind.
But there were qualities which he
Derived not from his family tree.
No leopard, lynx or jaguar
Could match this cat from Zanzibar
For whiskers that from ear to chin
Ran round to decorate his grin.
And something wilder yet than that
Lay in the nature of this cat.
It's said that mariners by night.
When near a dangerous coast-line, might
Recover bearings from the light
Of some strange thing that swam and gleamed;
A salamander it might be,
They said, or Lucifer that streamed
His fiery passage through the sea.
But in this banquet place not one
Of all the revellers could fail
To solve the riddle when Tom spun
A vast ecliptic as his tail,
A fiery comet, and his fur
Electrified each banqueter.
So the three beldams there agreed
No alien could invade the hall
If one of such a fighting breed
Were placed upon the fortress wall;
For who, they asked, of mortal creatures

Could claim more fearful derivation
Than Tom with his Satanic features
And his spontaneous conflagration?

THE FLIGHT OF THE IMMORTALS

Close to the dunnest hour of night,
Sniffing the odour of the brew,
Their bat-wings oiled for water flight,
The Devil and his legions flew,
Smashing the record from Hell's Gates
By plumbline to Magellan Straits.
Far in their wake, but hurrying fast
For fear the odour might not last
Till morning, came a spectral band
Weary from Hades—that dry land.

INVENTORY OF HADES

1. Statesmen and apothecaries,
Poets, plumbers, antiquaries,
Premiers with their secretaries,
Home and foreign missionaries,
And writers of obituaries.
2. Mediæval disputants,
Mystics in perpetual trance,

Philosophers in baggy pants,
Puritans to whom the chance
Had never come in life to dance
Save when the dreadful circumstance
Of death removed their maiden aunts.

3. Scribes with wide phylacteries,
Publicists and Sadducees,
Scholars, saints and Ph.D.'s.
4. Doctors, auctioneers and bakers,
Dentists, diplomats and fakirs,
Clergymen and undertakers.
5. Rich men, poor men, fools and sots,
Logicians, tying Shades in knots,
Pagans, Christians, Hottentots,
Deacons good and bad in spots,
Farmers with their Wyandots.

AN HOUR LATER

Not since the time the sense of evil
Caught our first parents by surprise,
While eating fruit in Paradise,
One fateful morning, had the Devil,
Used as he was to steam and smoke,
Beheld such chaos as now broke
Upon his horny, bloodshot eyes.
Prince of the Power of the air,

Lord of terrestrial things as well
As subterranean life in Hell,
He had till now not been aware
How this great watery domain
Might be enclosed within his reign;
Such things as fish, cold-blooded, wet,
Had served no end of his as yet.
The serpent could be made to lie,
And hence fit agent to deceive
A trustful female such as Eve;
But he, though cold, at least was dry.
For all his wily strategy
Since time began, the Devil saw
No way to circumvent the sea.
The fish transgressed no moral law,
They had no principles, no creed,
No prayers, no Bibles, and no Church,
No Reason's holy light to read
The truth and no desire to search.
Hence from Dame Nature's ancient way
Their fins had never learned to stray.
They ate and drank and fought, it's true,
And when the zest was on they slew;
But yet their most tempestuous quarrels
Were never prejudiced by morals;
As Nature had at the beginning
Created them, so they remained—
Fish with cold blood no skill had trained
To the warm arts of human sinning.

THE MIDNIGHT REVELS AS OBSERVED BY THE SHADES

"The witches' device for the equitable distribution of the liquor consisted in the construction of tens of thousands of stopcocks and bungs which were fitted into the perforations of the cauldron, and graded so nicely in calibre that every species of fish from a sardine to a shark might find perfect oral adjustment. To provide against all contingencies they had, in addition, furnished each amphibious member of the Cretan family with a ladle so that the weaker fish, unable to reach the taps and bung-holes, might be supplied at the surface of the water. But notwithstanding all their powers of divination, the scheme came very near to being wrecked, first, by the tremendous congregation of fish, and secondly, by the advent of the wild hordes from Hades. Now it was not within the counsels of either the witches or the Devil that the test should be prejudiced by the Shades. If they arrived at all, their role would be severely restricted to that of an audience. But the momentum of their rush carried them up against the sides of the cauldron with such a terrific impact that a vertical crack, one hundred cubits long, was made near the top. Fortunately, however, for the experiment, the Shades were immediately driven back to the rear by a battalion of imps, and the crack served the purpose of allowing sufficient liquor to trickle through into the sea to account for the inebriation of such fish as those whose nervous constitution could not stand the undiluted draughts."

Byron:

Now what the devil can be hid

In whisky straight, or punch or sherbet,
To give the doldrums to that squid,
Or plant the horrors in that turbot?
I never dreamed a calamary
Could get so dead stiff on Canary.

Wolsey:

I've watched the effect of many a dram
On Richmond and on Buckingham;
And with good reasons have I mourned
To see my Royal Henry corned;
And many a noble prelate losing
His benefice by one night's boozing.
But till this hour I never knew
What alcoholic draughts could do
To change a salmon or a hake
Into a paralytic rake;
Or how a drunken sturgeon felt
When fever burned inside his pelt.

Campeggio:

Now by my Hat and Clement's foot,
What kind of devil must have dwelt
Inside a liquor that could put
Delirium tremens in a smelt?

Pepys:

What maddening impulse makes that shark,
Which ought, by its own nature, choose a
Mate of its own kind, to spark

With that gelatinous Medusa?

Paracelsus:

They say that mortals may go mad
Beneath thy beams, Divinest Luna;
But how canst thou debauch a shad,
Create an epileptic tuna?

Gulliver:

I saw a sardine just now glut
His hunger on a halibut.

Samuel Butler:

How could a thing like rye or hops stir
The turgid corpus of a lobster?
And thus induce an inflammation
Within the shell of a crustacean?

Samson:

I saw a small phlegmatic mullet
Holding a dogfish by the gullet.

Saint Patrick:

Such crimes as from the sea arise
Beat out the days of old Gomorrah;
Had I not seen it with my eyes
I would not have believed, begorra!

THE CHARGE OF THE SWORDFISH

Now when, beneath the riotous drinking,
The witches found the liquor sinking
So low their ladles couldn't reach it,
The blacksmith with a blazing larynx
Organized a swordfish phalanx
And charged the cauldron plate to breach it.
Back from its copper flanks they fell,
The smith had done his work too well.

A Greek:

From such a race of myrmidons
Our heroes and our Marathons.

Fabius Maximus:

It's but the fury of despair.

A French General:

Magnifique! mais ce n'est pas la guerre.

Napoleon:

By some such wild demonic means
My astral promise was undone.

Nelson:

By spirits like to such marines
Trafalgar and the Nile were won.

Carlyle:

Full ten feet thick that plate was wrought,
And yet those swordfish tried to ram it;
Unthinking fools! I never thought
The sea so full of numskulls, dammit!

Satan:

Now by my hoof, this recipe
Is worth a million souls to me;
But lo! what mortal creature there
Grins, haunched upon the parapet,
Whose fierce, indomitable stare
I long have dreamed of, but not met?

Maryan:

Most sovereign and most sulphurous lord!
We, with the help of Cretans, made
This circumambient palisade
Of this great height and strength, to ward
Off such invaders as might mar
Our feast, and then as sentinel—
Chief vigilante out of hell—
We stationed HIM from Zanzibar.

Satan:

Good! From such audacious seed

Sprang Heaven's finest, fallen breed,
Maryan! Ardath! Lulu!
Try out upon this cat, the brew.

THE SUPREME TEST

Now it was clear to every Shade
That some great wonder was before them,
As Tom upon the palisade
Emptied, as fast as Lulu bore them,
The flasks upon the ocean wagon.
And clear it was when Tom had cleaned
The liquor from the hundredth flagon,
The Shades then saw Hell's darkest fiend,—
A sea-cat with an awful jag-on.

Up to this time, he did not see
Upon the wide expanse of grey
A single thing approach his way
Which he might call his enemy.
He spent the hours upon the rim,
Leaping, dancing, rarely sitting,
Always grinning, always spitting,
Waiting for a foe to swim
Within his range, but through the night
Not a walrus offered fight,—
A most unusual night for him.
But with the hundredth flagon drink,
He spat at his inactive fate,

And moving closer to the brink,
Began more madly to gyrate.
Upon his face, ironic, grim,
A resolution was ingrained,
If fish would not come unto him
To offer battle, what remained
But that his fighting blood would freeze
Unless he were allowed to go,
Ranging at will upon the seas,
To fight and conquer every foe?
With that, into the cavernous deep
He took a ghastly, flying leap.

Gaping, breathless, every Shade
Watched the course of the wild-cat's raid;
And never was an errand run
With means and end so much at one.
For from his birth he was imbued
With hatred of his racial kind;
A more inveterate, blasting feud
Within the world one could not find.
His stock were traitors to the sea,
Had somehow learned the ways of earth,
The need of air, the mystery
Of thing warm-blooded, and of birth.
To avenge this shameful derogation,
He had, upon his final flask,
Resolved to carry out his task,—
To wit:—the full extermination,
First, of his nearest order, male
And female, then the breed cetacean;
Grampus, porpoise, dolphin, whale,—

Humpback, Rorqual, Black and White;
Then the walrus, lion, hood,
Seals of all orders; these he would
Just as they came, in single fight,
Or in the fortunes of mêlée,
Challenge as his lawful prey.

The Blacksmith:

I never knew an ocean steed
Develop such demonic speed.

Sir Isaac Newton:

How he maintains that lightning rate,
Now in air and now in water,
And carries on such heavy slaughter,
Is more than I can formulate.

Blake:

The tiger, though in stretch of limb
And heft of bone is larger; still,
For straight uxoricidal will
Is but a lamb compared to him.

Bottom:

What humour is it makes him flail
His tawny quarters with that tail?

Owen Glendower:

Did any electrician mark
The explosive nature of that spark?

Benjamin Franklin:

I did in truth, but cannot quite
See, on the basis of my kite,
How such a flame should always sit
Upon a wild-cat's caudal tip.

Æsop:

Or what blind fury makes him whip
His smoking sides to capture it—
An ignis fatuus that eludes
The cat's most sanguinary moods.

Euclid:

The reasons for the circles lie
Within the nature of the thing;
This cat must run around a ring
If he would catch his tail. But why
So bloodily he chaseth it
Is past the compass of my wit.

Johnny Walker:

Just why this wild-cat should revolve,
Leaving his nether tip uncaught,
And spend his energy for naught,
The denser Shades will never solve;
But (granting that the speed is quicker)

All we discerning spirits know
It's just the way a man would go,
Grant the night and grant the liquor.

Calvin:

If I had known that such mad brutes
Had found, before the world began,
A place within the cosmic plan,
They would have dished my Institutes.

THE RETURN OF THE CAT

TIME—MORNING

A half-point Nor'ard from the West,
A bluish-tinted spot of light,
Now deep below, now on the crest
Of a high wave, hove into sight;
And by the curves and speed it made,
Conviction came to every Shade
That here the monster was returning
With all those inner fires burning
That no destruction could assuage;
Though through the hours of the night
The floating victims of the fight
Showed how the wild-cat could engage
His foes; achieve his victories;
For those he could not kill outright
Had either died from heart-disease

Or passed out through a hæmorrhage,
An unexpected wonder met
His rolling, unabated eye—
For when he reached the parapet
He found the witches' cauldron dry.
And there was something which surprised
Him even more; the drunken riot
Was followed by a holy quiet;
The fish lay dead or paralysed;
No witch this time came forth to serve
His inbred hunger for assault
With either rum or wine or malt.
The thing told heavily on his nerve,
That near that massive banquet place
Not one lone member of his race,
Outside the fortress or within,
Survived to give him grin for grin,
Or swish a tail across his face.
And so this wild-cat, now bereft
Of all of life's amenities,
Took one blood-curdling leap and left
Magellan's for the vacant seas.
Sullen and dangerous he ripped
A gleaming furrow through the water,
Magnificently still equipped
For combat with rapine and slaughter.
Now with his tail electro-tipped,
Swiftly but leisurely he made
Around the steaming palisade
A blazing spiral which outshone
The fiercest glow of Acheron.
Then suddenly, as if aware,

By a deep ferment in his soul
Or something psychic in his hair,
Of some ulterior, mystic goal,
He sharply turned, began a lonely
Voyage pregnant of immortal raids
And epic plunder. But the Shades
Saw him no more in the flesh. Only
To Satan and the witches three
(In touch with his galvanic tail,
By more occulted masonry)
Appeared a phosphorescent trail
That headed for the Irish Sea.

THE END

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By the same Author

NEWFOUNDLAND VERSE
By E. J. PRATT

With Decorations
By FREDK. H. VARLEY

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Pratt]