

A PARCEL FOR THE WITCH

By Janet McNeill

THE POSTMAN set the parcel down at the witch's front door early one morning, and got on to his bicycle again very quickly, and went off down the lane without looking back. There the parcel lay all day, for the witch and her cat had already come home in the thin grey hours after their night's adventures and were sound asleep inside the house. Anybody whose business took them up the lane that morning stared at the parcel, but nobody touched it.

It was the first fine frosty day in October, and leaves from the overhanging chestnut tree that had clung obstinately to the branches during the wet September gale now suddenly launched themselves, without any warning, into the still air, and dropped like large yellow hands on to the parcel. The biggest of the green spiked chestnut cases—the one that any boy who was brave enough to come near the witch's house had been trying to bring down with sticks and stones since August—now fell of its own accord and rolled up against the parcel and stopped there.

In the evening, when the rooks had gone home and the light in the sky was beginning to fade, the witch opened her door and came out to gather nettles to make her supper, and her cat came out at her heels. But when the witch saw the parcel, she stopped and stooped and picked it up.

“A parcel!” she cried, “a parcel for me!” and she forgot about the nettles and sat down right on her own doorstep with the parcel in her lap.

“And a parcel for me!” declared the cat, and he pounced on the green chestnut case and caught it firmly between his paws.

The witch held her parcel up to the light of the setting sun, and she read the address carefully, from front to back three times and then from back to front three times more, and she turned the parcel over towards the north and back again, and with her long grey pointed fingers she fingered the knots on the string.

“I wonder,” she said, “who has sent me a parcel, and what wonderful thing is inside it.”

The cat batted his green chestnut case from one paw to the other across the path, and he said, “And I wonder what wonderful thing is inside *my* parcel.”

“Then you can save yourself the trouble of wondering,” snapped the witch, “everyone knows that there are nothing but chestnuts inside a parcel like yours.”

“Perhaps,” the cat agreed, and he turned the green case over between his paws, but there was no crack in it anywhere; “but what size are the chestnuts and what colour and how many? And are they chestnuts? There might be jewels in my parcel—a ruby and a sapphire and an amethyst; or great pearls as white as the bed they are lying in.”

“Not in your parcel,” said the witch sharply, “in my parcel, perhaps, there might be jewels,” and her fingers caressed the string.

“Open it then,” the cat challenged. “What are you waiting for? Open it and find out.”

But the witch wasn’t ready yet to open her parcel. She sat nursing it on her lap.

“Take your parcel into the house,” she bade the cat, “and play with your chestnuts in front of the fire and leave me in peace. This is just a new head for my broomstick. I’ve been expecting it to come for days.”

“Have you indeed?” snorted the cat, blowing out his whiskers, “there’s not a thing wrong with your old broomstick that I know of. Anyhow that parcel isn’t the right shape for the head of a broomstick. You said yourself, didn’t you, that there might be jewels in it?”

“There might be anything in it. Jewels, perhaps, or a head for my broomstick or a book of spells or a new moon. Anything at all could be inside a parcel.”

“So it could,” the cat agreed, “I found a parcel once, lying in the street. And when I opened it there was the stinking head of a cod inside it, and some fishbones. Phew! It hung on my whiskers for weeks! Perhaps your parcel is like that?”

The witch was angry. “Of course it isn’t!” she declared, hugging her parcel and rocking backwards and forwards.

“How do you know? How can you be sure? How do you know anything about it before you have opened it?”

“Not a cod’s head! Who would send me a cod’s head in a parcel?”

“Who would send you anything in a parcel? Have you ever had a parcel in your life before?”

It was true that she hadn't. The cat knew it was her first parcel. For a moment the witch's fingers wrestled with the knots—and then she stopped.

“No,” she told the cat, “I shan't open my parcel for a little while longer. So long as the string is not untied and the paper not unwrapped there might still be anything in the world inside my parcel.”

The cat left his chestnut case and came and rubbed himself up and down against the witch's parcel three times each way. He teased the knots with his paws and said, “Have you forgotten who you are? Before the string is untied and the paper is unwrapped you can put anything inside your parcel that you would like to find. You can make a spell, and whatever you choose will be waiting for you, when you open it.”

The witch sat thinking about this for a little while. Then she said, “Yes, I could do that. But if I do make this spell then I shall never know what was inside my parcel at the beginning, or who sent it to me, or why.”

“Better perhaps not to know,” the cat suggested. He sat washing himself in the evening light, talking over his shoulder to her between the licks of his tongue. “Better to make a magic and put jewels in your parcel, or pearls—pearls that would be bigger than any of the chestnuts that are inside my parcel.”

“You are confusing me,” the witch said crossly, “magic is all very well, but even without it there might still be jewels. That would be the most wonderful parcel of all.”

“Ah, but will it be wonderful?” asked the cat, “a spell would be safer.” He nosed at the parcel and sniffed. “Maybe there's the head of a cod or the tail of a herring waiting for you this minute under that brown paper, or the shuffled-off skin of a toad, or a handful of thistledown, or nothing at all. So make your spell and untie the string, and let's get on with it.”

He turned and sprang so strongly against his green chestnut case that it burst open, and three chestnuts rolled out in different directions. They were large and silky and new, pale tawny colour with white markings, each one as beautiful as a newly minted penny, but every one different.

The cat collected them between his hooded paws, carefully so that none of them would be scratched, and sat down purring. “Thr-r-ree!” he exclaimed, “thr-r-ree! Who

would have thought there would have been thr-r-ree? And altogether new! No one has seen them before or touched them before, until I saw and touched them! This is indeed a wonderful parcel!”

His large complacent eyes burned as bright as topazes in the dusk. The witch sat so still that she had disappeared altogether among the shadows. Only her hands that held the parcel hovered like pale uneasy wings.

“I’m hungry!” the cat declared, and he got up suddenly scattering his chestnuts in all directions about the path; “it was a good parcel, but it won’t feed me. There are plenty of other parcels up there on the tree waiting for me tomorrow and the day after, and a surprise with each of them! I’m off to look for my breakfast!” And with his tail erect he stalked off down the lane.

The witch was left where she was with her parcel on her lap. Jewels? Chestnuts? A cod’s head? Everything—or nothing? Not a new moon, certainly, for there was one already, a thin bright slip in the sky.

All night through she sat there, holding her parcel. But in the morning, very early, when the rooster from the farm was shouting and the cat had not yet come home, she took the parcel, with the string still untied, and she went quickly to the bank of the river. She held the parcel out over the water for a moment between her hands, and then she closed her eyes and dropped it in.

It made very little splash and sank almost at once, and a ring of ripples spread across the water. The witch opened her eyes. In the centre of the ring three large bubbles rose one after another and gleamed for a moment and burst.

“Pearls!” said the witch contentedly, and she turned, and came home.