

This story won the 2010 Writers' Village short story contest:

[http:// www.writers-village.org/winners-2010-1-php](http://www.writers-village.org/winners-2010-1-php)

SPARROWBANE

Jennet Pace wasn't favoured, poor lamb.

She came not easy into the world, cold and blue and with her leg all twisted. The sixth she was, born to Matthew and Maggie on Beltanes's Eve, and cursed for it, some said.

Killed her poor mother, Jennet did, and very near followed her: old Locksley-wife it was breathed the life back into her.

"Poor, motherless mite," says she, "runt of the litter this one is, make no old bones, nor ever walk proper, she won't."

And Jennet's father, he denied her. Denounced her for the devil's spawn, and taken his Maggie from him. Neither touched her nor looked at her: truly forsaken she was. So they give her me to raise.

"You take her, Sarah," says they, "and if 'tis God's will, she'll thrive with you."

They all comes to me. Orphaned puppies and kittens and fledgelings out of the nest: I ain't never lost one yet. Five years gone by since my Thomas passed on: the Lord made me barren, but He gave me the gift of Mothering.

Well Jennet, she'd some grit for all her bad start. I'd rub her poor, bent little leg, and stretch it like the wing of a young bird, and bit by bit, it strengthened. Twas always blue, though, and never quite straight, but she learned herself to walk, after a fashion, up on the toes of her short leg.

And she'd follow the others, wanting to join their games. But they'd not have her, warned by their mothers to keep away.

“Devil-child, devil-child!” they'd shout, and off they'd run, laughing and cat-calling, and my heart would bleed for my poor little lame sparrow.

Yet for all the hurt, she'd never cry. Closed it up inside herself. And after the third time, when they stoned her, she never looked more for friends among the village children.

Sharp as knives, Jennet was, quick to note, and quick to learn. Learned herself to read, and write, and other things she would not tell of.

Solitary and secretive she became, off in the woods with her books, and wanting for no-one.

As Jennet came to womanhood, she grew tall, and fair, and at fifteen summers, far the most comely lass in the Dale. Lads began hanging around her, then, unmindful of her crippled leg, though she'd have none of them, remembering how they'd tormented her, as though saving herself for something better.

To Cotterdale Market I'd send her, each week's-end, with eggs from our hens, riding from the lane-bottom with old Martin-wife.

But one winter's eve, she comes home on a stranger's wagon. Tall he is, and grizzled, with a stern look about him, and a cold eye that chills my heart.

“This is Robin,” says she, “who has kin in these parts. We fell into conversation at the market, and he was good enough to drive me home.”

And even then, I know she lies. This man is known to her.

His manner is correct, and grave. So why, then, does a shudder pass through me?

“I am glad to meet you, Mistress Sarah,” says he, “for I have heard good things of you.”

He breaks bread with us, and takes ale, and every minute, I am fidgeting, longing for his going. And when he takes his leave, and makes to mount his wagon, I see him slip an arm around Jennet's waist, and kiss her—and I see, too, the way he looks at her, and she at him.

She will not speak of him, save to repeat that he was a stranger to her until this day. But that night, I cannot sleep, alert to every sound, and I dream terrible things I know will be.

Nor will anything ever be the same again.

And so it proves. For as the mistress of Witchfinder Wemyss, Jennet is untouchable: albeit he is another woman's husband, and father to daughters older than she.

For her, the power of denouncing, one by one, those village-maidens who denied her in childhood, and their mothers, and their grandmothers too. For her, the trial and the conviction of them all. And for her, vengeance as she stands on Brimley Hill, to watch them burn.

She heeds no-one, least of all myself, who loved and reared her, and I look back, cursing the Beltane's Eve that she was born. Ride high, milady, for when he tires of you, then your bones will crack and char as surely as theirs.

Bitterness fills my heart. My cell is cold: through the small, barred square of night I see the witch-flames flickering on the Hill: hear the screams, smell the stench of burning flesh.

Tomorrow, they will come for me. And may God have mercy on my soul.

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