

PENHALLOW TALES

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Penhallow tales by Edith Robinson

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EDITH ROBINSON

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By
Edith Robinson



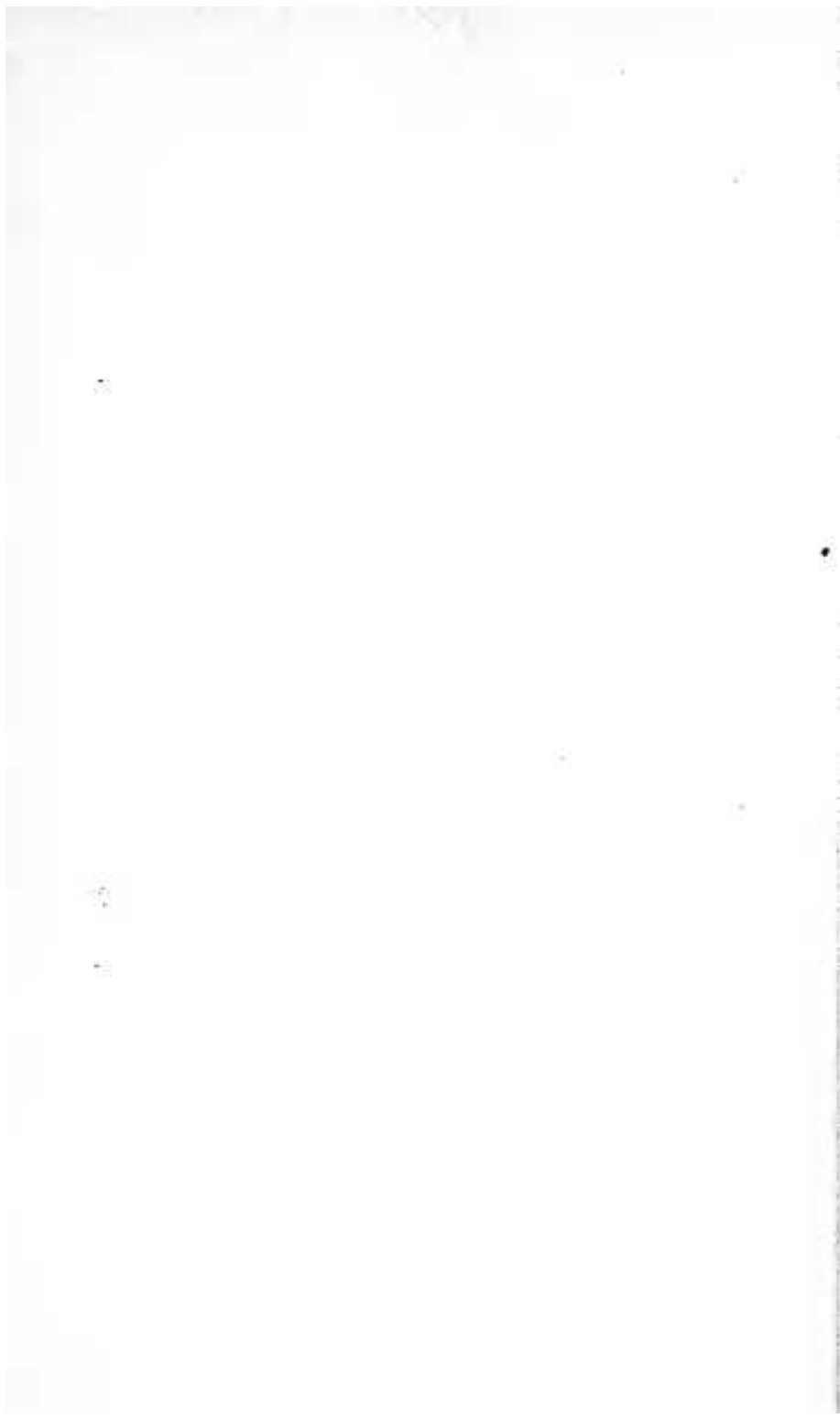
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PENHALLOW

I.

“THE witches are after me! Mr. Winn, Mr. Winn! The witches are after me! They’re tormenting me almost to death!”

I put my hands over my ears to shut out the hateful utterance, and involuntarily closed my eyes also, as though I could thereby dispel the mental picture that the words had evoked. I was in the little attic chamber at the end of the poorhouse, for which room I had begged in order to be as far as possible from the inmates, and she was in her usual place on the south steps, where the sun lay warm the greater part of the day. Vital heat she could not have had.

“The witches are after me! They’re tormenting me almost to death!”

The words ended with a wail such as might have been uttered by a lost soul condemned to wander on earth through indefinite time. In the darkness that I had created I only saw more vividly a skeleton form—a mummy

rather, with a skin like brown leather, drawn so tightly over its hairless skull that the eyes, in which lingered most of the life of the creature who had once been a woman, seemed to be starting from their sockets. One could only guess at her height, for her form was bent nearly double, except when she would straighten herself in a moment of passion, and then hobble after some boys who had mockingly chanted, as they passed by, the rhymes that her name or her habits had suggested:

"Old Sally Waters,
Sitting in the sun!"

She was clad in the almshouse uniform, consisting of a short skirt of gray linscy-woolsey, and a round waist with a little cape reaching to the shoulders. A sharp watch had to be kept upon her to prevent her tearing off strips of this gown for the strange purpose for which she coveted them. No definite information in regard to the length of time old Sally Waters had been at the poorhouse could be obtained from the records, which, particularly in the earlier days, had been carelessly kept; the people in the neighborhood, who had owned their farms for generations, could only say that she had "allers been there," and that she looked as

she did now when boys who had become grandfathers had called out to her as she sat in the glare of the July sunshine :

“ Old Sally Waters
Sitting in the sun,
Crying and weeping
For a young man ! ”

On stormy days, shutting herself into her bedroom, she would look over the contents of a battered little blue-painted chest that stood by the head of her bed, and which she guarded with jealous care : her treasure — probably charms against the witches that haunted her — was in the form of hundreds of knotted woollen rags that had been torn from her gown, and which contained cuttings of her nails. She had taken the most singular and unfortunate fancy to me, greeting me on my home-coming, a week before, with the words :

“ You've been long gone, Martina ! ”

And then, in some unfathomable emotion, she had begun crooning some gibberish to herself, varied by those wild shrieks.

Had she overheard my name in some chance mention by my father or mother? Dolt though old Sally Waters was, there were gleams of intelligence — cunning rather — that she now and then displayed, usually in