

# **The Broomstick Train**

Oliver Wendell Holmes

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# The Broomstick Train

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Look out ! Look out, boys! Clear the track!  
The witches are here! They've all come  
back  
They hanged them high, No use! No use!  
What cares a witch for a hangman's noose?  
They buried them deep, but they wouldn't  
lie still,  
For cats and witches are hard to kill;  
They swore they shouldn't and wouldn't  
die,  
Books said they did, but they lie! they lie!

A couple of hundred years, or so,  
They had knocked about in the world below,  
When an Essex Deacon dropped in to call,  
And a homesick feeling seized them all;  
For he came from a place they knew full well,  
And many a tale he had to tell.

They long to visit the haunts of men,  
To see the old dwellings they knew again,  
And ride on their broomsticks all around  
Their wide domain of unhallowed ground.

In Essex county there's many a roof  
Well known to him of the cloven hoof;  
The small square windows are full in view  
Which the midnight hags went sailing through,

On their well trained broomsticks mounted  
high,  
Seen like shadows against the sky;  
Crossing the track of owls and bats,  
Hugging before them their coal-black cats.

Well did they know, those gray old wives,  
The sights we see in our daily drives  
Shimmer of lake and shine of sea,  
Brown's bare hill with its lonely tree,

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(It wasn't then as we see it now,  
With one scant scalp-lock to shade its brow;)   
Dusky nooks in the Essex woods,  
Dark, dim, Dante-like solitudes,  
Where the tree-toad watches the sinuous snake  
Glide through his forests of fern and brake;  
Ipswich River; its old stone bridge;  
Far off Andover's Indian Ridge,  
And many a scene where history tells  
Some shadow of bygone terror dwells,  
Of "Norman's Woe " with its tale of dread,

Of the Screeching Woman of Marblehead,  
(The fearful story that turns men pale:  
Don't bid me tell it, my speech would fail.)

Who would not, will not, if he can,  
Bathe in the breezes of fair Cape Ann,  
Rest in the bowers her bays enfold,  
Loved by the sachems and squaws of old?  
Home where the white magnolias bloom,  
Sweet with the bayberry's chaste perfume,  
Hugged by the woods and kissed by the sea!  
Where is the Eden like to thee?

For that "couple of hundred years, or so,"  
There had been no peace in the world below;  
The witches still grumbling, "It isn't fair;  
Come, give us a taste of the upper air!  
We've had enough of your sulphur springs,  
And the evil odor that round them clings;  
We long for a drink that is cool and nice,  
Great buckets of water with Wenham ice;

We've served you well up-stairs, you know;  
You're a good old fellow come, let us  
go!"

I don't feel sure of his being good,  
But he happened to be in a pleasant mood,  
As fiends with their skins full sometimes  
are,  
(He'd been drinking with "roughs" at a  
Boston bar.  
So what does he do but up and shout  
To a graybeard turnkey, "Let 'em out!"

To mind his orders was all he knew;  
The gates swung open, and out they flew.  
"Where are our broomsticks?" the beldams

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cried.

"Here are your broomsticks," an imp replied.

"They've been in the place you know

so long

They smell of brimstone uncommon strong;

But they've gained by being left alone,

Just look, and you'll see how tall they've

grown."

"And where is my cat?" a vixen squalled.

"Yes, where are our cats?" the witches

bawled,

And began to call them all by name:

As fast as they called the cats, they came:

There was bob-tailed Tommy and long-tailed Tim,

And wall-eyed Jacky and green-eyed Jim,

And splay-foot Benny and slim-legged Beau,

And Skinny and Squally, and Jerry and Joe,

And many another that came at call,

It would take too long to count them all.

All black, one could hardly tell which was

which,

But every cat knew his own old witch;

And she knew hers as hers knew her,

Ah, didn't they curl their tails and purr!

No sooner the withered hags were free

Than out they swarmed for a midnight spree;

I couldn't tell all they did in rhymes,

But the Essex people had dreadful times.

The Swampscott fishermen still relate

How a strange sea-monster stole their bait;

How their nets were tangled in loops and

knots,

And they found dead crabs in their lobster-

pots.

Poor Danvers grieved for her blasted crops,

And Wilmington mourned over mildewed

hops.

A blight played havoc with Beverly beans,

It was all the work of those hateful queans!

A dreadful panic began at "Pride's,"

Where the witches stopped in their midnight

rides,

And there rose strange rumors and vague

alarms

'Mid the peaceful dwellers at Beverly Farms.

Now when the Boss of the Beldams found

That without his leave they were ramping

round,

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He called, they could hear him twenty miles,  
From Chelsea beach to the Misery Isles;  
The deafest old granny knew his tone  
Without the trick of the telephone.

"Come here, you witches! Come here!" says  
he,  
"At your games of old, without asking me!  
I'll give you a little job to do  
That will keep you stirring, you godless  
crew!"

They came, of course, at their master's  
call,  
The witches, the broomsticks, the cats, and  
all;

He led the hags to a railway train  
The horses were trying to drag in vain.  
"Now, then," says he, "you've had your fun,  
And here are the cars you've got to run.  
The driver may just unhitch his team,  
We don't want horses, we don't want steam;  
You may keep your old black cats to hug,  
But the loaded train you've got to lug."

Since then on many a car you'll see  
A broomstick plain as plain can be;  
On every stick there's a witch astride,  
The string you see to her leg is tied.  
She will do a mischief if she can,  
But the string is held by a careful man,  
And whenever the evil-minded witch  
Would cut some caper, he gives a twitch.  
As for the hag, you can't see her,  
But hark! you can hear her black cat's purr,  
And now and then, as a car goes by,  
You may catch a gleam from her wicked eye.

Often you've looked on a rushing train,  
But just what moved it was not so plain.  
It couldn't be those wires above,  
For they could neither pull nor shove;  
Where was the motor that made it go  
You couldn't guess, but now you know.  
Remember my rhymes when you ride again  
On the rattling rail by the broomstick train!