

Robert Bloch

Sweets for the sweet

- 5 Irma didn't look like a witch. She had small, regular features, a peaches-and-cream complexion, blue eyes, and fair, almost ash-blond hair. Besides, she was only eight years old.
- "Why does he tease her so?" sobbed Miss Pall. "That's where she got the idea in the first place because he calls her a little witch."
- Sam Steever bulged his paunch back into the squeaky swivel chair and folded his heavy hands on his lap. His fat lawyer's mask was immobile, but he was really quite distressed.
- 10 Women like Miss Pall should never sob. The glasses wiggle, their thin noses twitch, the creasy eyelids redden, and their stringy hair becomes disarrayed.
- "Please, control yourself," coaxed Sam Steever. "Perhaps if we could just talk this whole thing over sensibly"
- 15 "I don't care!" Miss Pall sniffled. "I'm not going back there again. I can't stand it. There's nothing I can do, anyway. The man is your brother and she's your brother's child. It's not my responsibility. I've tried"
- "Of course you've tried." Sam Steever smiled benignly, as if Miss Pall were foreman of a jury. "I quite understand. But I still don't see why you are so upset, dear lady."
- Miss Pall removed her spectacles and dabbed at her eyes with a floral-print handkerchief. Then she
- 20 deposited the soggy ball in her purse, snapped the catch, replaced her spectacles, and sat up straight.
- "Very well, Mr. Steever," she said. "I shall do my best to acquaint you with my reasons for quitting your brother's employ."
- She suppressed a tardy sniff.
- "I came to John Steever two years ago in response to an advertisement for a housekeeper, as you know.
- 25 When I found that I was to be governess to a motherless six-year-old child, I was at first distressed. I know nothing of the care of children."
- "John had a nurse the first six years," Sam Steever nodded. "You know Irma's mother died in childbirth."
- "I am aware of that," said Miss Pall, primly. "Naturally, one's heart goes out to a lonely, neglected little girl. And she was so terribly lonely, Mr. Steever if you could have seen her, moping around in the corners of that
- 30 big, ugly old house"
- "I have seen her," said Sam Steever, hastily, hoping to forestall another outburst. "And I know what you've done for Irma. My brother is inclined to be thoughtless, even a bit selfish at times. He doesn't understand."
- "He's cruel," declared Miss Pall, suddenly vehement. "Cruel and wicked. Even if he is your brother, I say he's no fit father for any child. When I came there, her little arms were black and blue from beatings. He used to
- 35 take a belt"
- "I know. Sometimes, I think John never recovered from the shock of Mrs. Steever's death. That's why I was so pleased when you came, dear lady. I thought you might help the situation."
- "I tried," Miss Pall whimpered. "You know I tried. I never raised a hand to that child in two years, though many's the time your brother has told me to punish her. 'Give the little witch a beating' he used to say.
- 40 That's all she needs a good thrashing.' And then she'd hide behind my back and whisper to me to protect her. But she wouldn't cry, Mr. Steever. Do you know, I've never seen her cry."
- Sam Steever felt vaguely irritated and a bit bored. He wished the old hen would get on with it. So he smiled and oozed treacle. "But just what is your problem, dear lady?"
- "Everything was all right when I came there. We got along just splendidly. I started to teach Irma to read
- 45 and was surprised to find that she had already mastered reading. Your brother disclaimed having taught her, but she spent hours curled up on the sofa with a book. 'Just like her,' he used to say. 'Unnatural little witch. Doesn't play with the other children. Little witch.' That's the way he kept talking. Mr. Steever. As if she were some sort of I don't know what. And she's so sweet and quiet and pretty!
- "Is it any wonder she read? I used to be that way myself when I was a girl, because but never mind.

50 "Still, it was a shock that day I found her looking through the Encyclopedia Britannica. 'What are you reading, Irma?' I asked. She showed me. It was the article on Witchcraft.
"You see what morbid thoughts your brother has inculcated in her poor little head?
"I did my best. I went out and bought her some toys she had absolutely nothing, you know; not even a doll. She didn't even know how to play! I tried to get her interested in some of the other little girls in the
55 neighborhood, but it was no use. They didn't understand her and she didn't understand them. There were scenes. Children can be cruel, thoughtless. And her father wouldn't let her go to public school. I was to teach her.
"Then I brought her the modeling clay. She liked that. She would spend hours just making faces with clay. For a child of six Irma displayed real talent.

60 "We made little dolls together, and I sewed clothes for them. That first year was a happy one, Mr. Steever. Particularly during those months when your brother was away in South America. But this year, when he came back oh, I can't bear to talk about it!"
"Please," said Sam Steever. "You must understand. John is not a happy man. The loss of his wife, the decline of his import trade, and his drinking but you know all that."
65 "All I know is that he hates Irma," snapped Miss Pall, suddenly. "He hates her. He wants her to be bad, so he can whip her. 'If you don't discipline the little witch, I shall,' he always says. And then he takes her upstairs and thrashes her with his belt you must do something, Mr. Steever, or I'll go to the authorities myself."
The crazy old biddy would at that, Sam Steever thought. Remedy more treacle. "But about Irma," he
70 persisted.
"She's changed, too. Ever since her father returned this year. She won't play with me any more, hardly looks at me. It is as though I failed her, Mr. Steever, in not protecting her from that man. Besides she thinks she's a witch."
Crazy. Stark, staring crazy. Sam Steever creaked upright in his chair.

75 "Oh, you needn't look at me like that, Mr. Steever. She'll tell you so herself if your ever visited the house!" He caught the reproach in her voice and assuaged it with a deprecating nod.
"She told me all right, if her father wants her to be a witch she'll be a witch. And she won't play with me, or anyone else, because witches don't play. Last Halloween she wanted me to give her a broomstick. Oh, it would be funny if it weren't so tragic. That child is losing her sanity.

80 "Just a few weeks ago I thought she'd changed. That's when she asked me to take her to church one Sunday. 'I want to see the baptism,' she said. Imagine that an eight-year-old interested in baptism! Reading too much, that's what does it.
"Well, we went to church and she was as sweet as can be, wearing her new blue dress and holding my hand. I was proud of her, Mr. Steever, really proud.

85 "But after that, she went right back into her shell. Reading around the house, running through the yard at twilight and talking to herself.
"Perhaps it's because your brother wouldn't bring her a kitten. She was pestering him for a black cat, and he asked why, and she said, 'Because witches always have black cats.' Then he took her upstairs.
"I can't stop him, you know. He beat her again the night the power failed and we couldn't find the candles.
90 He said she'd stolen them. Imagine that accusing an eight-year-old child of stealing candles!
"That was the beginning of the end. Then today, when he found his hairbrush missing"
"You say he beat her with his hairbrush?"
"Yes. She admitted having stolen it. Said she wanted it for her doll."
"But didn't you say she has no dolls?"
95 "She made one. At least I think she did. I've never seen it she won't show us anything any more; won't talk to us at table, just impossible to handle her.
"But this doll she made it's a small one, I know, because at times she carries it tucked under her arm. She talks to it and pets it, but she won't show it to me or to him. He asked her about the hairbrush and she'd said she took it for the doll.

100 "Your brother flew into a terrible rage he'd been drinking in his room again all morning, oh don't think I don't know it! and she just smiled and said he could have it now. She went over to her bureau and handed it to him. She hadn't harmed it in the least; his hair was still in it, I noticed.
"But he snatched it up, and then he started to strike her about the shoulders with it, and he twisted her arm and then he"

105 Miss Pall huddled in her chair and summoned great racking sobs from her thin chest.
Sam Steever patted her shoulder, fussing about her like an elephant over a wounded canary.
"That's all, Mr. Steever. I came right to you. I'm not even going back to that house to get my things. I can't stand any more the way he beat her and the way she didn't cry, just giggled and giggled and giggled sometimes I think she is a witch that he made her into a witch"

110 Sam Steever picked up the phone. The ringing had broken the relief of silence after Miss Pall's hasty departure.
"Hello that you, Sam?"
He recognized his brother's voice, somewhat the worse for drink.

115 "Yes, John."
"I suppose the old bat came running straight to you to shoot her mouth off."
"If you mean Miss Pall, I've seen her, yes."
"Pay no attention. I can explain everything."
"Do you want me to stop in? I haven't paid you a visit in months."

120 "Well not right now. Got an appointment with the doctor this evening."
"Something wrong?"
"Pain in my arm. Rheumatism or something. Getting a little diathermy. But I'll call you tomorrow and we'll straighten this whole mess out."
"Right."

125 But John Steever did not call the next day. Along about supper time, Sam called him.
Surprisingly enough, Irma answered the phone. Her thin, squeaky little voice sounded faintly in Sam's ears.
"Daddy's upstairs sleeping. He's been sick."
"Well don't disturb him. What is it his arm?"
"His back, now. He has to go to the doctor again in a little while."

130 "Tell him I'll call tomorrow, then. Uh everything all right, Irma? I mean, don't you miss Miss Pall?"
"No. I'm glad she went away. She's stupid."
"Oh. Yes. I see. But you phone me if you want anything. And I hope your Daddy's better."
"Yes. So do I," said Irma, and then she began to giggle, and then she hung up.
There was no giggling the following afternoon when John Steeler called Sam at the office. His voice was

135 sober with the sharp sobriety of pain.
"Sam for God's sake, get over here. Something's happening to me!"
"What's the trouble?"
"The pain it's killing me! I've got to see you, quickly."
"There's a client in the office, but I'll get rid of him. Say, wait a minute. Why don't you call the doctor?"

140 "That quack can't help me. He gave me diathermy for my arm and yesterday he did the same thing for my back."
"Didn't it help?"
"The pain went away, yes. But it's back now. I feel like I was being crushed. Squeezed, here in the chest. I can't breathe."

145 "Sounds like pleurisy. Why don't you call him?"
"It isn't pleurisy. He examined me. Said I was sound as a dollar. No, there's nothing organically wrong. And I couldn't tell him the real cause."
"Real cause?"

150 "Yes. The pins. The pin that little fiend is sticking into the doll she made. Into the arm, the back. And now heaven only knows how she's causing this."
"John, you mustn't"
"Oh, what's the use of talking? I can't move off the bed here. She has me now. I can't go down and stop her, get hold of the doll. And nobody else would believe it. But it's the doll all right, the one she made with the candle-wax and the hair from my brush. Oh it hurts to talk that cursed little witch! Hurry, Sam. Promise me you'll do something anything get that doll from her get that doll"
155

Half an hour later, at four-thirty, Sam Steever entered his brother's house.
Irma opened the door.
It gave Sam a shock to see her standing there, smiling and unperturbed, pale blonde hair brushed immaculately back from the rosy oval of her face. She looked just like a little doll. A little doll.
160 "Hello, Uncle Sam."
"Hello, Irma. Your Daddy called me, did he tell you? He said he wasn't feeling well"
"I know. But he's all right now. He's sleeping."
Something happened to Sam Steever; a drop of ice-water trickled down his spine.
165 "Sleeping?" he croaked. "Upstairs?"
Before she opened her mouth to answer he was bounding up the steps to the second floor, striding down the hall to John's bedroom.
John lay on the bed. He was asleep, and only asleep. Sam Steever noted the regular rise and fall of his chest as he breathed. His face was calm, relaxed.
170 Then the drop of ice-water evaporated, and Sam could afford to smile and murmur "Nonsense" under his breath as he turned away.
As he went downstairs, he hastily improvised plans. A six-month vacation for his brother; avoid calling it a "cure." An orphanage for Irma; give her a chance to get away from this morbid old house, all those books. He paused halfway down the stairs. Peering over the banister through the twilight he saw Irma on the sofa, cuddled up like a little white ball. She was talking to something she cradled in her arms, rocking it to and fro.
175 Then there was a doll, after all.
Sam Steever tiptoed quietly down the stairs and walked over to Irma.
"Hello," he said.
180 She jumped. Both arms rose to cover completely whatever it was she had been fondling. She squeezed it tightly.
Sam Steever thought of a doll being squeezed across the chest
Irma stared up at him, her face a mask of innocence. In the half-light her face did resemble a mask. The mask of a little girl, covering what?
185 "Daddy's better now, isn't he?" lisped Irma.
"Yes, much better."
"I knew he would be."
"But I'm afraid he's going to have to go away for a rest. A long rest."
A smile filtered through the mask. "Good," said Irma.
190 "Of course," Sam went on, "you couldn't stay here all alone. I was wondering maybe we could send you off to school, or to some kind of a home"
Irma giggled. "Oh, you needn't worry about me," she said. She shifted about on the sofa as Sam sat down, then sprang up quickly as he came close to her.
Her arms shifted with the movement, and Sam Steever saw a pair of tiny legs dangling down below her
195 elbow. There were trousers on the legs, and little bits of leather for shoes.
"What's that you have, Irma?" he asked. "Is it a doll?" Slowly, he extended his pudgy hand.
She pulled back.
"You can't see it," she said.

"But I want to. Miss Pall said you made such lovely ones."
200 "Miss Pall is stupid. So are you. Go away."
"Please, Irma. Let me see it."
But even as he spoke, Sam Steever was staring at the top of the doll, momentarily revealed when she backed away. It was a head all right, with wisps of hair over a white face. Dusk dimmed the features, but Sam recognized the eyes, the nose, the chin.
205 He could keep up the pretense no longer.
"Give me that doll, Irma!" he snapped. "I know what it is. I know who it is"
For an instant, the mask slipped from Irma's face, and Sam Steever stared into naked fear.
She knew. She knew he knew.
Then, just as quickly, the mask was replaced.
210 Irma was only a sweet, spoiled, stubborn little girl as she shook her head merrily and smiled with impish mischief in her eyes.
"Oh, Uncle Sam," she giggled. "You're so silly! Why, this isn't a real doll."
"What is it, then?" he muttered.
Irma giggled once more, raising the figure as she spoke. "Why, it's only candy!" Irma said.
215 "Candy?"
Irma nodded. Then, very swiftly, she slipped the tiny head of the image into her mouth.
And bit it off.
There was a single piercing scream from upstairs.
As Sam Steever turned and ran up the steps, little Irma, still gravely munching, skipped out of the front
220 door and into the night beyond.

(1947)