



Ankal the Witch by Roy Trumbull  
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Illustration by Bill Dempster

Ankal was a witch and she was pretty certain she'd always been a witch. But even she admitted that she didn't trust her memories for more than 200 years. She remained true to the witches tradition of dressing in black and wearing a pointed hat whenever she left her cottage in the woods. In the morning she'd gargle with some warm salt water and then practice her cackle while she fixed breakfast. That done she was off up to her ankles in the creeks and streams collecting eye of newt, tongue of frog, and in the early evening she'd use her hat to catch a stray bat or two. Someone always needed a witch. There were hexes to be placed on one's rivals, lovers needing love potions, farmers needing rain, maidens wanting their fortunes told, and so on.

One spring, business just sort of dried up and she didn't know why. She took out her iron cauldron and built a fire and carefully added ingredients to make a mirror of places. The she gazed into the liquid and stirred it slowly and called upon the spirits who served her. The wavering surface steadied and she saw the lobby directory of tenants in a new highrise office building. Suite 1313 read Zarpi - "Fortunes Told".

So, that was it. Another witch was poaching on her territory. "Fortunes Told" was understood by all to mean "magic practiced here". She sent out Cinder the crow to spy out what was going on and report back.

Zarpi, the new witch who rented the suite, was fresh out of witches college and up to date on all the latest magic. She wore bright flower print dresses and her hair was attractively styled. She could easily have passed for a business woman. Instead of a bubbling cauldron over a fire she had a small electric stove and a sauce pan. She didn't go slogging through stream beds either. She bought all the ingredients needed for her magic at Witch-Mart.

Her most prominent client was the Princess Irene who'd been having trouble with her family accepting her true love, Prince Brian. Zarpi had consulted her copy of the Merlin Manual and found the potion of harmony. Unlike Ankal, who would have taken a certain pleasure in combining some truly disgusting things and watching the awful faces made by her client as they were mixed, Zarpi put the nasty things into a blender and added two scoops of vanilla ice cream and a dollop of chocolate sauce thus making an enchanted frappe for the princess to drink. It worked. As a result, many in the court now went to Zarpi for their magic.

When Cinder the Crow returned to Ankal and reported what he had seen and heard Ankal was furious. "Why that young hussy, with her book learning and computer nonsense. I'll teach her to trifle with me. So, the Princess Irene is coming to her. Well, we'll see about that."

Ankal raised her voice and made an awful screeching sound and within minutes the king of crows was at her door. "Call the flock together. You must help me gather the ingredients for a spell not done these past 500 years." That done she cried for the great horned owl to whom she gave a list of things only to be found on the darkest nights in the deepest woods. Ankal felt really good about working on this spell. It had been her grandmother's favorite.

Neither Zarpi nor Princess Irene were at all aware of what Ankal was doing. But two days later, all dressed in her beautiful clothes, Princess Irene suddenly found herself on a road rutted with wheel tracks and watching where she stepped but having no idea who she was or where she was or how she'd gotten there.

Far away Ankal stared into her cauldron. The liquid shimmered and showed her the princess. She thoroughly enjoyed what she saw and chuckled softly as she ate her morning bowl of cream of frogs.

Zarpi first learned the Princess Irene had vanished when Prince Brian came to her. His first thought was that the princess had been kidnapped, or had met with some other sort of foul play. But all that had been thoroughly investigated and ruled out. Then he said when they were checking the Princess's chambers, a raven had flown in the window holding a branch with a flower on it. They didn't think anything of it at the time but he'd brought the flower for her to see. It looked vaguely familiar to Zarpi. She signed on to wickedpedia and looked it up. It was the flower of forgetfulness. It wasn't a natural flower. It could only be conjured from the depths of the deepest of dark places. It was a certain sign that magic had been used to make the Princess Irene vanish.

A gudwife coming home from market day chanced upon the princess and asked if she was lost.

"I guess I am. I don't know where I am and I'm not very sure I know who I am."

The gudwife, whose name was Thelma, looked her over and said, "From your fine dress I'd say you're a princess or maybe a lady in waiting to a princess."

Irene responded, "I like the idea of being a princess but a princess of what?"

Thelma frowned, "I'm afraid I don't know. We're fresh out of kings and queens in these parts and I don't think there's a castle to be found. Now when it comes to sheep we have plenty of them. Just look about you." The princess looked and in the surrounding meadows there must have been hundreds, if not thousands of sheep.

Gudwife Thelma then asked the Princess Irene, "What can you do?"

The princess gave her sort of a blank stare. If she was a princess, she thought, what did a princess do? Then she said, "I don't suppose out here in the country you've much need for someone to attend teas and grand parties."

Thelma gave a shake of her head and said, "Certainly not. When I asked what you can do I was thinking more along the line of milking cows, tending geese, sweeping, cooking, or spinning sheep's wool into yarn."

As each of these was mentioned the Princess frowned, as none of these common tasks was likely ever done by a princess. But then she said, "I might know how to spin."

Thelma smiled, "I hope you can, for the oil in the wool will preserve the smooth skin of your dainty hands. Doing the other work would have you looking like us in a fortnight."

Many miles and perhaps even years from the Princess Irene, Zarpi considered what to do. She had several mentors at the witches college she could call on but first she must understand the nature of the spell.

Down in a rundown industrial park nearby was a building bearing the sign "Used Typewriters". It was the workshop of Isaac the Wise. The sign gave him all the privacy he needed. No one wanted a typewriter, used or otherwise. Isaac and his many teenage interns collected castoff computers and networked the circuitry in supernatural ways. One of the fruits of their tinkering was the portable WCS. It sensed the presence of magic and could produce a map showing the location of Witches Casting Spells.

Zarpi came to Isaac to find out what he knew. "I thought I'd see you",he said, "something really big happened in the last 24 hours."

"Can you pinpoint it?", she asked.

"Yes", he responded, "It's came from about 5 miles out of town off in the deep woods."

She looked surprised, "I didn't know there was a witch or wizard down there."

Isaac pulled out a very old copy of the Witches Desk Reference. Some of the pages were falling out of the binding. He blew the dust off and turned the pages slowly. A few minutes later he let out a low whistle and said, "Oh boy! According to this, the deep woods is where Ankal the witch makes her home."

Zarpi sat down suddenly. She realized she'd set up shop in the territory of one of the most powerful and cunning witches the world had ever known. She also knew she had little chance of begging her forgiveness. Ankal was known to be stubborn. She could have taken the Princess Irene anywhere. This was going to be most difficult and promised to lead to a depth of magic she wasn't sure she could master.

In a meeting with Prince Brian later that day she laid out the scope of what they faced in recovering the person of Princess Irene. The Prince went back to his own kingdom and sought out an audience with Stevniak the Great, a wizard of great renown. He lived in a cave guarded by the dragon Bruce. Bruce was looking into a mirror the size of a house and combing his eyelashes when the prince approached. The prince bowed low and stated his case. The dragon put down the mirror and straightened up a bit saying, "You're here in time for office hours. Go right in. But remember, after 5 I eat anything that moves."

Rather than the standard robe covered with stars and a pointed wizard's hat, Stevniak wore sneakers, jeans and a black pull-over shirt. If it were especially cold he sometimes put on a Mackintosh. Scattered all around were bits and pieces from his latest experiments. Apparently he was trying to make a lap dog with a small computer screen atop its back. Depending on where you pet the dog, the cursor would move. A scratch on the head was the same as a left click and so on. It was aimed at matronly types who so far had disdained any contact with the internet.

"Ah Prince Brian, I've been expecting you. And I've been thinking about you and the Princess."

Prince Brian said, "Is there any hope?"

The wizard looked grave. "Well", he said, "There is and there isn't. We may find her but the minute we do Ankal could make her vanish again. First we need to determine if she's living or dead."

"How can that be done?", the Prince asked.

“It's not we I'm afraid. It's going to be just you, if you're willing.” The Prince drew himself up to his full height and was about to speak when the Wizard said, “Yes, I see you'll do it. You may have regrets along the way but you'll do it.”

Two nights later the Prince stood by the graveyard gate at midnight. He carried on his person only such things as the Wizard had given him plus a few items belonging to the princess. He wore a charm around his neck that permitted transit into the realm of the dead.

He saw a cloud of dust in the distance and then his eyes made out a coach. He could hear the horses hooves and heard the driver crack his whip. When they got closer he saw it was a team of six pulling the coach and as big and strong as they were he could see right through them. The driver was a decomposed cadaver with a hideous grin. Boarding the coach were the shades of those who'd died since the last time the coach had passed this way. Prince Brian boarded and felt a deep chill settle into his bones.

The coach traveled about the world and made countless stops to take on passengers. There was no danger the coach would become full for the dead occupied only a slight space. A thousand might fit into a thimble.

The ride seemed to take forever but the Prince knew the journey would be ended before the sun arose. All the while the Prince held the Princesses hanky in his hand to see if it would glow and tell him she was near but alas it never changed.

They drove along a river and a ferry slip came into view. There was a ferry similar in size to the coach. He knew this to be the final transit point between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Once one crossed over that river there was no turning back. The far side was guarded by the three headed hound Cerberus who had recently been adopted by dog dentists as their logo because Cerberus could brush, floss, and rinse all at the same time.

The faceless ferryman knew the Prince to be mortal. He held up his staff to block his path. But the Prince held up the hanky belonging to the princess and made a show of smelling it and the ferryman understood. A great basset hound was summoned who came to the coach and sniffed the hanky in the Prince's hand. The dog then slowly shook his head. A person with that scent had not taken the journey to the far side. The Princess was still among the living.

Thelma had taken the Princess into her home, such as it was. The floor was dirt. The roof was made of thatch. Several of the chickens were accustomed to come in looking for scraps should the door be left open. A fire was always burning for both heat and cooking. She stored the clothes the princess was wearing in a wicker chest and gave her an old cotton dress and a smock to go over it. “If you want better I'm afraid you'll have to learn how to sew.” The Princess thanked her and very soon looked the part of a poor country wench.

Thelma's oldest daughter was Cedar and she was a good spinner who had the proper feel for the pull and twist needed to turn the sheep's wool into yarn. She gave the Princess some instruction and then watched her spin. She was a little awkward at first but it quickly became apparent she'd spun before. While the Princess had no memory of it, it had been her nursemaid who'd instructed her years and years before. Once you've done it the hand and the mind remember. Before the week was over she learned to keep the fire going, feed the pigs and chickens, and milk the cow. She also wore a garment

she'd stitched together with Cedar's help. It wasn't one that could be sold on market day, but still, it was a clever design and suited her.

The Prince slept a fitful sleep after his encounter with the dead, then he again met with the Wizard and Zarpi.

"If Ankal has cast the Princess into another time, how can we find her?"

The Wizard made a pass with his hand and his M-screen shimmered into view. He called up the image of a flowing river. "Here", he said, "We have something very much like time. Can either of you tell me what it looks like upstream?"

Zarpi responded, "I can't tell you because I can't see upstream."

"Then what about downstream?", he asked next. The Prince shook his head no. "Well, there it is. Ankal can't see beyond her own life. What happened before she existed is unknown and the future is unknown to us all. So her magic with regard to time covers a limited span.

"Zarpi spoke up, "That is still a lot of time."

The Wizard agreed. "I would guess at least 200 years but less than 300."

"I will still find the Princess.", the Prince declared.

The Wizard caused the image to magnify a spot of rough water and said, "A person's time can be peaceful or turbulent, just like these waters. If I throw a stick into the calm steady flow of a river I can pretty well predict where it will go. Should I toss it into the rapids it might go downstream, it might be cast upon the bank or become wedged between rocks. Very unpredictable. This is by way of saying that the spell Ankal cast upon the Princess took her to a peaceful time in Ankal's own life. I say this because I think she intends to bring the Princess back for reasons only she knows."

The Prince then looked at Zarpi and asked, "So when does a witch have a peaceful time in her life?"

Zarpi blushed a bit and then answered. "It must be in childhood just before one starts to understand the cares of one's elders."

"Well put.", said the Wizard.

In the cave the light cast many shadows. But there was one shadow for which there was no corresponding person or object. It was the figure of a fairy holding a violin. The Wizard spoke to it. "Stephanie, I have a task for you." The shadow took a bow. "Fly off to the home of Ankal the witch and play her tunes sweet to her ears, then bring me back her dreams." The shadow could briefly be seen moving across the walls of the cave and was quickly gone.

Ankal was in a contemplative mood. She'd long wondered where her powers came from and had at last decided they came from those who believed in witches. The invisible forces were little more than what the common folk believed. If enough people believed, then there was power for her magic. She heard a faint tune. It was a violin playing the Danse Macabre by Saint-Saens. The dance of death. It had always been her favorite. She mused "And shall I go on forever? Might I come to my end? Perhaps there is something across that final river for me?" She stirred the coals under her caldron and added a few pieces of wood.

She waved her hands, clearing the vapor away and called forth a vision. Ah, there was the princess in the countryside that Ankal had known as a girl. She felt her cold heart flutter a bit with longing for what was long gone. She thought, "What else might I have become?"

Her sister had given up witchcraft to become the wife of a red state senator. Couldn't get more evil than that. Which reminded her she had to wake her nephew Herman. They hadn't wanted to take him and his coffin along to Washington. Her dull witted kin wanted to become a vampire and was practicing sleeping during the daytime.

Stephanie played the country folk tunes of long ago evoking in Ankal memories of pleasant times, and she sighed. That night as Ankal dreamt, Stephanie gathered her dreams in a basket made of spider web and hurried with them back to the Wizard. He examined them using the dream ap on his wizpad.

He told the prince and Zarpi that there was so much longing in those dreams for the past that he expected Ankal would do something about it. He didn't tell them about Ankal's dream of the snake and the kitten.

Zarpi had an idea. She'd researched the Oxford Witchcraft Dictionary for spells used to move through time and found they all required the powdered bloom of the black rhododendron of Willets, a difficult ingredient to come by. She just happened to have some. She'd bought it during a remainder sale at the Walblack store.

The Wizard dispatched Stephanie to continue to fill Ankal's mind with longings for the past. It put Ankal off of her regular routines. Normally on Tuesdays she collected beetles and scorpions but forgot all about doing so. She even forgot to load the wetware upgrade for her cauldron.

Late one morning the Fred-X truck pulled up and delivered a parcel. It contained the dried powder of the black rhododendron of Willits. Ankal was puzzled. She hadn't ordered it, but she would certainly put it to good use.

Soon she was sailing through the air in her mortar and pestle, headed to Trader Merlin's store. She always went there with a shopping list but still couldn't resist all the impulse items. Along with what she intended to buy she came back with a clear plastic box filled with dark chocolate horseflies. Yum!

As the cauldron boiled and bubbled, Stephanie played the main theme from Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake Ballet. As it had also been used as the title music for Dracula with Bela Lugosi, it gave the sleeping Herman some really neat dreams. Well, neat to him; your experience may vary.

In good time Ankal was ready to call upon the spirits of customer service to aide her. She had tuned cowbells her mother had left her. Ring 1 for enchantment, ring 2 for test marketing, ring 3 for social networking, ring 4 for election polls, ring 5 to download a spell, ring 6 for time travel.

She rang 6 and an elf wearing a name tag that said Marvin Stewart appeared. He raised his eyebrows, shook his dyed blonde hair, curled his lip and said, "You can't be serious, dear. Nowadays no one does magic in cast iron cauldrons. At the very least you need stainless steel with a copper bottom. I can get you a discount on one at Fate and Marrow. This week they're also on special at Death, Graves, and Beyond." Ankal said nothing. Then she made a hideous face and said, "How'd you like a rain of hot sparks to land on your velvet tunic?" Immediately he screamed, "Elf abuse, elf abuse."

Eventually they got down to business. He ran a checklist on the ingredients and found they were all there. There was some discussion over whether it was better to use English or Metric units. It wasn't

really an issue as even Marvin had to agree that a spell calling for handfuls of this and pinches of that didn't conform to either system.

The cauldron had bubbled contentedly as each ingredient was added but when the powdered blossom from the black rhododendron of Willets went in, a vapor arose. In that vapor was a hooded figure in a robe that was half black and half white. Depending on how this specter turned it would seem to be one or the other.

Finally it spoke. "Who has called me?"

"It is I, Ankal."

"What would you have me do?"

"Take me back to where I was born."

There was silence for a moment. Then the specter spoke again. "Would you be as you were or will you go as you are?"

Ankal said, "I would be a child again." The shape of the specter seemed to vibrate a bit. It reached into its robe and took out some sort of hand-held device and tapped on its screen with a bony finger. "I can send you back as you are but I see you've sent another back. To restore your youth I will need to bring that other one forward."

Marvin piped in. "Intertemporal Commerce Commission Rules".

Ankal was looking more and more frustrated. "Ok Jose. Just do it."

"As you wish."

In Thelma's hut, she, the princess and Cedar were sitting at the table eating mutton stew. Suddenly the Princess stood up and asked where her clothes were; meaning the ones she'd originally worn. Thelma pointed at the wicker chest. Princess Irene got up and took off her home spun clothes and put on her finery. Cedar was very impressed with their elegance. Like most little girls she thought looking like a princess was a big deal. Then suddenly there was a shimmer and a sparkle and the princess was gone and in her place was a girl about Cedar's age.

Zarpi was in her lab mixing up a forgetfulness potion for a banker who was to appear before a committee on mortgage fraud. Minerva her white owl, sat atop Zarpi's magic imirror. It had recently been rigged by Issac for witch-fi. Minerva hooted and Zarpi looked up. There was the image of Isaac surrounded by his computer kludge. She asked, "What's up Isaac?"

"We've just recorded a class 1 materialization at the castle. It appears to be in the quarters of the princess."

"Thanks. I'd better get up to the castle."

Yes, the Princess Irene was back in her own bedroom. It was just as she remembered it with one exception. Apparently, in her absence, the steward had still been placing a chocolate on her pillow each night. But her ladies in waiting had been eating them and dropping the wrappers all over her Persian carpet. She assumed that her maid service had been stopped.

Isaac also notified the Wizard, who got word to Prince Brian. He cautioned him not to get his hopes up until Zarpi had investigated. Nonetheless the prince told his page to saddle his trusty steed and have Curly, Moe, and Larry, his personal guard, be ready to accompany him.

Zarpi was ushered into the castle and taken to the Princess Irene, who was obviously still shaken by her sudden transition and the recovery of her memory. She told Zarpi about her life as a peasant tending animals and spinning wool, and about her companion Cedar who had taught her so much. It had been about as far from her life as a princess as possible. Yet it made her sympathetic for those who must do so much with so little.

Back in the past, Cedar didn't know what to think. One moment she'd been staring at her new friend wearing an elegant dress and now here was this child dressed all in black. Finally the stranger spoke. With a twisted smile she said, "Where's the mall?"

