

By Jerry Miller

Love at First Sight

Her love potion worked like a charm.

Edward Reiser held the steering wheel tight between his sweating hands as his Lexus lurched from one hole to another on the backcountry dirt road. He could scarcely see through his dust-covered windshield. When he tired of cursing the road, he cursed himself for being such a fool. The whole story, obviously, would be a hoax. Such things were merely old wives' tales. But what options did he have? He had already tried everything else.

Edward was so wrapped up in his anger that he missed the shack and had to stop his car and back up to it. He waited for a while for the dust cloud to drift away before opening the car door and stepping out. An ancient, shapeless hag in an ancient, shapeless dress stepped out of the shack and onto the front porch to greet him.

"How do?" she croaked out. "How do?" "Aye you the person they call Aunt Hattie?" he called.

"Yep," she answered, beckoning with her hand. "Come on in. Come on in."

Edward went inside with some rather queasy misgivings. The interior of the shack gave him no comfort. The small room Hattie led him into had only two pieces of real furniture—a worn, sagging couch and an equally worn and sagging easy chair. The

rest of the room was filled with tables made of old packing crates. The crates were covered with jars and cages containing Hattie's collection of spiders, snakes, dried bats, and the usual assortment of creatures witches find necessary to their work. The walls were unpainted, and the room had apparently never been cleaned. The floors were stained with tobacco juice, and a gray cat stared at him from a dusty corner. Fortunately, the room did not smell as bad as he had expected it to.

Edward seated himself on the front edge of the dilapidated chair, touching as little of it as possible. He felt that his expensive, beautifully tailored suit was being tainted by everything in the room. Nevertheless, he had come on business, and he was not the sort of man to let anything get in his way.

"Well, well," Hattie said happily. "It's not often I get a chance to visit with a good-looking young feller like yourself. Set down a spell."

"I didn't come to chat," replied Edward firmly. "I'm here on business. I... well, I understand you can make a certain potion...."

"I make all kinds of potions, honey," she said. "What kind do you want?"

Edward couldn't keep himself from



Illustration by Marty Baurova

She could cast spells and make potions. Love

looking around, as if he were making a fool of himself before an unseen audience.

"A love potion," he said.

The old woman cackled with delight. "Well, well, well. So you want the love potion. I can't blame you fer that!" She cackled some more. "Nosirree, can't blame you fer wantin' that. Git the itch, sometimes muhself. Course it don't do *me* much good to itch. When I was young, now, the men used to come arunnin'. Oh, fellers won't leave a woman alone when she's young. When yer old, though. ..." She shook her head sadly. "But what's a handsome feller like you need a potion fer? It seems to me the women ought to be wantin' to use it on you."

"Never mind why I want it. Just give it to me, and I'll pay and leave."

"Oh, don't git in no hurry. It ain't often I git visitors. Set and tell me about yerself."

"No, thank you," said Edward. "If you'll give me the potion, I'll be going."

"Well, if yer in a hurry, dearie, I'll see about gittin' it started. It'll take a while to fix up, though."

Hattie rose from the chair and hobbled to the door at the end of the room. She carefully closed the door behind her, and Edward was left alone—except for the cat, which continued to stare at him.

The witch had been right about Edward's attractiveness to women. A combination of good looks, sold-hearied technique, and inherited wealth had made him a phenomenally successful suitor. At the age of 32, he had already been passionately loved by many women than he

cared to, or even could, remember. He had, in fact, begun to grow rather bored with women.

Then he met Rita. She was young, beautiful, intelligent, vivacious—the English language could scarcely do her justice. She was working as a secretary to Edward's lawyer when he met her, and as soon as he saw her, he was infatuated with her. For the first time in his life, however, he had met a woman who was completely *not* interested in him.

Rita had turned down his request for a date, politely explaining that she was engaged to an architect and quite happy about it. He began to see his lawyer every day in order to see her more often. She changed jobs and went to work for a different lawyer. He changed lawyers. She left that job for a job with a large company. He called her on the phone until she refused to answer it anymore. He rang her doorbell until he was "counseled" about that by two very large policemen. What had been mere interest became complete obsession. Complete obsession turned into total frustration when Rita finally got a court order that forbade him to come anywhere near her or try to contact her. He lost his appetite and took to hanging out in bars during long, melancholy afternoons.

It was during one of those afternoons that he overheard a rough-looking young man in work clothes telling an older man about a witch who lived near his hometown in Kentucky. She could cast spells and make potions, he said. Love potions, for instance.

Potions, for instance.

Edward's warm show of friendliness toward the two men and his willingness to buy three rounds of drinks was rewarded with more information about the alleged witch and her potions.

Edward, of course, did not believe in either witches or potions. Still, it gave him something to think about during those endless, bar-haunting afternoons. After all, everything else had failed. Full of desperation, Edward had set out on his long drive to Kentucky.

The old woman re-entered the room, slamming the door and waking Edward from his daydream.

"Won't be long now," she croaked, grinning toothlessly. "Jest needs to settle a bit. Like a cup of tea?"

"No," Edward said, shuddering. He was deeply repulsed by the idea of sitting and drinking tea with the old hag, as if they were having a social hour together.

"Then how 'bout a glass of nice, cool well water, dearie? It must've been a hot, dusty drive up here."

Edward was parched with thirst, partly from the drive and partly from nervousness. He admitted to being thirsty, feeling that even she wouldn't be able to turn a glass of water into a social occasion.

Hattie hobbled out the door and soon returned with his water. He took it gratefully and drank half of it with his first gulp. It tasted a bit brackish, but it felt good to his dry throat.

"Don't s'pose a city feller like you really believes in love potions," she said.

"Well, no, of course not."

"No, of course not," she sighed. "No one does anymore. Not even the hill

people. But you come anyway. You come. Not so many come as use to, though. Gits real lonely, nowadays. Ever since Old Sallie died—"

Edward interrupted.

"The potion," he said. "Just how does it work?"

"Well, it's liquid, you see. You kin give it in a glass of whiskey if you want. Whoever drinks it will fall in love with the first person they see after it takes hold."

"How deeply in love?" Edward asked. He was worried about Rita's engagement to the architect. "Will they give up, uh, other obligations?"

"Yep," she said. "Give up everything 'cept bein' in love."

"Good," said Edward. "Now, how long does it take to work?"

"Minute er two," she said.

"Oh, before I forget to ask. Does it have any bad or bitter taste that will have to be disguised?"

"It tastes," she said slowly, "sorta like brackish water."

"Brack ..."

But even before he could be sure of what had happened, Edward's anger had changed into an entirely different emotion—an emotion unlike any he had ever experienced before. The sound of haggish cackling became, to Edward, the sound of full-throated, feminine laughter. For a moment, Edward was too overcome by this strange, new emotion to act. Then he stepped forward and gathered his beloved in his arms. Old Hattie would never be lonely again. ■