

Joanna Baillie (1762-1851)

5 *The Moody Seer: A Ballad*

“The sun shines in a cloudless sky,
The lake is blue and still;
Up, Flora! on thine errand hie,
And climb the eyrie hill;

“And tell my ancient kinsman there 5
To leave his lonely tower,
And at our yearly feast to share
The merry social hour.”

“Oh mother! do not bid me go;
I scarce can draw my breath, 10
When I see his eyes move to and fro,
His lowering brows beneath;

“His moving lips, that give no sound,
My very spirits quell,
When he stares upon the harmless ground 15
As ’twere the mouth of hell.”

“Fy, foolish child! — on such a day
Aught ill thou needst not fear,
And thy cousin Malcolm will the way
With tale or ballad cheer.” 20

The maiden blush’d and turn’d her head,
And saw young Malcolm near,
And she thought no more of scath or dread,
Or the looks of the moody Seer.

And now, bound for the mountain hold, 25
The youthful pair are seen,
He like a stripling frank and bold,
She like a fairy queen.

With merry songs and merry talk
The long way cheated he, 30
And pluck'd her blue-bells from the stalk,
And blossoms from the tree.

Time (how they wist not) swiftly ran,
Till scarcely half a rood
From the opening gate of the gifted man, 35
With beating hearts they stood.

Then issued from that creaking gate
A figure bent and spare,
In checker'd garb of ancient state,
With grizzled, shaggy hair. 40

By motion, look, and mien, he seem'd
Of gentle pedigree,
Well struck with years, you might have deem'd,
But more with misery.

He raised his face to the youthful pair, 45
Gramercy! can it be?
There passeth a glance of pleasure there,
And a smile of courtesy.

“My cousin's daughter near my hold!
Some message kind, I trow. 50
But no, fair maid, I am too old
To mix in revels now.

“And who is this so gay and young? —
No, no! thou needst not tell;
His mother is from Garelace sprung, 55
His sire from bold Glenfell.

“His mother’s smile is on his face,
His father’s form I see,
Those well-knit limbs of active grace,
Those feet — it cannot be! 60

“Out, out! mine eyes see falsely! toss’d
And drifted by the wind,
Some beldame’s kerchief hath been lost,
And round his brogues hath twined.”

Thus muttering low, with voice unsweet, 65
He turn’d his face aside,
And hastily snatch’d at Malcolm’s feet,
But the close-clutch’d palm was void.

“Why gropest thou with thy trembling hand?
Thinkst thou my feet are bound? 70
Let loose thy house-guard, famous Brand,
And I’ll out-run the hound.”

“Ah! swiftest race is soonest o’er,
Like stream of the mountain brook:
Go home, and con some sober lore, 75
Betake thee to bead and book.”

“Yes, I will pray to Mary mild,
And my first request shall be,
That from all fancies grim and wild,
Thou mayst deliver’d be.” 80

Then anger tinged the maid's round cheek —

“Come, Malcolm, come away!

When Hallow-e'en blows chill and bleak,

Macvorely will join our play.”

“When Hallow-e'en blows bleak and chill

85

An old man's seat prepare,

For if life and strength be in him still,

Macvorely will be there.”

The old man sigh'd, as down the hill

They took their homeward way,

90

And he heard afar so loud and shrill

Young Malcolm's joyous lay.

'Tis Hallow-e'en in Flora's home,

Bright shines the fir-wood flame;

From distant halls and holds are come

95

Maid, youngster, laird, and dame.

Their friets are tried true love to prove —

Friets taught by warlock lore,

And mingled lovers gladly move

Upon the crowded floor.

100

And flaming nuts are keenly watch'd

By many a youthful eye,

And coleworts, from the dark mould snatch'd,

Are borne triumphantly.

Then gay strathspeys are featly danced

105

To the pibroch's gallant sound,

While the sighted man like one intranced,

In the honour'd chair is found.

But who comes now so buoyantly,
In flaunting kirtle dress'd, 110
Who snaps her fingers, capers high,
And foots it with the best?

She leaps and crosses, wheels and turns,
Like mawkin on the lea,
Till every kindred bosom burns 115
Such joyous sight to see.

Her dark eyes gleam'd, and her ribands stream'd,
And bells and bracelets rung,
And the charm'd rout raised a joyous shout
As her arms aloft she flung. 120

Out spoke a bachelor, Glenore,
Of threescore years and ten,
And well respected heretofore
By prudent, wary men:

“O were I now as I have been 125
(Vain wish! alas how vain!)
I would plight my faith to that winsome queen,
And with my freedom twain.”

But nought cared she for laugh, or shout,
Or cheers from every tongue; 130
She circled in, and she circled out,
Through all the yielding throng,

Until before the honour'd chair
With sliding step she came,
And dropp'd a sober curtsey there 135

To the Seer of elrich fame.

But ah! how different is his face
From those so blithe and boon!
Tears down his cheeks the big tears chase,
Like thunder-drops in June. 140

“Nay, weep not, kind though hapless Seer;
Forgive my foolish glee,
That, flaunting thus in woman’s gear,
Thought to deceive e’en thee.

“I’ve danced before thee, vain and proud, 145
In crimson kirtle drest.”
“Thou’st danced before me in a shroud,
Raised mid-way to thy breast.”

Dull grew the sound of the crowded hall,
Yet Malcolm danced again, 150
And did for rousing pibrochs call,
But pipers piped in vain.

Before the early cock had crow’d,
Withdrawn was every guest;
Ere on high Ben a sun-beam glow'd, 155
All were retired to rest.

A goodly ship at anchor rides,
With freight of British store,
And a little boat from her shadow glides,
Swift nearing to the shore. 160

And, on that shore, kind hearts and true,

Small groups of kinsfolk stand,
To bid a much-loved youth adieu,
Who quits his native land.

There Flora and her mother dear 165
Heave many a heavy sigh,
And by them is the moody Seer,
With red and lowering eye.

“Weep not, dear aunt!” says the parting wight,
“Weep not, my play-mate sweet! 170
Hope beckons me to fortune bright,
And we again shall meet.

“And, good Macvorely, send me hence
With thy blessing; on me pour
Some mutter’d spell of sure defence, 175
When wild waves round me roar.

“This band that round my neck is tied,
Is the gift of a maiden dear,
Fenced with thy potent spell beside,
What danger need I fear?” 180

“I see no band around thy neck,
But the white shroud gather’d high:
Yon breakers rage, and a stranded wreck
Doth on the dark rocks lie.

“A solemn requiem for the dead 185
Is the gift I will give to thee;
O that, to save thee, in thy stead,
The same were sung for me!”

Yet still the youth, with parting cheer,

Extends to all his hand; 190
Embraces those who are most dear,
And hastens from the land.

His form reflected on the wave,
As the lessening boat withdrew,
Of that joyous youth, so boon and brave, 195
Was their last heart-moving view.

In Flora's home the midnight blast
Rose with a wailing moan,
And all had to their chambers past,
And the maiden sat alone. 200

She thought of the seaman's perilous case
As the loud gust went and came,
And she gazed on the fire with a woeful face,
And watch'd the flickering flame.

The flickering flame burnt dull and blue, 205
And the icy chill of fear
Pass'd o'er her head; then well she knew
Some ghastly thing was near.

She turn'd her head the room to scan,
To wot if aught was there; 210
And she saw a figure wet and wan
Three paces from her chair.

Fix'd were the eyes of its pallid face,
Like those who walk in sleep,
And she started up and pray'd for grace 215
With a voice suppress'd and deep.

Then gazing on that face, at length,
She knew the features dear;
She spoke, — affection lent her strength,
“Malcolm, how cam’st thou here?” 220

“How spirits travel, dear, dear maid!
No living wight may know,
But far from hence my corse is laid,
The deep green waves below.”

“O Malcolm say, in this world of care 225
Is there aught I can do for thee?”
“When thou bendest thy knees in humble prayer,
My Flora, pray for me;

“And let my kinsfolk know the fate
Of one so young and vain. 230
And now farewell, till time’s last date,
When we shall meet again.”

The figure faded from her sight,
And the angry tempest fell,
And she heard through the stilly air of night 235
A distant passing bell.

1790

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