

William Bell Scott (1811-90)

3 *A Lowland Witch Ballad*

The old witch-wife beside her door
Sat spinning with a watchful ear,
A horse's hoof upon the road
Is what she waits for, longs to hear.

The mottled gloaming dusky grew, 5
Or else we might a furrow trace,
Sowed with small bones and leaves of yew,
Across the road from place to place.

Hark he comes! The young bridegroom,
Singing gaily down the hill, 10
Rides on, rides blindly to his doom,
His heart that witch hath sworn to kill.

Up to the fosse he rode so free,
There his steed stumbled and he fell,
He cannot pass, nor turn, nor flee; 15
His song is done, he's in the spell.

She dances round him where he stands,
Her distaff touches both his feet,
She blows upon his eyes and hands,
He has no power his fate to cheat. 20

'Ye cannot visit her to-night,
Nor ever again,' the witch-wife cried;
'But thou shalt do as I think right,
And do it swift without a guide.

'Upon the top of Tintock hill 25
This night there rests the yearly mist,
In silence go, your tongue keep still,
And find for me the dead man's kist.

'Within the kist there is a cup,

Thou 'lt find it by the dead man's shine, 30
Take it thus! thus fold it up, —
It holds for me the wisdom-wine.

'Go to the top of Tintock hill,
Grove within that eerie mist,
Whatever happens, keep quite still 35
Until ye find the dead man's kist.

'The kist will open, take the cup,
Heed ye not the dead man's shine,
Take it thus, thus fold it up,
Bring it to me and I am thine.' 40

He went, he could make answer none,
He went, he found all as she said,
Before the dawn had well begun
She had the cup from that strange bed.

Into the hut she fled at once, 45
She drank the wine; — forthwith, behold!
A radiant damozel advance
From that black door in silken fold.

The little Circe flower she held
Towards the boy with such a smile 50
Made his heart leap, he was compelled
To take it gently as a child.

She turned, he followed, passed the door,
Which closed behind: at noon next day,
Ambling on his mule that way, 55
The Abbot found the steed, no more,
The rest was lost in glamoury.

1882

(From *A Poet's Harvest Home: Being One Hundred Short Poems*. With an Aftermath of Twenty Short Poems. London, 1893)