

Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775-1818)

16 *The Grim White Woman*

Lord Ronald was handsome, Lord Ronald was young;  
The green wood he traversed, and gaily he sung;  
His bosom was light, and he spurr'd on amain,  
When lo! a fair lass caught his steed by the rein.

She caught by the rein, and she sank on her knee; 5  
— “Now stay thee, Lord Ronald, and listen to me!” —  
She sank on her knee, and her tears 'gan to flow,  
— “Now stay thee, Lord Ronald, and pity my woe!” —

— “Nay, Janet, fair Janet, I needs must away;  
“I speed to my mother, who chides my delay.” — 10  
— “Oh! heed not her chiding; though bitter it be,  
“Thy falsehood and scorn are more bitter to me.” —

— “Nay, Janet, fair Janet, I needs must depart;  
“My brother stays for me to hunt the wild hart.” —  
— “Oh! let the hart live, and thy purpose forego, 15  
“To sooth with compassion and kindness my woe.” —

— “Nay, Janet, fair Janet, delay me no more;  
“You please me no longer, my passion is o'er:  
“A leman more lovely waits down in yon dell,  
“So, Janet, fair Janet, for ever farewell!” — 20

No longer the damsel's entreaties he heard;  
His dapple-grey horse through the forest he spurr'd;  
And ever, as onwards the foaming steed flew,  
Did Janet with curses the false one pursue.

— “Oh! cursed be the day,” in distraction she cries, 25  
“When first did thy features look fair in my eyes!

“And cursed the false lips, which beguiled me of fame;  
“And cursed the hard heart, which resigns me to shame!

“The wanton, whom now you forsake me to please —  
“May her kisses be poison, her touch be disease! 30  
“When you wed, may your couch be a stranger to joy,  
“And the Fiend of the Forest your offspring destroy!

“May the Grim White Woman, who haunts this wood,  
“The Grim White Woman, who feasts on blood,  
“As soon as they number twelve months and a day, 35  
“Tear the hearts of your babes from their bosoms away.” —

Then frantic with love and remorse home she sped,  
Lock’d the door of her chamber, and sank on her bed;  
Nor yet with complaints and with tears had she done,  
When the clock in St. Christopher’s church struck — “one!” — 40

Her blood, why she knew not, ran cold at the sound;  
She lifted her head; she gazed fearfully round!  
When, lo! near the hearth, by a cauldron’s blue light,  
She saw the tall form of a female in white.

Her eye, fix’d and glassy, no passions express’d; 45  
No blood fill’d her veins, and no heart warm’d her breast!  
She seem’d like a corpse newly torn from the tomb,  
And her breath spread the chillness of death through the room.

Her arms, and her feet, and her bosom were bare;  
A shroud wrapp’d her limbs, and a snake bound her hair. 50  
This spectre, the Grim White Woman was she,  
And the Grim White Woman was fearful to see!

And ever, the cauldron as over she bent,  
She mutter’d strange words of mysterious intent:  
A toad, still alive, in the liquor she threw, 55  
And loud shriek’d the toad, as in pieces it flew!

To heighten the charm, in the flames next she flung  
A viper, a rat, and a mad tiger's tongue;  
The heart of a wretch, on the rack newly dead,  
And an eye, she had torn from a parricide's head. 60

The flames now divided; the charm was complete;  
Her spells the White Spectre forbore to repeat;  
To Janet their produce she hasten'd to bring,  
And placed on her finger a little jet ring!

— “From the Grim White Woman,” she murmur'd, “receive 65  
“A gift, which your treasure, now lost, will retrieve.  
“Remember, 'twas she who relieved your despair,  
“And when you next see her, remember your prayer!” —

This said, the Fiend vanish'd! no longer around  
Pour'd the cauldron its beams; all was darkness profound; 70  
Till the gay beams of morning illumined the skies,  
And gay as the morning did Ronald arise.

With hawks and with hounds to the forest rode he:  
— “Trallira! trallara! from Janet I'm free!  
“Trallira! trallara! my old love, adieu! 75  
“Trallira! trallara! I'll get me a new!” —

But while he thus caroll'd in bachelor's pride,  
A damsel appear'd by the rivulet's side:  
He rein'd in his courser, and soon was aware,  
That never was damsel more comely and fair. 80

He felt at her sight, what no words can impart;  
She gave him a look, and he proffer'd his heart:  
Her air, while she listen'd, was modest and bland:  
She gave him a smile, and he proffer'd his hand.

Lord Ronald was handsome, Lord Ronald was young, 85

And soon on his bosom sweet Ellinor hung;  
And soon to St. Christopher's chapel they ride,  
And soon does Lord Ronald call Ellen his bride.

Days, weeks, and months fly. — "Ding-a-ding! ding-a-ding!" —  
Hark! hark! in the air how the castle-bells ring! 90  
— "And why do the castle-bells ring in the air?" —  
Sweet Ellen hath borne to Lord Ronald an heir.

Days, weeks, and months fly. — "Ding-a-ding! ding-a-ding!" —  
Again, hark! how gaily the castle-bells ring?  
— "Why again do the castle bells carol so gay?" — 95  
A daughter is born to Lord Ronald to-day.

But see'st thou yon herald so swift hither bend?  
Lord Ronald is summon'd his king to defend:  
And see'st thou the tears of sweet Ellinor flow?  
Lord Ronald has left her to combat the foe. 100

Where slumber her babies, her steps are address'd;  
She presses in anguish her son to her breast;  
Nor ceases she Annabell's cradle to rock,  
Till — "one!" — is proclaim'd by the loud castle-clock.

Her blood, why she knows not, runs cold at the sound! 105  
She raises her head; she looks fearfully round;  
And lo! near the hearth, by a cauldron's blue light,  
She sees the tall form of a female in white!

The female with horror sweet Ellen beholds:  
Still closer her son to her bosom she folds; 110  
And cold tears of terror bedew her pale cheeks,  
While, nearer approaching, the Spectre thus speaks. —

— "The Grim White Woman, who haunts yon wood,  
"The Grim White Woman, who feasts on blood,  
"Since now he has number'd twelve months and a day, 115

“Claims the heart of your son, and is come for her prey.” —

— “Oh! Grim White Woman, my baby now spare!

“I’ll give you these diamonds, so precious and fair!” —

— “Though fair be those diamonds, though precious they be,

“The blood of thy babe is more precious to me!” — 120

— “Oh! Grim White Woman, now let my child live!

“This cross of red rubies in guerdon I’ll give!” —

— “Though red be the flames from those rubies which dart,

“More red is the blood of thy little child’s heart.” —

To soften the dæmon no pleading prevails; 125

The baby she wounds with her long crooked nails:

She tears from his bosom the heart as her prey!

— “’Tis mine!” — shriek’d the Spectre, and vanish’d away.

The foe is defeated, and ended the strife,

And Ronald speeds home to his children and wife. 130

Alas! on his castle a black banner flies,

And tears trickle fast from his fair lady’s eyes.

— “Say, why on my castle a black banner flies,

“And why trickle tears from my fair lady’s eyes?” —

— “In your absence the Grim White Woman was here, 135

“And dead is your son, whom you valued so dear.” —

Deep sorrow’d Lord Ronald; but soon for his grief,

He found in the arms of sweet Ellen relief:

Her kisses could peace to his bosom restore,

And the more he beheld her, he loved her the more; 140

Till it chanced, that one night, when the tempest was loud,

And strong gusts of wind rock’d the turrets so proud,

As Ronald lay sleeping he heard a voice cry,

— “Dear father, arise, or your daughter must die!” —

He woke, gazed around, look'd below, look'd above; 145  
— “Why trembles my Ronald? what ails thee, my love?” —  
— “I dreamt, through the skies that I saw a hawk dart,  
“Pounce a little white pigeon, and tear out its heart.” —

— “Oh hush thee, my husband; thy vision was vain.” —  
Lord Ronald resign'd him to slumber again: 150  
But soon the same voice, which had rouzed him before,  
Cried — “Father, arise, or your daughter's no more!” —

He woke, gazed around, look'd below, look'd above;  
— “What fears now, my Ronald? what ails thee, my love?” —  
— “I dreamt that a tigress, with jaws open'd wide, 155  
“Had fasten'd her fangs in a little lamb's side!” —

— “Oh! hush thee, my husband; no tigress is here.” —  
Again Ronald slept, and again in his ear  
Soft murmur'd the voice, — “Oh! be warn'd by your son;  
“Dear father, arise, for it soon will strike — “one!” — 160

“Your wife, for a spell your affections to hold,  
“To the Grim White Woman her children hath sold;  
“E'en now is the Fiend at your babe's chamber door;  
“Then father, arise, or your daughter's no more!” —

From his couch starts Lord Ronald, in doubt and dismay, 165  
He seeks for his wife — but his wife is away!  
He gazes around, looks below, looks above;  
Lo! there sits on his pillow a little white dove!

A mild lambent flame in its eyes seem'd to glow;  
More pure was its plumage than still-falling snow, 170  
Except where a scar could be seen on its side,  
And three small drops of blood the white feathers had dyed.

— “Explain, pretty pigeon, what art thou, explain?” —  
— “The soul of thy son, by the White Dæmon slain;

“E’en now is the Fiend at your babe’s chamber door, 175  
“And thrice having warn’d you, I warn you no more!” —

The pigeon then vanish’d; and seizing his sword,  
The way to his daughter Lord Ronald explored;  
Distracted he sped to her chamber full fast,  
And the clock it struck — “one!” — as the threshold he past. 180

And straight near the hearth, by a cauldron’s blue light,  
He saw the tall form of a female in white;  
Ellen wept, to her heart while her baby she press’d,  
Whom the spectre approaching, thus fiercely address’d.

— “The Grim White Woman, who haunts yon wood, 185  
“The Grim White Woman, who feasts on blood,  
“Since now she has number’d twelve months and a day,  
“Claims the heart of your daughter, and comes for her prey!” —

This said, she her nails in the child would have fix’d;  
Sore struggled the mother; when, rushing betwixt, 190  
Ronald struck at the Fiend with his ready-drawn brand,  
And, glancing aside, his blow lopp’d his wife’s hand!

Wild laughing, the Fiend caught the hand from the floor,  
Releasing the babe, kiss’d the wound, drank the gore;  
A little jet ring from the finger then drew, 195  
Thrice shriek’d a loud shriek, and was borne from their view!

Lord Ronald, while horror still bristled his hair,  
To Ellen now turn’d; — but no Ellen was there!  
And lo! in her place, his surprise to complete,  
Lay Janet, all cover’d with blood, at his feet! 200

— “Yes, traitor, ’tis Janet!” — she cried; — “at my sight  
“No more will your heart swell with love and delight;  
“That little jet ring was the cause of your flame,  
“And that little jet ring from the Forest-Fiend came.

“It endow’d me with beauty, your heart to regain; 205  
“It fix’d your affections, so wavering and vain;  
“But the spell is dissolved, and your eyes speak my fate,  
“My falsehood is clear, and as clear is your hate.

“But what caused *my* falsehood? — your falsehood alone;  
“What voice said — ‘be guilty?’ — seducer, your own! 210  
“You vow’d truth for ever, the oath I believed,  
“And had *you* not deceived me, *I* had not deceived.

“Remember my joy, when affection you swore!  
“Remember my pangs, when your passion was o’er!  
“A curse, in my rage, on your children was thrown, 215  
“And alas! wretched mother, that curse struck my own!” —

And here her strength fail’d her! — the sad one to save  
In vain the Leech labour’d; three days did she rave;  
Death came on the fourth, and restored her to peace,  
Nor long did Lord Ronald survive her decease. 220

Despair fills his heart! he no longer can bear  
His castle, for Ellen no longer is there:  
From Scotland he hastens, all comfort disdains,  
And soon his bones whiten on Palestine’s plains.

If you bid me, fair damsels, my moral rehearse, 225  
It is, that young ladies ought never to curse;  
For no one will think her well-bred, or polite,  
Who devotes little babes to Grim Women in White.

1801

(From *Tales of Wonder*. Written and Collected by M. G. Lewis.  
Vol. 1. London, 1801)