

William Julius Mickle (1735-1800)

4 *The Sorceress; or Wolfwold and Ulla*

— “Oh, low he lies; his cold pale cheek
“Lies lifeless on the clay;
“Yet struggling hope — O day spring break,
“And lead me on my way.

“On Denmark’s cruel bands, O heaven! 5
“Thy red-wing’d vengeance pour;
“Before my Wolfwold’s spear be driven —
“O rise bright morning hour!” —

Thus Ulla wail’d, the fairest maid
Of all the Saxon race; 10
Thus Ulla wail’d, in nightly shade,
While tears bedew’d her face.

When sudden o’er the fir-crown’d hill,
The full orb’d moon arose;
And o’er the winding dale so still, 15
Her silver radiance flows.

No more could Ulla’s fearful breast,
Her anxious care delay;
But deep with hope and fear impress’d,
She holds the moonshine way. 20

She left the bower, and all alone
She traced the dale so still;
And sought the cave, with rue o’ergrown,
Beneath the fir-crown’d hill,

Black knares of blasted oak, embound 25
With hemlock, fenced the cell:

The dreary mouth, half under ground,
Yawn'd like the gate of hell.

Soon as the gloomy den she spied,
Cold Horror shook her knee; 30
— “And hear, O Prophetess,” she cried,
“A Princess sue to thee.” —

Aghast she stood! athwart the air,
The dismal screech-owl flew;
The fillet round her auburn hair 35
Asunder burst in two.

Her robe of softest yellow, glow'd
Beneath the moon's pale beam;
And o'er the ground, with yew-boughs strew'd,
Effused a golden gleam. 40

The golden gleam the Sorceress spied,
As in her deepest cell,
At midnight's magic hour she tried
A tomb o'erpowering spell.

When from the cavern's dreary womb 45
Her groaning voice arose,
— “O come, my daughter, fearless come,
“And fearless tell thy woes.” —

As shakes the bough of trembling leaf,
When whirlwinds sudden rise; 50
As stands aghast the warrior chief,
When his base army flies;

So shook, so stood, the beauteous maid,
When from the dreary den

A wrinkled hag came forth, array'd
In matted rags obscene. 55

Around her brows, with hemlock bound,
Loose hung her ash-grey hair;
As from two dreary caves profound
Her blue flamed eye-balls glare. 60

Her skin, of earthy red, appear'd
Clung round her shoulder bones,
Like wither'd bark, by lightning sear'd
When loud the tempest groans.

A robe of squalid green and blue, 65
Her ghostly length array'd,
A gaping rent, full to the view
Her furrow'd ribs betray'd.

— “And tell, my daughter, fearless tell,
“What sorrow brought thee here; 70
“So may my power thy cares expel,
“And give thee sweetest cheer.” —

— “O, mistress of the powerful spell,
“King Edric's daughter see;
“Northumbria to my father fell, 75
“And sorrow fell to me.

“My virgin heart Lord Wolfwold won;
“My father on him smiled;
“Soon as he gain'd Northumbria's throne,
“His pride the youth exiled. 80

“Stern Denmark's ravens o'er the seas
“Their gloomy black wings spread,

“And o’er Northumbria’s hills and leas,
 “Their dreadful squadrons sped.

“— ‘Return, brave Wolfwold,’ — Edric cried, 85
 ‘O generous warrior, hear,
 ‘My daughter’s hand, thy willing bride,
 ‘Awaits thy conquering spear.’ —

“The banish’d youth in Scotland’s court
 “Had pass’d the weary year; 90
 “And soon he heard the glad report,
 “And soon he grasp’d his spear.

“He left the Scottish dames to weep,
 “And wing’d with true love speed;
 “Nor day, nor night, he stopt to sleep, 95
 “And soon he cross’d the Tweed.

“With joyful voice, and raptured eyes,
 “He press’d my willing hand;
 “— ‘I go, my fair, my love,’ — he cries,
 ‘To guard thy father’s land. 100

““By Edon’s shore in deathful fray
 ‘The daring foe we meet,
 ‘Ere three short days I trust to lay
 ‘My trophies at thy feet.’ —

“Alas, alas! that time is o’er, 105
 “And three long days beside,
 “Yet not a word from Edon’s shore
 “Has cheer’d his fearful bride.

“O, mistress of the powerful spell,
 “His doubtful fate decide.” — 110

— “And cease, my child, for all is well,”
The grizzly witch replied.

— “Approach my cave, and where I place
“The magic circle, stand,
“And fear not aught of ghastly face 115
“That glides beneath my wand.” —

The grizzly witches powerful charms,
Then reach’d the labouring moon,
And, cloudless at the dire alarms,
She shed her brightest noon. 120

The pale beam struggled through the shade,
That black’d the cavern’s womb,
And in the deepest nook betray’d
An altar and a tomb.

Around the tomb, in mystic lore, 125
Were forms of various mien,
And efts, and foul wing’d serpents, bore
The altar’s base obscene.

Eyeless, a huge and starved toad sat
In corner murk aloof, 130
And many a snake and famish’d bat
Clung to the creviced roof.

A fox and vulture’s skeletons
A yawning rift betray’d,
And grappling still each other’s bones, 135
The strife of death display’d.

— “And now, my child,” the Sorceress said,
“Lord Wolfwold’s father’s grave

“To me shall render up the dead,
“And send him to my cave. 140

“His skeleton shall hear my spell,
“And to the figured walls
“His hand of bone shall point, and tell
“What fate his son befalls.” —

O cold down Ulla’s snow-like face 145
The trembling sweat drops fell,
And, borne by sprites of gliding pace,
The corse approach’d the cell.

And thrice the Witch her magic wand
Waved o’er the skeleton; 150
And slowly, at the dread command,
Up rose the arm of bone.

A cloven shield and broken spear
The figure wander’d o’er,
Then rested on a sable bier 155
Distain’d with drops of gore.

In ghastly writhes her mouth, so wide
And black, the Sorceress throws,
— “And be those signs, my child,” she cried,
“Fulfill’d on Wolfwold’s foes! 160

“A happier spell I now shall try;
“Attend, my child, attend,
“And mark what flames from altar high,
“And lowly floor, ascend.

“If of the roses softest red 165
“The blaze shines forth to view,
“Then Wolfwold lives — but Hell forbid

“The glimmering flame of blue!” —

The Witch then raised her haggard arm,
And waved her wand on high; 170
And, while she spoke the mutter'd charm,
Dark lightning fill'd her eye.

Fair Ulla's knee swift smote the ground,
Her hands aloft were spread,
And every joint as marble bound, 175
Felt Horror's darkest dread.

Her lips, erewhile so like the rose,
Were now as vi'let pale,
And tumbling in convulsive throes,
Express'd o'erwhelming ail. 180

Her eyes, erewhile so starry bright,
Where living lustre shone,
Were now transform'd to sightless white,
Like eyes of lifeless stone.

And soon the dreadful spell was o'er, 185
And glimmering to the view,
The quivering flame rose through the floor,
A flame of ghastly blue.

Behind the altar's livid fire,
Low from the inmost cave, 190
Young Wolfwold rose in pale attire,
The vestments of the grave.

His eye to Ulla's eye he rear'd,
His cheek was wan as clay,
And half cut through his hand appear'd 195
That beckon'd her away.

Fair Ulla saw the woeful shade,
Her heart struck at her side,
And burst – low bow'd her listless head,
And down she sunk and died.

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