

The Witch of Erkmurden

By James Whitcomb Riley

I

Who cantereth forth in the night so late—
So late in the night, and so nigh the dawn?
'Tis The Witch of Erkmurden who leapeth the gate
Of the old churchyard where the three Sprites wait
Till the whirl of her broom is gone.

And who peereth down from the belfry tall,
With the ghost-white face and the ghastly stare,
With lean hands clinched in the grated wall
Where the red vine rasps and the rank leaves fall,
And the clock-stroke drowns his prayer?

II

The wee babe wails, and the storm grows loud,
Nor deeper the dark of the night may be,
For the lightning's claw, with a great wet cloud,
Hath wiped the moon and the wild-eyed crowd
Of the stars out wrathfully.

Knuckled and kinked as the hunchback shade
Of a thorn-tree bendeth the beldam old
Over the couch where the mother-maid,
With her prayerful eyes, and the babe are laid,
Waiting the doom untold.

“Mother, O Mother, I only crave
Mercy for him and the babe—not me!”
“Hush! for it maketh my brain to rave
Of my two white shrouds, and my one wide grave,
And a mound for my children three.”

“Mother, O Mother, I only pray
Pity for him who is son to thee
And more than my brother.—”
“Wilt hush, I say!
Though I meet thee not at the Judgment Day,
I will bury my children three!”

“Then hark! O Mother, I hear his cry—
Hear his curse from the churchtower now,—
‘Ride thou witch till thy hate shall die,
Yet hell as Heaven eternally
Be sealed to such as thou!’”

An infant’s wail—then a laugh, god wot,
That strangled the echoes of deepest hell;
And a thousand shuttles of lightning shot,
And the moon bulged out like a great red blot,
And a shower of blood-stars fell.

III

There is one wide grave scooped under the eaves—
Under the eaves as they weep and weep;
And, veiled by the mist that the dead storm weaves,
The hag bends low, and the earth receives
Mother and child asleep.

There’s the print of the hand at either throat,
And the frothy ooze at the lips of each,
But both smile up where the new stars float,
And the moon sails out like a silver boat
Unloosed from a stormy beach.

IV

Bright was the morn when the sexton gray
Twirled the rope of the old church-bell,—
But it answered not, and he tugged away—
And lo, at his feet a dead man lay—
Dropped down with a single knell.

And the scared wight found, in the lean hand gripped,
A scrip which read: “O the grave is wide,
But it empty waits, for the low eaves dripped
Their prayerful tears, and the three Sprites slipped
Away with my babe and bride.”