

# 3

Karel Jaromír Erben (1811-1870)

## THE WILLOW

In the morn he sat at meat;  
Thus his youthful spouse did greet:

“Mistress mine, thou mistress dear,  
Thou in all things wert sincere.

“Thou in all things wert sincere,—  
One thing ne'er thou let'st me hear,  
“We have now two years been wed,  
Only one thing brings me dread.

“Mistress mine, O mistress blest,  
With what slumber dost thou rest?

“In the evening fresh and bright,  
Like a corpse thou art at night.

“Naught has sounded, naught has stirred  
Nor is trace of breathing heard.

“Filled with coldness is thy frame,  
E'en as if to dust it came.

“Nor doth rouse thee from thy sleeping  
Our young child, with bitter weeping.

“Mistress mine, thou wife of gold,  
Doth some sickness thee enfold ?

“If by sickness thou'rt dismayed,  
Let wise counsel be thine aid.

“Many herbs are in the held,  
Thou perchance by one art healed.

“But if herbs can naught avail,  
A potent spell can never fail.

“Clouds to a potent spell will yield,  
That ships in the raging storm can shield.

“A potent spell o'er fire holds sway,  
Rocks can shelter, dragons slay.

“A gleaming star from heaven can rend  
A potent spell thy weal can send.”

“O husband mine, so dear to me,  
Let no vain word trouble thee.

“What was fated at my birth,  
To no balm will yield on earth.

“What has been decreed by fate,  
At man's word will not abate.

“Tho' lifeless on my bed I lie,  
Ever 'neath God's might am I.

“I am ever 'neath God's might,  
Who protects me night by night.

“Tho' I sleep as dead, at morn  
My spirit back to me is borne.

“I rise at morn from weakness freed  
For 'twas thus by God decreed.”

“Wife, these works of thine are naught,  
For thy husband guards his thought.”

At a fire an aged soul  
Water pours from bowl to bowl.

Cauldrons twelve stand in a row,—  
The husband for her aid doth go.

“Mother, hear ! thy skill is great,  
Know’st what each has to await.

“Know’st how plague comes into being,  
Where the Maid of Death is fleeing.

“Tell me, now, with clearness, this:  
What is with my bride amiss?

“In the evening fresh and bright,  
Like a corpse she lies at night.

“Naught has sounded, naught has stirred,  
Ne’er a trace of breathing heard.

“Filled with coldness is her frame,  
E’en as if to dust it came.”

“How can she be aught but dead,  
Since her life but half is led?

“She dwells by day at home with thee,  
At night her soul dwells in a tree.

“Go to the stream beyond the park,  
Thou find’st a willow with shining bark.

“A yellow bough the tree doth bear,  
The spirit of thy bride is there.”

“I have not espoused my bride,  
That with a willow she might abide.

“Near to me my bride shall stay,  
The willow in the earth decay.”

In his arm the axe he held,  
From the root the willow felled.

In the stream amain ’twas cast,  
From the depths a murmur passed.

There came murmur, there came a sigh,  
As of a mother whose end is nigh.

As of a mother in death’s embrace,  
Who to her infant turns her face.

“Round my dwelling what a throng,  
Wherefore sings the knell its song?”

“The wife thou lovest is no more,  
As by a sickle smitten sore.

“At her toil she bore her well,  
Till like a tree hewn down she fell.

“And she sighed in death’s embrace,  
And to her infant turned her face.”

“Ah, woe is me! Ah, grievous woe;  
My bride, unwitting, I laid low.

“In that same hour, thro’ me was left  
My child of mother’s care bereft.

“O thou willow, willow white,  
Why did’st bring me to this plight?

“Half my life thou took’st from me;  
What shall I do unto thee?”

“Let me from the stream be drawn,  
And my yellow bough be sawn.

“The wooden strips thou then shalt take,  
And thereof a cradle make.

“Lay the child therein to sleep,  
That the poor mite may not weep.

“When he lies in slumber there,  
He shall find his mother’s care.

“Plant the boughs by the water-side,  
That no evil them betide.

“Till he to a stripling grown,  
Frame a reed-pipe for his own.

“On the reed-pipe he will sing,  
To his mother answering.”

The Garland (1853)