

**GRAHAM R. TOMSON**  
**[ROSAMUND MARRIOTT WATSON]**

“Ballad of the Bird-bride”

(Eskimo)

They never come back, though I love them well;  
I watched the South in vain;  
The snow-bound skies are blear\* and grey,      \*misty; watering eyes  
Waste and wide is the wild gull's way,  
And she comes never again.

Years ago, on the flat white strand,  
I won my sweet sea-girl:  
Wrapped in my coat of the snow-white fur,  
I watched the wild birds settle and stir,  
The grey gulls gather and whirl.

One, the greatest of all the flock,  
Perched on an ice-floe bare,  
Called and cried as her heart were broke,  
And straight they were changed, that fleet bird-folk,  
To women young and fair.

Swift I sprang from my hiding-place  
And held the fairest fast;  
I held her fast, the sweet, strange thing:  
Her comrades skirled\*, but they all took wing,      \*shrieked [Scottish]  
And smote me as they passed.

I bore her safe to my warm snow house;  
Full sweetly there she smiled;  
And yet, whenever the shrill winds blew,  
She would beat her long white arms anew,  
And her eyes glanced quick and wild.

But I took her to wife, and closed her warm  
With skins of the gleaming seal;  
Her wandering glances sank to rest  
When she held a babe to her fair, warm breast,

And she love me dear and leal.

Together we tracked the fox and the seal,  
And at her behest I swore  
That bird and beast my bow might slay,  
For meat and for raiment, day by day,  
But never a grey gull more.

A weariful watch I kept for aye\* \*for aye = forever  
    'Mid the snow and the changeless frost:  
Woe is me for my broken word!  
Woe, woe's me for my bonny\* bird, \*bright, comely  
    My bird and the love-time lost!

Have you forgotten the old keen life?  
    The hut with the skin-strewn floor?  
O winged white wife, and children three,  
Is there no room left in your hearts for me,  
    Or our home on the low sea-shore?

Once the quarry was scarce and shy,  
    Sharp hunger gnawed us sore,  
My spoken oath was clean forgot,  
My bow twanged and thrice with a swift, straight shot,  
    And slew me sea-gulls four.

The sun hung red on the skies dull breast,  
    The snow was wet and red;  
Her voice shrilled out in a woeful cry,  
She beat her long white arms on high,  
    'The hour is here,' she said.

She beat her arms, and she cried full fain\* \*very eagerly, gladly  
    As she swayed and wavered there.  
'Fetch me the feathers, my children three,  
Feathers and plumes for you and me,  
    Bonny grey wings to wear!'

They ran to her side, our children three,  
    With the plumage black and grey;

Then she bent her down and drew them near,  
She laid the plumes on our children dear,  
    'Mid the snow and the salt sea-spray.

'Babes of mine of the wild wind's kin,  
    Feather ye quick, nor stay,  
Oh, oho! but the wild winds blow!  
Babes of mine, it is time to go:  
    Up, dear hearts, and away!'

And lo! the grey plumes covered them all,  
    Shoulder and breasts and brow.  
I felt the wind of her whirling flight:  
Was it sea or sky? was it day or night?  
    It is always night-time now.

Dear, will you never relent, come back?  
    I loved you long and true.  
O winged white wife, and our children three,  
Of the wild wind's kin though you surely be,  
    Are ye not of my kin too?

Aye, you once were mine, and, till I forget,  
    Ye are mine forever and aye,  
Mine, wherever your wild wings go,  
While shrill wind's whistle across the snow  
And the skies are blear and grey.

[1889]