

GRAHAM R. TOMSON
[ROSAMUND MARRIOTT WATSON]

“Old Pauline”

So your boys are going to Paris? That’s how I lost my own.
Lonely? Ah yes, but I know it, the old are always alone.
You remember my boys, Euphrasie*? No? Was it before your day?
Each, when his turn came, kissed me, and cried; but they went away.
How I longed for them, always, vainly! and thought of them, early and late;
I would start and look round in the pasture if any one clicked the gate.
But a greater sorrow fell on me: my Marie, with eyes so blue,
Grew restless, poor bird! in the home-nest—she must seek her fortune too.
And, once the desire is on them, ’tis a fever, they cannot stay;
And Marie, my poor little Marie! well, I missed her one bright spring day.
’Twas *then* that my heart broke, ’Phrasie, for my children gay and tall,
For fair, vile, glittering Paris had taken them all.
Yet the good God is merciful always; I live, and I have no pain,
Only the old dumb longing for the children home again.
Still I watch the road to the city, up the glistening sun-set track,
But they never come back, Euphrasie—never come back!

[1884]

* *Euphrasia* is a species name for the plant known as “eyebright.” It has been reputed to be good for sore eyes.

GRAHAM R. TOMSON
[ROSAMUND MARRIOTT WATSON]

“Nirvana”

Sleep will He give His beloved?

Not dreams, but the precious guerdon of deepest rest?

Aye, surely! Look on the grave-closed eyes,

And cold hands folded on tranquil breast.

Will *not* the All-Great be just, and forgive?

For He knows (though we make no prayer nor cry)

How our lone souls ached when our pale star waned,

How we watch the promiseless sky.

Life hereafter? Ah no! we have lived enough.

Life eternal? Pray God it may *not* be so.

Have we not suffered and striven, loved and endured,

Run through the whole wide gamut of passion and woe?

Strangest illusion! sprung from a fevered habit of hope,

Wild enthusiast's dream of blatant perfection at best.

Give us darkness for anguished eyes, stillness for weary feet,

Silence, and sleep; but no heaven of glittering, loud unrest.

No more the lifelong labour of smoothing the stone-strewn way;

No more the shuddering outlook athwart the sterile plain,

Where every step we take, every word we say,

Each warm, living hand that we cling to, is but a fence against pain.

And nothing may perish, but lives again? Where? Out of thought, out of sight?

And where is your cresset's flame that the rough wind slew last night?

[1884]

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*
 'Mid the snow and the changeless frost:
Woe is me for my broken word!
Woe, woe's me for my bonny* bird,
 My bird and the love-time lost!

*for aye = forever

*bright, comely

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 quarrry 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*
 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!'

*very eagerly, gladly

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]

GRAHAM R. TOMSON
[ROSAMUND MARRIOTT WATSON]

“A Ballad of the Were-Wolf”
[in Scottish dialect]

| | |
|---|--|
| The gudewife* sits i' the chimney-neuk* An' looks on the loupin* flame; The rain fa's* chill, and the win' ca's* shrill, Ere the auld* gudeman* comes hame.* | *wife; nook *leaping *falls; calls *old; husband; home |
| “Oh, why is your cheek sae* wan, gudewife? An' why do ye glower on me? Sae dour ye luik* i' the chimney-neuk, Wi' the red licht* in your e'e! | *so *look *light |
| “Yet this nicht* should ye welcome me, This *ae nicht mair than a', For I hae* scotched* yon great grey wolf That took our *bairnies twa. | *night *one night more than all *have; “neutralized” *two little children |
| “’Twas a sair*, sair strife for my very life, As I warstled* there my lane; But I'll hae her heart or e'er we part, Gin* ever we meet again. | *painful or difficult *wrestled alone *in case |
| “An' 'twas ae sharp stroke o' my bonny knife That *gar'd her haud awa'; Fu'* fast she went *out-owre the bent Wi'outen* her right fore-paw. | *[idiom]: forced her hold to loosen *full; across the moorland *without |
| “Gae* tak' the foot, o' the drumlie* brute, And hang it upo' the wa'; An' the next time that we meet, gudewife, The tane* of us shall fa'.” | *go; turbid or troubled *[idiom]: one or the other |
| He's flung his pouch on the gudewife's lap, I' the firelicht shinin' fair, Yet naught they saw o' the grey wolf's paw, For a bluidy* hand lay there. | *bloody |
| O hooly*, hooly rose she up, | *slowly and carefully |

Wi' the red licht in her e'e,
Till she stude* but a *span frae the auld gudeman *stood; an (extended) hand's-breadth
Whiles never a word spak'* she. *spoke

But she stripped the *claiths frae her *lang richt arm, *cloths from; long right
That were wrappit roun' and roun',
The first was white, an' the last was red;
And the fresh bluid dreeped* adown. *dripped

She stretchit him out her lang right arm,
An' *cauld as the deid stude he. *cold as the dead
The flames louped bricht i' the *gloamin' licht— *twilight
There was nae hand there to see!—

[1891]

GRAHAM R. TOMSON
[ROSAMUND MARRIOTT WATSON]

“The Moor Girl’s Well”

Where the still sunshine falls
 On faded splendours of old days long done—
The Moorish castle halls
 Void and forsaken, save for wind and sun—
Lies a square court-yard fenced with painted walls.
There, where the yellow sunlight lies asleep,
 Bound in a drowsy spell,
Glimmers that silent water, clear and deep,
 Our village maidens call the More Girl’s Well.

Fair are the village maidens— kind and fair—
 And black-browed Manuela smiles on me,
 Driving her white goats homeward leisurely
Up from the pastures through the evening air,
 And I fling back her jest,
Laughing, with all the will to woo her—yet
I pass—the words unspoken, mine eyelids wet.
 Why, my heart knoweth best.

Through the grey dusk of dawn
 I went one autumn morning, long ago,
 Forth, with my flock behind me trailing slow;
 And to that castle in the veil below—
I know not why—my vagrant steps were drawn.

And I beheld a woman, fair and young,
 Beside the well-spring in the court-yard bare,
 Dabbling her slim feet in the water there,
And singing softly in some outland tongue;
No veil about her golden beauty clung—
 No veil nor raiment rare,
 Save but her dusky hair.

Sweetly she smiled on me, and, lisping, spake,
 Even as a child that strives to say aright
Some unlearned language for its teacher’s sake;

Her long eyes pierced me with their diamond light.
She told me of an old spell laid on her
That bound her in the semblance of a snake,
Lonely and mute as in the sepulchre.

And he who would this bitter bondage break
Must suffer her in serpent form to cling
Close to his breast, unshrinking, undismayed,
And let her cold kiss on his lips be laid
Thrice without faltering.

All this I promised her, for fervently
I long to free her from the evil spell—
Pity and love so swiftly wrought on me!
(Scarce I beheld her but I love her well.)
Then, as I spake, she vanished suddenly,
And o'er the marble came
A great snake, brighter than a shifting flame;

With scales of emerald and of amethyst
Her lithe coils dazzled me, and yet the same
Shown her sad eyes; but quickly, ere I wist,
She twined about me, clammy-chill and cold,
Staying my life-breath with her strangling fold;

The bright eyes neared mine own, the thin mouth hissed,
And I, nice swooning, shrank from her embrace.
'Leave me,' I gasped, and turned aside my face—
'Leave me, and loose me from thy loathly hold!'

The icy bands fell from me; numb with pain,
Half blind, I sank beside the Moor Girl's Well,
Hearing a sough as of the summer rain,
A slow, sad voice from out the depths complain,
'Redoubled tenfold is the cruel spell,'

And sometimes when the yellow dawn is chilled
The memory grips my heart so that I rise,
And go with hurried footsteps down the hill
Where the lone court-yard lies,

And kneeling gaze into those waters still
 Beneath the quiet skies:
'Only come back and I shall do thy will!'

I see, and still the steely deep denies
The piercing sorrow of her diamond eyes;
I seek, but only see
Mine own gaze back at me.

[1891]

GRAHAM R. TOMSON
[ROSAMUND MARRIOTT WATSON]

“Epitaph”

Now lay thee down to sleep, and dream of me;
 Though thou art dead and I am living yet,
Though cool thy couch and sweet thy slumbers be,
 Dream,—do not quite forget.

Sleep all the autumn, all the winter long,
 With never a painted shadow from the past
To haunt thee; only, when the blackbird’s song
 Wakens the woods at last,

When the young shoots grow lusty overhead,
 Here, where the spring sun smiles, the spring wind grieves,
When budding violets close above thee spread
 Their small, heart-shapen leaves,

Pass, O Belovèd, to dreams from slumber deep;
 Recount the store that mellowing time endears,
Thread, through the measureless mazes of thy sleep,
 Our old, unchangeable years.

Lie still and listen—while the sheltering tree
 Whispers of suns that rose, of suns that set—
For far-off echoes of the Spring and me.
 Dream—do not quite forget.

[1893]

GRAHAM R. TOMSON
[ROSAMUND MARRIOTT WATSON]

“Vespertilia”

In the late autumn's dusky-golden prime,
 When sickles gleam and rusts the idle plough,
The time of apples dropping from the bough,
And yellow leaves on sycamore and lime;
O'er grassy uplands far above the sea
Often at twilight would my footsteps fare,
And often I met a stranger-woman there
 Who stayed and spake with me:
Hard by the ancient barrow smooth and green,
Whose rounded burg swells dark upon the sky,
Lording it high o'er dusky dell and dene,
 We wandered—she and I.

Ay, many a time as came the evening hour
And the red moon rose up behind the sheaves,
I found her straying by that barren bower,
Her fair face glimmering like a white wood-flower
That gleams through withered leaves.
Her mouth was redder than the pimpernel,
Her eyes seemed darker than the purple air
'Neath browse half hidden—I remember well—
'Mid mists of cloudy hair.

And all about her breast, around her head,
Was wound a wide veil shadowing cheek and chin,
Woven like the ancient grave-gear of the dead:
 A twisted clasp and pin
Confined her long blue mantle's heavy fold
Of splendid tissue dropping to decay,
 Faded like some rich raiment worn of old,
With rents and tatters gaping to the day.
Her sandals wrought about the threads of gold,
Scarce held together still, so worn were they,
Yet sewn with winking gems of green and blue,
And pale as pearls her naked feet shone through.

And her talk was of some outland rare,
Where myrtles blossom by the blue sea's rim,
And life is ever good and sunny and fair;
'Long since,' she sighed, 'I sought this island grey—
Here, where the winds moan and the sun is dim,
When his beaked galleys cleft the ocean spray,
For love I followed him.'

Once, as we stood, we heard the nightingale
Pipe from a thicket on the sheer hillside,
Breathless she hearkened, still and marble-pale,
Then turned to me with strange eyes open wide—
'Now I remember! . . . Now I know!' said she,
'Love will be life . . . ah, Love *is* Life!' she cried,
'And thou—thou lovest me?'

I took her chill hands gently in mine own,
'Dear, but no love is mine to give,' I said,
'My heart is colder than the granite stone
That guards my true-love in her grassy bed;
My faith and troth are hers, and hers alone,
Are hers . . . and she is dead.'

Weeping, she drew her veil about her face,
And faint her accents were and dull with pain;
'Poor Vespertilia! gone her days of grace,
Now doth she plead for love—and plead in vain:
None praise her beauty now, or woo her smile!

.....

Ah, hadst thou loved me but a little while,
I might have lived again.'

Then slowly as a wave along the shore
She glided from me to yon sullen mound;
My frozen heart, relenting, smote me sore —
Too late—I searched the hollow slopes around,
Swiftly I followed her, but nothing found,

Nor saw nor heard her more.

And now, alas, my true-love's memory,
Even as a dream of night-time half-forgot,
 Fades faint and far from me,
And all my thoughts are of the stranger still,
 Yea, though I loved her not:
I loved her not—and yet—I fain would see,
Upon this wind-swept hill,
Her dark veil fluttering in the autumn breeze;
Fain would I hear her changeful voice awhile,
Soft as the wind of spring-tide in the trees,
And watch her slow, sweet smile.

Ever the thought of her abides with me
Unceasing as the murmur of the sea;
When the round moon is low and night-birds flit,
When sink the stubble-fires with smouldering flame,
Over and o'er the sea-wind sighs her name,
 And the leaves whisper it.

'*Poor Vespertilia*,' sing the grasses sere,
'*Poor Vespertilia*,' moans the surf-beat shore;
Almost I feel her very presence near —
 Yet she comes never more.

[1895]

GRAHAM R. TOMSON
[ROSAMUND MARRIOTT WATSON]

“Hic Jacet”

And is it possible?—and must it be—
At last, indifference ’twixt you and me?
We who have loved so well,
Must we indeed fall under that strange spell,
The tyranny of the grave?

In sullen severance patient and resigned,
By each of each forgotten out of mind—
Dear, is there none to save?
Must you whose heart makes answer to mine own,
Whose voice compels me with its every tone,
Must you forget my fealty to claim,
And I—to turn and tremble at your name,
Sunk in dull slumber neath a lichened stone?
Shall not my pulses leap if you be near?
Shall these endure, the sun, the wind, the rain,
And not of all our tenderness remain,
Our joy—our hope—our fear? . . .

Sweet, ’tis one thing certain— rail or weep,
Plead or defy, take counsel as we may,
It shall not profit us: this, only, pray
Of the blind powers that keep
The harvest of the years we sow and reap,
That not shall sever nor estrange us—Nay,
Let us live out our great love’s little day
Fair and undimmed, before we fall on sleep.

[1895]

GRAHAM R. TOMSON
[ROSAMUND MARRIOTT WATSON]

“Children of the Mist”

The cold airs from the river creep
 About the murky town,
The spectral willows, half asleep,
 Trail their thin tresses down
Where the dim tide goes wandering slow,
Sad with perpetual ebb and flow.

The great blind river, cold and wide,
 Goes groping by the shore,
And still where water and land divide
 He murmurs evermore
The overword of an old song,
The echo of an ancient wrong.

There is no sound 'twixt stream and sky,
 But white mists walk the strand,
Waifs of the night that wander by,
 Wraiths from the river-land—
While here, beneath the dripping trees,
Stray other souls more lost than these.

Voiceless and visionless they fare,
 Known all too well to me—
Ghosts of the years that never were,
 The years that could not be—
And still, beneath the eternal skies
The old blind river gropes and sighs.

[1896]

GRAHAM R. TOMSON
[ROSAMUND MARRIOTT WATSON]

“A Ruined Altar”

“The hair shall kettle on thy cold hearth-stane.” — Thomas the Rhymer

Green is the valley, and fair the slopes around it,
Wide waves of barley shining to the sun;
Softly the stock-doves murmur in the pine trees,
Deep through the hollow the happy waters run.

Ruthless and ruinous lies the little homestead,
All the grey walls of it crumbling to the ground;
Only the hearth-place, steadfast and unshaken,
Stands, like a tomb, 'mid the lusty leafy round.

Foxglove and hemlock blossom in the garden,
Where those bright ragwort tramples on the rose;
Gone is the gate, and lost the little pathway,—
High on the threshold the gaunt nettle grows.

Here, long ago, were toil, and thought, and laughter,
Poor schemes for pleasures, piteous plans for gain,
Love, fear, and strife—for men were born and died here—
Strange human passion, bitter human pain.

Now the square hearth-place, shrouded deep in shadow,
Holds in its hollow wild things of the wood;
Here comes the hawk, and hear the vagrant swallow
Nests in the niche where cup and trencher stood.

Shy furry forms, that hide in break and covert,
Leap on the stone where leapt the yellow flame;
Up the wide chimney, black with vanished smoke-wreaths,
Clambers the weed that wreathes the mantel-frame.

But when cometh Winter and all the weeds are withered
In these bare chambers open to the rain,
Then, when the wind moans in the broken chimney,

And the hare shivers in the sodden lane,
Then the old hearth-nook mourns the folk that filled it,
Mourns for the cheer of the red and golden blaze;
Heaped with the snow-drifts, standing bleak and lonely,
Dreams of the dead and their long-forgotten days.

[1904]

GRAHAM R. TOMSON
[ROSAMUND MARRIOTT WATSON]

“The Cage”

Amid the medley of ironic things

 We break our hearts upon from age to age
Glimmers a question,—Had the bird no wings
Who would have taken thought to build a cage?

[1909?]