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[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!

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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.

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