

Singing the Child Ballads

Rosaleen Gregory

In this column Rosaleen Gregory continues her journey through the Child ballads in her own repertoire, and calls for readers' submissions of the alternative versions that they sing, or of other ballads in the Child canon that she does not perform. This time we cover Child Nos. 37-44.

Rosaleen writes:

Child #37: Thomas Rymer.

Words and tune from *A Bonnie Bunch of Roses (Songs of England, Ireland and Scotland)* by Dan Milner and Paul Kaplan, Oak Publications, 1983, where it is titled "Thomas the Rhymer". They in turn adapted the words from Sir Walter Scott's version in *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. The source of the haunting tune is not given.

This is one of my favourite songs at present, and the guitar chords suggested in this version are simple and unobtrusive. I have slightly altered some of the words to make them more accessible to a non-Scottish audience.

Child #39: Tam Lin.

Another favourite – so much so that I've included two versions, being unable to decide that I like one better than the other. It depends whether I'm feeling upbeat or downbeat.

The first version I learned from the singing of Sandy Denny of Fairport Convention on their 1969 record *Liege and Lief*, where it is stated to be "arranged by [Dave] Swarbrick". The second version I found much later, in the mid-1980s, in *A Bonnie Bunch of Roses*, where it is called "Tomlin". Dan Milner credits the text to J. Maidment, *A New Book of Old Ballads*, and the tune to himself; it is certainly an attractive one, and quite different from the Fairport Convention version, being brighter and less foreboding.

I sing both versions unaccompanied. The Maidment text has the serious flaw (for a story-teller) of stopping dead in mid-action, just when Fair Margaret is standing at Rides Cross waiting for the fairy court to ride by, so when I sing it I either complete the story by inserting further verses (of my own composition but heavily dependent on what has gone before), or, if time is pressing, one succinct verse from the Fairport Convention version:

"In the middle of the night
She heard the bridles ring;
She heeded all that he did say,
And young Tomlin did win"

followed by, in both cases, the last two verses of the Fairport Convention version, for the Fairy Queen's final furious protest.

Child #43: The Broomfield Hill.

Here's another one I've done a fair amount of mucking about with. I've known it since early undergraduate days, and I suspect the tune and words I sang then were from *The Penguin Book of English Folksongs*, my copy of which I've since lost.

I found a version called "The Broomfield Wager" in my 1968 copy of *The Seeds of Love*, a wonderful book of British folksongs compiled and edited by Stephen Sedley and published by Essex Music Limited in association with the English Folk Dance and Song Society in 1967, but neither its melody nor its words were the ones I remembered.

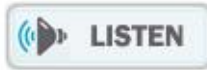
I therefore decided to start afresh and use the *Seeds of Love* text as a basis, with the last two verses omitted and two and a half extra verses added from sources in Child. So my fifth verse is from Child's version D (Kinloch's *Ancient Scottish Ballads*); in the eighth verse I've replaced the third and fourth lines with two lines from Child's version A (Scott's *Minstrelsy*), and my final verse is based on one in Child's version C (Buchan's *Ballads of the North of Scotland*). Since I had no trouble remembering the tune I used to sing at Keele, that's what I use now, and I sing it unaccompanied.

Child #44: The Twa Magicians.

Another unaccompanied song that I learned in the 1960s from Bob, a friend at Keele University whose last name I have unfortunately forgotten, though I still have the sheet of paper on which he kindly typed out the words for me!

Dave and I are pretty sure that Bob learned it from the singing of Martin Carthy (a frequent visitor to Keele Folk Club in those days), who in turn learned it from A. L. Lloyd. There is an almost identical version on the compilation CD of traditional songs *Classic A. L. Lloyd* issued by Fellside Records in 1994.

Thomas the Rhymer



www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue39_4/Thomas_the_Rhymer.mp3

True Thomas lay on Hunt - lie bank, A
fer - lie he spied with his ee, And there he saw a
la - dy bright, Come rid - ing down by the Eil - don tree.

True Thomas lay on Huntlie bank,
A wonder he spied with his ee;
For there he saw a ladye bright,
Come riding down by the Eildon tree.

Her shirt was of the grass-green silk,
Her mantle of the velvet fine;
At every tuft of her horse's mane
Hung fifty silver bells and nine.

True Thomas, he pulled off his cap
And louted low down to his knee,
"All hail, thou mighty Queen of Heaven!
For thy peer on earth I did never see."

"O no, O no, Thomas," she said,
"That name does not belong to me;
I am but the Queen of fair Elfland,
That am hither come to visit thee."

"Harp and carp, Thomas," she said;
"Harp and carp along with me;
And if ye dare to kiss my lips,
Sure of your body I will be."

"Betide me weal, betide me woe,
That doom shall never daunton me."
Soon he has kissed her rosy lips,
All underneath the Eildon tree.

"Now, ye maun go with me," she said,
"True Thomas, ye maun go with me;
And ye maun serve me seven years,
Thro' weal or woe as may chance to be."

She's mounted on her milk-white steed;
And ta'en true Thomas up behind,
And aye, whene'er her bridle rang,
The steed flew swifter than the wind.

O they rode on, and farther on,
The steed gaed swifter than the wind,
Until they reached a desert wide,
For living land was left behind.

"Light down, light down now, true Thomas,
And lean your head upon my knee;
Abide and rest a little space,
And I will show you wonders three."

"O see ye not yon narrow road,
So thick beset with thorns and briers?
That is the path of righteousness,
Though after it but few enquires."

"And see ye not that braid, braid road,
That lies across that lily leven?
That is the path of wickedness,
Though some call it the road to heaven."

"And see ye not that bonny road,
That winds about the fernie brae?
That is the road to fair Elfland,
Where thou and I this night maun gae."

"But Thomas, ye maun hold your tongue,
Whatever ye may hear or see;
For, if you speak in Elfyn land,
Ye'll never get back to your ain countrie."

O they rode on, and farther on,
And they waded through rivers aboon the knee,
And they saw neither sun nor moon,
But they heard the roaring of the sea.

It was mirk mirk night, there was nae starlight,
And they waded through red blood to the knee;
For all the blood that's shed on earth
Runs through the springs of that countrie.

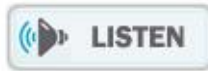
Then they came on to a garden green,
And she pulled an apple frae a tree.
"Take this for thy wages, true Thomas,
It will give thee the tongue that can never lie."

"My tongue is mine ain," true Thomas said,
"A goodly gift ye would give to me!
For I could neither buy nor sell
At fair or tryst where I may be."

"I could neither speak to prince nor peer,
Nor ask of grace from fair lady."
"Now hold thy peace!" the lady said,
"For as I say, so must it be."

He has gotten a coat of the even cloth,
And a pair of shoes of velvet green;
And till seven years were gone and past,
True Thomas on earth was never seen.

Tam Lin



www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue39_4/Tam_Lin.mp3

I for - bid you maid - ens all that wear gold in your hair,
To trav - el to Car - ter Haugh, For young Tam Lin is there.

I forbid you, maidens all, that wear gold in your hair,
To travel to Carter Haugh, for young Tam Lin is there.

None that go by Carter Haugh but they leave to him a pledge,
Either their mantle of green, or else their maidenhead.

Janet's tied her kirtle green a bit above her knee,
And she's gone to Carter Haugh as fast as go can she.

She's not pulled a double rose, a rose but only two,
When up and came young Tam Lin, says "Lady, pull no more!

And why come you to Carter Haugh without command of me?"
"I'll come and go," young Janet said, "and ask no leave of thee."

Janet's tied her kirtle green a bit above her knee,
And she's gone to her father as fast as go can she.

Well up and spoke her father dear, and he spoke meek and mild,
"O and alas, Janet!" he said, "I fear you go with child."

"Well and if that be so," Janet said, "myself shall bear the blame,
There's not a knight in all your hall shall get the baby's name."

"For if my love were an earthly knight as he is an elfin gay,
I'll not change my own true love for any knight you have."

Janet's tied her kirtle green a bit above her knee,
And she's gone to Carter Haugh as fast as go can she.

"O tell to me, Tam Lin," she said, "why came you here to dwell?"
"The Queen of Fairies caught me, when from my horse I fell."

And at the end of seven years she pays a tithe to Hell,
I am so fair and full of flesh I'm feared it be myself."

"But tonight is Hallowe'en and the fairy folk ride,
Those that would their true love win, at Miles Cross they must bide."

"First let pass the horses black, and then let pass the brown,
Quickly run to the white steed and pull the rider down."

"For I ride on the white steed, the nearest to the town,
For that I was an earthly knight they give me that renown."

"O they will turn me in your arms to a newt or a snake,
But hold me tight and fear not, I am your baby's father."

"And they will turn me in your arms into a lion bold,
But hold me tight and fear not, and you will love your child."

"And they will turn me in your arms into a naked knight,
Cloak me in your mantle and keep me out of sight."

In the middle of the night she heard the bridles ring,
She heeded what he did say, and young Tam Lin did win.

Then up and spoke the Fairy Queen, and an angry queen was she:
"Woe betide her ill-faur'd face, an ill death may she die!"

"O, had I known, Tam Lin," she said, "what this night I did see,
I'd have looked you in the eyes and turned you to a tree!"

Tomlin



www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue39_4/Tomlin.mp3

O, all you la - dies young and gay, Who
are so sweet and fair, Do not go in - to
Chas - ter's wood, For Tom - lin will be there.

O, all you ladies young and gay,
Who are so sweet and fair,
Do not go into Chaster's wood,
For Tomlin will be there.

Fair Margaret sat in her bonny bower,
Sewing a silken seam:
She's wished to be in Chaster's wood,
Among the leaves so green.

She's let the seam fall to her foot,
The needle to her toe;
And she is down to Chaster's wood
As fast as she can go.

When she began to pull the flowers,
She pull'd both red and green;
Then by did come, and by did go,
Said "Lady, let alone."

“O! why pluck you the flowers, lady,
Or why climb you the tree;
Or why come you to Chaster’s wood
Without the leave of me?”

“O! I will pull the flowers”, she said,
And I will break the tree,
For Chaster’s wood it is my own;
I’ll ask no leave at thee.”

He took her by the milk-white hand,
And by the grass-green sleeve;
And laid her down upon the flowers,
At her he ask’d no leave.

The lady blush’d and sourly frown’d,
As she did think great shame;
Says, “If you are a gentleman,
You’ll tell to me your name”.

“First they did call me Jack”, he said,
“And then they called me John;
But since I liv’d in the fairy court,
Tomlin has been my name.”

“So do not pluck that flower, lady,
That bears the pimples gray;
That would destroy the bonny babe
That we’ve got in our play”.

“O! tell to me, Tomlin,” she said,
And tell it to me soon:
Was you ever at a good church door,
Or got you Christendom?”

“O! I have been at a good church door,
And oft her gates within;
I was the laird of Foulis’s son,
The heir of all his land.”

“But it fell once upon a day,
As hunting I did ride;
As I rode east and west yon hill,
There woe did me betide.”

“O! drowsy, drowsy as I was,
Dead sleep upon me fell;
The Queen of fairies she was there,
And took me to hersel’.”

“But the morn at even is Hallowe’en,
The fairy court will ride,
Through England and through Scotland both,
Through all the world so wide;
And if that ye would me borrow,
At Rides Cross ye may bide.”

“You may go into the Miles Moss,

Between twelve hours and one;
Take holy water in your hand,
And cast a compass round.”

“The first court that comes along,
You’ll let them all pass by;
The next court that comes along,
Salute them reverently.”

“The next court that comes along,
Is clad in robes of green;
And that’s the head court of them all,
For in it rides the Queen.”

“And I myself on a milk-white steed,
With a gold star in my crown;
Because I am an earthly man,
They give me that renown.”

“Then seize upon me with a spring,
And to the ground I’ll fa’;
And then you’ll hear a rueful cry,
That Tomlin is awa’.”

“Then I’ll grow in your arms two,
Like to a savage wild;
But hold me fast, let me not go,
I’m the father of your child.”

“I’ll grow into your arms two,
Like an adder, or a snake;
But hold me fast, let me not go,
I’ll be your earthly mate.”

“And I’ll grow into your arms two,
Like ice on a frozen lake;
But hold me fast, let me not go,
Nor from your two arms break.”

“And I’ll grow into your arms two,
Like iron in a strong fire;
But hold me fast, let me not go,
And you’ll have your desire.”

And it’s next night into Miles Moss
Fair Margaret has gone;
And there she stands beside Rides Cross,
Between twelve hours and one.

There’s holy water in her hand,
To cast a compass round:
And presently a fairy band
Comes riding o’er the mound.
[end of *J. Maidment* version]

The first court that came along,
She let them all pass by;
The next court that came along,

She saluted reverently.

The next court that came along
Was clad in robes of green:
It was the head court of them all,
For in it rode the Queen.

And he himself on a milk-white steed,
With a gold star in his crown;
She seized upon him with a spring
And pulled the rider down.

Then he grew in her arms two,
Like to a savage wild;
But she held fast, let him not go,
The father of her child.

And he grew in her arms two
Like an adder, or a snake;
She held him fast, let him not go,
He was her earthly mate.

And he grew in her arms two
Like ice on a frozen lake;
But she held fast, let him not go,

Nor from her two arms break.

And he grew in her arms two
Like iron in a strong fire:
She held him fast, let him not go,
And she had her desire.

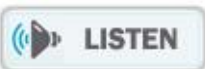
[if time is pressing, the previous seven verses can be replaced with the following verse:

In the middle of the night
She heard the bridles ring;
She heeded all that he did say,
And young Tomlin did win.]

Then up and spoke the fairy Queen,
And an angry queen was she:
“Ill betide her ill-faur’d face!
An ill death may she die!”

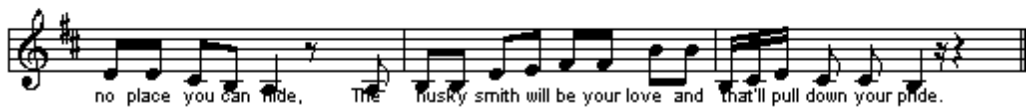
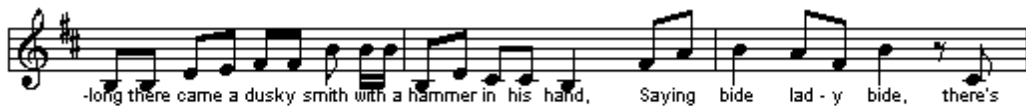
“O! had I known, Tomlin”, she said,
“What this night I did see,
I’d have look’d into your two gray eyes
And turn’d you to a tree!”

The Two Magicians



LISTEN

www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue39_4/Two_Magicians.mp3



The lady stood at her own front door
As straight as a willow wand,
And along there came a dusky smith
With a hammer in his hand,
Saying, “Bide, lady, bide,
There’s nowhere you can hide,
The husky smith will be your love
And that’ll pull down your pride.”

“Well may you dress you, lady fair,
All in your robes of red,
But before tomorrow at this same time

I’ll have your maidenhead.”
Saying, “Bide, lady, bide,” etc.

“Away, away, you coal-black smith,
Would you do me this wrong,
To think to have my maidenhead
That I have kept so long.”

“I’d rather I was dead and cold
And my body laid in the grave
Than a husky, dusky coal-black smith
My maidenhead should have.”

And the lady she held up her hand
 And swore upon her soul,
 She never would be the blacksmith's love
 For all of a box of gold.

And the blacksmith he held up his hand
 And swore upon the mass:
 "I'll have you in my bed, young girl,
 For half of that or less."
 Saying, "Bide, lady, bide," etc.

Then she became a little dove
 And flew up in the air,
 And he became an old cock pigeon
 And they flew pair and pair,
 Cooing, "Bide, lady, bide," etc.

Then she became a little duck
 A-swimming on the pond,
 And he became a pink-necked drake
 And chased her round and round,
 Quacking, "Bide, lady, bide," etc.

Then she became a little hare
 A-running on the plain,
 And he became a greyhound dog
 And chased her back again,
 Barking, "Bide, lady, bide," etc.

Then she became a little mare
 As dark as the night was black,
 And he became a golden saddle
 And clung on to her back,
 Creaking, "Bide, lady, bide," etc.

Then she became a hot griddle
 And he became a cake,
 And every change that poor girl made
 The blacksmith was her mate,
 Saying, "Bide, lady, bide," etc.

Then she became a full-dressed ship
 A-sailing on the sea,
 And he became a captain bold
 And aboard of her went he,
 Roaring, "Bide, lady, bide," etc.

Then the lady ran in her own bedroom
 And changed into a bed,
 And he became a green coverlet
 And gained her maidenhead.

And was she woe he held her so?
 And still he bade her bide,
 So the husky smith became her love
 And that pulled down her pride.

The Broomfield Hill



www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue39_4/Broomfield_Hill.mp3

A wag - er, a wa - ger with
 you my pret - ty maid, Here's five hun - dred pounds to
 your ten, That a maid - en you may go to
 yon mer - ry green broom, But a maid - en you shall
 nev - er more re - turn.

“A wager, a wager with you my pretty maid,
Here’s five hundred pounds to your ten,
That a maiden you may go to the merry green broom
But a maiden you shall never more return.”

“A wager, a wager with you kind sir,
It’s five hundred pounds to my ten,
That a maiden I will go to the merry green broom
And a maiden I’ll return back again.”

And when that she came to the bonny broom field
Her true love lay there fast asleep,
With his horse by his head and a knife in his hand
And his greyhound it lay at his feet.

O three times she walked round the crown of his head,
And three times she walked round his feet,
And three times she kissed his red rosy lips,
As he lay on the ground fast asleep.

Sound, sound was the sleep he took,
For he slept till it was noon,
And his lady came at day, left a token, and away,
Went as light as a glint of the moon.

She took from her left hand her golden ring
And placed it on his right hand,
And all for a token when he did awake
That his true love had been there and gone.

“O, where were you, my good greyhound,
That once I bought so dear,
That you did not waken me from my sleep
When my true love was here?”

“Three times I patted with my foot, master,
And three times I made my bells to ring,
No bird flies faster through the wood
Than she fled through the broom.”

“You must sleep more in the night, master,
And wake more in the day,
And then you will see when your true love she does come
And when she goes away.”

When she went out, right bitterly she wept,
But singing came she home,
“A maiden I have been to the merry green broom
And a maiden I’ve returned back again.”