

## *Reading a poem*

**A VALENTINE by Mary Rae Campbell**

*When I was young and foolish  
I heard a wise man say,  
"Marry me! Marry me! Marry me!"  
But lightly I said "Nay".*

*When I was young and lonely  
A letter he did pen,  
"Would God that you could love me!"  
I laughed and said "Amen".*

*A ring upon my finger  
It seemed a pretty token.  
I thought a promise lightly made  
As lightly could be broken.*

*Now care and time and children  
Have bound me to his side;  
And he has a loving wife,  
Who had a thoughtless bride.*

*Did he with man's low cunning  
Beguile me to be true?  
Or was that thoughtless foolish girl  
Yet wiser than she knew?*

This piece was an also-ran in a *Literary Review* "Grand Poetry Competition" for poems which rhyme and scan. It is difficult to forget. It may look like an easy, run-of-the-mill, versifying job, but it wonderfully captures the tone of voice and character of both the speakers. Take only the two lines where the rhythm is broken. "Marry me, marry me, marry me" tells us how impatient he was; "And he has a loving wife/ Who had a thoughtless bride" forces the reader to stress the contrast. It seems she still can't quite believe it. But there is deeper game. The poem opens with a borrowing from Yeats which leads us to suspect that misery is on the way: "She bid me take love easy as the grass grows on the weirs;/ But I was young and foolish, and now am full of tears." The gloom deepens with the ballad flavour of the inversion of normal word order in line six and the superfluous "it" in line 10. When, "The king *he* writes a loving letter/ with his ain hand sae tenderly", we know the rivers will soon be running red. But the rarity is that the poem speaks with such grace and humour about the forbidden subject of a long, loving marriage. If this is easy to do, why has it not been done more often? ●

DAVID WEST

This poem had a lot of resonance for Valentine, and she put on  
our bedroom wall where it has been for 30 or more years.