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The Emigrant or Reflections While Descending the Ohio

Frederick W. (Frederick William) Thomas

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THE
EMIGRANT,

OR

REFLECTIONS

WHILE DESCENDING THE OHIO.

A Poem,
BY FREDERICK W. THOMAS.

"Westward the star of Empire takes its way."

From the original Edition of 1833, to which is added a memoir of
the author.

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PREFACE.

This Poem was written under the circumstances which its title implies. Three years since, as the author was descending the Ohio, to become a citizen of the West, he wrote a considerable number of stanzas, expressive of his feelings, six or eight of which were published as a fragment on his arrival in Cincinnati, in the Commercial Daily Advertiser, and republished and noticed by different prints in a way that induced the author, from time to time, to add stanzas to stanzas, until they almost imperceptibly reached their present number. He wrote on, without any previous study of the style or manner in which the subject should be pursued--using the poetic license of light and shade as Fancy dictated. Being in ill health, and coming to a strange land, it was very natural for his Reflections to be of a sombre cast, without there being any thing peculiar in his situation differing from that of other Emigrants.

The reader will perceive that the metrical arrangement of the stanzas is the same as that used by Gray, in his Ode to Adversity, with this difference, that the Ode is written in lines of eight syllables, and the author has attempted the heroic measure.

iv

After the Poem had been finished some time, the author delivered it in the Hall of the Lyceum to an assemblage of Ladies and Gentlemen. Their reception and that of the several editors (to whom he is most grateful) who noticed its delivery, and gave extracts from the Poem, induced him to publish it.

The author has by him many manuscript pieces with which he might have swelled the volume to a much greater size; but as this is his first attempt at authorship, in the shape of a volume, he offers it, tremblingly, at the ordeal of public opinion, merely as a sample of his ware.

DEDICATION.

TO CHARLES HAMMOND, ESQ.

My Dear Sir,

Before I had the pleasure of your personal acquaintance, differing from you as I do on many political points, I imbibed some of those impressions against you, which ever attach to an exalted character, when he takes a decided stand in the political arena.

Permit me, Sir, in acknowledging how much those impressions were prejudices, to inscribe this volume to you, in testimony of my admiration for your talents, and respect for your virtues. And, moreover, as the first encouragement which I received, for this my first literary attempt of any length, proceeded from yourself; if it has merit, I know no one to whom I should more properly inscribe it than to the one, who being entitled to speak *ex cathedra* on the subject, first cheered me with the hope of its success. And if it shall be found to be destitute of merit, while it shows that your judgment has for once been wrong, it will also prove that the error proceeded from a personal partiality, for which I am anxious to express my gratitude.

I am, Sir,
With the greatest respect,
Your obliged friend and humble servant,
THE AUTHOR.

Cincinnati, *April 23, 1833.*

MEMOIR.

Frederick William Thomas was the oldest child of E. S. Thomas and Anna his wife. He was born at Providence Rhode Island, but spent his earlier years at Charleston South Carolina, where Mr. E. S. Thomas resided and edited and published the Charleston City Gazette.

While Frederick William was still young, Mr. Thomas removed to Baltimore Maryland, and there his son was educated and brought up to the profession of the law. Being unfortunate in business, when Frederick William was about nineteen, Mr. Thomas resolved to remove with his family to the west, which he did, making Cincinnati his place of residence. His son however, remained in Baltimore.

It was in the following year while journeying West, to join his family in their new home, that this poem--the Emigrant was suggested to him, by the associations and the romantic scenery of the Ohio river, and while descending it most, if not all the poem, was written. He was about twenty-one when it appeared. It was followed by "Clinton Bradshaw," or the adventures of a Lawyer, published by Carey, Lee and Blanchard, of Philadelphia. This was called the best American Novel of its time. Mr. Thomas' next venture was "East and West" which was succeeded by "Howard Pinkney." During the years which intervened viii between the writing of these books he resided in the west, principally in Cincinnati, and wrote tales, sketches, fugitive poetry, delivered lectures, and made political speeches. In 1840 when General Harrison was elected President, Mr. Thomas went to Washington City. After General Harrison's death, Mr. Tyler gave him an office under government and he continued to reside at the Capital, but wrote little except an occasional song or story. Some years elapsed and Mr. Thomas left Washington and went south on a lecturing tour. He was engaged to write for several newspapers and continued lecturing through the South and West. His literary efforts at this period were chiefly confined to Magazine articles, short poems and songs. His song "T'is said that Absence conquers Love," was one of the most popular of the day. He often spoke of the feeling he had in passing of a summers night

through a strange city and having his own words greet him from houses whose inmates only knew of his existence through them.

Clinton Bradshaw was also very popular. An American visiting Calcutta India, wrote home of the thrill it gave him to find it on the shelves of a book store there.

Mr. Thomas was popular in society for he was amiable and entertaining. He was a fine belle letter scholar, and was remarkable for his conversationable powers--he had a fund of anecdote always at command. He was a great observer and studier of Character and a believer in human nature.

The year 1866 found him again in Washington city where after a short illness he died. Recently his remains have been brought to Cincinnati, by his brother Calvin W. Thomas and placed beside those of his parents in Spring Grove Cemetery.

The Emigrant,

OR REFLECTIONS [1] WHILE DESCENDING THE OHIO.

I.

We both are pilgrims, wild and winding river!
Both wandering onward to the boundless West--
But thou art given by the good All-giver,
Blessing a land to be in turn most blest: [2]
While, like a leaf-borne insect, floating by,
Chanceful and changeful is my destiny;
I needs must follow where thy currents lave--
Perchance to find a home, or else, perchance a grave.

II.

Yet, dost thou bear me on to one I've loved
From Boyhood's thoughtlessness to Manhood's thought,
In all the changes of our lives, unmoved--
That young affection no regret has brought:
Beloved one! when I seem Fortune's slave,
Reckless and wrecked upon the wayward wave,
Bright Hope, the Halcyon, rises o'er the sea,
Calming the troubled wave--bearing my heart to thee.

10

III.

Alas! we parted: what a bitter sorrow
Clings to the memory of our last embrace!
No joy to-day, no promise of to-morrow,
No idol image, shall usurp thy place:
For thee my holiest hope is upward given--
My love for thee is with my love for Heav'n,
A dedication of my heart to thine,

With God to smile on both, and consecrate the shrine.

IV.

Our home, when last I saw it, was all lone;
Yet my affections peopled it with those
Whose sunny smile upon my boyhood shone;
Then came reality,--the heart-spring froze:--
There was the stream, the willow, and the wild wood,
Where, emulous of height, in playing childhood,
With hearts encircled, on the beechen tree,
Dear one, I carved thy name, but then thou wert with me.

V.

Thou wert my nurse in many an hour of pain,
My comforter in many an hour of sadness;
And when my spirit leaped to joy again,
Thou wert the one who joyed most in its gladness.
Ay, more than nurse--and more than comforter--
Thou taught'st my erring spirit not to err,
Gave it a softness nature had not given,
As now the blessed moon makes earth resemble heav'n.

11

VI.

How deep the bitterness alone to grieve
In grief's deep hour--the death-watch of the night--
When Fancy can no more her day dreams weave,
And there seems madness in the moon's pale light--
When sorrow holds us, like a life-long state,
Not as a portion, but the whole of fate,
When the mind yields, like sick men to their dreams,
Who know all is not right, yet know not that which seems.

VII.

Why come such thoughts across the brow? Oh, why
Cannot the soul sit firmly on her throne,
And keep beside her strong Philosophy?
Alas! I am a wanderer and alone.
Beneath deep feeling reason's self must sink;
We cannot change the thought, yet we *must* think;
And, O! how darkly come such thoughts to me--
The gathered pangs of years, recounting agony.

VIII.

Who has not felt, in such a night as this,
The glory and the greatness of a God,
And bowed his head, in humbleness, to kiss
His merciful and kindly chast'ning rod?
The far off stars! how beautiful and bright!
Peace seems abroad upon the world to-night;
And e'en the bubble, dancing on the stream,
Is glittering with hope,--a dream--a very dream!
12

IX.

In sickness and in sorrow, how the breast
Will garner its affections in their home!
Like stricken bird that cowers within its nest,
And feels no more an anxiousness to roam;
While a thick darkness, like a cloud, comes o'er
The gallant spirit;--it can rise no more
To wing its way, as if it sought the sky,
But falls to earth, forlorn, as though it fell to die.

X.

And yet, there is a torturing sense of life,

E'en in the feeling of the quick drawn breath,
That tells of many years of woe and strife,
Ekeing our being out, though bringing death:
While Fancy, with a thousand thronging tales,
Now in her gladness, now in woe, prevails,—
Till the dark moment of o'erwhelming grief,
When sorrow mourns as one who cannot find relief.

XI.

Is health returnless? Never more may I
Throw by the staff on which, alas! I lean?
Is the woof woven of my destiny?
Shall I ne'er be again what I have been?
And must th' bodily anguish be combined
With the intenseness of the anxious mind?
The fever of the fame and of the soul,
With no medicinal draught to quell it or control.

13

XII.

Upon my brow I feel the furrow's course,
Deep sinking inward to the source of thought;
The deeper sinking if I seek its source,
Or try to crush its agony, unsought,
O! tell thy secret, thou stern vampyre, Care!
E'en for Philosophy thou hast a snare,
For in thy quest she wears the galling chain,
Making the burden more, the more she'd soothe its pain.

XIII.

Sweet solace of the life-lorn! Hope! to thee
How oft in loneliness the heart will turn,
To quell the pang of its keen misery;
While wailing sorrow weeps o'er memory's urn:

14

Rise from the ashes of my buried years!
The past comes up with overflowing tears,
To quench the promises that would arise:--
They're in the future far--where are they?--in the skies!

XIV.

My hopes, e'en my hopes, wither; a dark cloud
Has passed between them and the glorious sun,
Clothing the breathing being in a shroud--
The pall is o'er them and their race is run:
Their epitaph is written in my heart--
The all of mem'ry that can ne'er depart--
Yes, it is here! the truth of every dream,
The ever-present thought, in every varying theme.

14

XV.

O! who can pierce the cloud that o'er him lowers?
It were as vain my wayward fate to scan;
Enough, 'twill come with th' onhurrying hours--
The futile purpose or the settled plan:
Or Death, perchance, e'en now each tie may sever!
There's many a grave in this bright rolling river,
That's bounding onward where the one I love,
To meet my coming, now, on its far banks may rove.

XVI.

And, but that thou would'st feel a pang for me,
'Twere sweet, methinks, to sleep beneath the wave;
Its murmuring song, like sweetest minstrelsy,
Would rest a wanderer in an early grave,
Within thee, River, many a pale face sleeps--
And many a redman's ghost his vigil keeps--
And many a maid has watched the dark banks over--

He comes not, yet, in truth, he was a faithful lover.

XVII.

For then, perchance, thy stream ran red with blood,
Then pale and red men met upon thy shore--
Embracing foes they sunk within the flood,
Fierce twins in death, and joined forevermore,--
Forevermore in time. Eternity!

Thy doom we see not, and we may not see,
But God is just! to Him the red race fly,
Driv'n to the pathless West, thence upward to the sky.

15

XVIII.

Here once Boone trod--the hardy Pioneer--
The only white man in the wilderness: [3]
Oh! how he loved, alone, to hunt the deer,
Alone, at eve, his simple meal to dress;
No mark upon the tree, nor print, nor track,
To lead him forward, or to guide him back;
He roved the forest, king by main and might,
And looked up to the sky and shaped his course aright.

XIX.

That mountain, there, that lifts its bald high head
Above the forest, was, perchance, his throne;
There has he stood and marked the woods outspread,
Like a great kingdom, that was all his own;
In hunting shirt and moccassins arrayed,
With bear skin cap, and pouch, and needful blade,
How carelessly he leaned upon his gun!
That sceptre of the wild, that had so often won.

XX.

Those western Pioneers an impulse felt,
Which their less hardy sons scarce comprehend;
Alone, in Nature's wildest scenes, they dwelt,
Where crag, and precipice, and torrent blend,
And stretched around the wilderness, as rude
As the red rovers of its solitude,
Who watched their coming with a hate profound,
And fought with deadly strife for every inch of ground.

16

XXI.

To shun a greater ill sought they the wild?
No! they left happier lands behind them far,
And brought the nursing mother and her child
To share the dangers of the border war;
The log-built cabin from the Indian barred,
Their little boy, perchance, kept watch and ward,
While Father ploughed with rifle at his back,
Or sought the gluttoned foe through many a devious track.

XXII.

How cautiously, yet fearlessly, that boy
Would search the forest for the wild beast's lair,
And lift his rifle with a hurried joy
If chance he spied the Indian lurking there:
And should they bear him prisoner from the fight,
While they are sleeping in the dead midnight,
He slips the thongs that bind him to the tree,
And leaving death with them, bounds home right happily. [4]

XXIII.

Before the mother, bursting through the door,

The redman rushes where her infants rest;
Oh God! he hurls them on the cabin floor!
While she, down kneeling, clasps them to her breast.
How he exults and revels in her woe,
And lifts the weapon, yet delays the blow:
Ha! that report! behold! he reels! he dies!
And quickly to her arms the husband--father--flies.
17

XXIV.

In the long winter eve, their cabin fast,
The big logs blazing in the chimney wide--
They'd hear the Indian howling, or the blast,
And deem themselves in castellated pride:
Then would the fearless forester disclose
Most strange adventures with his sylvan foes,
Of how his arts did over theirs prevail,
And how he followed far upon their bloody trail.

XXV.

And it was happiness, they said, to stand,
When summer smiled upon them in the wood,
And see their little clearing there expand,
And be the masters of the solitude.
Danger was but excitement; and when came
The tide of Emigration, life grew tame;
Then would they seek some unknown wild anew,
And soon, above the trees, the smoke was curling blue.

XXVI.

Long e'er the pale-face knew them, or their land,
Here, too, the redmen met in the stern strife
Of foe to foe and bloody hand to hand--
The mortal agony of life for life:

How fertile is this "dark and bloody ground!"
Here Death has given many a horrid wound! [5]
Here was the victim tortured to the stake,
While dark Revenge stood by, his burning thirst to slake.
18

XXVII.

Methinks I see it all within yon dell,
Where trembles thro' the leaves the clear moonlight;
Say, Druid Oak, can'st not the story tell?
Why met they thus? and wherefore did they fight?
And wept his maiden much? and who was he,
Who thus so calmly bore his agony?
Sang he his death song well? was he a chief?
And mourned his nation long in notes of lengthened grief?

XXVIII.

Here, from the woods, he came to woo his mate,
And launched, to meet her, his bark-built canoe:
Who would have thought he had a soul to hate
To see him thus, all gentleness to woo?
In tenderest tone he tells his deeds of war,
With blandest feeling shows the ghastly scar
He joyed to take, that he might win his bride,
His own, his blushing one--the dark-eyed by his side.

XXIX.

Again he goes--again she looks for him--
At the death-stake her warrior-love is tied:
Say, when he thought of her, did the tear swim?
Shook, for an instant, that bold Indian's pride?
No! when he thought of her, it was to nerve
A soul whose purpose knew not how to swerve!
For this she loves him, holds him doubly dear;

He knows what 'tis to love, but not what 'tis to fear.

19

XXX.

O, Love what rhymer has not sung of thee?
And, who, with heart so young as his who sings,
Knows not thou art self-burdened as the bee,
Who, loving many flowers, must needs have wings?
Yes, thou art wing'd, O, Love! like passing thought,
That now is with us, and now seems as nought,
Until deep passion stamps thee in the brain,
Like bees in folded flowers that ne'er unfold again.

XXXI.

Who does not love his early dream of love?--
The passionate fondness of the happy boy,
When woman's lightest look the pulse would move
To the wild riot of extatic joy;
The tremulous whisper, mingling hopes and fears,
Her very presence, that so long endears
The spot, on which the mutual vow was giv'n,
The interchange of love, and the on-looking Heav'n.

XXXII.

This is the tale that never tires in telling--
If woman listens as ye tell the tale:
And then, to mark her gentle bosom swelling,
And feel the fervor of your faith prevail!
Her tone, the confidence of her bright eye,
That looks to yours its eloquent reply!
And then, her seeming doubt--spoke you in vain?
O! no! she only doubts to hear you speak again!

20