Bessy Bell and Mary Gray 2

(alternate:)

BESSBELL.2

Bessy Bell and Mary Gray 2

Bessy Bell an Mary Gray,
They were twa bonny lasses;
They built their hoose upon the ley,
An covered it wi rashes.

Bessy kept the gairden gate,
An Mary kept the pantry;
Bessy Bell had aye tae wait,
While Mary leeved in plenty.

Montgomerie SNR (1946), 113 (no. 141). 2nd stanza in Rymour Club Misc. I (1906-11), 124, "as a rhyme sung by the children at Cummertrees": "O, Bessie kept the garden gate,/ And Mary kept the pantry;/ Bessie had all day to wait,/ While Mary lived in plenty."
See ODNR 71: refs. to The Cheerful Warbler (J. Kendrew), c. 1820, first verse only, with "They built their house with walls of clay"; Halliwell 1842 [p. 36, LVI, evidently first printing of the complete rhyme]. With music in Moffat TSNR (1933), 3, var. (anglicisation) "Poor Bessie always had to wait".
Of the adult song there are two versions: (A) is anon., in MCA (1874), 20. 2 v. of 8 lines. Line 5, "They theekit it o'er wi' rashes green". Note says "According to tradition, Bessy Bell and Mary Gray were two young ladies of Perthshire, who, at the time of the plague (in 1645) retired for safety to some cottage or `bower', about a mile from Lynedoch House, Mary Gray's home. A youth, who was much attached to them, supplied them with food from Perth, but at last brought the infection, and they both died; according to custom, they were buried in a lonely spot, instead of with `their noble kin'."
First printed by C.K. Sharpe as "The Twa Lasses" (Ballad Book, 1824). Chambers (SSPB 321) gives a version of the last 4 lines. Ford Harp of Perthshire (1893) 46; idem., Song Histories 145 (4x4 lines). (B) is by Ramsay, 1720, utilising th
SMM II no. 128, with tune; SSPB (+ music) 319, Ford Song

Histories 147, Greig SM III.288 (+ m).
Other words to air include "Mary's Twa Lovers" (Lochore) and other songs by Robert Nicoll, John Leyden, Ebenezer Elliot, James Duff.
The tune is in Orpheus Caledonius, 1725 (1733, I.3); adopted by Gay for "A curse attends that woman's love" in The Beggar's Opera; it appears first in Playford, Original Scots Tunes (1700) as Bessy Bell. What seems an accompaniment is in the Guthrie tablature MS., with the same title. Air also in Stewart's Musick, c. 1725. The air is used in Mitchell's Highland Fair (1731), 45 (XXVIII). See SNQ VII.7 (Dec. 1893), 109-111.
Gomme (II, 1898, 452), has "Rashes", a Derbyshire game, "a relic of the old custom of rush-bearing", using the first 4 lines:

> [In the warm days of May and June the village children gather the finest and best rushes, which are brought with ceremony to some favourite spot and woven into baskets, parasols, etc.] Small arbours are made of green bushes and strewn with rushes, inside which the children sit and play at "keeping house" with much lordly ceremony. At these times they play at a game which consists in joining hands in a circle, and going round a heap of rushes singing or saying--

Mary Green and Bessy Bell,
They were two bonny lasses;

They built a house in yonder hill,
And covered it with rashes.
Rashes, rashes, rashes!

> [At each repetition of "rashes" they loosen hands, pick up a lot of rushes, and throw them into the air to fall on everyone.] --From Thomas Radcliffe, in Long Ago, I.49 (1873).

Child #201

MS

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