

# Nancy MacIntyre

A TALE OF THE PRAIRIES



HENRY SHEPARD PARSONS

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I was takin' leave of Nancy, Standin' out there in the night.

# **Nancy MacIntyre**

# *A Tale of the Prairies*

**LESTER SHEPARD PARKER**

1910



*To My Wee Daughter*  
*RACHEL ELLEN PARKER*  
*this little story is*  
*affectionately inscribed*



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*"Standing there, a pictured goddess  
Sketched against a lowering storm"*

*"But, instead, I shot, to scare him,*

*All the buttons off his coat"*



# **BILLY'S REVERY**

## 1

No use talking, it's perplexing,  
     Everything don't look the same;  
 Never had these curious feelin's  
     Till those MacIntyres came.  
 Quit my plowing long 'fore dinner,  
     Didn't hitch my team again;  
 Spent the day with these new  
     neighbors,  
     Getting 'quainted with the men.  
 Talk about the prairie roses!  
     Purtiest flow'rs in all the world,  
 But they look like weeds for beauty  
     When I think of that new girl.  
 Strange, she seems so kind of  
     friendly  
     When I'm awkward, every way,  
 And my tongue gets hitched and  
     hobbled,  
     Everything I try to say!

## 2

There's one person, that Jim Johnson,  
     That there man I can't abide;  
 He's been milling around near  
     Nancy,--  
     Durn his dirty, yaller hide!  
 Never really liked that Johnson;  
     Now, each time I hear his name,  
 Feel this state's too thickly settled,--  
     That is, since that new girl  
     came.  
 If this making love to women  
     Went like breaking in a horse,  
 I might stand some show of winning,  
     'Cause I've learned that game, of

course;  
But this moonshine folks call  
'courting,'  
I ain't never played that part;  
I can't keep from talking foolish  
When I'm thinking with my  
heart.

3

Now, those women that you read of  
In these story picture books,  
They can't ride in roping distance  
Of that girl in style and looks.  
They have waists more like an insect,  
Corset shaped and double  
cinched;  
Feet just right to make a watch  
charm,  
Small, of course, because  
they're pinched.  
This here Nancy's like God made  
her,--  
She don't wear no saddle girth,  
But she's supple as a willow,  
And the purtiest thing on earth.  
I'm in earnest; let me ask you--  
'Cause I want to reason fair--  
What darn business has that rope-  
necked  
Johnson sneaking over there?

4

Hands so soft and strong and tender,  
When I shook a "how de do,"  
They was loaded sure with  
something  
Seemed to thrill me through and

through;  
Hair as black as fire-burnt prairie;  
Eyes that dance and flash and  
flirt;  
Every time she smiled she showed  
you  
Teeth as white's my Sunday  
shirt.  
Baked us biscuits light as cotton;  
I can't eat mine any more,--  
I must get some better breeches,--  
Kind o' 'shamed of those I wore;  
But I'm goin' there to-morrow,  
Like enough I'll stay all day,  
Seems to me too dry for plowing--  
Durn that Johnson, anyway!

5

I ain't much on deep-down thinkin',  
Reasoning out the way things  
go,  
So I s'pose I'll keep on foolin'  
Till in time I get to know.  
I've had chills and fever 'n' ague;  
Suffered till their course was  
run.  
Maybe love just keeps on runnin',  
Till a man has lost--or won.  
One thing certain: I have got it;  
Seems to struck in good and  
hard.  
Makes me sometimes soft and  
tender;  
Next thing I would fight my  
pard.  
Appetite is surely failing,  
Sometimes I don't eat a bite;  
Dream of Nancy all the daytime,

That durn Johnson, half the  
night.

6

I've just got to get to plowin',  
Break a fire-guard 'round my  
shack,  
Plant my sod corn, fix my garden;  
Everything is goin' to rack.  
I can't work the way I used to;  
Got to quittin' early now,  
Since a little thing that happened,  
I can't just remember how.  
I was takin' leave of Nancy,  
Standin' out there in the night,  
And I put my arms around her--  
Heart stopped beatin', just from  
fright.  
Can't express the kind of feelin',--  
Words wa'n't never made for  
this,--  
As I drew her face up closer,  
And I stole my first sweet kiss.

# THE QUARREL

1

Things have moved along some  
smoother  
Since a week ago to-night,  
Seems my blood turned all to  
p'ison--  
Me and Johnson had a fight.  
Caught him twice up there to  
Nancy's;  
Told him plain to stay  
away;  
But he didn't seem to notice  
Anything I had to say.  
Caught him settin' there and  
talkin'  
'Bout the things that he had  
done--  
Durndest liar on the prairie--  
Laughing like he thought  
'twas fun,  
Settin' there beside o' Nancy--  
Settin' down is all he does,  
Good for nothin', bug-eyed,  
loafin',  
Wrinkled, yaller, meddlin'  
cuss!

2

I just let him keep on settin'  
All the whole long evenin'  
through;

When he started off I follered,  
Told him what I meant to  
do.  
"Why," says he, "now, don't git  
foolish;  
I ain't skeered o' your light  
breeze;  
I'll go thar and set by Nancy,  
Spite o' you, when I blame  
please."  
Well, I don't just clear remember  
All the doin's that took  
place,  
But you'll know the story better  
If you'll look at Johnson's  
face.  
As we rode we clinched and  
wrestled,  
Then we tumbled to the  
ground,  
Tore the bunch grass up, and  
cactus,  
For a hundred yards around.

Then I dragged him on the prairie Through a Turk's Head cactus bed

3

Got him down, and in the  
scrimmage  
Felt my lasso on the  
ground,  
Tied his legs and bent him over,  
Bound him like he's sittin'  
down;  
Hustled quick to mount my  
pony,  
Threw the loose end round  
the horn,

Thought I'd learn that Mr.  
Johnson  
He'd missed out in bein'  
born.  
Then I dragged him on the  
prairie,  
Through a Turk's Head  
cactus bed,  
Prickly pears and shoestring  
bushes,--  
'Twasn't decent what he  
said.  
He's so dev'lish fond of settin',  
Thought I'd fix his settin'  
end  
So's he'd be more kinder careful  
Settin' by that girl again.



# THE DISAPPOINTMENT

I am standing by her dug-out, Open stands the sagging door

1

There's a feeling in my bosom,  
Like a hound that's lost the  
game,  
After chasing over bunch grass  
Till his feet are sore and lame.  
I am standing by her dug-out,  
Open stands the sagging door;  
Every grassblade speaks of Nancy,  
But she's gone, to come no  
more.  
For her father and her mother,  
And her brothers, late last  
night,  
Loaded up their prairie schooner,  
And vamoosed the ranch, 'fore  
light.  
'Taint no use to stand here cussin',  
But my heart slumps down  
like lead  
When I think of losing Nancy  
And to know my dreams are  
dead.

2

It was here I held you, Nancy,  
When I showed you all my  
heart;  
When I told you I would always  
Be your friend and take your

part.  
Oh, I thought that in life's lottery  
I had drawn the biggest prize,  
When I kissed you there that  
evening  
And looked down into your  
eyes;  
For I never had such feelin's  
Fill my hide clean through and  
through  
Such a hungry, starving longing,  
To be always close to you.  
But you've gone with all your  
family,  
And I'm left to mourn my loss,  
While the posse hunts your daddie,  
'Cause he stole Bill Kelly's  
hoss.

3

Now, I don't know where you're  
roaming,  
And I don't know where'll  
you'll land;  
But I wish you knew my feelin's,  
And 'twas clear just how I  
stand:  
How the good Lord, high in heaven,  
Put a throbbing heart in here,  
But it starts to pumping backwards  
When it feels that you don't  
keer.  
I'm a roving old jay-hawker,  
Never caught like this before,  
But I'd give my last possession  
For a glimpse of you once  
more.  
If we lose your old fool father

Folks 'round here can stand the  
loss,  
He was raised in old Missoura,  
Or he'd never stole that hoss.

4

When my mind gets to recalling  
All the happy times we had,  
Good red liquor and tobacco  
Gets to tasting kind o' bad.  
You remember on your birthday  
How I drove 'round kind o'  
late,  
And we went to Donkey Collins'  
To a dance, to celebrate?  
When you got up in my wagon,  
Bless my heart, you sure was  
sweet!  
You was bound that you'd go  
barefoot,  
'Cause your new shoes hurt  
your feet.  
Well, I tell you, pretty Nancy,  
Every minute of that ride  
Seemed like floating through the  
heavens,  
'Cause you set there by my side.

5

When we pulled up at old Collins',  
Quite a bunch was there  
before,  
You could hear the fiddler calling,  
And the scraping on the floor.  
Through the dingy sodhouse  
window  
Gleamed a sickly yellow light,

Where I helped you from the  
wagon,  
Holding you so loving tight.  
Then they called out, "Choose your  
pardners,  
Numbers five, six, seven, and  
eight,"  
And we hustled up to join in,  
For we knew that we were late.  
After starting up the music  
Something happened--you  
know what--  
All because I loved you, Nancy,  
And their manners made me  
hot.

6

I just glanced around the circle,  
When we came to "Balance,  
all;"  
To that mess of cowhide-covered  
Feet that stomped at every call.  
Sure enough, the thing I looked for  
Come to pass when Aleck  
Rose  
Tried to *dos-a-dosby* you, dear,  
And, instead, waltzed on your  
toes.  
Recollect? I stopped the fiddler,  
And I stopped that stomping  
crowd,  
Using language that was decent,  
But was mighty clear and loud:  
"Now, you fellers from the Sand  
Hills,  
Fight me, or if you refuse  
You don't dance with me and Nancy  
While a one of you wears

shoes!"

7

Yes, they took them off, Miss  
Nancy,  
In respect for you and me,  
Putting all on equal footing,  
Just the way it ought to be.  
And we went through all the figures  
That we knew in that quadrille,  
But it didn't seem like dancin',  
Steppin' round so awful still.  
Fiddler, even, did his calling  
In a sort of quiet hush--  
"Swing your pardners," "Back to  
places,"  
"Sounds to me like paddlin'  
mush."  
"Man in center," "Circle round  
him,"  
"All join hands," and "'Way  
you go,"  
"Wait fur Betsy, she's in trouble,  
With a splinter in her toe."

8

When I took you home, towards  
morning,  
Such a night I never saw.  
How the Kansas wind was blowing!  
Swift and keen and kind o'  
raw.  
Blew more furious every minute,  
Blew a hole clear through the  
skies;  
Blew so loud, like demons hissing,  
That the moon was 'fraid to

rise.  
Got so fierce it blew the stars out,  
Saw them flicker, then go  
dead,  
While the blackness, mad and  
murky,  
Rolled in thunder overhead.  
Goin' with it, durn my whiskers!  
Hind wheels riz plumb off the  
ground;  
Goin' 'gainst it, you and me, dear,  
Had to push the hosses down.

9

Now and then a raindrop whistled  
Like a bullet past my head;  
And I hollered out to you, dear,  
"Scrooch down in the wagon  
bed."  
Then they come as big as hen eggs;  
Struck the hosses stinging  
raps,  
Till the frightened, tremblin' critters  
Leaped beneath the angry  
slaps.  
Lord a'mighty, how they  
scampered!  
While I gripped the lines in  
tight,  
As the wagon box sailed upward  
Like a mighty wind-borne kite.  
Down below us ran the hosses,  
While we floated through the  
air,  
But through all that roaring  
shakeup,  
You, dear, never turned a hair.

When the lightning flashed around  
     us,  
     Rabbits stopped to let us by,--  
 Looked as if they said by halting,  
     "We can't race with things that  
     fly!"  
 Coyotes sneaked off in the slough  
     grass,  
     Prairie dogs stayed in their  
     holes;  
 We was lubricated blazes,--  
     Couldn't stop to save our souls.  
 Up the hills we flew like swallows,  
     Down the slopes, a hurricane,  
 Bumped and jumped the humps and  
     hollows,  
     Dragged the ground and riz  
     again.  
 And I prayed, "Dear Lord, save  
     Nancy,  
     For a desperate lover's sake!"  
 You was hangin' to my gallus,  
     And I felt it strain and break.

Felt you holdin' to my boot-leg,  
     Slattin' in the roarin' gale,  
 So, to save you, I worked for'ard,  
     Got the nigh hoss by the tail.  
 Miles on miles we tore on blindly,  
     Had to let the critters roam,  
 Till, at last, they turned their noses  
     To the north, and towards their  
     home.  
 We went charging down a valley,  
     Stopped in something soft and

deep;  
Wagon box and you and me, dear,  
Landed in a mixed-up heap.  
Both the hosses' legs was buried  
And I knew that that was proof  
We had 'lighted on the top of  
Old Jim Davis's dug-out roof.

12

Now, old Jim was sleeping soundly  
Close beside his faithful wife;  
Peace had smoothed his savage  
wrinkles,  
All his dreams were free from  
strife.  
He was safe from ragin' cyclones,  
Wolves could never force his  
door,  
All the ills of life had vanished,  
On his mountain torrent snore.  
So when our descent awoke him  
Sitting bolt upright in bed,  
With the flying hoofs above him,  
Kicking hair off of his head,  
He aroused his sleeping helpmeet;  
Loud his curses and abuse,  
"Mary, hike your lazy carcass,  
Hell has turned the devil  
loose."

13

While ole Jim was shooting at us--  
Couldn't make him  
understand;  
Kept his blamed old gun a-going  
Till he got me through the  
hand--



Not a whimper did you utter,  
    But you grabbed the hosses'  
        heads,  
Coaxed and helped them in their  
    trouble,  
    While they strove like  
        thoroughbreds,  
Lunging, plunging, you stayed with  
    them  
    Till they both were clear and  
        free.  
Riding one, you lashed them  
    forward,  
    Circled round and picked up  
        me,  
Helped me mount, while Jim was  
    loading;  
    Then we struck off through the  
        night,  
Right across the storm-swept  
    prairie,  
    Till the East was streaked with  
        light.

14

I was faint and sick and dizzy,  
    From my shattered, bleeding  
        hand,  
And it seemed as if the jolting  
    Gave me more than I could  
        stand.  
Once I reeled, and would have  
    fallen,  
    If you hadn't held me there;  
Put your dear arm tight around me,  
    Whispered, "Billy, don't you  
        care."  
Then you headed straight for water,

Threw the lines, dismounted  
first,  
Smoothed the grass down for my  
pillow,  
While the hosses quenched  
their thirst.  
Then you bathed my throbbing  
forehead,--  
Love and healing in the touch,-  
-  
Sayin', "Billy, pardner, listen:  
That there shootin' wasn't  
much!"

Bringing back a hat of water, Through the dim light and the rain

15

From your skirt you tore a piece  
out,  
Dressed my wounds so neat  
and quick,  
That I felt the Lord had sent you  
Just to soothe and heal the  
sick.  
Bringing back a hat of water,  
Through the dim light and the  
rain,  
Thought I saw your face turn  
paler,  
Like you felt a twinge o' pain;  
But as you knelt down beside me  
I could hear you humming  
low  
Some mysterious song, stopped  
short by,  
"Billy, man, we sure must  
go!"  
And the sun turned loose his glory,

Through the tempest-riven  
sky,  
Till it touched us like a blessing  
From the Father there on  
high.

Loaded up their prairie schooner, And vamoosed the ranch 'fore light

16

I am standing by her dug-out;  
Open swings the sagging  
door,  
Every grassblade speaks of  
Nancy;  
But she's gone, to come no  
more,  
For her father and her mother,  
And her brothers, late last  
night,  
Loaded up their prairie schooner,  
And vamoosed the ranch,  
'fore light.  
There's the bed poles and the  
stove hole;  
Not a thing is left for me,  
As a keepsake of my Nancy,  
Anywhere that I can see.  
What! a paper, pinned up  
yonder,  
Kind o' folded like a note!  
It has writin', sure as blazes!  
It is somethin' Nancy wrote.

17

"My dere billy, you will wunder  
Why I ever rote you this;  
I am sorry I am leevin

Daddie needs me in his biz.  
I don't reely like this quiet  
Kind of sober farmer life;  
I like something allus doin,  
But for this, I'd be your  
wife.

I got two of old Jim's bullets,  
Didn't like to let you know,  
Cause the one that you was  
luggin'  
Seemed to fret and hurt you  
so.

Daddie cut them out that evenin;  
I don't mind a little such,  
But, dere billy, don't you worry,  
Old Jim's shootin wasn't  
much."

# THE DECISION

1

Since that girl went off and left  
me,

I can't plan just what to do.

Saw Tom Frothingham this  
mornin',

He says Johnson's gone off,  
too.

My old mother used to tell me,

When I lagged at any task,

"Keep on working, do no shirking,  
You will bring the thing to

pass."

That advice has been my motto:

Everything that I've begun,

I've stayed with it, sick or weary,

Till the job was squarely  
done.

But this case is kind o' different;

Though I ain't the kind that  
grieves,

How you goin' to work that motto

When the job gets up and  
leaves?

2

S'pose, in thinkin' and decidin',

I refuse to do my part;--

Just sit down and let my mem'ry

Finish breaking up my heart--

S'pose I give up like a coward,

Let the world say I ain't  
game,  
'Cause by leavin' I should forfeit  
My poor eighty-acre claim.  
I ain't 'fraid to do my duty  
If I'm clear what it's about,  
But this scrape is so peculiar  
That my mind's smoked up  
with doubt.  
I believe that Nancy loves me,  
And it may be she'll stay true;  
But I wonder why the blazes  
That darn Johnson's gone off  
too.

3

Blamed if I don't get my hosses,  
Saddle Zeb and lead old Si,  
And we'll search the wind-swept  
prairie  
Till we find that girl, or die!  
Who'd a thought a man's whole  
future  
Could get twisted up like  
this?  
All his plans burn up like tinder  
In the fire of one sweet kiss!  
"Zeb, come here, and good old  
Simon--  
Listen while I talk to you;  
Put your noses on my shoulder  
While I tell you what we'll  
do.  
Your fool master's deep in trouble,  
Can't explain to you just how,  
But until we find my Nancy,  
You shall never pull a plow."

# THE SEARCH

## 1

In the West, where twilight  
glories  
Paint with blood each sky-  
line cloud,  
While the virgin rolling prairie  
Slowly dons her evening  
shroud;  
While the killdeer plover settles  
From its quick and noisy  
flight;  
While the prairie cock is blowing  
Warning of the coming  
night--  
There against the fiery  
background  
Where the day and night  
have met,  
Move three disappearing figures,  
Outlined sharp in silhouette.  
Zeb and Si and Bill, the lover,  
Chafing under each delay,  
Pass below the red horizon,  
Toward the river trail away.

## 2

Far across the upland prairie  
To the valley-land below,  
Where the tall and tangled joint-  
grass  
Makes the horses pant and

blow,  
There the silent Solomon River  
Reaching westward to its  
source,  
With its fringe of sombre timber  
Guides the lover on his  
course.  
All the night he keeps his saddle,  
Urging Zeb and Simon on,  
Till the trail clears up before him  
In the gray of early dawn.  
Where it turns in towards the  
river,  
Arched above with vine-  
growth rank,  
He, dismounting, ties the horses  
Near the steep and  
treacherous bank.

3

More than light and shade and  
landscape  
Meet the plainsman's  
searching look,  
For the paths that lie before him  
Are the pages of his book.  
Stooping down and reading  
slowly,  
Noting every trace around,  
Of the travel gone before him,  
Every mark upon the  
ground,  
Down the winding, deep-cut  
roadway  
Furrowed out by grinding  
tire,  
Where the ruts lead to the water,  
In the half-dried plastic



mire,  
He beholds the telltale marking  
Of an odd-shaped band of  
steel,  
Welded to secure the fellies  
Of old MacIntyre's wheel.

4

High above the wind is moaning  
In a lonely, fretful mood,  
Through the lofty spreading  
branches  
Of the elm and cottonwood.  
Where the willows hide the  
fordway  
With their fringe of lighter  
green,  
Is the dam, decayed and broken,  
Where the beavers once  
have been.  
On the sycamore bent o'er it,  
With its gleaming trunk of  
white,  
Sits the barred owl, idly blinking  
At the early morning's light,  
While, within its spacious hollow,  
Where the rotting heart had  
clung  
Till removed by age and fire,  
Sleeps the wild cat with her  
young.

5

Plunging through the sluggish  
water,  
Scarcely halting for a drink,  
Toiling through the sticky

quagmire,  
They attain the farther brink.  
Here the trail leads to the  
westward,--  
Once the redman's wild  
domain;  
Now the shallow rutted highway  
Of the settler's wagon train.  
Here and there along the edges,  
Paths work through the  
waving grass,  
Where at night from bluff to  
river,  
Sneaking coyotes find a  
pass.  
Here the meadow lark sings gaily  
As she leaves her hidden  
nest,  
While the sun of early morning  
Double-tints her orange  
breast.

6

Up this broad and fertile valley,  
Tracing all its winding ways,  
Plodding on with dogged  
patience  
Through a score of weary  
days,  
Camping in the lonely timber,  
Sleeping on the scorching  
plain,  
Bearing heat and thirst and  
hunger,  
Sore fatigue and wind and  
rain--  
Halting only when the telltale  
Mark was missing in the

track;  
Only when he called a greeting,  
As he passed some settler's  
shack;  
Till the valley and its timber  
Vanished, where the rolling  
sward  
Of the westward-sweeping prairie  
Marks the trail 'cross  
Mingo's ford.

He was startled by a stranger's Sudden presence and 'Hello!'

7

Here for hours he searched the  
crossing  
And the wheel-ruts leading on  
To the north, a full day's journey,  
But the guiding mark was gone.  
Not a vestige here remaining  
Of the sign that could be told,  
For old Mac had traveled swiftly  
And the trail was mixed and old.  
Two whole days Bill searched and  
waited,  
Hoping for some other clew,  
Weighing questions of direction,  
Undecided what to do.  
Till, one night, while cooking supper  
By the camp-fire's genial glow,  
He was startled by a stranger's  
Sudden presence and "Hello!"

8

Tall of stature, dark of visage,  
By the wind well dried and  
tanned,

Clad in "shaps" and spurs that jingled,  
With a bull whip in his hand.  
Close behind him in the shadows,  
Eyes aglow with red and green,  
Stood a blazed-face Texas pony,  
Ewe-necked, cat-hammed, wild,  
and mean.  
"Hello, stranger! glad to see you,  
Got my cattle fixed for night;  
Just got through, and riding round  
'em,  
'Cross the bluff, I saw your light.  
No, thanks, pardner, had my supper;  
Seems your fire is short o' wood;  
I just thought I'd see who's camped  
here--  
Gee! that bacon does smell good!"

9

When the frugal meal was over,  
When the pipes were filled and  
lit,  
And the cowboy ceased his stories  
Weak in moral, rank in wit,  
Billy plied him long with questions,  
Wording each with thought and  
care,  
Lest his zeal for information  
Should reveal his mission there.  
"Tell me who you've seen go by here,  
Just within the last few days;  
What they had for teams and outfits;  
How the country round here lays.  
Have you seen a prairie schooner--  
Old style freighter--pass this  
way?  
Both wheel hosses white-nosed  
sorrels,

Lead team of a dun and gray?"

10

"I remember some such outfit,  
If I've got your idee right.  
Think they camped a mile below  
here  
Week ago last Thursday night.  
Pulled in sometime 'long 'bout  
sundown,  
Turned their stock in yonder  
draw,  
But an oldish sort of fellow  
Was the only one I saw;  
Rode a speckled chestnut pony  
With a white star in his face;  
Asked some questions 'bout the  
country,  
'Bout the proper crossing-  
place.  
Pulled out sometime long 'fore  
daylight.  
Didn't see them when they  
passed,  
But from all the indications  
They was trav'ling pretty fast.

11

"Crossed right here where we are  
settin',  
Saw their trail that very day;  
Struck plumb north, and by my  
reck'nin'  
Towards the north they'll  
likely stay.  
North of here, by my experience,

He'll find grass that's mighty  
fine.  
Chances are that he'll keep goin'  
Till he strikes Nebraska's line.  
It was just the next day after  
That my cattle scattered so;  
Some strayed off 'way south to  
Jimson's,  
One bunch in the bend below.  
That's the day I met that feller  
(Eyes so black he couldn't see)  
Who kept pumpin' me with  
questions  
Like you've just been askin'  
me.

12

"Asked about that prairie schooner,  
Said that they was friends of  
hisn,  
Like to wore me plumb to frazzles  
With his everlasting quiz'n.  
Rode a piebald, knock-kneed  
broncho;  
Coat was battered, ripped, and  
torn;  
He was yaller, long, and g'anted  
Like a steer with holler horn.  
An' you oughter seen his breeches!  
He must sure be shy on sense;  
Why, they looked like he'd been  
riding  
On a bucking barb wire fence.  
You won't meet him, 'cause I saw  
him  
Coming back across this way,  
Going eastward where he come  
from;

Took the back trail yesterday.

13

"Said he'd found the old man's  
outfit  
Moving westward on North  
Fork.  
Can't remember all he told me,  
For he runs a heap to talk.  
Said he'd found out what he  
wanted;  
Said he 'had a plan or two,  
And the folks that knowed Jim  
Johnson,  
Knowed that he would put 'em  
through.'  
Then there's others took the west  
trail;  
They got that way huntin'  
range--  
Funny how folks when they come  
here  
Get to itchin' for a change!  
I've been stayin' too confinin';  
Never left this herd but once.  
I'm the oldest puncher round here,--  
Been here over fourteen  
months."

14

Long before the sun had risen,  
While the night mist's ghostly  
veil  
Hid from view the sloughs and  
hollows,  
Billy took the northern trail.  
Through the sunflowers in the low

land,  
    Plodding over sandstone  
        knolls,  
Winding through the level stretches  
    Dotted thick with treacherous  
        holes  
Where the prairie dogs sat  
    chattering,  
    Bolt upright upon their  
        mounds,  
While the ground owls sought their  
    burrows,  
    Startled by the warning  
        sounds;  
Stumbling into buffalo wallows,  
    Dug out in an earlier day  
By the halting herds that rested,  
    Rolled and bellowed in their  
        play.

15

Now and then the sheltered hillside  
    Waved its varicolored flowers  
As a greeting to the trav'ler,  
    Solace to the toilsome hours.  
Old Jack Rabbit hopped before  
    him,  
    Then sat up, to watch him  
        pass,  
Dusky horned-toads scurried  
    nimble  
    Through the withered buffalo  
        grass.  
Here and there the buzzing rattler  
    Whirred a warning, head alert,  
Then retreated from the snapping,  
    Stinging strokes of Billy's  
        quirt.



Day by day the wild breeze flying,  
With'ring in its scorching heat,  
Hummed a tune to labored beating  
Of the plodding horses' feet.

16

Day by day this panorama  
Passing slowly, dully by,  
With the sun's brass disc high  
gleaming  
From a white and cloudless  
sky,  
Sometimes drew fantastic pictures.  
Many a strange and gruesome  
sign--  
Phantom trees and fairy castles--  
Blurred the far horizon line.  
Then they'd vanish like the fancies  
Of a fever-smitten brain,  
And returning, changed in outline,  
Elsewhere on the mighty plain  
Would allure the eyesore trav'ler  
Till the very sky above  
Seemed to mock with vague  
mirages  
Every surety of love.

17

When each weary day was over,  
Halting near some watering-  
place,  
Bill unpacked his meager outfit,  
Turned the horses loose to  
graze,  
Baked his varicolored dough-bread,  
On a fire of cattle chips;  
Coffee made of green-scummed

water,  
Nectar to his thirsty lips.  
On the ground he spread his blanket  
And reclining there alone,  
Heard the swiftly sweeping breezes  
Sing in dreary monotone  
Strange wild anthems, weird and  
lonesome,  
Like lost spirits floating by,  
While afar in broken measure  
Swelled the coyotes' yelping  
cry.

18

All the varied information  
Gathered from the few he  
passed--  
Some from herders, some from  
stragglers  
Gave the missing clew at last  
As to where old Mac was heading;  
For that telltale band of steel  
Stamped along the endless roadway  
Printed by the turning wheel,  
Pressed its image on the memory  
Of the settlers coming back,  
Who, when questioned by the  
searcher,  
Told him that the telltale track  
Had begun to veer to westward  
After crossing by the way  
Leading up the North Platte River,  
Where the sand wastes stretch  
away.

19

As he crossed this barren prairie's

Sweeping waste of poverty,  
Billy paused beside the cripple  
Of a wind-torn twisted tree,  
Standing there, marooned forever,  
Where its hapless seed had  
blown,  
Miles on miles from forest  
neighbor,  
Struggling out its life alone.  
Here he stopped, with head  
uncovered,  
Conscious of a strange appeal,  
Yielding to the voiceless longing  
Human hearts are bound to  
feel  
When their lot is isolation,  
And a field of sterile soil  
Dwarfs and twists the struggling  
spirit  
As the body bends with toil.

20

Here, that subtle, silent craving,  
Which with life will never  
end,  
Of the lonesome and the needy  
For the comfort of a friend,  
Drew the trav'ler to this tree waif,  
And he spread his outfit near,  
And they held that sacred converse  
Which the soul alone can hear.  
While the horses browsed the sage  
brush,  
And the sun withdrew his  
light,  
And the moon in mournful splendor  
Ushered in the lonely night,  
He lay down beneath the branches,

Wrapped in musings strange  
and deep--  
Thoughts that bore him off in  
silence  
O'er the placid sea of sleep.

21

In his dreams he saw a monarch  
Decked in sumptuous array,  
Seated on a throne of glory  
Bearing royal title, Day.  
Then some mighty power  
transcendent,  
Thrust him from his gorgeous  
throne,  
Turning all the realm to darkness,  
And the world was left alone.  
As the shades of gloom were  
spreading,  
By strange flashing threads of  
light  
He beheld in dim-drawn outline,  
On the background of the  
night,  
Phantom horse and girlish rider,  
Speeding on in reckless race,  
Till she turned directly toward him  
And he saw her fearless face!

Faithful Simon, weak and starving, Groaned and fell beneath his pack....

22

With the journey's slow  
progression  
Slipped away the summer  
days,  
Merging with the sleepy beauty

Of the lazy autumn haze;  
And the frosts and drought  
combining  
Waged relentless battle there,  
Withering up the scanty ranges,  
Leaving all the country bare.  
When he entered Colorado,  
Following still the barren  
plain  
Where for months the mocking  
heavens  
Never spared a drop of rain,  
Faithful Simon, weak and  
starving,  
Following feebly in the track  
Pulled upon his straining halter,  
Groaned and fell beneath his  
pack.

23

Vain were all the kind entreaties,  
Vain the simple nursing done  
To relieve his palsied weakness--  
Poor old Simon's course was  
run.  
Billy spent the night beside him,  
But with next day's early  
dawn,  
With the east's first flush of  
scarlet,  
Simon's faithful soul passed  
on.  
Then, with hands outstretched  
before him,  
Half remembering what was  
said  
When a child he saw the sexton  
Sprinkle earth upon the dead-

-

"Dust to dust, and then to ashes--  
I forget the other part--  
I can't say the words I want to,  
I can't think--all's in my heart.

24

"Over twenty years, old pardner,  
We have been companions  
true;  
You have always kept your end up  
In the hardships we've gone  
through.  
If we'd stayed, and I had never  
Seen her face or touched her  
hand,  
We should still have been  
contented,  
On our little piece of land.  
This strange spell won't let me  
falter,  
Though the chasing never  
ends;  
Seems that nothing ever'll stop it,  
Sickness, death, or loss of  
friends.  
Where this love will drive a  
fellow,  
I ain't wise enough to tell;  
Sometimes think it leads to heaven  
By a trail that runs through  
hell."

25

Weeks thereafter, plodding  
northward  
Crossing over Lodge Pole

creek,  
Threading Colorado's stretches--  
Sandy deserts wild and bleak--  
-  
Where the sun wars on the living,  
Struggling 'neath his blinding  
light,  
Then resigns his work of ravage  
To the chilling frosts of night;  
Where the bleaching bones of  
horses  
Here and there bestrew the  
plains,  
Telling many a ghastly story  
Of misguided settlers' trains--  
Where the early frontier ranger  
Marked the first trail to  
Cheyenne,  
Billy, following its wand'rings,  
Found the missing mark  
again.

26

Then the labored pace grew faster  
As he passed each camping  
place,  
Marking well the lessening  
distance  
In the long-contested race.  
Riding through Wyoming's  
foothills,  
With their rugged summit  
lines  
Stretched across the clear horizon,  
Fringed with pointed spruce  
and pines,  
He beheld, one early morning,  
Rising slowly to the sky,

Smoke--the thin and gauzy  
column  
Of a camp fire built close by;  
And, on looking down the valley  
With exultant, ringing cheer,  
He beheld the prairie schooner  
And the MacIntyres near.

Resting calm in fancied safety Sat the elder MacIntyre

27

On an open spot of grass land  
Gilded by the rising sun,  
Sloping sharply to the crevice  
Where the mountain waters  
run,  
Ike, reclining, watched the horses,  
Now increased to quite a  
band,  
While above him, in the timber,  
Brother Bill, with gun in  
hand,  
Held it poised in sudden wonder,  
Half in attitude to shoot,  
As he saw the coming rider,  
Heard his loudly yelled  
salute.  
Near an old abandoned cabin,  
Huddled by the breakfast  
fire,  
Resting calm in fancied safety  
Sat the elder MacIntyre.

28

"You! Why, Billy, where d'you  
come from?  
What new game you playing



now?  
If you're out on posse business  
By the gods, jest start your  
row!  
What you saying? You are  
friendly?  
Wal, I'm glad to hear it's so;  
And I s'pose you made the  
journey  
Way out here to let me know!  
Oh! you're talking 'bout our  
Nancy!  
Now I just begin to see.  
Set down, Billy; you are askin'  
Something that sure puzzles  
me.  
Nancy ain't like other women--  
What I say may hit you  
queer,  
But it's jest as well to tell you--  
That there girl--she isn't here.

29

"Don't stampede your words, now,  
Billy.  
Slow 'em down and let 'em  
walk.  
Lord a'mighty, man! keep quiet!  
Never heard such crazy talk!  
Where's the girl? Wal, let me tell  
you--  
T'aint no use to take on so--  
Where is Nancy? P'r'aps in  
heaven;  
I can't tell yer,--I don't know.  
When we left last spring from  
Kansas,  
Travelin' mostly in the night,

We was chased up by a posse;  
    Fourth day out we had a  
        fight.  
We had jest unhitched the hosses,  
    Making camp at Old Man's  
        Creek--  
Gimme some o' that tobacker,  
    I've been out for more'n a  
        week.

30

"We had jest unhitched the hosses,  
    Nance was riding Kelly's  
        mare,  
When we heard them all a-comin'-  
    -  
        They had seen us pull in  
            there.  
Nancy said, 'I'll hold 'em, daddie,  
    Get the outfit over here,  
And I'll trail you in the mornin';  
    I will see they don't get near.'  
It was in that heavy timber--  
    Growing dark and spittin'  
        rain--  
Where the creek runs to the  
    eastward,  
    Makes that loop, and back  
        again.  
We was in a reg'lar pocket;  
    Creek banks made a kind of  
        bluff  
All around us, so it looked like  
    We was trapped there, sure  
        enough.

31

"Wal, we had a time in movin';  
    Things got mixed up in the  
        rush;  
Lead team broke a piece of  
    harness  
    Pulling through the  
        underbrush.  
Then the wagon turned clean over,  
    But we drug her plumb  
        across,  
Hitched with ropes and other  
    fixin's,  
    Usin' every extra hoss.  
Wal, you never heard such  
    shootin',  
    Bullets whizzin' everywhere;  
Pumped 'em on us till it sounded  
    Like they had an army there.  
Nancy stayed and cracked it to  
    'em,  
    Kind o' circlin' round and  
        round;  
I could tell the two six-shooters  
    She was usin', by the sound.

32

"You can bet we did some trav'lin'  
    All that night and all next  
        day;  
I could still a-hear the shootin'  
    After we was miles away.  
I supposed we'd see the girl come  
    Ridin' up to us 'fore long,  
That is--I was jest a-thinkin'--  
    If there wasn't somethin'  
        wrong.  
But, in spite of all our lookin',  
    Sometimes slackin' up our

gait,  
Always thinkin' we should see her  
Every time we'd stop and  
wait.  
We have never seen her, Billy,  
And I own I'm balked a bit,  
Fur I know that she's a critter  
Made of nothin' else but grit.

33

"I wish I could go and find her,  
But 'twould be too hot for  
me;  
Long before I got back that fur  
I'd be strung up to a tree.  
So I've been a kind o' thinkin',  
Since I see what's both'rin'  
you,  
'Bout a thing--I hate to ask it--  
That I'd like for you to do.  
I don't think that girl has ever--  
It sure hurts me, what I say--  
But I'm sure that in the scrimmage  
Nancy never got away.  
Billy, you go back and find her;  
You are all I've got to send,  
You can sort o' fix things decent,  
Where she is--in Old Man's  
Bend."

# THE RETURN

1

Every life is but a journey--  
    Trav'ling on from place to  
        place--  
Starting from the point God gave  
    us  
    With an ever-varying pace.  
Outward, onward, spurred by  
    motives  
    In our wand'rings here and  
        there,  
Sometimes led by hope alluring,  
    Sometimes halted by  
        despair;  
But the life that travels farthest  
    On that deeper strength  
        depends,  
For with love, there is no  
    turning;  
    When love dies the journey  
        ends.

2

Back across the broken foothills,  
    With a courage none can  
        feel  
Till the burning pangs of sorrow  
    Turn the heart-strings into  
        steel;  
Back across the winter's  
    playground,

Tracing out the paths he  
trod,  
With each muttered execration  
Ending in a prayer to God.  
Blasts that howled with fiendish  
laughter,  
By their loud derisive cry  
Seemed to mock his labored  
progress  
As they passed him swiftly  
by;  
Icy, blizzard-driven snowflakes  
Into ghost-like fancies  
whirled,  
Painting on the barren canvas,  
Gaunt Death battling for the  
world.

Once again the twisted branches Of the lone and friendly tree

3

Back across the snow-strewn  
desert,  
Fighting famine face to  
face,  
Trusting to his horse to take him  
To each former camping  
place.  
Once Zeb stopped beside a  
snowdrift  
With a loud and startling  
neigh;  
Tried to tell his half-dazed master  
Where his mate, old Simon,  
lay.  
Pressing on, he reached the  
border  
Of Nebraska's whitened

plain,  
Where his mind in maudlin  
fancies  
Yielded to the bitter strain,  
As he saw far in the distance,  
Like a battered mast at sea,  
Once again the twisted branches  
Of the lone and friendly  
tree.

4

"Git up, Zeb. Come, see! She's  
waving!  
Waving there for you and  
me.  
See her there, so white and  
pretty,  
Standing by our friend, the  
tree!  
Quit that stumbling! Now then,  
streak it!  
Hit the gait you used to do  
When we hired out for the round  
up  
And you beat the first one  
through.  
There she is! There's where I saw  
her  
When we stayed there all  
that night;  
Though 'twas dark, I saw her  
riding,  
By those flashing threads of  
light;  
She's been waiting! Oh, I left her  
In this awful lonely place!  
God forgive me! Nancy! hear  
me!

Oh, that face--that poor  
white face!"

5

One cold morning, old Zach  
Baxter,  
Riding o'er this snowbound  
sea  
Saw a famished pony standing  
Near a queer and lonely  
tree.  
From his frost-encrusted nostrils  
Came a plaintive whinny,  
low,  
As the man rode up beside him  
Struggling through the  
drifted snow.  
When the old man tried to lead  
him,  
He refused to turn away;  
But he pawed the drift beneath  
him,  
Where his stricken master  
lay.  
And below the cold, white cover,  
In a deathlike stupor deep,  
Old Zach found a sorry stranger  
Shrouded for his last long  
sleep.

6

Tearing at the ragged bundle  
Lodged between the horse's  
feet,  
Clutching at the frozen blanket,  
Brushing back the crusted  
sleet,



Faithful in his rude endeavors,  
    Rousing by his loud  
        commands,  
Roughly shaking, turning,  
    rubbing,  
    Zach breathed on his face  
        and hands;  
Till the stiffened limbs responded  
    And the closed eyes opened  
        wide,  
Dazed and puzzled at the  
    stranger  
    Working fiercely at his side.  
Billy felt the strong arms raise  
    him,  
    Felt the Frost King's  
        stinging breath  
As he struggled, half  
    unconscious,  
    In the wav'ring fight with  
        death.

7

In the east, the sun dogs glistened  
    Like tall shafts of marble,  
        bright,  
O'er the whitened grave of nature,--  
    Ghostly spires of frozen light,  
Flying frost flakes snapping,  
    sparkling,  
    Dancing in a wild display,  
Turned into a mist of diamonds  
    As they mocked the newborn  
        day.

8

Old Zach's pony bearing double,  
    Reeking steam from every  
        pore,  
Reached at last the covered pathway  
    Leading to the dug-out door.  
With his arms clasped tight round  
    Billy,  
    Zach half dragged his helpless  
        load  
Through the lowly, mud-walled  
    entrance  
    Of his rudely built abode.  
There, upon the narrow bunk bed  
    Spread with nondescript attire,  
Zach enfolded him in wrappings  
    While he started up a fire;  
And no nurse, however skillful,  
    Whatsoever her degree,  
Ever gave more loyal service  
    To a patient, than did he.

9

Poor and meager were the comforts  
    Of Zach's cave-like prairie  
        home,  
Permeated with the odor  
    Of the fresh-dug virgin loam.  
Pungent wreaths of smoke, slow  
    drifting,  
    Floated lazily above,  
To the dried grass of the ceiling  
    From the cracked and rusty  
        stove.  
Willow poles athwart for rafters  
    Sagged beneath the dirt roof's  
        strain,  
And a piece of grease-smear'd paper  
    Formed the only window-pane.

In the center, on the dirt floor  
    Stood a table-like affair  
Fashioned from a wagon end-gate,  
    Where Zach spread his scanty  
    fare.

10

There for weeks lay Billy, helpless,  
    Racked with mad'ning fever  
    pains,  
As the burning sun of summer  
    Scorches sere the desert plains.  
Then he lay with cold, white  
    features  
    And the feeble, scarce drawn  
    breath,  
As the silent winter prairie  
    Lies beneath its shroud of  
    death.  
Ofttimes when the raging sickness  
    Sent the hot blood to his brain,  
He would point with frantic gesture  
    To the dingy window pane,  
Calling in excited mutterings,  
    Eyes transfixed in frenzied  
    fright--  
"There she is! Now, can't you see  
    her?  
    See her face there in the light!"

11

Then old Zach would try to soothe  
    him  
    In his simple-hearted way;  
"She won't hurt you," he would tell  
    him,  
    "I'll go drive her clear away.

I've seen things--now listen,  
    pardner--  
    Those things happened once to  
    me  
Once down there in old Dodge City,  
    Winding up a three weeks'  
    spree.  
What you see is jest a 'lusion,  
    'Cause you're crazy in your  
    head;  
When your thinker's runnin' proper  
    You'll find 'She' is gone or  
    dead.  
There, now, pardner, see what this  
    is!  
    Ain't it purty? Your tin cup;  
Found a little pinch o' coffee.  
    That's the boy, now, drink it  
    up!"

12

When the breeze of spring in  
    whispers  
    Stirred the withered bunch-  
    grass plume,  
Humming hymns of resurrection  
    Over nature's silent tomb,  
And the fleeing clouds of heaven,  
    Bending low at God's  
    command,  
Spilled their tribute from the ocean  
    On the long-forsaken land,  
And the sun, with mellow kindness  
    Spread abroad his softened  
    rays,  
Calling bud and blade and blossom  
    From their sleep of many days,  
Billy heard, at last, the music

Of the glad earth's jubilee,  
Felt a new strength stir within him,  
And a longing to be free.

13

One day, o'er the hill's low summit,  
Whence the prairie dipped  
away,  
There appeared a moving wagon  
With its canvas patched and  
gray,  
Like a vessel on the ocean  
Under taut and close-reefed  
sail,  
Rising slowly on the billows  
Heaped up by the driving gale.  
Veering towards the little dug-out,  
Making for a friendly shore,  
Heaving to, the schooner anchored  
Close beside the open door.  
Loud and hearty were the greetings,  
For the driver of the team  
Was Tom Frothingham, a neighbor,  
Who had lived near Billy's  
claim.

14

Bit by bit he told the story--  
How he'd wandered all around  
Since he left his Kansas homestead  
And the folks near North Pole  
mound;  
How he'd traveled all through Texas  
With the roving fever on,  
Camping oft in strange new places,  
Where no other soul had gone.  
So the news, now half forgotten

In his absence from the place,  
Came in broken recollections--  
Careful efforts to retrace  
All the incidents of interest  
To the sick one listening there,  
Who, with pale and careworn  
features,  
Heard the story with despair.

15

"Three weeks after you left Kansas  
I hitched up and came away.  
Still, I reckoned you intended  
To improve your claim and  
stay;  
For your eighty was a picture--  
Running spring and good clear  
land--  
Everything a body needed  
For a starter, right at hand.  
Well, some others left 'fore I did--  
You remember Mac, of course,  
How he got the moving notion  
When Bill Kelly missed his  
horse?  
Chased him clear to Old Man's  
crossing,  
So I heard the posse say;  
Thought they had him fairly  
cornered,  
But, by jings! he got away.

16

"There are stranger things than  
fiction;  
What is natural may seem  
queer,

So I s'pose we needn't wonder  
At the things we see out here.  
One thing happened since you left  
there  
That I call a burning shame--  
Did you know that rope-necked  
Johnson  
Jumped your eighty-acre  
claim?  
Last I saw him, he was plowing,  
And he laughed and tried to  
joke:  
Said 'twas kind of you to leave him  
All the ground that you had  
broke;  
Said your house was so untidy  
He was sleeping out of doors,  
Till he got a girl to help him  
Wash the pans and scrub the  
floors.

17

"Lots of people coming in there  
From most every foreign land--  
Massachusetts and Missouri--  
Made a mess I couldn't stand.  
Every man that's made of manhood  
Wants to live where he is free,  
So I'm bound to keep on moving  
When they get to crowding me.  
Then another thing that happened:  
Puzzled every one around  
When they heard one morning early,  
That Bill Kelly's horse was  
found.  
Aleck Rose told me about it  
After I had packed and gone;  
Said the mare strayed in the

dooryard  
With Mac's steel-horn saddle  
on."

18

As each day in steady conquest  
Charged the ranks of fleeing  
night,  
Winning back the stolen hours  
With their golden spears of  
light;  
As the living in all nature  
Felt that mighty spirit's sway,  
So the sick man caught the power  
And his illness wore away.  
One clear morning, as Aurora  
Silver-tinted all the plain,  
In his weatherbeaten saddle  
Billy took the trail again.  
"Good by, boy," old Zach repeated,  
"I'm most sure you'll never see  
Any more o' them 'ere 'lusions,  
Anyway, what you called  
'She.'"

19

Day by day the low horizon  
Spread its narrow circle round,  
As if fate had drawn a barrier,  
And forbade advance beyond.  
Though the journey dragged on  
slowly,  
Night time brought its sure  
reward,  
For the added miles behind him  
Stretched at length to Mingo's  
Ford,



Where the breeze bore from the  
upland  
Broken fragments of the song  
Of the cowboy with his cattle,  
As he drove the strays along;  
Where the voice of flowing water  
And the treble of the birds,  
Swelled the hallowed evening  
anthem  
To the bass of lowing herds.

20

Then the trail along the Solomon  
Where the timber, making  
friends  
With the ever-widening valley,  
Filled the rounded river bends;  
Then the rankling recollection,  
As he passed some well-known  
place  
Where before, with hope and vigor,  
He had sped in fruitless chase.  
Then the lonely camp at nightfall,  
Where the wind in monotone  
Thrummed the harp strings of the  
grass stems,  
Breathing low its song,  
"Alone!"  
Where the stars, fixed in the  
heavens,  
To his upturned face would say,  
With their heartless glint of distance,  
"She thou seek'st is far away."

21

Then the long, far-reaching bottoms  
Rank with withered blue-joint

grass,  
With its broken stems entangled  
    In a matted jungle mass;  
Then across the higher prairie,  
    Searching out a shorter way,  
To the creek that joined the river  
    Where Mac crossed and got  
    away;  
Then the twinge of bitter sorrow  
    As he neared his journey's end,  
And beheld the fringe of timber  
    On the banks of Old Man's  
    bend,  
Where no living sign or token  
    Broke the gloom that brooded  
    there,  
Save a solitary buzzard  
    Floating idly in the air.

22

From these high and broken hilltops  
    He could trace the river's flow,  
And the creek's untamed  
    meandering,  
    With its looplike bend below,  
Seeming in the light of evening  
    Like a giant serpent there,  
Which had coiled about its victim,  
    And lay resting in its lair.  
Breaking through the tangled  
    brushwood  
    As the night was coming on,  
Creeping down the steep  
    embankment  
    Where the muddy waters run,  
Billy crossed within the timber  
    Where the shroud of deeper  
    gloom,

And its chilling breath of darkness  
Marked the hidden prairie  
tomb.

23

As the soul in deep communion,  
Seeks some isolated bower  
Where the body's sordid cravings  
Yield beneath the spirit's  
power,  
So the searcher, bowed in reverence,  
Left untouched his evening fare  
As he listened to the voices  
Of the shadows gathering there.  
Here no lighted torch or camp fire  
With its weak and fitful ray,  
Could illumine the mystic journey  
Of prayer's consecrated way.  
Here the silence brought its message  
Of forebodings, vague and  
deep,  
In its visions to the dreamer,  
Through the mystery of sleep.

24

In his dreams he saw a monarch  
Decked in sumptuous array,  
Seated on a throne of glory,  
Bearing royal title, Day.  
Then some mighty power  
transcendent,  
Thrust him from his gorgeous  
throne,  
Turning all the realm to darkness,  
And the world was left alone.  
As the shades of gloom were  
spreading,

By strange flashing threads of  
light  
He beheld in dim-drawn outline,  
On the background of the night,  
Phantom horse and girlish rider,  
Speeding on in reckless race,  
Till she turned directly toward him  
And he saw her fearless face.

25

Then, behold! the King returning  
With a pageantry so bright,  
That the shadow-clad usurpers  
Fled in ignominious fright.  
As he saw the hosts approaching  
Through a cloud of battle  
smoke,  
Charging wildly down upon him,  
He, in sudden fear, awoke.  
As he looked, the blackened heavens  
Splashed with demon-tinted  
blood  
From the hue of burning prairie  
Throbbled above the fiery flood.  
Leaping o'er the rounded bluff-tops,  
Down the valley's long incline,  
He could see the lurid column  
Spread its blazing battle line.

26

Like a troop of charging horsemen  
Sweeping on with maddened  
roar,  
Mowing down the grass battalions,  
Crackling flames swept all  
before.  
Then the driftwood's rifted

breastwork,  
Left there by the waters high,  
Flashed up in a hissing furnace,  
As the red-armed fiends leaped  
by.  
Clinging to the swaying saddle  
And the plunging horse's mane,  
Billy dashed through falling embers  
To the level, open plain.  
On the right and left, the head fires  
Rushing on at furious pace,  
Stretched beside the horse and rider  
In the life-and-death-fought  
race.

Fiercer with each flying moment Drove those scorching blasts of death

27

Here the gale with venom'd fury  
Met in vortex from afar,  
Raising high the flaming pennons  
Of the fiery fiends of war.  
Flashing by, the blazing grass stems  
Sped like arrows through the  
air,  
Falling on the distant prairie,  
Kindling fresh fires everywhere.  
Pressing through the low-flung  
smoke clouds--  
Stifling fumes of Hades' breath-

-  
Fiercer with each flying moment  
Drove those scorching blasts of  
death.  
Thrice his horse, 'neath quirt and  
rowel  
Bravely struggling, almost fell,  
As he fled in desperation

O'er the trail that led through  
hell.

28

One poor singed and panting coyote  
Through the perils of the ride  
Hemmed in by the flames pursuing  
Ran close by the horse's side.  
Scarce a meager pace behind them,  
Pressing hard the coyote's rear,  
Raced a frantic old jack rabbit,  
Ears laid low in speed and fear.  
Reaching now a stretch of upland,  
Here the coyote changed his  
course,  
Breaking through the narrow side-  
fire,  
Followed fast by hare and  
horse;  
And, upon the smoking prairie  
Over which the fire had passed,  
Steaming horse and stricken rider  
Found a breathing space at last.

29

When the morning sun in splendor  
Rose upon the blackened plain,  
His red beams revealed the lover  
Back at Old Man's Bend again.  
Waist deep in its soothing waters  
Bathing blistered brow and  
hands;  
While near by, in pain a-tremble,  
Faithful Zeb impatient stands.  
Through the bend he searched and  
wandered,  
But except the furrowed bark,

Of a gnarled and aged elm tree  
Which revealed one bullet-  
mark,  
Naught was left save blackened  
embers;  
And the words he "knew in  
part"--  
"Dust to dust and then to ashes"--  
Told the story of his heart.

30

Back along the Solomon River,  
Trailing towards the humble  
claim  
He had lost when love and duty  
Fired his soul to "being game";  
Back, across the beaver fordway,  
Where love first had found the  
track,  
Now returning with the rankling  
Sting of hate to bring him back-  
-  
Hate, that hunger made more bitter  
When his last jerked beef was  
gone;  
Climbing trees to cut off branches  
For his horse to browse upon;  
Back, where once the flower-decked  
prairie,  
Spread its bloom of hope and  
bliss,  
Now a blackened field of mourning,  
From the fire of one sweet kiss.

31

Till one day, he saw beyond him,  
In the distance, purple crowned,

That old monarch of the prairie,  
Guard of ages, North Pole  
Mound.  
Then the field where Zeb and Simon  
Pulled the old sod-breaking  
plow  
Stretching like a narrow ribbon  
On the land that lay below.  
Now the horse's steps grew lighter  
As he passed each well-known  
sign  
Of the old familiar landscape,  
And they crossed the eighty's  
line,  
Where the spring of running waters  
Gave envenomed purpose birth,  
As he drank its bubbling offering  
From the pulsing heart of earth.

32

Then, ascending from the hollow,  
Full before his eyes appeared  
Home--his home--the low-walled  
sodhouse  
Which his toiling hands had  
reared.  
Near the straw shed stood the wagon  
He had brought from Wichita,  
And beneath the grass-fringed gable  
Hung his trusty crosscut saw.  
In the dooryard, near the window,  
Lay the broken homemade  
chair,  
Where, at evening, love-born fancies  
Revelled, as he rested there;  
Love, whose scattered seed had  
fallen  
On a mystic field of fate,



Where the tangled vine extending  
Bore the bitter fruit of hate.

33

Hurrying nearer, he dismounted,  
Trembling with the rage he felt,  
As he cast aside the bridle  
And drew taut his cartridge belt.  
Throwing down his torn sombrero,  
There, before the tight-closed  
door,  
On the cowardly usurper  
Loud and bitter vengeance  
swore.  
"Come, you dirty, green-scummed  
scoundrel,  
With your sneaking 'plan or  
two'!  
Just come out, you rope-necked  
buzzard!  
See how far you'll put them  
through.  
You can keep the eighty acres,  
Hell will write your pedigree,  
But I'll rub your crooked nose-piece  
In the dirt you stole from me.

34

"Come outside, you sneaking coyote!  
If you've got a drop of man  
In your greasy, thieving carcass,  
Finish up what you began."  
Fiercer grew his coarse invective,  
Louder yet his taunting calls,  
When no answer to his challenge  
Came from out the low sod  
walls.

Uncontrolled, his furious anger  
    Spoke in quick and murderous  
        roar  
As he pumped his old six-shooter  
    Through the barred and bolted  
        door.  
When he paused the rude door  
    opened,  
    And before its splintered place  
Stood the vision of the shadows,  
    And he saw Her fearless face.

Standing there, a pictured goddess Sketched against a lowering storm

35

As the artist in his painting  
    Plans the background to  
        enhance  
All the beauty of his subject  
    Both in pose and  
        countenance,  
So the poor and dark interior  
    Lent its gloom to magnify  
All the power and witching  
    beauty  
    Of her face and lustrous eye.  
Standing there, a pictured goddess  
    Sketched against a lowering  
        storm,  
Bearing on her pallid features  
    That supernal gift of calm.

36

"Nancy! Woman! God in heaven,  
    Speak, girl! Can this thing be  
        true?  
Are you here with that--that

scoundrel,  
After all that I've gone  
through?  
Do you stand there, fiend or  
human,  
After lending him your hand,  
First to break an honest spirit,  
Then to steal away my land?  
Must a man who loves a woman  
Like a devil's imp be driven  
Through the tortures of damnation  
For a single glimpse of  
heaven?  
Tell me where the cur is hiding--  
I've no wish to hurt his bride,  
But I'll braid a twelve-foot bull  
whip  
From his dirty, yaller hide!

37

"Speak to me and tell me, woman,  
How the God in heaven  
above  
Starts the fires of hell a-burning  
From a spark of human love;  
Why He ever made a woman  
Who could play a fickle part;  
Why He ever made a fellow  
With his soul tied to his  
heart;  
Why He made life just a gamble--  
I can't talk the way I feel--  
In the game that I've been playing,  
You know this ain't no square  
deal!  
I will go away and leave you,  
But 'twould kind o' ease the  
pain

If you'd only tell me, Nancy--  
If you'd try--to--just explain.

38

"If you wouldn't stand there  
looking  
With a face of livid white  
Like the specter of the prairie  
That I saw one horrid night,  
Riding through the endless  
darkness  
Like a being doomed from  
birth  
Just to roam outside of heaven  
And denied a place on earth.  
Say one word to me! Speak,  
Nancy,  
If you have a voice and live!  
Tell the worst, e'en though you  
ask me  
To be patient and forgive.  
I will listen--I will suffer--  
I will do the best I can;  
Nancy, sweetheart! hear the  
pleading  
Of a broken-hearted man,"

39

"See here, Billy! You gone crazy?  
Charging like you got a fit?  
Johnson ain't in--just at present--  
Won't you stop and rest a bit?  
Don't act strange. There's no hard  
feelings,  
Though I've never seen  
before  
Any man that knocked like you

did  
On a peaceful neighbor's  
door.  
Come right in; now, don't be  
backward,  
Like old times to have  
*you'*round!  
You look tired, like you'd traveled  
Over quite a stretch of  
ground.  
Sit right here in this old rocker;  
Johnson fixed it up one day,  
Feeling certain you would never  
Come meandering 'round this  
way.

40

"Don't get up and act uneasy,  
Rest yourself, now, if you  
can,  
You don't mind me like Jim  
Johnson--  
He's a most obedient man.  
You went off and left your eighty,  
Roaming where the luck-  
wind blows,  
Like a tumbleweed in winter,  
Where you've been, Lord  
only knows.  
While Jim's gone we'll talk  
together,  
As we used to, months ago,  
When I tried to quench the  
burning  
Of a love I didn't know.  
Listen, Billy, while I tell you  
All about my 'fickle part';  
When I'm done you may know

better  
How God made a woman's  
heart.

41

"While you're resting, I'll get  
supper,  
Though there ain't much here  
to eat,  
'Cepting bran, to make some  
muffins,  
And a little rabbit meat.  
Wish I had that pinch of coffee  
I saved up for--oh, so long,  
Till one day I went and used it,  
Though I somehow felt 'twas  
wrong;  
For I kind o' thought that  
sometime  
Some one might be coming  
here  
Worn out with a long, long  
journey,  
And would crave that kind o'  
cheer.  
Now, then, Billy, draw your stool  
up;  
What we've got is scant and  
plain--  
I ain't hungry--honest--Billy,  
While you eat--why--I'll  
'explain."

# NANCY'S STORY

1

"I went off and left you, Billy,  
    'Cause I'm used to being free,  
And I love my dear old daddie--  
    He has been so good to me.  
Ever since I learned to toddle  
    We've been living on the run,  
And my first and only playthings  
    Were a saddle and a gun.  
When I went away with daddie,  
    After trav'ling nigh a week,  
We were caught up by the posse  
    In the bend on Old Man's  
    Creek.  
Think I'd let them take my daddie?  
    No: I held them all at bay,  
While the boys hitched up the  
    horses,  
    Crossed the creek and got  
    away.

2

"I just told them I would follow  
    After all the fuss was through,  
But instead, all night I wandered,  
    Thinking all the time of you;  
For when we were last together  
    You cast over me a spell  
That just seemed to change my  
    nature,  
    In a way that words can't tell;

For it left a fire a-burning  
    Like a live and glowing coal,  
That at length blazed into longing  
    Till I craved with all my soul  
To be back, somehow, where you  
    were,  
    And to hear you tell once more  
That you loved me. That man-story  
    I had never heard before.

3

"Then I trailed back o'er the prairie,  
    Riding steady every night,  
Picking out the wildest country  
    With my luck to guide me  
    right.  
When I'd see the hungry morning  
    Eat the stars up in the East,  
I would hide in gulch or timber  
    Like a wild and hunted beast.  
How I learned to love the darkness  
    As it spread its mighty arm,  
Close around me, like a lover,  
    Fondly shielding me from  
    harm!  
And I knew the sweet caresses  
    Of the earth and sky above,  
As the night's mysterious voices  
    Soothed me with their tale of  
    love.

4

"Then I'd ride like forty devils  
    Just to catch upon my face  
All the kisses which the tempest  
    Pressed upon me in the race.  
How I thought of poor old daddie,



Whom, perhaps, I'd see no  
more  
If I went clear back to your place,  
While he hurried on before!  
I could hardly bear the burden  
When I'd think of--both of you;  
But that fire you set a-burning,  
One night told me what to do--  
I would see and ask you, Billy,  
If you wouldn't go with me  
Where we both could be with  
daddie,  
Way out West, where he must  
be.

5

"Then at last the night that loved  
me,  
Turned its pent-up furies loose,  
Roaring out on me its anger  
And unpitying abuse.  
How the rain beat down upon me!  
How the lightning burned its  
track  
Through the clouds of storm and  
thunder  
As I reached your sod-walled  
shack!  
All was dark within, and quiet,  
When I rapped upon the door.  
Then I saw the flash of matches  
And the lamplight on the floor;  
Heard you stomp your heavy boots  
on,  
Heard you walk and draw the  
bar,  
But the door, when thrown wide  
open,

Showed Jim Johnson standing  
thar.

6

"'What you doing here?' I shouted,  
When I saw his hateful leer;  
'Tell me what this means, Jim  
Johnson.  
Where is Billy? Ain't he here?'  
He was standing on the doorstep,  
And the light that shone within  
Seemed to twist his wrinkled  
features  
In a sort of wonder-grin.  
'Well! well! Nancy! sure's I'm livin'!  
Out there in the pouring wet!  
Sure I'll care for you, Miss Nancy,  
I'll protect you, don't you fret!  
I'm a friend that you can count on,  
Does me good to see your face!  
Come in, gal, and dry your  
garments,  
You have struck the very  
place!'

7

"You don't blame me, do you, Billy,  
If I did go in and stay,  
Warming by your stove and fire,  
Just to hear what he would  
say?  
I will try to tell his story  
As he told it, if I can,  
Putting in what I remember  
Of his 'interesting plan.'  
'Now, then, gal, I heard you calling  
As you stood there in the dark,

On a fellow, named Bill Truly,  
But you shot 'way off the mark.  
Billy ain't here now, and further,  
He won't be here, you can bet;  
Anyhow, that's what he told me  
Two weeks past, when we last  
met.

8

"When your folks all skipped the  
country  
I decided I'd move, too;  
Thought perhaps you'd get in  
trouble  
And I'd try to help you  
through;  
So I got beyond the posse,  
Rode like fire upon your track,  
Found your dad, and you not with  
him,  
So I turned and came right  
back.  
Riding home along the Solomon,--  
For the truth I pledge my word-

-  
I met Billy with his horses  
Three miles east of Mingo's  
Ford.  
Stopped and shook my hand and  
told me  
He was so far on his way  
To a ranch 'way up in Utah,  
Where he'd made his plans to  
stay.

9

"Said he wanted to be friendly,

So the things that he had left,  
If I cherished no hard feelings,  
I could look on as his gift.  
"If you come across Miss Nancy  
You can say to her for me,  
That I've got another sweetheart,  
And that she is wholly free."  
Billy'd never do to tie to--  
He's too fickle, gal, for you--  
So I just propose to offer  
You a man that will stay true.  
I have worked it out, Miss Nancy--  
It's the problem of my life;  
I have planned that you shall stay  
here  
As my own dear little wife.'

10

"Look here, Johnson! You're a liar,  
When you say he's set me free!  
When you met him there at Mingo's  
He had gone to hunt for me.  
Don't you dare to touch me,  
scoundrel!  
Don't you dare to slur his  
name!  
You're a cur--a thief--Jim Johnson!  
You have jumped my  
sweetheart's claim.  
Don't you dare to venture near me!  
Or you'll wish you'd not begun.  
All your schemes and double  
dealings,  
All your hatched-up plans are  
done.  
You start now and pack your fixin's!  
Don't you leave the smallest  
bit!

Every filthy thing you own here,  
Pack it up--you dog, and *git!*

But, instead, I shot, to scare him, All the buttons off his coat

11

"He was standing there uncertain,  
And I felt to clinch his throat;  
But, instead, I shot--to scare him--  
All the buttons off his coat.  
Then I pumped two in the corner,  
Where he'd sunk down on his  
knees--  
Slit his ear and cut his collar,  
Never listening to his pleas.  
Told him if he didn't mosey  
I would plant his carcass  
whole,  
In a grave I'd dig that evening  
On the eighty he had stole.  
Then he promised, but I chased  
him  
'Way across the old Saline,  
And so far as I have knowledge,  
He has never since been  
seen.

12

"When I got back here 'fore  
morning,  
Thought of having Kelly's  
mare,  
So I rode her to his stable  
And I left her standing there.  
For I knew that you'd consider  
Twas the proper thing to do,  
If you came back here and found

me  
Holding down your claim for  
you.  
But I felt right sorry, Billy,  
When I looked around next  
day,  
In the box there in the corner  
Where the pans and dishes  
lay;  
For in fixing for my breakfast,  
My! the crockery was slim!  
More than half of it was busted  
By the bullets fired at Jim:

13

"I forgot to tell you, Billy,  
That for thirteen months or  
more,  
You're the only man that's ever  
Crossed the threshold of that  
door.  
I have stayed alone and waited,  
Full of faith that you would  
come,  
So that I--might go to daddie,  
And that you'd--have back  
your home.  
Though perhaps I've sometimes  
suffered  
From the cold and from the  
heat,  
And I've gone for days together,  
Here, without a bite to eat,  
'Twasn't hunger of the body  
That I craved to satisfy,  
I was starved for--you--and  
daddie,  
As the weary weeks trailed

by.

14

"How I tried to think and reason  
    Why the fire from one caress  
Turned my burning, yearning  
    spirit  
    To a cinder of distress.  
Some one told me, I remember,  
    Long ago when I was small,  
God made every star up yonder,  
    Everything--the world and  
    all.  
Then I thought that in His  
    workshop,  
    Up there in the heavens  
    above,  
He had made that curious hunger  
    Of the heart that we call love.  
P'r'aps my troubles and the  
    waiting  
    Stirred me to this queer-like  
    whim;  
But I couldn't help it, Billy,  
    I just had to talk to Him.

15

"In the night, when God wa'n't  
    busy  
    And could hear the slightest  
    sound,  
I would venture from my hiding  
    To the top of North Pole  
    Mound.  
I was sure He'd never let His  
    Angels come out this-a-way,  
But would use the wind to carry,

Prayers out here, that people  
pray.  
So I'd hold my hands, and  
stopping  
Gusts that tried to struggle  
free,  
Tell them this here simple  
message  
They must take to you from  
me:  
'Please, dear God, won't you tell  
Billy  
That I'm holding down his  
claim?  
He don't come 'cause he's in  
trouble.  
Thank you, God. He ain't to  
blame.'"

16

Long before her honest story  
Faltered to its hallowed  
close,  
Pushing back his untouched  
supper,  
Tremblingly her guest arose.  
Vain for him to curb emotion,  
Or to stammer out his praise  
Through a storm of rude devotion,  
Cast in halting human phrase.  
Vain for him to frame a message  
Never meant for words to  
tell,  
At the joy of reaching heaven  
By that trail that led through  
hell.  
But his fervent benediction  
Was a passionate embrace,



And the Amen love's own ending,  
As he kissed her fearless  
face.

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