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Title: Nancy MacIntyre: A Tale of the Prairies

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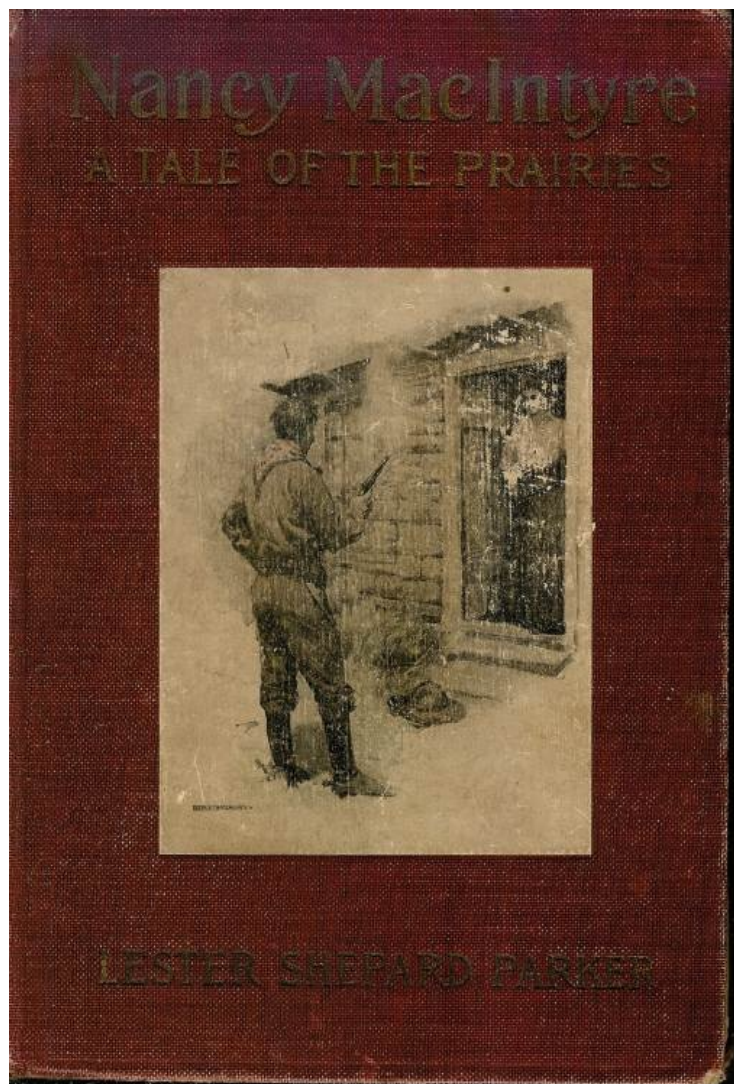
Release date: September 30, 2004 [EBook #13560]

Most recently updated: December 18, 2020

Language: English

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK NANCY MACINTYRE: A TALE OF THE
PRAIRIES ***

E-text prepared by Audrey Longhurst, Leah Moser,
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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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***"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 durn 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-dos* by 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.

10

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.

11

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,
Cirled 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 durn 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."

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.

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."*

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.

"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.

"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.

"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."

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.'"

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.

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.

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.

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.

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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