

A CYCLE OF THE WEST I  
**THE MOUNTAIN MEN**  
JOHN G. NEIHARDT



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## THE MOUNTAIN MEN

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# THE MOUNTAIN MEN

*The Song of Three Friends*  
*The Song of Hugh Glass*  
*The Song of Jed Smith*

Volume I of *A Cycle of the West*

BY

JOHN G. NEIHARDT



excelsior editions

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**THE SONG OF JED SMITH**

THE SONG OF JED SMITH . . . . .	I
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## INTRODUCTION

In 1912, at the age of 31, I began work on the following cycle of heroic *Songs*, designed to celebrate the great mood of courage that was developed west of the Missouri River in the nineteenth century. The series was dreamed out, much of it in detail, before I began; and for years it was my hope that it might be completed at the age of 60—as it was. During the interval, more than five thousand days were devoted to the work, along with the fundamentally important business of being first a man and a father. It was planned from the beginning that the five *Songs*, which appeared at long intervals during a period of twenty-nine years, should constitute a single work. They are now offered as such.

The period with which the *Cycle* deals was one of discovery, exploration and settlement—a genuine epic period, differing in no essential from the other great epic periods that marked the advance of the Indo-European peoples out of Asia and across Europe. It was a time of intense individualism, a time when society was cut loose from its

roots, a time when an old culture was being overcome by that of a powerful people driven by the ancient needs and greeds. For this reason only, the word "epic" has been used in connection with the *Cycle*; it is properly descriptive of the mood and meaning of the time and of the material with which I have worked. There has been no thought of synthetic *Iliads* and *Odysseys*, but only of the richly human saga-stuff of a country that I knew and loved, and of a time in the very fringe of which I was a boy.

This period began in 1822 and ended in 1890. The dates are not arbitrary. In 1822 General Ashley and Major Henry led a band of a hundred trappers from St. Louis, "the Mother of the West," to the beaver country of the upper Missouri River. During the following year a hundred more Ashley-Henry men ascended the Missouri. Out of these trapper bands came all the great continental explorers after Lewis and Clark. It was they who discovered and explored the great central route by way of South Pass, from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean, over which the tide of migration swept westward from the 40's onward.

*The Song of Three Friends* and *The Song of Hugh Glass* deal with the ascent of the river and with characteristic adventures of Ashley-Henry men in the country of the upper Missouri and the Yellowstone.

*The Song of Jed Smith* follows the first band of Americans through South Pass to the Great Salt Lake, the first band of Americans to reach Spanish California by an overland trail, the first white men to cross the great central desert from the Sierras to Salt Lake.

*The Song of the Indian Wars* deals with the period of migration and the last great fight for the bison pastures between the invading white race and the Plains Indians—the Sioux, the Cheyenne and the Arapahoe.

*The Song of the Messiah* is concerned wholly with the conquered people and the worldly end of their last great dream. The period closes with the Battle of Wounded Knee in 1890, which marked the end of Indian resistance on the Plains.

It will have been noted from the foregoing that the five *Songs* are linked in chronological order; but in addition to their progress in time and across the vast land, those who may feel as I have felt while the tales were growing may note a spiritual progression also—from the level of indomitable physical prowess to that of spiritual triumph in apparent worldly defeat. If any vital question be suggested in *The Song of Jed Smith*, for instance, there may be those who will find its age-old answer once again in the final *Song* of an alien people who also were men, and troubled.

But, after all, "the play's the thing"; and while

it is true that a knowledge of Western history and the topography of the country would be very helpful to a reader of the *Cycle*, such knowledge is not indispensable. For here are tales of men in struggle, triumph and defeat.

Those readers who have not followed the development of the *Cycle* may wish to know, and are entitled to know, something of my fitness for the task assumed a generation ago and now completed. To those I may say that I did not experience the necessity of seeking material about which to write. The feel and mood of it were in the blood of my family, and my early experiences aroused a passionate awareness of it. My family came to Pennsylvania more than a generation before the Revolutionary War, in which fourteen of us fought; and, crossing the Alleghenies after the war, we did not cease pioneering until some of us reached Oregon. Any one of my heroes, from point of time, could have been my paternal grandfather, who was born in 1801.

My maternal grandparents were covered-wagon people, and at the age of five I was living with them in a sod house on the upper Solomon in western Kansas. The buffalo had vanished from that country only a few years before, and the signs of them were everywhere. I have helped, as a little boy could, in "picking cow-chips" for winter fuel. If I write of hot-winds and grasshoppers, of prairie



fires and blizzards, of dawns and noons and sunsets and nights, of brooding heat and thunderstorms in vast lands, I knew them early. They were the vital facts of my world, along with the talk of the old-timers who knew such fascinating things to talk about.

I was a very little boy when my father introduced me to the Missouri River at Kansas City. It was flood time. The impression was tremendous, and a steadily growing desire to know what had happened on such a river led me directly to my heroes. Twenty years later, when I had come to know them well, I built a boat at Fort Benton, Montana, descended the Missouri in low water and against head winds, dreamed back the stories men had lived along the river, bend by bend. This experience is set forth in *The River and I*.

In northern Nebraska I grew up at the edge of the retreating frontier, and became intimately associated with the Omaha Indians, a Siouan people, when many of the old "long-hairs" among them still remembered vividly the time that meant so much to me. We were good friends. Later, I became equally well acquainted among the Oglala Sioux, as my volume, *Black Elk Speaks*, reveals; and I have never been happier than while living with my friends among them, mostly unreconstructed "long-hairs," sharing, as one of them, their thoughts, their feelings, their rich memories

that often reached far back into the world of my *Cycle*.

When I have described battles, I have depended far less on written accounts than upon the reminiscences of men who fought in them—not only Indians, but whites as well. For, through many years, I was privileged to know many old white men, officers and privates, who had fought in the Plains Wars. Much of the material for the last two *Songs* of the series came directly from those who were themselves a part of the stories.

For the first three *Songs*, I was compelled to depend chiefly upon early journals of travel and upon an intimate knowledge of Western history generally. But while I could not have known my earlier heroes, I have known old men who had missed them, but had known men who knew some of them well; and such memories at second hand can be most illuminating to one who knows the facts already. For instance, I once almost touched even Jedediah Smith himself, the greatest and most mysterious of them all, through an old plainsman who was an intimate friend of Bridger, who had been a comrade of Jed!

Such intimate contacts with soldiers, plainsmen, Indians and river men were an integral part of my life for many years, and I cannot catalog them here. As for knowledge of the wide land with which the *Cycle* deals, those who know any

part of it well will know that I have been there too.

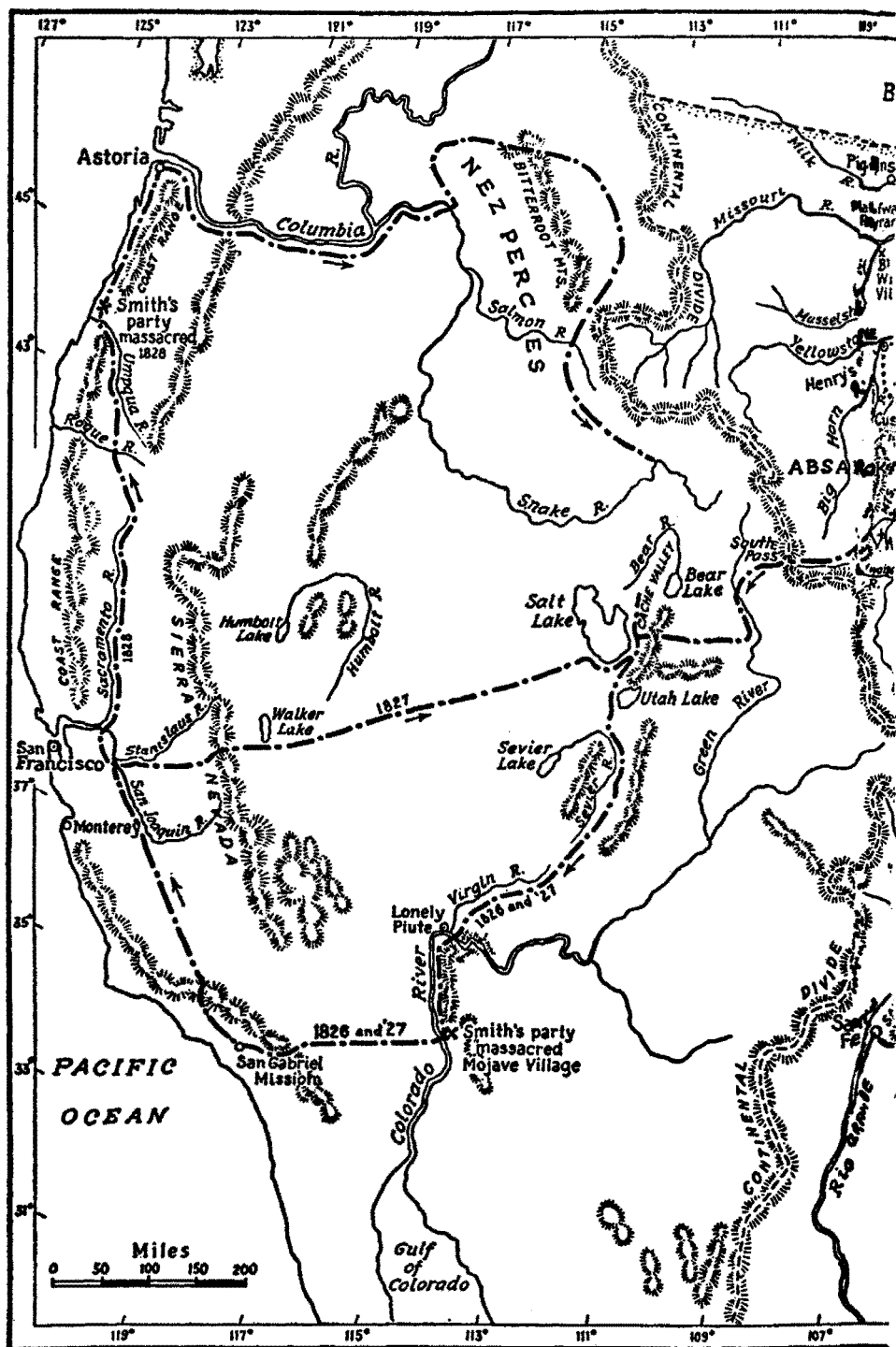
Those who are not acquainted with early Western history will find a good introduction to the *Cycle* in Harrison Dale's *The Ashley-Henry Men*—or perhaps my own book, *The Splendid Wayfaring*.

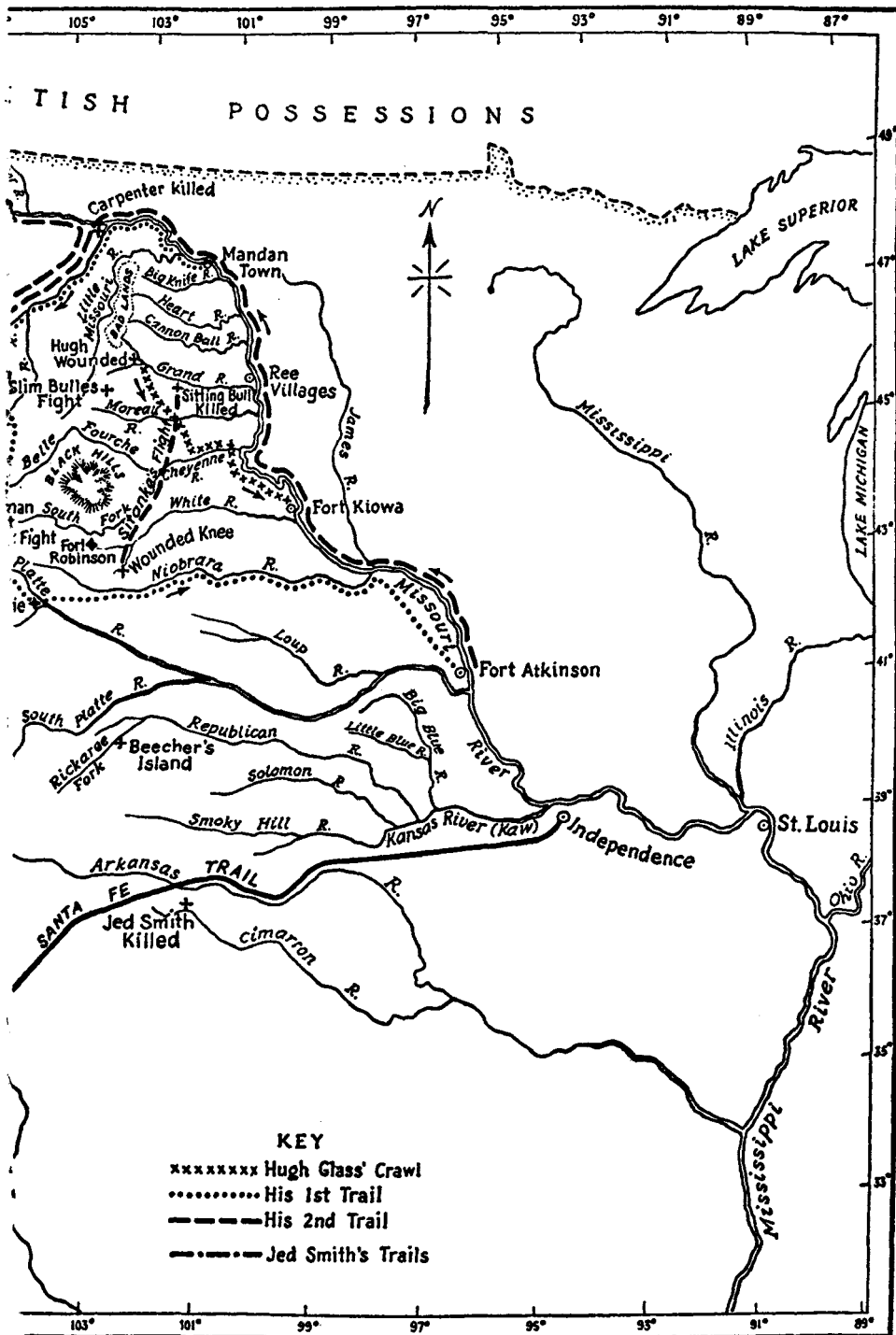
I can see now that I grew up on the farther slope of a veritable "watershed of history," the summit of which is already crossed, and in a land where the old world lingered longest. It is gone, and, with it, all but two or three of the old-timers, white and brown, whom I have known. My mind and most of my heart are with the young, and with the strange new world that is being born in agony. But something of my heart stays yonder, for in the years of my singing about a time and a country that I loved, I note, without regret, that I have become an old-timer myself!

The foregoing was set down in anticipation of some questions that readers of good will, potential friends, might ask.

JOHN NEIHARDT

Columbia, Mo., 1948.





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## THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

## ΤΟ HILDA

Ὅϊον τὸ γλυκύμαλον ἐρεύθεται ἄκρῳ ἐπ' ὕσδα·  
ἄκρον ἐπ' ἄκροτάτῳ· λελάθοντο δὲ μαλοδρόπῃς,  
οὐ μὰν ἐκλελαθοντ', ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐδύναντ' ἐπίκεσθαι.



# THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

## I

### ASHLEY'S HUNDRED

Who now reads clear the roster of that band?  
Alas, Time scribbles with a careless hand  
And often pinchbeck doings from that pen  
Bite deep, where deeds and dooms of mighty men  
Are blotted out beneath a sordid scrawl!

One hundred strong they flocked to Ashley's call  
That spring of eighteen hundred twenty-two;  
For tales of wealth, out-legending Peru,  
Came wind-blown from Missouri's distant springs,  
And that old sireny of unknown things  
Bewitched them, and they could not linger more.  
They heard the song the sea winds sang the shore  
When earth was flat, and black ships dared the  
steep  
Where bloomed the purple perils of the deep  
In dragon-haunted gardens. They were young.

## 2 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Albeit some might feel the winter flung  
Upon their heads, 'twas less like autumn's drift  
Than backward April's unregarded sift  
On stout oaks thrilling with the sap again.  
And some had scarce attained the height of men,  
Their lips unroughed, and gleaming in their eyes  
The light of immemorial surprise  
That life still kept the spaciousness of old  
And, like the hoarded tales their grandsires told,  
Might still run bravely.

For a little span  
Their life-fires flared like torches in the van  
Of westward progress, ere the great wind 'woke  
To snuff them. Many vanished like a smoke  
The blue air drinks; and e'en of those who burned  
Down to the socket, scarce a tithe returned  
To share at last the ways of quiet men,  
Or see the hearth-reek drifting once again  
Across the roofs of old St. Louis town.

And now no more the mackinaws come down,  
Their gunwales low with costly packs and bales,  
A wind of wonder in their shabby sails,  
Their homing oars flung rhythmic to the tide;  
And nevermore the masted keelboats ride  
Missouri's stubborn waters on the lone  
Long zigzag journey to the Yellowstone.

Their hulks have found the harbor ways that know  
The ships of all the Sagas, long ago —  
A moony haven where no loud gale stirs.  
The trappers and the singing *voyageurs*  
Are comrades now of Jason and his crew,  
Foregathered in that timeless rendezvous  
Where come at last all seekers of the Fleece.

Not now of those who, dying, dropped in peace  
A brimming cup of years the song shall be :  
From Mississippi to the Western Sea,  
From Britain's country to the Rio Grande  
Their names are written deep across the land  
In pass and trail and river, like a rune.

Pore long upon that roster by the moon  
Of things remembered dimly. Tangled, blear  
The writing runs; yet presently appear  
Three names of men that, spoken, somehow seem  
Incantatory trumpets of a dream  
Obscurely blowing from the hinter-gloom.  
Of these and that inexorable doom  
That followed like a hound upon the scent,  
Here runs the tale.

## II

### THE UP-STREAM MEN

When Major Henry went  
Up river at the head of Ashley's band,  
Already there were robins in the land.  
Home-keeping men were following the plows  
And through the smoke-thin greenery of boughs  
The scattering wild-fire of the fruit bloom ran.

Behold them starting northward, if you can.  
Dawn flares across the Mississippi's tide;  
A tumult runs along the waterside  
Where, scenting an event, St. Louis throngs.  
Above the buzzing voices soar the songs  
Of waiting boatmen — lilting *chansonnettes*  
Whereof the meaning laughs, the music frets,  
Nigh weeping that such gladness can not stay.  
In turn, the herded horses snort and neigh  
Like panic bugles. Up the gangplanks poured,  
Go streams of trappers, rushing goods aboard  
The snub-built keelboats, squat with seeming  
sloth —  
Baled three-point blankets, blue and scarlet  
cloth,

Rum, powder, flour, guns, gauderies and lead.  
And all about, goodbyes are being said.  
Gauche girls with rainy April in their gaze  
Cling to their beardless heroes, count the days  
Between this parting and the wedding morn,  
Unwitting how unhuman Fate may scorn  
The youngling dream. For O how many a lad  
Would see the face of Danger, and go mad  
With her weird vixen beauty; aye, forget  
This girl's face, yearning upward now and wet,  
Half woman's with the first vague guess at woe!

And now commands are bellowed, boat horns  
blow

Haughtily in the dawn; the tumult swells.  
The tow-crews, shouldering the long cordelles  
Slack from the mastheads, lean upon the sag.  
The keelboats answer lazily and drag  
Their blunt prows slowly in the gilded tide.  
A steersman sings, and up the riverside  
The gay contagious ditty spreads and runs  
Above the shouts, the uproar of the guns,  
The nickering of horses.

So, they say,  
Went forth a hundred singing men that day;  
And girlish April went ahead of them.  
The music of her trailing garment's hem

6 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Seemed scarce a league ahead. A little speed  
Might yet almost surprise her in the deed  
Of sorcery; for, ever as they strove,  
A gray-green smudge in every poplar grove  
Proclaimed the recent kindling. Aye, it seemed  
That bird and bush and tree had only dreamed  
Of song and leaf and blossom, till they heard  
The young men's feet; when tree and bush and  
bird

Unleashed the whole conspiracy of awe!  
Pale green was every slough about the Kaw;  
About the Platte, pale green was every slough;  
And still the pale green lingered at the Sioux,  
So close they trailed the marching of the South.  
But when they reached the Niobrara's mouth  
The witchery of spring had taken flight  
And, like a girl grown woman over night,  
Young summer glowed.

And now the river rose,  
Gigantic from a feast of northern snows,  
And mightily the snub prows felt the tide;  
But with the loud, sail-filling South allied,  
The tow-crews battled gaily day by day;  
And seldom lulled the struggle on the way  
But some light jest availed to fling along  
The panting lines the laughter of the strong,

For joy sleeps lightly in the hero's mood.  
And when the sky-wide prairie solitude  
Was darkened round them, and the camp was set  
Secure for well-earned sleep that came not yet,  
What stories shaped for marvel or for mirth! —  
Tales fit to strain the supper-tightened girth,  
Looped yarns, wherein the veteran spinners vied  
To color with a lie more glorified  
Some thread that had veracity enough,  
Spun straightway out of life's own precious  
stuff

That each had scutched and heckled in the raw.  
Then thinner grew each subsequent guffaw  
While drowsily the story went the rounds  
And o'er the velvet dark the summer sounds  
Prevailed in weird crescendo more and more,  
Until the story-teller with a snore  
Gave over to a dream a tale half told.

And now the horse-guards, while the night grows  
old,  
With intermittent singing buffet sleep  
That surges subtly down the starry deep  
On waves of odor from the manless miles  
Of summer-haunted prairie. Now, at whiles,  
The kiote's mordant clamor cleaves the drowse.  
The horses stamp and blow; about the prowls

8 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Dark waters chug and gurgle; as with looms  
Bugs weave a drone; a beaver's diving booms,  
Whereat bluffs grumble in their sable cowls.  
The devil laughter of the prairie owls  
Mocks mirth anon, like unrepentant sin.  
Perceptibly at last slow hours wear thin  
The east, until the prairie stares with morn,  
And horses nicker to the boatman's horn  
That blares the music of a day begun.

So through the days of thunder and of sun  
They pressed to northward. Now the river  
shrank,  
The grass turned yellow and the men were lank  
And gnarled with labor. Smooth-lipped lads  
matured  
'Twixt moon and moon with all that they  
endured,  
Their faces leathered by the wind and glare,  
Their eyes grown ageless with the calm far  
stare  
Of men who know the prairies or the seas.  
And when they reached the village of the  
Rees,  
One scarce might say, This man is young, this  
old,  
Save for the beard.



Here loitered days of gold  
And days of leisure, welcome to the crews;  
For recently had come the wondrous news  
Of beaver-haunts beyond the Great Divide —  
So rich a tale 'twould seem the tellers lied,  
Had they not much fine peltry to attest.  
So now the far off River of the West  
Became the goal of venture for the band;  
And since the farther trail lay overland  
From where the Great Falls thundered to no  
ear,  
They paused awhile to buy more ponies here  
With powder, liquor, gauds and wily words.  
A horse-fond people, opulent in herds,  
The Rees were; and the trade was very good.

Now camped along the river-fringing wood,  
Three sullen, thunder-brewing, rainless days,  
Those weathered men made merry in their  
ways  
With tippie, euchre, story, jest and song.  
The marksmen matched their cleverness; the  
strong  
Wrestled the strong; and brawling pugilists  
Displayed the boasted power of their fists  
In stubborn yet half amicable fights.  
And whisky went hell-roaring through the nights

10     THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Among the lodges of the fuddled Rees.  
Thus merrily the trappers took their ease,  
Rejoicing in the thread that Clotho spun;  
For it was good to feel the bright thread run,  
However eager for the snipping shears.

O joy long stifled in the ruck of years!  
How many came to strange and bitter ends!  
And who was merrier than those three friends  
Whom here a song remembers for their woe?

Will Carpenter, Mike Fink and Frank Talbeau  
Were they — each gotten of a doughty breed;  
For in the blood of them the ancient seed  
Of Saxon, Celt and Norman grew again.  
The Mississippi reared no finer men,  
And rarely the Ohio knew their peers  
For pluck and prowess — even in those years  
When stern life yielded suck but to the strong.  
Nor in the hundred Henry took along  
Was found their match — and each man knew it  
well.

For instance, when it suited Mike to tell  
A tale that called for laughter, as he thought,  
The hearer laughed right heartily, or fought  
And took a drubbing. Then, if more complained,  
Those three lacked not for logic that explained

The situation in no doubtful way.  
"Me jokes are always funny" Mike would say;  
And most men freely granted that they were.

A lanky, rangy man was Carpenter,  
Quite six feet two from naked heel to crown;  
And, though crow-lean, he brought the steelyard  
down

With twice a hundred notched upon the bar.  
Nor was he stooped, as tall men often are;  
A cedar of a man, he towered straight.  
One might have judged him lumbering of gait,  
When he was still; but when he walked or ran,  
He stepped it lightly like a little man —  
And such a one is very good to see.  
Not his the tongue for quip or repartee;  
His wit seemed slow; and something of the child  
Came o'er his rough-hewn features, when he  
smiled,

To mock the porching brow and eagle nose.  
'Twas when he fought the true import of those  
Grew clear, though even then his mien deceived;  
For less in wrath, he seemed, than mildly  
grieved —

Which made his blows no whit less true or hard.  
His hair was flax fresh gleaming from the card;  
His eyes, the flax in bloom.

12 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

A match in might,  
Fink lacked five inches of his comrade's height,  
And of his weight scarce twenty pounds, they  
say.

His hair was black, his small eyes greenish gray  
And restless as though feeling out of place  
In such a jocund plenilunar face.

That seemed made just for laughter. Then one  
saw

The pert pugnacious nose, the forward jaw,  
The breadth of stubborn cheekbones, and one  
knew

That jest and fight to him were scarcely two,  
But rather shifting phases of the joy  
He felt in living. Careless as a boy,  
Free handed with a gift or with a blow,  
And giving either unto friend or foe  
With frank good will, no man disliked him long.  
They say his voice could glorify a song,  
However loutish might the burden be;  
And all the way from Pittsburg to the sea  
The Rabelaisian stories of the rogue  
Ran wedded to the richness of his brogue.  
And wheresoever boatmen came to drink,  
There someone broached some escapade of Fink  
That well might fill the goat-hoofed with delight;  
For Mike, the pantagruelizing wight,

Was happy in the health of bone and brawn  
And had the code and conscience of the faun  
To guide him blithely down the easy way.  
A questionable hero, one might say :  
And so indeed, by any civil law.  
Moreover, at first glimpse of him one saw  
A bull-necked fellow, seeming over stout ;  
Tremendous at a heavy lift, no doubt,  
But wanting action. By the very span  
Of chest and shoulders, one misjudged the man  
When he was clothed. But when he stripped to  
swim,

Men flocked about to have a look at him,  
Moved vaguely by that body's wonder-scheme  
Wherein the shape of God's Adamic dream  
Was victor over stubborn dust again!

O very lovely is a maiden, when  
The old creative thrill is set astir  
Along her blood, and all the flesh of her  
Is shapen as to music! Fair indeed  
A tall horse, lean of flank, clean-limbed for  
speed,  
Deep-chested for endurance! Very fair  
A soaring tree, aloof in violet air  
Upon a hill! And 'tis a glorious thing  
To see a bankfull river in the spring

14 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Fight homeward! Children wonderful to see —  
The Girl, the Horse, the River and the Tree —  
As any suckled at the breast of sod;  
Dissolving symbols leading back to God  
Through vista after vista of the Plan!  
But surely none is fairer than a man  
In whom the lines of might and grace are one.

Bronzed with exposure to the wind and sun,  
Behold the splendid creature that was Fink!  
You see him strolling to the river's brink,  
All ease, and yet tremendously alive.  
He pauses, poised on tiptoe for the dive,  
And momentarily it seems the mother mud,  
Quick with a mystic seed whose sap is blood,  
Mysteriously rears a human flower.  
Clean as a windless flame the lines of power  
Run rhythmic up the stout limbs, muscle-  
laced,  
Athwart the ropy gauntness of the waist,  
The huge round girth of chest, wherever spread  
Enormous shoulders. Now above his head  
He lifts his arms where big thews merge and  
flow  
As in some dream of Michelangelo;  
And up along the dimpling back there run,  
Like lazy serpents stirring in the sun,

Slow waves that break and pile upon the slope  
Of that great neck in swelling rolls, a-grope  
Beneath the velvet softness of the skin.  
Now suddenly the lean waist grows more thin,  
The deep chest on a sudden grows more deep;  
And with the swiftness of a tiger's leap,  
The easy grace of hawks in swooping flight,  
That terrible economy of might  
And beauty plunges outward from the brink.

Thus God had made experiment with Fink,  
As proving how 'twere best that men might  
grow.

One turned from Mike to look upon Talbeau —  
A little man, scarce five feet six and slim —  
And wondered what his comrades saw in him  
To justify their being thus allied.  
Was it a sort of planetary pride  
In lunar adoration? Hark to Mike:  
"Shure I declare I niver saw his like —  
A skinny whiffet of a man! And yit —  
Well, do ye moind the plisint way we mit  
And how he interjooiced hisself that day?  
'Twas up at Pittsburg, liquor flowin' fray  
And ivrybody happy as a fool.  
I cracked me joke and thin, as is me rule,

16 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Looked round to view the havoc of me wit;  
And ivrywan was doubled up wid it,  
Save only wan, and him a scrubby mite.  
Says I, and shure me language was polite,  
'And did ye hear me little joke?' says I.  
'I did' says he. 'And can't ye laugh, me  
b'y?'

'I can't' says he, the sassy little chap.  
Nor did I git me hand back from the slap  
I give him till he landed on me glim,  
And I was countin' siventeen of him  
And ivry dancin' wan of him was air!  
Faith, whin I hit him he was niver there;  
And shure it seemed that ivry wind that blew  
Was peltin' knuckles in me face. Hurroo!  
That toime, fer wance, I got me fill of fun!  
God bless the little whiffet! It begun  
Along about the shank of afthernoon;  
And whin I washed me face, I saw the moon  
A-shakin' wid its laughther in the shtrame.  
And whin, betoimes, he wakened from his  
drame,

I says to him, 'Ye needn't laugh, me b'y:  
A cliver little man ye are,' says I.  
And Och, the face of me! I'm tellin' fac's —  
Ye'd wonder did he do it wid an ax!  
'Twas foine! 'Twas art!"



Thus, eloquent with pride,  
Mike Fink, an expert witness, testified  
To Talbeau's fistic prowess.

Now they say  
There lived no better boatmen in their day  
Than those three comrades; and the larger  
twain  
In that wide land three mighty rivers drain  
Found not their peers for skill in marksmanship.  
Writes one, who made the long Ohio trip  
With those boon cronies in their palmy days,  
How once Mike Fink beheld a sow at graze  
Upon the bank amid her squealing brood;  
And how Mike, being in a merry mood,  
Shot off each wiggling piglet's corkscrew tail  
At twenty yards, while under easy sail  
The boat moved on. And Carpenter could bore  
A squirrel's eye clean at thirty steps and more —  
So many say. But 'twas their dual test  
Of mutual love and skill they liked the best  
Of all their shooting tricks — when one stood up  
At sixty paces with a whisky cup  
Set brimming for a target on his head,  
And felt the gusty passing of the lead,  
Hot from the other's rifle, lift his hair.  
And ever was the tin cup smitten fair

18 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

By each, to prove the faith of each anew :  
For 'twas a rite of love between the two,  
And not a mere capricious feat of skill.  
"Och, shure, and can ye shoot the whisky, Bill?"  
So Mike would end a wrangle. "Damn it,  
Fink!  
Let's bore a pair of cups and have a drink !"  
So Carpenter would stop a row grown stale.  
And neither feared that either love might fail  
Or either skill might falter.

Thus appear  
The doughty three who held each other dear  
For qualities they best could comprehend.

Now came the days of leisure to an end —  
The days so gaily squandered, that would  
seem  
To men at length made laughterless, a dream  
Unthinkably remote; for Ilion held  
Beneath her sixfold winding sheet of Eld  
Seems not so hoar as bygone joy we prize  
In evil days. Now vaguely pale the skies,  
The glimmer neither starlight's nor the morn's.  
A rude ironic merriment of horns  
Startles the men yet heavy with carouse,  
And sets a Ree dog mourning in the drowse,

Snout skyward from a lodge top. Sleepy birds  
Chirp in the brush. A drone of sullen words  
Awakes and runs increasing through the camp.  
Thin smoke plumes, rising in the valley damp,  
Flatten among the leathern tents and make  
The whole encampment like a ghostly lake  
Where bobbing heads of swimmers come and go,  
As with the whimsy of an undertow  
That sucks and spews them. Raising dust and  
    din,  
The horse-guards drive their shaggy rabble in  
From nightlong grazing. *Voyageurs*, with packs  
Of folded tents and camp gear on their backs,  
Slouch boatward through the reek. But when  
    prevails  
The smell of frying pans and coffee pails,  
They cease to sulk and, greatly heartened,  
    sing  
Till ponies swell the chorus, nickering,  
And race-old comrades jubilate as one.

Out of a roseless dawn the heat-pale sun  
Beheld them toiling northward once again —  
A hundred horses and a hundred men  
Hushed in a windless swelter. Day on day  
The same white dawn o'ertook them on their  
    way;

20 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

And daylong in the white glare sang no bird,  
But only shrill grasshoppers clicked and whirred,  
As though the heat were vocal. All the while  
The dwindling current lengthened, mile on  
mile,  
Meandrous in a labyrinth of sand.

Now e'er they left the Ree town by the Grand  
The revellers had seen the spent moon roam  
The morning, like a tipsy hag bound home.  
A bubble-laden boat, they saw it sail  
The sunset river of a fairy tale  
When they were camped beside the Cannon-  
ball.  
A spectral sun, it held the dusk in thrall  
Nightlong about the Heart. The stars alone  
Upon the cluttered Mandan lodges shone  
The night they slept below the Knife. And  
when  
Their course, long westward, shifted once again  
To lead them north, the August moon was new.

The rainless Southwest wakened now and blew  
A wilting, worrying, breath-sucking gale  
That roared one moment in the bellied sail,  
Next moment slackened to a lazy croon.  
Now came the first misfortune. All forenoon

With line and pole the sweating boatmen strove  
Along the east bank, while the horseguards  
drove

The drooping herd a little to the fore.  
And then the current took the other shore.  
Straight on, a maze of bar and shallow lay,  
The main stream running half a mile away  
To westward of a long low willow isle.  
An hour they fought that stubborn half a mile  
Of tumbled water. Down the running planks  
The polesmen toiled in endless slanting ranks.  
Now swimming, now a-flounder in the ooze  
Of some blind bar, the naked cordelle crews  
Sought any kind of footing for a pull;  
While gust-bedevelled sails, now booming full,  
Now flapping slack, gave questionable aid.

The west bank gained, along a ragged shade  
Of straggling cottonwoods the boatmen sprawled  
And panted. Out across the heat-enthralled,  
Wind-fretted waste of shoal and bar they saw  
The string of ponies ravelled up a draw  
That mounted steeply eastward from the vale  
Where, like a rampart flung across the trail,  
A bluff rose sheer. Heads low, yet loath to  
graze,  
They waxed and withered in the oily haze,

22 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Now ponies, now a crawling flock of sheep.  
Behind them three slack horseguards, half  
asleep,  
Swayed limply, leaning on their saddle-bows.

The boat crews, lolling in a semi-doze,  
Still watch the herd; nor do the gazers dream  
What drama nears a climax over stream,  
What others yonder may be watching too.  
Now looming large upon the lucent blue,  
The foremost ponies top the rim, and stare  
High-headed down the vacancies of air  
Beneath them; while the herders dawdle still  
And gather wool scarce halfway up the hill —  
A slumbrous sight beheld by heavy eyes.

But hark! What murmuring of far-flung cries  
From yonder pocket in the folded rise  
That flanks the draw? The herders also hear  
And with a start glance upward to the rear.  
Their spurred mounts plunge! What do they  
see but dust  
Whipped skyward yonder in a freakish gust?  
What panic overtakes them? Look again!  
The rolling dust cloud vomits mounted men,  
A ruck of tossing heads and gaudy gears  
Beneath a bristling thicket of lean spears  
Slant in a gust of onset!

## Over stream

The boatmen stare dumfounded. Like a dream  
In some vague region out of space and time  
Evolves the swiftly moving pantomime  
Before those loungers with ungirded loins;  
Till one among them shouts "*Assiniboines!*"  
And swelling to a roar, the wild word runs  
Above a pellmell scramble for the guns,  
Perceived as futile soon. Yet here and there  
A few young hotheads fusillade the air,  
And rage the more to know the deed absurd.  
Some only grind their teeth without a word;  
Some stand aghast, some grinningly inane,  
While some, like watch-dogs rabid at the chain,  
Growl curses, pacing at the river's rim.

So might unhappy spirits haunt the dim  
Far shore of Styx, beholding outrage done  
To loved ones in the region of the sun —  
Rage goaded by its own futility!

For one vast moment strayed from time, they see  
The war band flung obliquely down the slope,  
The flying herdsmen, seemingly a-grope  
In sudden darkness for their saddle guns.  
A murmuring shock! And now the whole scene  
runs

24 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Into a dusty blur of horse and man;  
And now the herd's rear surges on the van  
That takes the cue of panic fear and flies  
Stampeding to the margin of the skies,  
Till all have vanished in the deeps of air.  
Now outlined sharply on the sky-rim there  
The victors pause and taunt their helpless  
foes

With buttocks patted and with thumbs at nose  
And jeers scarce hearkened for the wind's guffaw.  
They also vanish. In the sunwashed draw  
Remains no sign of what has come to pass,  
Save three dark splotches on the yellow grass,  
Where now the drowsy horseguards have their  
will.

At sundown on the summit of the hill  
The huddled boatmen saw the burial squad  
Tuck close their comrades' coverlet of sod —  
Weird silhouettes on melancholy gray.  
And very few found anything to say  
That night; though some spoke gently of the  
dead,  
Remembering what that one did or said  
At such and such a time. And some, more  
stirred  
With lust of vengeance for the stolen herd,



Swore vaguely now and then beneath their breath.  
Some, brooding on the imminence of death,  
Grew wistful of their unreturning years;  
And some who found their praying in arrears  
Made shift to liquidate the debt that night.

But when once more the cheerful morning light  
Came on them toiling, also came the mood  
Of young adventure, and the solitude  
Sang with them. For 'tis glorious to spend  
One's golden days large-handed to the end —  
The good broadpieces that can buy so much!  
And what may hoarders purchase but a crutch  
Wherewith to hobble graveward?

On they pressed  
To where once more the river led them west;  
And every day the hot wind, puff on puff,  
Assailed them; every night they heard it sough  
In thickets prematurely turning sere.

Then came the sudden breaking of the year.

Abruptly in a waning afternoon  
The hot wind ceased, as fallen in a swoon  
With its own heat. For hours the swinking  
crews  
Had bandied scarcely credible good news

26 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Of clouds across the dim northwestward plain;  
And they who offered wagers on the rain  
Found ready takers, though the gloomy rack,  
With intermittent rumbling at its back,  
Had mounted slowly. Now it towered high,  
A blue-black wall of night across the sky  
Shot through with glacial green.

A mystic change!

The sun was hooded and the world went  
strange —

A picture world! The hollow hush that fell  
Made loud the creaking of the taut cordelle,  
The bent spar's groan, the plunk of steering  
poles.

A bodeful calm lay glassy on the shoals;  
The current had the look of flowing oil.  
They saw the cloud's lip billow now and boil —  
Black breakers gnawing at a coast of light;  
They saw the stealthy wraith-arms of the night  
Grove for the day to strangle it; they saw  
The up-stream reaches vanish in a flaw  
Of driving sand: and scarcely were the craft  
Made fast to clumps of willow fore and aft,  
When with a roar the blinding fury rolled  
Upon them; and the breath of it was cold.  
There fell no rain.

That night was calm and clear :  
Just such a night as when the waning year  
Has set aflare the old Missouri wood ;  
When Greenings are beginning to be good ;  
And when, so hollow is the frosty hush,  
One hears the ripe persimmons falling — *plush!* —  
Upon the littered leaves. The kindly time!  
With cider in the vigor of its prime,  
Just strong enough to edge the dullest wit  
Should neighbor folk drop in awhile to sit  
And gossip. O the dear flame-painted gloam,  
The backlog's sputter on the hearth at home —  
How far away that night! Thus many a  
    lad,  
Grown strangely old, remembered and was sad.  
Wolves mourned among the bluffs. Like hanks  
    of wool  
Fog flecked the river. And the moon was full.

A week sufficed to end the trail. They came  
To where the lesser river gives its name  
And meed of waters to the greater stream.  
Here, lacking horses, they must nurse the  
    dream  
Of beaver haunts beyond the Great Divide,  
Build quarters for the winter trade, and bide  
The coming up of Ashley and his band.

So up and down the wooded tongue of land  
That thins to where the rivers wed, awoke  
The sound of many axes, stroke on stroke;  
And lustily the hewers sang at whiles —  
The better to forget the homeward miles  
In this, the homing time. And when the geese  
With cacophonic councils broke the peace  
Of frosty nights before they took to wing;  
When cranes went over daily, southering,  
And blackbirds chattered in the painted wood,  
A mile above the river junction stood  
The fort, adjoining the Missouri's tide.  
Foursquare and thirty paces on a side,  
A wall of sharpened pickets bristled round  
A group of sod-roofed cabins. Bastions frowned  
From two opposing corners, set to brave  
A foe on either flank; and stout gates gave  
Upon the stream, where now already came  
The Indian craft, lured thither by the fame  
Of traders building by the mating floods.

### III

#### TO THE MUSSELSHELL

Now came at dawn a party of the Bloods,  
Who told of having paddled seven nights  
To parley for their people with the Whites,  
The long way lying 'twixt a foe and foe;  
For ever on their right hand lurked the Crow,  
And on their left hand, the Assiniboine.  
The crane-winged news, that where the waters  
join

The Long Knives built a village, made them sad ·  
Because the pastures thereabouts were bad,  
Sustaining few and very scrawny herds.  
So they had hastened hither, bringing words  
Of kindness from their mighty men, to tell  
What welcome waited on the Musselshell  
Where stood the winter lodges of their band.

They rhapsodized the fatness of that land :  
Lush valleys where all summer bison ran  
To grass grown higher than a mounted man !  
Aye, winter long on many a favored slope  
The bison grazed with goat and antelope,

30 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Nor were they ever leaner in the spring!  
One heard the diving beaver's thundering  
In all the streams at night; and one might hear  
Uncounted bull elks whistle, when the year  
Was painted for its death. Their squaws were  
good,  
Strong bearers of the water and the wood,  
With quiet tongues and never weary hands;  
Tall as the fighting men of other lands,  
And good to look upon. These things were so!  
Why else then should Assiniboine and Crow  
Assail the Bloods?

Now flaring up, they spoke  
Of battles and their haters blown as smoke  
Before the blizzard of their people's ire,  
Devoured as grass before a prairie fire  
That licks the heavens when the Northwind  
runs!  
But, none the less, their warriors needed guns  
And powder. Wherefor, let the Great White  
Chief  
Return with them, ere yet the painted leaf  
Had fallen. If so be he might not leave  
This land of peoples skillful to deceive,  
Who, needing much, had scarce a hide to sell —  
Then send a party to the Musselshell

To trade and trap until the grass was young  
And calves were yellow. With no forkéd tongue  
The Bloods had spoken. Had the White Chief  
ears?

So Major Henry called for volunteers;  
And Fink was ready on the word to go  
"And chance the bloody naygurs"; then Tal-  
beau,  
Then Carpenter; and after these were nine,  
In whom young blood was like a beading wine,  
Who lusted for the venture.

Late that night  
The Bloods set out for home. With day's first  
light  
The dozen trappers followed, paddling west  
In six canoes. And whatso suited best  
The whimsies of the savage or his needs,  
The slim craft carried — scarlet cloth and beads,  
Some antiquated muskets, powder, ball,  
Traps, knives, and little casks of alcohol  
To lubricate the rusty wheels of trade!

So, singing as they went, the blithe brigade  
Departed, with their galloping canoes  
Heeding the tune. They had no time to lose;

32 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

For long and stubborn was the upstream way,  
And when they launched their boats at break of  
day

They heard a thin ice tinkle at the prows.

A bodeful silence and a golden drowse  
Possessed the land. The Four Winds held their  
breath

Before a vast serenity of death,  
Wherein it seemed the reminiscent Year —  
A yearning ghost now — wrought about its bier  
Some pale hallucination of its May.  
Bleak stretched the prairie to the walls of day,  
So dry, that where a loping kiote broke  
Its loneliness, it smouldered into smoke:  
And when a herd of bison rumbled past,  
'Twas like a great fire booming in a blast,  
The rolling smudge whereof concealed the flame.

Proceeding in the truce of winds, they came  
In five days to the vale the Poplar drains.  
A trailing flight of southbound whooping cranes,  
Across the fading West, was like a scrawl  
Of cabalistic warning on a wall,  
And counselled haste. In seven days they  
reached  
The point where Wolf Creek empties in, and  
beached



Their keels along its dusty bed. In nine,  
Elk Prairie and the Little Porcupine,  
Now waterless, had fallen to the rear.  
The tenth sun failed them on the lone frontier  
Where flows the turbid Milk by countless bends  
And where Assiniboian country ends  
And Blackfoot Land begins. The hollow gloom  
All night resounded with the beaver's boom;  
A wolf pack yammered from a distant hill;  
Anon a rutting elk cried, like a shrill  
Arpeggio blown upon a flageolet.  
A half day more their lifting prows were set  
To westward; then the flowing trail led south  
Two days by many a bend to Hell Creek's mouth  
Amid the Badlands. Gazing from a height,  
The lookout saw the marching of the Night  
Across a vast black waste of peaks and deeps  
That could have been infernal cinder-heaps,  
The relics of an ancient hell gone cold.

That night they saw a wild aurora rolled  
Above the lifeless wilderness. It formed  
Northeastwardly in upright waves that stormed  
To westward, sequent combers of the bow  
That gulfed Polaris in their undertow  
And hurtled high upon the Ursine Isles  
A surf of ghostly fire. Again, at whiles,

34 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

A shimmering silken veil, it puffed and swirled  
As 'twere the painted curtain of the world  
That fluttered in a rising gale of doom.  
And when it vanished in the starry gloom  
One said "'Twill blow to-morrow."

So it did.

Ere noon they raised the Half Way Pyramid  
Southwestward; saw its wraith-like summit  
lift

And seem to float northwest against a drift  
Of wind-whipped dust. The lunar hills about —  
Where late a bird's note startled like a shout  
The hush that seemed the body of old Time —  
Now bellowed where the hoofs of Yotunheim  
Foreran the grizzled legions of the Snow.

'Twas peep of day when it began to blow,  
A zephyr growing stronger with the light,  
And now by fits it churned the river white  
And whipped the *voyageurs* with freezing spray.  
The windward reaches took their breath away.  
Ghost-white and numb with cold, from bend to  
bend,

Where transiently the wind became a friend  
To drive them south, they battled; till at  
last

Around a jutting bluff they met a blast

That choked as with a hand upon their throats  
The song they sang for courage; hurled their  
boats  
Against the farther shore and held them pinned.

A sting of spitting snow was in the wind.  
Southwest by west across the waste, where fell  
A murky twilight, lay the Musselshell —  
Two days of travel with the crow for guide.  
Here must they find them shelter, and abide  
The passing of the blizzard as they could.  
The banks bore neither plum nor cottonwood  
And all the hills were naked as a hand.  
But where, debouching from the broken land,  
A river in the spring was wont to flow,  
A northward moving herd of buffalo  
Had crossed the river, evidently bound  
From failing pastures to the grazing ground  
Along the Milk: and where the herd had  
passed  
Was scattered *bois de vache* enough to last  
Until the storm abated. So they packed  
Great blanketfuls of sun-dried chips, and stacked  
The precious fuel where the wind was stilled —  
A pocket hemmed by lofty bluffs and filled  
With mingled dusk and thunder; bore therein  
Canoes and cargo, pitched their tents of skin

36 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

About a central heap of glowing chips,  
And dined on brittle bull-meat dried in strips,  
With rum to wash it down.

It snowed all night.  
The earth and heavens, in the morning light,  
Were one white fury; and the stream ran slush.  
Two days and nights the gale boomed; then a  
hush  
Fell with the sun; and when the next dawn  
came —  
A pale flare flanked by mockeries of flame —  
The river lay as solid as the land.

Now caching half their goods, the little band  
Resumed the journey, toiling under packs;  
And twice they felt the morning at their backs,  
A laggard traveller; and twice they saw  
The sunset dwindle to a starry awe  
Beyond the frozen vast, while still they pressed  
The journey — bearded faces yearning west,  
White as the waste they trod. Then one day  
more,  
Southwestward, brought them to the jutting shore  
That faced the goal.

A strip of poplars stretched  
Along a winding stream, their bare boughs etched

Black line by line upon a flat of snow  
Blue tinted in the failing afterglow.  
Humped ponies 'mid the drifts and clumps of sage  
Went nosing after grudging pasturage  
Where'er it chanced the blizzard's whimsic flaws  
Had swept the slough grass bare. A flock of  
squaws

Chopped wood and chattered in the underbrush,  
Their ax strokes thudding dully in the hush,  
Their nasal voices rising shrill and clear :  
And, circled 'neath a bluff that towered sheer  
Beside the stream, snug lodges wrought of hide,  
Smoke-plumed and glowing with the fires inside,  
Made glad the gazers. Even as they stood,  
Content to stare a moment, from the wood  
The clamor deepened, and a running shout  
Among the lodges brought the dwellers out,  
Braves, squaws, papooses; and the wolf dogs  
bayed ;  
And up the flat the startled ponies neighed,  
Pricking their ears to question what befell.

So came Fink's party to the Musselshell,  
Gaunt, bearded, yet — how gloriously young  
And then, what feasts of bison fleece and tongue  
Of browned *boudin* and steaming humprib stew !  
What roaring nights of wassailing they knew —

38 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Gargantuan regales — when through the town  
The fiery liquor ravined, melting down  
The tribal hoard of beaver! How they made  
Their merest gewgaws mighty in the trade!  
Aye, merry men they were! Nor could they  
know

How even then there came that wraith of woe  
Amongst them; some swift-fingered Fate that  
span

The stuff of sorrow, wove 'twixt man and man  
The tangling mesh, that friend might ruin friend  
And each go stumbling to a bitter end —  
A threefold doom that now the Song recalls.

## IV

### THE NET IS CAST

There was a woman.

What enchantment falls  
Upon that far off revel! How the din  
Of jangling voices, chaffering to win  
The lesser values, hushes at the words,  
As dies the dissonance of brawling birds  
Upon a calm before the storm is hurled!  
Lo, down the age-long reaches of the world  
What rose-breatht wind of ghostly music creeps!

And was she fair — this woman? Legend keeps  
No answer; yet we know that she was young,  
If truly comes the tale by many a tongue  
That one of Red Hair's party fathered her.  
What need to know her features as they were?  
Was she not lovely as her lover's thought,  
And beautiful as that wild love she wrought  
Was fatal? Vessel of the world's desire,  
Did she not glow with that mysterious fire  
That lights the hearth or burns the roof-tree down?  
What face was hers who made the timeless town

40 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

A baleful torch forever? Hers who wailed  
Upon the altar when the four winds failed  
At Aulis? What the image that looked up  
On Iseult from the contemplated cup  
Of everlasting thirst? What wondrous face  
Above the countless cradles of the race  
Makes sudden heaven for the blinking eyes?  
One face in truth! And once in Paradise  
Each man shall stray unwittingly, and see —  
In some unearthly valley where the Tree  
With golden fruitage perilously fraught  
Still stands — that image of God's afterthought.  
Then shall the world turn wonderful and strange!

Who knows how came that miracle of change  
To Fink at last? For he was not of such  
As tend to prize one woman overmuch;  
And legend has it that, from Pittsburg down  
To Baton Rouge, in many a river town  
Some blowsy Ariadne pined for Mike.  
"It is me rule to love 'em all alike."  
He often said, with slow, omniscient wink,  
When just the proper quantity of drink  
Had made him philosophic; "Glass or gourd,  
Shure, now, they're all wan liquor whin they're  
poured!  
Aye, rum is rum, me b'y!"



Alas, the tongue!

How glibly are its easy guesses flung  
Against the knowing reticence of years,  
To echo laughter in the time of tears,  
Raw gusts of mocking merriment that stings!  
Some logic in the seeming ruck of things  
Inscrutably confutes us!

Now had come

The time when rum no longer should be rum,  
But witchwine sweet with peril. It befell  
In this wise, insofar as tongue may tell  
And tongues repeat the little eyes may guess  
Of what may happen in that wilderness,  
The human heart. There dwelt a mighty man  
Among the Bloods, a leader of his clan,  
Around whose life were centered many lives,  
For many sons had he of many wives;  
And also he was rich in pony herds.  
Wherefore, they say, men searched his lightest  
words

For hidden things, since anyone might see  
That none had stronger medicine than he  
To shape aright the stubborn stuff of life.  
Among the women that he had to wife  
Was she who knew the white man when the band  
Of Red Hair made such marvel in the land,

42 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

She being younger then and little wise.  
But in that she was pleasing to the eyes  
And kept her fingers busy for her child  
And bore a silent tongue, the great man smiled  
Upon the woman, called her to his fire  
And gave the Long Knife's girl a foster sire,  
So that her maidenhood was never lean,  
But like a pasture that is ever green  
Because it feels a mountain's sunny flank.

Now in the season when the pale sun shrank  
Far southward, like another kind of moon,  
And dawns were laggard and the dark came soon  
It pleased the great man's whim to give a feast.  
'Twas five days after Carpenter went east  
With eight stout ponies and a band of three  
To lift the cache; a fact that well might be  
Sly father to the great man's festive mood —  
A wistfully prospective gratitude,  
Anticipating charity!

It chanced  
That while the women sang and young men  
danced  
About the drummers, and the pipe went round,  
And ever 'twixt the songs arose the sound  
Of fat dog stewing, Fink, with mournful eyes  
And pious mien, lamented the demise

Of "pore owld Fido," till his comrades choked  
With stifled laughter; soberly invoked  
The plopping stew ("Down, Rover! Down, me  
lad!");

Discussed the many wives the old man had  
In language more expressive than polite.  
So, last of all his merry nights, that night  
Fink clown'd it, little dreaming he was doomed  
To wear that mask of sorrow he assumed  
In comic mood, thenceforward to the last.  
For even as he joked, the net was cast  
About him, and the mystic change had come,  
And he had looked on rum that was not rum —  
The Long Knife's daughter!

Stooped beneath a pack  
Of bundled twigs, she pushed the lodge-flap  
back

And entered lightly; placed her load of wood  
Beside the fire; then straightened up and stood  
One moment there, a shapely girl and tall.  
There wasn't any drama: that was all.  
But when she left, the wit had died in Fink.  
He seemed a man who takes the one more drink  
That spoils the fun, relaxes jaw and jowl  
And makes the jester, like a sunstruck owl,  
Stare solemnly at nothing.

44 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

All next day

He moped about with scarce a word to say,  
And no one dared investigate his whim.  
But when the twilight came, there fell on him  
A sentimental, reminiscent mood,  
As though upon some frozen solitude  
Within him, breathed a softening chinook,  
Far strayed across the alplike years that look  
On what one used to be and what one is.  
And when he raised that mellow voice of his  
In songs of lovers wedded to regret,  
'Tis said that, unashamed, men's eyes grew  
wet,  
So poignantly old memories were stirred.  
And much his comrades marvelled as they  
heard  
That ribald jester singing thus of love.  
Nor could they solve the mystery thereof,  
Until at dawn they saw him rise and take  
A rifle of the latest Hawkin make,  
Ball, powder, and a bolt of scarlet goods,  
And hasten to the fringe of cottonwoods  
Where rose the great man's lodge smoke. Then  
they knew;  
For thus with gifts the Bloods were wont to  
woo  
The daughter through the sire.

The white sun burned  
Midmost the morning steep when he returned  
Without his load and humming as he went.  
And hour by hour he squatted in his tent  
And stared upon the fire; save now and then  
He stirred himself to lift the flap again  
And cast an anxious gaze across the snows  
Where stood the chieftain's lodge. And well did  
those  
Who saw him know what sight he hoped to see;  
For 'twas the custom that the bride-to-be  
Should carry food to him she chose to wed.  
Meanwhile, with seemly caution, be it said,  
Fink's men enjoyed a comedy, and laid  
Sly wagers on the coming of the maid —  
She would! She wouldn't! So the brief day  
waned.

Now when the sun, a frosty specter maned  
With corruscating vapors, lingered low  
And shadows lay like steel upon the snow,  
An old squaw, picking faggots in the brush,  
Saw that which set her shrieking in the hush.  
"They come! They come!" Then someone  
shouted "Crows!"  
The town spewed tumult, men with guns and  
bows,

Blinking, dazed  
With sudden light and panic fear, they gazed  
About the frozen waste; and then they saw  
Eight laden ponies filing up the draw,  
Their nostrils steaming, slack of neck and slow.  
Behind them, stumbling in the broken snow,  
Three weary trappers trudged, while in the  
lead  
Strode Carpenter. A goodly sight, indeed!  
Upstanding, eagle-faced and eagle-eyed,  
The ease of latent power in his stride,  
He dwarfed the panting pony that he led;  
And when the level sunlight 'round his head  
Made glories in the frosted beard and hair,  
Some Gothic fighting god seemed walking there,  
Strayed from the dim Hercynian woods of old.

How little of a story can be told !  
 Let him who knows what happens in the seed  
 Before the sprout breaks sunward, make the deed

A plummet for the dreaming deeps that surged  
Beneath the surface ere the deed emerged  
For neat appraisal by the rule of thumb !  
The best of Clio is forever dumb,  
To human ears at least. Nor shall the Song  
Presume to guess and tell how all night long,  
While roared the drunken orgy and the trade,  
Doom quickened in the fancy of a maid,  
The daughter of the Long Knife; how she saw,  
Serenely moving through a spacious awe  
Behind shut lids where never came the brawl,  
That shining one, magnificently tall,  
A day-crowned mortal brother of the sun.  
Suffice it here that, when the night was done  
And morning, like an uproar in the east,  
Aroused the town still heavy with the feast,  
All men might see what whimsic, fatal bloom  
A soil, dream-plowed and seeded in the gloom,  
Had nourished unto blowing in the day.

'Twas then the girl appeared and took her way  
Across the snow with hesitating feet.  
She bore a little pot of steaming meat;  
And when midmost the open space, she turned  
And held it up to where the morning burned,  
As one who begs a blessing of the skies.  
Unconscious of the many peeping eyes,

48 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Erect, with wrapt uplifted face she stood —  
A miracle of shapely maidenhood —  
Before the flaming god. And many heard,  
Or seemed to hear by piecing word to word,  
The prayer she muttered to the wintry sky :  
"O Sun, behold a maiden! Pure am I!  
Look kindly on the little gift I give;  
For, save you smile upon it, what can live?  
Bright Father, hear a maiden!" Then, as one  
Who finds new courage for a task begun,  
She turned and hastened to the deed.

They say

There was no dearth of gossiping that day  
Among the lodges. Shrewish tongues there were  
That clacked no happy prophecies of her.  
And many wondered at the chieftain's whim.  
The Long Knife's girl had wrought a spell on  
him;  
Why else then was he silent? See her shrink  
A moment there before the tent of Fink,  
As one who feels a sudden sleety blast!  
But look again! She starts, and hurries past!  
All round the circled village, lodges yawn  
To see how brazen in the stare of dawn  
A petted girl may be. For now, behold!  
Was ever maiden of the Bloods so bold?



She stops before another tent and stoops,  
Her fingers feeling for the buckskin loops  
That bind the rawhide flap. 'Tis opened wide.  
The slant white light of morning falls inside,  
And half the town may witness at whose feet  
She sets the little pot of steaming meat —  
'Tis Carpenter!

## V

### THE QUARREL

Perceptibly, at length,  
The days grew longer, and the winter's strength  
Increased to fury. Down across the flat  
The blizzards bellowed; and the people sat  
Fur-robed about the smoky fires that stung  
Their eyes to streaming, when a freak gust flung  
The sharp reek back with flaws of powdered snow.  
And much the old men talked of long ago,  
Invoking ghostly Winters from the Past,  
Till cold snap after cold snap followed fast,  
And none might pile his verbal snow so deep  
But some athletic memory could heap  
The drifts a trifle higher; give the cold  
A greater rigor in the story told;  
Put bellows to a wind already high.  
And ever greater reverence thereby  
The old men won from gaping youths, who heard,  
Like marginalia to the living word,  
The howling of the poplars tempest-bent,  
The smoke-flap cracking sharply at the vent,

The lodge poles creaking eerily. And O!  
The happy chance of living long ago,  
Of having wrinkles now and being sires  
With many tales to tell around the fires  
Of days when things were bigger! All night  
long

White hands came plucking at the buckskin thong  
That bound the door-flap, and the writhing dark  
Was shrill with spirits. By the snuffling bark  
Of dogs men knew that homesick ghosts were  
there.

And often in a whirl of chilling air  
The weird ones entered, though the flap still held,  
Built up in smoke the shapes they knew of eld,  
Grew thin and long to vanish as they came.

Now had the scandal, like a sudden flame  
Fed fat with grasses, perished in the storm.  
The fundamental need of keeping warm  
Sufficed the keenest gossip for a theme;  
And whimsies faded like a warrior's dream  
When early in the dawn the foemen cry.

The time when calves are black had blustered  
by —

A weary season — since the village saw  
The chief's wife pitching for her son-in-law

52 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

The nuptial lodge she fashioned. Like a bow  
That feels the arrow's head, the moon hung  
low  
That evening when they gave the wedding  
gifts;  
And men had seen it glaring through the rifts  
Of wintry war as up the east it reeled,  
A giant warrior's battle-bitten shield —  
But now it braved no more the charging air.  
Meanwhile the lodge of Carpenter stood there  
Beside the chieftain's, huddled in the snows,  
And, like a story everybody knows,  
Was little heeded now.

But there was one  
Who seldom noted what was said or done  
Among his comrades; he would sit and look  
Upon the fire, as one who reads a book  
Of woeful doings, ever on the brink  
Of ultimate disaster. It was Fink:  
And seeing this, Talbeau was sick at heart  
With dreading that his friends might drift apart  
And he be lost, because he loved them both.  
But, knowing well Mike's temper, he was loath  
To broach the matter. Also, knowing well  
That silence broods upon the hottest hell,  
He prayed that Fink might curse.

So worried past  
The days of that estrangement. Then at last  
One night when round their tent the blizzard  
    roared

And, nestled in their robes, the others snored,  
Talbeau could bear the strain no more and spoke.  
He opened with a random little joke,  
Like some starved hunter trying out the range  
Of precious game where all the land is strange;  
And, as the hunter, missing, hears the grim  
And spiteful echo-rifles mocking him,  
His own unmirthful laughter mocked Talbeau.  
He could have touched across the ember-glow  
Mike's brooding face — yet Mike was far away.  
And O that nothing more than distance lay  
Between them — any distance with an end!  
How tireless then in running to his friend  
A man might be! For suddenly he knew  
That Mike would have him choose between the  
    two.

How could he choose 'twixt Carpenter and Fink?  
How idle were a choice 'twixt food and drink  
When, choosing neither, one were sooner dead!

Thus torn within, and hoarse with tears unshed,  
He strove again to find his comrade's heart:  
"O damn it, Mike, don't make us drift apart!

54 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Don't do it, Mike! This ain't a killin' fuss,  
And hadn't ought to faze the three of us  
That's weathered many a rough-and-tumble fight!  
W'y don't you mind that hell-a-poppin' night  
At Baton Rouge three years ago last fall —  
The time we fit the whole damned dancin' hall  
And waded out nigh belly-deep in men?  
O who'd have said a girl could part us, then?  
And, Mike, that fracas in the Vide Poche dive!  
Can you forget it long as you're alive? —  
A merry time! Us strollin' arm-in-arm  
From drink to drink, not calculatin' harm,  
But curious, because St. Louis town  
Fair boiled with greasy mountain men, come  
down

All brag and beaver, howlin' for a spree!  
And then — you mind? — a feller jostled me —  
'Twas at the bar — a chap all bones and big.  
Says he in French: 'You eater of a pig,  
Make room for mountain men!' And then says  
you

In Irish, aimin' where the whiskers grew,  
And landin' fair: 'You eater of a dog,  
Make room for boatmen!' Like a punky log  
That's water-soaked, he dropped. What hap-  
pened then?

A cyclone in a woods of mountain men —

That's what! O Mike, you can't forget it  
now!  
And what in hell's a woman, anyhow,  
To memories like that?"

So spoke Talbeau,  
And, pausing, heard the hissing of the snow,  
The snoring of the sleepers, and the cries  
Of blizzard-beaten poplars. Still Fink's eyes  
Upon the crumbling embers pored intent.  
Then momentarily, or so it seemed, there went  
Across that alien gaze a softer light,  
As when bleak windows in a moony night  
Flush briefly with a candle borne along.  
And suddenly the weary hope grew strong  
In him who saw the glimmer, and he said:  
"O Mike, I see the good old times ain't dead!  
Why don't you fellers shoot the whisky cup  
The way you used to do?"

Then Fink looked up.  
'Twas bad the way the muscles twitched and  
worked  
About his mouth, and in his eyes there lurked  
Some crouchant thing. "To hell wid you!" he  
cried.  
So love and hate that night slept side by side;

56 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

And hate slept well, but love lay broad awake  
And, like a woman, for the other's sake  
Eked out the lonely hours with worrying.

Now came a heartsick yearning for the spring  
Upon Talbeau; for surely this bad dream  
Would vanish with the ice upon the stream,  
Old times be resurrected with the grass!  
But would the winter ever, ever pass,  
The howling of the blizzard ever cease?  
So often now he dreamed of hearing geese  
Remotely honking in the rain-washed blue;  
And ever when the blur of dawn broke through  
The scudding rack, he raised the flap to see,  
By sighting through a certain forkéd tree,  
How much the sun made northward.

Then, one day,  
The curtain of the storm began to fray;  
The poplars' howling softened to a croon;  
The sun set clear, and dusk revealed the moon —  
A thin-blown bubble in a crystal bowl.  
All night, as 'twere the frozen prairie's soul  
That voiced a hopeless longing for the spring,  
The wolves assailed with mournful question-  
ing  
The starry deeps of that tremendous hush.



Dawn wore the mask of May — a rosy flush.  
It seemed the magic of a single bird  
Might prove the seeing of the eye absurd  
And make the heaped-up winter billow green.  
On second thought, one knew the air was keen —  
A whetted edge in gauze. The village fires  
Serenely builded tenuous gray spires  
That vanished in the still blue deeps of awe.  
All prophets were agreed upon a thaw.  
And when the morning stood a spearlength high,  
There grew along the western rim of sky  
A bank of cloud that had a rainy look.  
It mounted slowly. Then the warm chinook  
Began to breathe a melancholy drowse  
And sob among the naked poplar boughs,  
As though the prairie dreamed a dream of June  
And knew it for a dream. All afternoon  
The gale increased. The sun went down blood-  
red;  
The young moon, perilously fragile, fled  
To early setting. And the long night roared.

Tempestuously broke the day and poured  
An intermittent glory through the rifts  
Amid the driven fog. The sodden drifts  
Already grooved and withered in the blast;  
And when the flying noon stared down aghast,

58 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

The bluffs behind the village boomed with  
flood.

What magic in that sound to stir the blood  
Of winter-weary men! For now the spring  
No longer seemed a visionary thing,  
But that which any morning might bestow.  
And most of all that magic moved Talbeau;  
For, scrutinizing Fink, he thought he saw  
Some reflex of that February thaw —  
A whit less curling of the upper lip.  
O could it be returning comradeship,  
That April not beholden to the moon  
Nor chattered to the sun?

That afternoon  
They played at euchre. Even Fink sat in;  
And though he showed no eagerness to win,  
Forgot the trumps and played his bowers wild,  
There were not lacking moments when he smiled,  
A hesitating smile 'twixt wan and grim.  
It seemed his stubborn mood embarrassed him  
Because regret now troubled it with shame.

The great wind died at midnight. Morning  
came,  
Serene and almost indolently warm —  
As when an early April thunder storm

Has cleansed the night and vanished with the  
gloom;

When one can feel the imminence of bloom  
As 'twere a spirit in the orchard trees;  
When, credulous of blossom, come the bees  
To grumble 'round the seepages of sap.  
So mused Talbeau while, pushing back the flap,  
Instinctively he listened for a bird  
To fill the hush. Then presently he heard —  
And 'twas the only sound in all the world —  
The trickle of the melting snow that purled  
And tinkled in the bluffs above the town.  
The sight of ragged Winter patched with brown,  
The golden peace and, palpitant therein,  
That water note, spun silverly and thin,  
Begot a wild conviction in the man:  
The wounded Winter weakened; now began  
The reconciliation! Hate would go  
And, even as the water from the snow,  
Old comradeship come laughing back again!

All morning long he pondered, while the men  
Played seven-up. And scarce a trick was  
played

But someone sang a snatch of song or made  
A merry jest. And when the game was balked  
By one who quite forgot his hand, and talked

60 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Of things in old St. Louis, none demurred.  
And thus, by noon, it seemed the lightest word  
Of careless salutation would avail  
To give a happy ending to the tale  
Of clouded friendship. So he 'rose and went,  
By studied indirection, to the tent  
Of Carpenter, as one who takes the air.  
And, as he raised the flap and entered there,  
A sudden gale of laughter from the men  
Blew after him. What music in it then!  
What mockery, when memory should raise  
So often in the coming nights and days  
The ruthless echo of it!

Click on click

Amid the whirlwind finish of a trick  
The cards fell fast, while King and Queen and Ace,  
With meaner trumps for hounds, pursued the chase  
Of wily Knave and lurking Deuce and Ten;  
When suddenly the game-enchanted men  
Were conscious of a shadow in the place,  
And glancing up they saw the smiling face  
Of Carpenter, thrust in above Talbeau's.  
"How goes it, Boys?" said he; and gaily those  
Returned the greeting. "Howdy, Mike!" he  
said;  
And with a sullen hanging of the head

Fink mumbled "Howdy!" Gruff — but what  
of that?

One can not doff displeasure like a hat —  
'Twould dwindle snow-like.

Nothing else would do  
But Carpenter should play. Now Fink played  
too;

And, having brought his cherished ones together,  
Talbeau surrendered to the languid weather  
And, dreamily contented, watched the sport.  
All afternoon the pictured royal court  
Pursued its quarry in the mimic hunt;  
And Carpenter, now gayer than his wont,  
Lost much; while Fink, with scarce a word to say,  
His whole attention fixed upon the play,  
Won often. So it happened, when the sun  
Was near to setting, that the day seemed won  
For friendliness, however stood the game.  
But even then that Unseen Player came  
Who stacks the shuffled deck of circumstance  
And, playing wild the Joker men call Chance,  
Defeats the Aces of our certainty.

The cards were dealt and Carpenter bid three.  
The next man passed the bid, and so the next.  
Then Fink, a trifle hesitant and vexed,

62 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Bid four on spades. And there was one who said  
In laughing banter: "Mike, I'll bet my head  
As how them spades of your'n 'll dig a hole!"  
And in some subtle meaning of the soul  
The wag was more a prophet than he knew.

Fink held the Ace and Deuce, and that made two:  
His black King scored another point with  
Knave.

But Carpenter, to whom that Weird One gave  
A band of lesser trumps to guard his Ten,  
Lay low until the Queen had passed, and then  
Swept in a last fat trick for Game, and scored.  
And now the players slapped their knees and  
roared:  
"You're set! You're in the hole! He set you,  
Mike!"

Then suddenly they saw Fink crouch to strike;  
And ere they comprehended what they saw,  
There came a thud of knuckles on a jaw  
And Carpenter rolled over on the ground.  
One moment in a breathless lapse of sound  
The stricken man strove groggily to 'rise,  
The emptiness of wonder in his eyes  
Turned dreamily with seeming unconcern  
Upon Mike's face, where now began to burn

The livid murder-lust. 'Twixt breath and breath  
The hush and immobility of death  
Made there a timeless picture. Then a yell,  
As of a wild beast charging, broke the spell.  
Fink sprang to crush, but midway met Talbeau  
Who threw him as a collie dog may throw  
A raging bull. But Mike was up again,  
And wielding thrice the might of common men,  
He gripped the little man by nape and thigh  
And lightly lifted him and swung him high  
And flung him; and the smitten tent went down.  
Then 'rose a roar that roused the teeming town,  
And presently a shouting rabble surged  
About the wreck, whence tumblingly emerged  
A knot of men who grappled Fink and clung.  
Prodigiously he rose beneath them, flung  
His smashing arms, man-laden, forth and back;  
But stubbornly they gripped him, like a pack  
That takes uncowed the maulings of a bear.  
"Let Carpenter get up!" they cried. "Fight  
fair!  
Fight fair! Fight fair!"

Quite leisurely the while  
The stricken man arose, a sleepy smile  
About his quiet eyes. Indeed, he seemed  
As one but lately wakened, who has dreamed

64 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

A pleasing dream. But when he stroked his  
beard

And gazed upon his fingers, warmly smeared  
With crimson from the trickle at his jaw,  
His eyes went eagle-keen with what they saw.  
The stupor passed. He hastily untied  
His buckskin shirt and, casting it aside,  
Stood naked to the hips. The tumult ceased  
As, panting hard, the *voyageurs* released  
Their struggling charge and, ducking to a swing  
Of those freed arms, sought safety, scamper-  
ing.

Fink also stripped his shirt; and as the man  
Stood thus revealed, a buzz of wonder ran  
Amid the jostling rabble. Few there were  
Who in that moment envied Carpenter,  
Serenely poised and waiting placid browed:  
For shall a lonely cedar brave a cloud  
Bulged big and shapen to the cyclone's whirl?  
Lo, even as the body of a girl,  
The body of the blond was smooth and white;  
But vaguely, as one guesses at the might  
Of silent waters running swift and deep,  
One guessed what stores of power lay asleep  
Beneath the long fleet lines of trunk and limb.  
Thus God had made experiment with him;



And, groping for the old Adamic dream,  
Had found his patterns in the tree and stream,  
As Fink's in whirling air and hungry flame.

Now momentarily the picture there became  
A blur of speed. Mike rushed. The tiptoe town  
Craned eagerly to see a man go down  
Before that human thunder gust. But lo!  
As bends a sapling when the great winds blow,  
The other squatted, deftly swayed aside,  
And over him the slashing blows went wide.  
Fink sprawled. But hardly had a spreading  
    roar

O'errun the town, when silence as before  
Possessed the scene; for Mike flashed back again  
With flame-like speed, and suddenly the men  
Clenched, leaning neck to neck.

Without a word,  
Like horn-locked bulls that strive before the herd,  
They balanced might with might; till Mike's  
    hands whipped  
Beneath the other's arm-pits, met and gripped  
Across the broad white shoulders. Then began  
The whole prodigious engine of the man  
To bulge and roll and darken with the strain.  
Like rivulets fed suddenly with rain,

66 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

The tall one's thews rose ropily and flowed  
Converging might against the growing load  
Of those tremendous arms that strove to crush.

Their labored breathing whistled in the hush.  
One saw the blond man's face go bluish red,  
As deeper, deeper sank Fink's shaggy head  
Amid his heaped-up shoulder brawn. One knew  
That very soon the taller of the two  
Must yield and take that terrible embrace.

A tense hypnotic quiet filled the place.  
The men were like two wrestlers in a dream  
That holds an endless moment; till a scream  
Fell stab-like on the hush. One saw Talbeau,  
Jaws set, hands clenched, eyes wild, and bending  
    low,  
As though he too were struggling, slowly bowed  
Beneath Fink's might. And then —

What ailed the crowd?  
Swept over by a flurry of surprise,  
They swayed and jostled, shouting battle-cries  
And quips and jeers of savage merriment.  
One moment they had seen the tall man bent,  
About to break: then, falling back a-haunch,  
His feet had plunged against the other's paunch  
And sent Fink somersaulting.

Once again

A silence fell as, leaping up, the men  
Were mingled briefly in a storm of blows.  
Now, tripping like a dancer on his toes,  
The blond man sparred; while, like a baited bear,  
Half blinded with the lust to crush and tear,  
Fink strove to clutch that something lithe and  
sleek

That stung and fled and stung. Upon his cheek  
A flying shadow laid a vivid bruise;  
Another — and his brow began to ooze  
Slow drops that splattered on his bearded jaw.  
Again that shadow passed — his mouth went raw,  
And like a gunshot wound it gaped and bled.

Fink roared with rage and plunged with lowered  
head

Upon this thing that tortured, hurled it back  
Amid the crowd. One heard a thud and smack  
Of rapid blows on bone and flesh — and then  
One saw the tall man stagger clear again  
With gushing nostrils and a bloody grin,  
And down his front the whiteness of the skin  
Was striped with flowing crimson to the waist.  
Unsteadily he wheeled about and faced  
The headlong hate of his antagonist.  
Now toe to toe and fist to flying fist,

68 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

They played at give and take; and all the while  
The blond man smiled that riddle of a smile,  
As one who meditates upon a jest.

Yet surely he was losing! Backward pressed,  
He strove in vain to check his raging foe.  
Fink lunged and straightened to a shoulder  
blow

With force enough to knock a bison down.  
The other dodged it, squatting. Then the  
town

Discovered what a smile might signify.  
For, even as the futile blow went by,  
One saw the lithe white form shoot up close in,  
A hooked white arm jab upward to the chin —  
Once — twice — and yet again. With eyes a-  
stare,

His hands aloft and clutching at the air,  
Fink tottered backward, limply lurched and fell.

Then came to pass what stilled the rabble's  
yell,  
So strange it was. And 'round the fires that  
night

The wisest warriors, talking of the fight,  
Could not explain what happened at the end.  
No friend, they said, makes war upon a friend;

Nor does a foe have pity on a foe :  
And yet the tall white chief had bathed with  
    snow  
The bloody mouth and battered cheek and brow  
Of him who fell !

    Queer people, anyhow,  
The Long Knives were — and hard to under-  
    stand !

## VI

### THE SHOOTING OF THE CUP

Bull-roaring March had swept across the land,  
And now the evangelic goose and crane,  
Forerunners of the messianic Rain,  
Went crying through the wilderness aloft.  
Fog hid the sun, and yet the snow grew soft.  
The monochrome of sky and poplar bough,  
Drab tracery on drab, was stippled now  
With swelling buds; and slushy water ran  
Upon the ice-bound river that began  
To stir and groan as one about to wake.

Now, while they waited for the ice to break,  
The trappers fashioned bull-boats — willow  
wrought  
To bowl-like frames, and over these drawn taut  
Green bison hides with bison sinew sewn.  
And much they talked about the Yellowstone:  
How fared their comrades yonder since the fall?  
And would they marvel at the goodly haul  
Of beaver pelts these crazy craft should bring?  
And what of Ashley starting north that spring

With yet another hundred? Did his prowess  
 Already nose the flood? — Ah, cherry boughs  
 About St. Louis now were loud with bees  
 And white with bloom; and wading to the knees,  
 The cattle browsed along the fresh green sloughs!  
 Yes, even now the leaning cordelle crews  
 With word from home (so far away, alas!)  
 Led north the marching armies of the grass,  
 As 'twere the heart of Summertime they towed!

So while they shaped the willow frames and sewed  
 The bison hides, the trappers' hearts were light.  
 They talked no longer now about the fight.  
 That story, shaped and fitted part by part,  
 Unwittingly was rounded into art,  
 And, being art, already it was old.  
 When this bleak time should seem the age of gold,  
 These men, grown gray and garrulous, might tell  
 Of wondrous doings on the Musselshell —  
 How Carpenter, the mighty, fought, and how  
 Great Fink went down. But spring was coming  
     now,  
 And who's for backward looking in the spring?

Yet one might see that Mike still felt the sting  
 Of that defeat; for often he would brood,  
 Himself the center of a solitude

72 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Wherein the friendly chatter of the band  
Was like a wind that makes a lonely land  
Seem lonelier. And much it grieved Talbeau  
To see a haughty comrade humbled so;  
And, even more, he feared what wounded pride  
Might bring to pass, before their boats could  
ride

The dawnward reaches of the April floods  
And leave behind the village of the Bloods;  
For now it seemed a curse was on the place.  
Talbeau was like a man who views a race  
With all to lose: so slowly crept the spring,  
So surely crawled some formless fatal thing,  
He knew not what it was. But should it win,  
Life could not be again as it had been  
And spring would scarcely matter any more.  
The daybreak often found him at the shore,  
A ghostly figure in the muggy light,  
Intent to see what progress over night  
The shackled river made against the chain.

And then at last, one night, a dream of rain  
Came vividly upon him. How it poured!  
A witch's garden was the murk that roared  
With bursting purple bloom. 'Twas April  
weather,  
And he and Mike and Bill were boys together



Beneath the sounding shingle roof at home.  
 He smelled the odor of the drinking loam  
 Still rolling mellow from the recent share;  
 And he could feel the meadow greening there  
 Beyond the apple orchard. Then he 'woke  
 And raised the flap. A wraith of thunder-smoke  
 Was trailing off along the prairie's rim.  
 Half dreaming yet, the landscape puzzled him.  
 What made the orchard seem so tall and lean?  
 And surely yonder meadow had been green  
 A moment since! What made it tawny now?  
 And yonder where the billows of the plow  
 Should glisten fat and sleek — ?

The drowsy spell

Dropped off and left him on the Musselshell  
 Beneath the old familiar load of care.  
 He looked aloft. The stars had faded there.  
 The sky was cloudless. No, one lonely fleece  
 Serenely floated in the spacious peace  
 And from the distance caught prophetic light.  
 In truth he had heard thunder in the night  
 And dashing rain; for all the land was soaked,  
 And where the withered drifts had lingered,  
     smoked  
 The naked soil. But since the storm was gone,  
 How strange that still low thunder mumbled on —

74 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

An unresolving cadence marred at whiles  
By dull explosions! Now for miles and miles  
Along the vale he saw a trail of steam  
That marked the many windings of the stream,  
As though the river simmered. Then he knew.  
It was the sound of April breaking through!  
The resurrection thunder had begun!  
The ice was going out, and spring had won  
'The creeping race with dread!

His ringing cheers  
Brought out the blinking village by the ears  
To share the news; and though they could not  
know  
What ecstasy of triumph moved Talbeau,  
Yet lodge on lodge took up the joyous cry  
That set the dogs intoning to the sky,  
The drenched cayuses shrilly nickering.  
So man and beast proclaimed the risen Spring  
Upon the Musselshell.

And all day long  
The warring River sang its ocean song.  
And all that night the spirits of the rain  
Made battle music with a shattered chain  
And raged upon the foe. And did one gaze  
Upon that struggle through the starry haze,

One saw enormous bodies heaved and tossed,  
Where stubbornly the Yotuns of the Frost  
With shoulder set to shoulder strove to stem  
The wild invasion rolling over them.  
Nor in the morning was the struggle done.  
Serenely all that day the doughty Sun,  
A banished king returning to his right,  
Beheld his legions pouring to the fight,  
Exhaustless; and his cavalries that rode —  
With hoofs that rumbled and with manes that  
    flowed  
White in the war gust — crashing on the foe.  
And all that night the din of overthrow  
Arose to heaven from the stricken field;  
A sound as of the shock of spear and shield,  
Of wheels that trundled and the feet of hordes,  
Of shrieking horses mad among the swords,  
Hurraing of attackers and attacked,  
And sounds as of a city that is sacked  
When lust for loot runs roaring through the night.  
Dawn looked upon no battle, but a flight.  
And when the next day broke, the spring flood  
    flowed  
Like some great host that takes the homeward  
    road  
With many spoils — a glad triumphal march,  
Of which the turquoise heaven was the arch.

76 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Now comes a morning when the tents are down  
And packed for travel; and the whole Blood town  
Is out along the waterfront to see  
The trappers going. Dancing as with glee,  
Six laden bull-boats feel the April tide  
And sweep away. Along the riverside  
The straggling, shouting rabble keeps abreast  
A little while; but, longer than the rest,  
A weeping runner races with the swirl  
And loses slowly. 'Tis the Long Knife's girl,  
Whom love perhaps already makes aware  
How flows unseen a greater river there —  
The never-to-be-overtaken days.  
And now she pauses at the bend to gaze  
Upon the black boats dwindling down the long  
Dawn-gilded reach. A merry trapper's song  
Comes liltingly to mock her, and a hand  
Waves back farewell. Now 'round a point of land  
The bull-boats disappear; and that is all —  
Save only that long waiting for the fall  
When he would come again.

All day they swirled  
Northeastwardly. The undulating world  
Flowed by them — wooded headland, greening  
vale  
And naked hill — as in a fairy tale

Remembered in a dream. And when the flare  
 Of sunset died behind them, and the air  
 Went weird and deepened to a purple gloom,  
 They saw the white Enchanted Castles loom  
 Above them, slowly pass and drift a-rear,  
 Dissolving in the starry crystal sphere  
 'Mid which they seemed suspended.

Late to camp,

They launched while yet the crawling valley damp  
 Made islands of the distant hills and hid  
 The moaning flood. The Half Way Pyramid  
 That noon stared in upon them from the south.  
 'Twas starlight when they camped at Hell Creek's  
 mouth,

Among those hills where evermore in vain  
 The Spring comes wooing, and the April rain  
 Is tears upon a tomb. And once again  
 The dead land echoed to the songs of men  
 Bound dayward when the dawn was but a streak.  
 Halfway to noon they sighted Big Dry Creek,  
 Not choked with grave dust now, but carolling  
 The universal music of the spring.  
 Then when the day was midway down the sky,  
 They reached the Milk. And howsoe'er the  
 eye

Might sweep that valley with a far-flung gaze,  
 It found no spot uncovered with a maze

78 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Of bison moving lazily at browse —  
Scarce wilder than a herd of dairy cows  
That know their herdsman.

Now the whole band willed  
To tarry. So they beached their boats and killed  
Three fatling heifers; sliced the juicy rumps  
For broiling over embers; set the humps  
And loins to roast on willow spits, and threw  
The hearts and livers in a pot to stew  
Against the time of dulling appetites.  
And when the stream ran opalescent lights  
And in a scarlet glow the new moon set,  
The feast began. And some were eating yet,  
And some again in intervals of sleep,  
When upside down above the polar steep  
The Dipper hung. And many tales were told  
And there was hearty laughter as of old,  
With Fink's guffaw to swell it now and then.  
It seemed old times were coming back again;  
That truly they had launched upon a trip  
Whereof the shining goal was comradeship:  
And tears were in the laughter of Talbeau,  
So glad was he. For how may mortals know  
Their gladness, save they sense it by the fear  
That whispers how the very thing held dear  
May pass away?

The smoky dawn was lit,  
And, suddenly become aware of it,  
A flock of blue cranes, dozing on the sand,  
With startled cries awoke the sprawling band  
And took the misty air with moaning wings.  
Disgruntled with the chill drab scheme of things,  
Still half asleep and heavy with the feast,  
The trappers launched their boats. But when  
the east

Burned rosily, therefrom a raw wind blew,  
And ever with the growing day it grew  
Until the stream rose choppily and drove  
The fleet ashore. Camped snugly in a grove  
Of cottonwoods, they slept. And when the gale,  
Together with the light, began to fail,  
They 'rose and ate and set a-drift again.

It seemed the solid world that mothers men  
With twilight and the falling moon had passed,  
And there was nothing but a hollow vast,  
By time-outlasting stars remotely lit,  
And they who at the central point of it  
Hung motionless; while, rather sensed than seen,  
The phantoms of a world that had been green  
Stole by in silence — shapes that once were  
trees,  
Black wraiths of bushes, airy tracteries

80 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Remembering the hills. Then sleep made swift  
The swinging of the Dipper and the lift  
Of stars that dwell upon the day's frontier;  
Until at length the wheeling hollow sphere  
Began to fill. And just at morningshine  
They landed at the Little Porcupine.

Again they slept and, putting off at night,  
They passed the Elk Horn Prairie on the right  
Halfway to dawn and Wolf Creek. One night  
more

Had vanished when they slept upon the shore  
Beside the Poplar's mouth. And three had  
fled

When, black against the early morning red,  
The Fort that Henry builded heard their calls,  
And sentries' rifles spurting from the walls  
Spilled drawling echoes. Then the gates swung  
wide

And shouting trappers thronged the riverside  
To welcome back the homing *voyageurs*.

That day was spent in sorting out the furs,  
With eager talk of how the winter went;  
And with the growing night grew merriment.  
The hump and haunches of a bison cow  
Hung roasting at the heaped-up embers now



On Henry's hearth. The backlog whined and  
 popped  
 And, sitting squat or lounging elbow-propped,  
 Shrewd traders in the merchandise of tales  
 Held traffic, grandly careless how the scales  
 Tiptilted with a slight excessive weight.  
 And when the roast was finished, how they ate!  
 And there was that which set them singing too  
 Against the deep bass music of the flue,  
 While catgut screamed ecstatic in the lead,  
 Encouraging the voices used and keyed  
 To vast and windy spaces.

Later came

A gentler mood when, staring at the flame,  
 Men ventured reminiscences and spoke  
 About Kentucky people or the folk  
 Back yonder in Virginia or the ways  
 They knew in old St. Louis; till the blaze  
 Fell blue upon the hearth, and in the gloom  
 And melancholy stillness of the room  
 They heard the wind of midnight wail outside.  
 Then there was one who poked the logs and cried:  
 "Is this a weeping drunk? I swear I'm like  
 To tear my hair! Sing something lively, Mike!"  
 And Fink said nought; but after poring long  
 Upon the logs, began an Irish song —

82 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

A gently grieving thing like April rain,  
That while it wakes old memories of pain,  
Wakes also odors of the violet.

A broken heart, it seemed, could ne'er forget  
The eyes of Nora, dead upon the hill.  
And when he ceased the men sat very still,  
As hearing yet the low caressing note  
Of some lost angel mourning in his throat.  
And afterwhile Mike spoke: "Shure, now," said  
he,

"'Tis in a woman's eyes shtrong liquors be;  
And if ye drink av thim — and if ye drink —"  
For just a moment in the face of Fink  
Talbeau beheld that angel yearning through;  
And wondering if Carpenter saw too,  
He looked, and lo! the guileless fellow — grinned!

As dreaming water, stricken by a wind,  
Gives up the imaged heaven that it knows,  
So Fink's face lost the angel. He arose  
And left the place without a word to say.

The morrow was a perfect April day;  
Nor might one guess — so friendly was the sun,  
So kind the air — what thread at length was  
spun,

What shears were opened now to sever it.  
No sullen mood was Mike's. His biting wit

Made gay the trappers busy with the fur;  
 Though more and ever more on Carpenter  
 His sallies fell, with ever keener whet.  
 And Carpenter, unskilled in banter, met  
 The sharper sally with the broader grin.  
 But, by and by, Mike made a jest, wherein  
 Some wanton innuendo lurked and leered,  
 About the Long Knife's girl. The place went  
 weird

With sudden silence as the tall man strode  
 Across the room, nor lacked an open road  
 Among the men. A glitter in his stare  
 Belied the smile he bore; and, pausing there  
 With stiffened index finger raised and held  
 Before the jester's eyes, as though he spelled  
 The slow words out, he said: "We'll have no  
 jokes  
 In just that way about our women folks!"  
 And Fink guffawed.

They would have fought again,  
 Had not the Major stepped between the men  
 And talked the crisis by. And when 'twas past,  
 Talbeau, intent to end the strife at last,  
 Somehow persuaded Fink to make amends,  
 And, as a proof that henceforth they were  
 friends,

84 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Proposed the shooting of the whisky cup.  
"Shure, b'y," said Mike, "we'll toss a copper up  
And if 'tis heads I'll thry me cunning first.  
As fer me joke, the tongue of me is cursed  
Wid double j'int's — so let it be forgot!"  
And so it was agreed.

They cleared a spot  
And flipped a coin that tinkled as it fell.  
A tiny sound — yet, like a midnight bell  
That sets wild faces pressing at the pane,  
Talbeau would often hear that coin again,  
In vivid dreams, to waken terrified.  
'Twas heads.

And now the tall man stepped aside  
And, beckoning Talbeau, he whispered: "Son,  
If anything should happen, keep my gun  
For old time's sake. And when the Major  
pays  
In old St. Louis, drink to better days  
When friends were friends, with what he's owing  
me."  
Whereat the little man laughed merrily  
And said: "Old Horse, you're off your feed  
to-day;  
But if you've sworn an oath to blow your pay,

I guess the three of us can make it good !  
Mike couldn't miss a target if he would."  
"Well, maybe so," said Carpenter, and smiled.

A windless noon was brooding on the wild  
And in the clearing, eager for the show,  
The waiting trappers chatted. Now Talbeau  
Stepped off the range. The tall man took his  
place,  
The grin of some droll humor on his face;  
And when his friend was reaching for his head  
To set the brimming cup thereon, he said :  
"You won't forget I gave my gun to you  
And all my blankets and my fixin's too?"  
The small man laughed and, turning round, he  
cried :  
"We're ready, Mike!"

A murmur ran and died  
Along the double line of eager men.  
Fink raised his gun, but set it down again  
And blew a breath and said : "I'm gittin' dhry!  
So howld yer noddle shtiddy, Bill, me b'y,  
And don't ye shpill me whisky!" Cedar-straight  
The tall man stood, the calm of brooding Fate  
About him. Aye, and often to the end  
Talbeau would see that vision of his friend —

86 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

A man-flower springing from the fresh green sod,  
While, round about, the bushes burned with God  
And mating peewees fluted in the brush.

They heard a gun lock clicking in the hush.  
They saw Fink sighting — heard the rifle crack,  
And saw beneath the spreading powder rack  
The tall man pitching forward.

Echoes fled

Like voices in a panic. Then Mike said :  
"Bejasus, and ye've shpilled me whisky, Bill!"

A catbird screamed. The crowd stood very still  
As though bewitched.

"And can't ye hear?" bawled Fink ;  
"I say, I'm dhry — and now ye've shpilled me  
drink!"

He stooped to blow the gasses from his gun.

And now men saw Talbeau. They saw him run  
And stoop to peer upon the prostrate man  
Where now the mingling blood and whisky ran  
From oozing forehead and the tilted cup.  
And in the hush a sobbing cry grew up :  
"My God! You've killed him, Mike!"

Then growing loud,  
A wind of horror blew among the crowd  
And set it swirling round about the dead.  
And over all there roared a voice that said :  
"I niver mint to do it, b'ys, I swear !  
The devil's in me gun !" Men turned to stare  
Wild-eyed upon the center of that sound,  
And saw Fink dash his rifle to the ground,  
As 'twere the hated body of his wrong.

Once more arose that wailing, like a song,  
Of one who called and called upon his friend.

## VII

### THE THIRD RIDER

It seemed the end, and yet 'twas not the end.  
A day that wind of horror and surprise  
Blew high; and then, as when the tempest dies  
And only aspens prattle, as they will,  
Though pines win silence and the oaks are still,  
By furtive twos and threes the talk survived.  
To some it seemed that men were longer lived  
Who quarreled not over women. Others guessed  
That love was bad for marksmanship at best —  
The nerves, you know! Still others pointed  
out

Why Mike should have the benefit of doubt;  
For every man, who knew a rifle, knew  
That there were days you'd split a reed in two,  
Off-hand at fifty paces; then, one day,  
Why, somehow, damn your eyes, you'd blaze  
away

And miss a bull! No doubt regarding that!  
"But," one replied, "'tis what you're aiming at,  
Not what you hit, determines skill, you know!"—  
An abstract observation, apropos



Of nothing in particular, but made  
As just a contribution to the trade  
Of gunnery! And others would recall  
The center of that silence in the hall  
The night one lay there waiting, splendid, still,  
And nothing left to wait for. Poor old Bill!  
There went a man, by God! Who knew his  
like —  
So meek in might? And some remembered  
Mike —  
The hearth-lit room — the way he came to look  
Upon that face — and how his shoulders shook  
With sobbing as he moaned: "My friend! My  
friend!"

It seemed the end, and yet 'twas not the end,  
Though men cared less to know what cunning  
gnome  
Or eyeless thing of doom had ridden home  
The deadly slug. And then there came a day  
When Major Henry had a word to say  
That seemed, at last, to lay the ghost to rest.  
He meant to seek the River of the West  
Beyond the range, immensely rich in furs,  
And for the wiving prows of *voyageurs*  
A virgin yearning. Yonder one might glide  
A thousand miles to sunset, where the tide

90 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Is tempered with an endless dream of May!  
So much and more the Major had to say —  
Words big with magic for the young men's  
ears.

And finally he called for volunteers —  
Two men to hasten to the Moreau's mouth,  
Meet Ashley's party coming from the south  
And bid them buy more horses at the Grand  
Among the Rees. Then, pushing through the  
band,  
Mike Fink stood forth, and after him, Talbeau.

Now Henry thought 'twere wiser they should  
go

By land, although the river trail, he knew,  
Were better. But a wind of rumor blew  
Up stream. About the region of the Knife,  
It seemed, the Grovans tarried, nursing strife  
Because the Whites were favoring their foes  
With trade for guns; and, looking on their  
bows,

The Grovans hated. So the rumor said.  
And thus it came to pass the new trail led  
About six days by pony to the south;  
Thence eastward, five should find the Moreau's  
mouth

And Ashley toiling up among the bars.

The still white wind was blowing out the stars  
When yawning trappers saw the two men row  
Across the river with their mounts in tow —  
A red roan stallion and a buckskin mare.  
And now the ponies gain the far bank there  
And flounder up and shake themselves like dogs.  
And now the riders mount and breast the  
fogs

Flung down as wool upon the flat. They dip  
And rise and float, submerging to the hip,  
Turn slowly into shadow men, and fade.  
And some have said that when the ponies neighed,  
'Twas like a strangled shriek; and far ahead  
Some ghostly pony, ridden by the dead,  
Called onward like a bugle singing doom.  
And when the valley floor, as with a broom,  
Was swept by dawn, men saw the empty land.

Not now the Song shall tell of Henry's band  
Ascending to the Falls, nor how they crossed  
The Blackfoot trail, nor how they fought and  
lost,  
Thrown back upon the Yellowstone to wait  
In vain for Ashley's hundred. Yonder, Fate  
Led southward through the fog, and thither  
goes  
The prescient Song.

The April sun arose  
 And fell; and all day long the riders faced  
 A rolling, treeless, melancholy waste  
 Of yellow grass; for 'twas a rainless time,  
 Nor had the baby green begun to climb  
 The steep-kneed hills, but kept the nursing  
 draws.

And knee to knee they rode with scarce a pause,  
 Save when the ponies drank; and scarce a word,  
 As though the haunting silence of a third,  
 Who rode between them, shackled either tongue.  
 And when along the sloughs the twilight flung  
 Blue haze, and made the hills seem doubly bleak,  
 They camped beside a songless little creek  
 That crawled among the clumps of stunted plum  
 Just coming into bud. And both sat dumb  
 Beside a mewling fire, until the west  
 Was darkened and the shadows leaped and pressed  
 About their little ring of feeble light.  
 Then, moved by some vague menace in the  
 night,

Fink forced a laugh that wasn't glad at all,  
 And joked about a certain saddle gall  
 That troubled him — a Rabelaisian quip  
 That in the good old days had served to strip  
 The drooping humor from the dourest jowl.  
 He heard the laughter of the prairie owl,

A goblin jeering. Gazing at the flame,  
Talbeau seemed not to hear. But when there  
came

A cry of kiotes, peering all about  
He said: "You don't suppose they'll dig him  
out?"

I carried heavy stones till break of day.  
You don't suppose they'll come and paw away  
The heavy stones I packed, and pester Bill?"  
"Huh uh," Fink grunted; but the evening chill  
Seemed doubled on a sudden; so he sought  
His blanket, wrapped it closely, thought and  
thought  
Till drowsy nonsense tumbled through his skull.

Now at that time of night when comes a lull  
On stormy life; when even sorrow sleeps,  
And sentinels upon the stellar steeps  
Sight morning, though the world is blind and  
dumb,

Fink wakened at a whisper: "Mike! He's come!  
Look! Look!" And Mike sat up and blinked  
and saw.

It didn't walk — it burned along the draw —  
Tall, radiantly white! It wasn't dead —  
It smiled — it had a tin cup on its head —  
Eh? — Gone!

Fink stirred the embers to a flare.  
What dream was this? The world seemed  
unaware

That anything at all had come to pass.  
Contentedly the ponies nipped the grass  
There in the darkness; and the night was still.  
They slept no more, but nursed the fire until  
The morning broke; then ate and rode away.

They weren't any merrier that day.  
And each spoke little, save when Fink would swear  
And smirch the virtue of the buckskin mare  
For picking quarrels with the roan he rode.  
(Did not the Northwind nag her like a goad,  
And was there any other horse to blame?)

The worried day dragged on and twilight came —  
A dusty gray. They climbed a hill to seek  
Some purple fringe of brush that marked a creek.  
The prairie seemed an endless yellow blur:  
Nor might they choose but tarry where they were  
And pass the cheerless night as best they could,  
For they had seen no water-hole or wood  
Since when the sun was halfway down the sky;  
And there would be no stars to travel by,  
So thick a veil of dust the great wind wove.  
They staked their ponies in a leeward cove,  
And, rolling in their blankets, swooned away.

Talbeau awoke and stared. 'Twas breaking  
day!

So soon? It seemed he scarce had slept a wink!  
He'd have another snooze, for surely Fink  
Seemed far from waking, sprawled upon the  
ground,

His loose mouth gaping skyward with a sound  
As of a bucksaw grumbling through a knot.  
Talbeau dropped back and dreamed the sun was  
hot

Upon his face. He tried but failed to stir;  
Whereat he knew that he was Carpenter  
And hot-breath wolves were sniffing round his  
head;

He wasn't dead! He really wasn't dead!  
Would no one come, would no one drive them off?  
His cry for help was nothing but a cough,  
For something choked him. Then a shrill long  
scream

Cut knife-like through the shackles of his dream,  
And once again he saw the lurid flare  
Of morning on the hills.

What ailed the mare?  
She strained her tether, neighing. And the  
roan?  
He squatted, trembling, with his head upthrown,

96 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

And lashed his tail and snorted at the blast.  
Perhaps some prowling grizzly wandered past.  
Talbeau sat up. What stifling air! How warm!  
What sound was that? Perhaps a thunder  
storm  
Was working up. He coughed; and then it  
broke  
Upon him how the air was sharp with smoke;  
And, leaping up, he turned and looked and knew  
What birdless dawn, unhallowed by the dew,  
Came raging from the northwest! Half the  
earth  
And half the heavens were a burning hearth  
Fed fat with grass inflammable as tow!  
He shook Fink, yelling: "Mike, we've got to go!  
All hell's broke loose!"

They cinched the saddles on  
With hands that fumbled; mounted and were  
gone,  
Like rabbits fleeing from a kiote pack.  
They crossed the valley, topped a rise, looked  
back,  
Nor dared to gaze. The firm, familiar world,  
It seemed, was melting down, and Chaos swirled  
Once more across the transient realms of form  
To scatter in the primal atom-storm



The earth's rich dust and potency of dreams.  
Infernal geysers gushed, and sudden streams  
Of rainbow flux went roaring up the skies  
Through ghastly travesties of Paradise,  
Where, drowsy in a tropic summertime,  
Strange gaudy flowers bloomed and aged and  
died —

Whole seasons in a moment. Bloody rain,  
Blown slant like April silver, spewed the plain  
To mock the fallow sod; and where it fell  
Anemones and violets of hell  
Foreran the fatal summer.

Spurs bit deep.

Now down the hill where shadow-haunted sleep  
Fell from the broken wind's narcotic breath,  
The ponies plunged. A sheltered draw, where  
death

Seemed brooding in the silence, heard them  
pass.

A hollow, deep with tangled jointed grass,  
Snatched at the frantic hoofs. Now up a slope  
They clambered, blowing, at a stumbling lope  
And, reined upon the summit, wheeled to stare.  
The stallion snorted, and the rearing mare  
Screamed at the sight and bolted down the wind.  
The writhing Terror, scarce a mile behind,

98 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Appeared to gain; while far to left and right  
Its flanks seemed bending in upon the night —  
A ten-league python closing on its prey.

No guiding hand was needed for the way;  
Blind speed was all. So little Nature heeds  
The fate of men, these blew as tumbleweeds  
Before that dwarfing, elemental rage.  
A gray wolf bounded from a clump of sage;  
A rabbit left its bunchgrass nest and ran  
Beside its foe; and neither dreaded Man,  
The deadliest of all earth's preying things.  
A passing knoll exploded into wings,  
And prairie owls, befuddled by the light,  
Went tumbling up like patches of the night  
The burning tempest tattered.

Leaning low,

The gasping riders let the ponies go,  
The little buckskin leading, while the roan  
Strove hard a-flank, afraid to be alone  
And nickering at whiles. And he who led,  
By brief hypnotic lapses comforted,  
Recalled the broad Ohio, heard the horns  
The way they used to sing those summer morns  
When he and Mike and —. There the dream  
went wrong  
And through his head went running, like a song

That sings itself: 'He tried so hard to come  
And warn us; but the grave had made him dumb,  
And 'twas to show he loved us that he smiled.'  
And of the other terror made a child  
Whom often, for a panic moment's span,  
Projections from the conscience of the man  
Pursued with glaring eyes and claws of flame.  
For this the dead arose, for this he came —  
That grin upon his face!

A blinding gloom  
Crushed down; then, followed by a rolling  
boom,  
There broke a scarlet hurricane of light  
That swept the farthest reaches of the night  
Where unsuspected hills leaped up aghast.  
Already through the hollow they had passed  
So recently, the hounding Terror sped!  
And now the wind grew hotter. Overhead  
Inverted seas of color rolled and broke,  
And from the combers of the litten smoke  
A stinging spindrift showered.

On they went,  
Unconscious of duration or extent,  
Of everything but that from which they fled.  
Now, sloping to an ancient river bed,

100 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

The prairie flattened. Plunging downward there,  
The riders suddenly became aware  
How surged, beneath, a mighty shadow-stream —  
As though the dying Prairie dreamed a dream  
Of yesteraige when all her valleys flowed  
With Amazons, and monster life abode  
Upon her breast and quickened in her womb.  
And from that rushing in the flame-smeared  
gloom

Unnumbered outcries blended in a roar.  
The headlong ponies struck the sounding shore  
And reared upon their haunches. Far and near,  
The valley was a-flood with elk and deer  
And buffalo and wolves and antelope  
And whatsoever creature slough and slope  
Along the path of terror had to give.  
Torrential with the common will to live,  
The river of unnumbered egos swept  
The ponies with it. But the buckskin kept  
The margin where the rabble frayed and thinned  
And, breathing with the wheeze of broken wind,  
The stallion clung to her.

It came to pass  
The valley yawned upon a sea of grass  
That seemed to heave, as waves of gloom and glare  
Ran over it; and, rising here and there,

Tall buttes made islands in the living tide  
That roared about them. Still with swinging  
stride  
And rhythmic breath the little buckskin ran  
Among the herd, that opened like a fan  
And scattered. But the roan was losing ground.  
His breathing gave a gurgling, hollow sound,  
As though his life were gushing from his throat.  
His whole frame quivered like a scuttled boat  
That slowly sinks; nor did he seem to feel  
Upon his flank the biting of the steel  
That made him bleed. Fink cut the rifle-boot  
And saddle-bags away, to give the brute  
Less burden.

Now it happened, as they neared  
A lofty butte whose summit glimmered weird  
Beneath the lurid boiling of the sky,  
Talbeau was startled by a frantic cry  
Behind him; noted that he rode alone,  
And, turning in the saddle, saw the roan  
Go stumbling down and wither to a heap.  
And momentarily, between a leap and leap,  
The love of self was mighty in the man;  
For now the Terror left the hills and ran  
With giant strides along the grassy plains.  
Dear Yesterdays fought wildly for the reins,

102 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

To-morrows for the spur. And then the mare  
Heeled to the sawing bit and pawed the air  
And halted, prancing.

Once again Talbeau  
Looked back to where the sparks were blown as  
snow  
Before that blizzard blast of scorching light,  
And saw Fink running down the painted night  
Like some lost spirit fleeing from the Wrath.

One horse — and who should ride it? All he  
hath  
A man will give for life! But shall he give  
For living that which makes it good to live —  
The consciousness of fellowship and trust?  
Let fools so prize a pinch of throbbing dust!  
Now Fink should ride, and let the rest be hid.  
He bounded from the mare; but, as he did,  
The panic-stricken pony wheeled about,  
Won freedom with a lunge, and joined the  
rout  
Of fleeing shadows.

Well, 'twas over now —  
Perhaps it didn't matter anyhow —  
They'd go together now and hunt for Bill!  
And momentarily the world seemed very still

About Talbeau. Then Fink was at his side,  
Blank horror in his face. "Come on!" he cried;  
"The butte! We'll climb the butte!" And  
once again  
Talbeau knew fear.

Now, gripping hands, the men  
Scuttled and dodged athwart the scattered flight  
Of shapes that drifted in the flood of light,  
A living flotsam; reached the bare butte's base.  
Went scrambling up its leaning leeward face  
To where the slope grew sheer, and huddled there.  
And hotter, hotter, hotter grew the air,  
Until their temples sang a fever tune.  
The April night became an August noon.  
Then, near to swooning in a blast of heat,  
They heard the burning breakers boom and beat  
About their lofty island, as they lay,  
Their gaping mouths pressed hard against the  
clay,  
And fought for every breath. Nor could they tell  
How long upon a blistered scarp in hell  
They gasped and clung. But suddenly at last —  
An age in passing, and a moment, passed —  
The torture ended, and the cool air came;  
And, looking out, they saw the long slant flame  
Devour the night to leeward.

By and by  
 Drab light came seeping through the sullen sky.  
 They waited there until the morning broke,  
 And, like a misty moon amid the smoke,  
 The sun came stealing up.

They found a place  
 Where rain had scarred the butte wall's western  
     face  
 With many runnels; clambered upward there —  
 And viewed a panorama of despair.  
 The wind had died, and not a sound arose  
 Above those blackened leagues; for even crows  
 (The solitude embodied in a bird)  
 Had fled that desolation. Nothing stirred,  
 Save here and there a thin gray column grew  
 From where some draw still smouldered. And  
     they knew  
 How universal quiet may appal  
 As violence, and, even as a wall,  
 Sheer vacancy confine.

No horse, no gun!  
 Nay, worse; no hint of water hole or run  
 In all the flat or back among the hills!  
 Mere hunger is a goad that, ere it kills,  
 May drive the lean far down the hardest road:  
 But thirst is both a snaffle and a load;



It gripped them now. When Mike made bold to speak,  
His tongue was like a stranger to his cheek.  
"Shure, b'y," he croaked; "'tis Sunday morn in hell!"  
The sound seemed profanation; on it fell  
The vast, rebuking silence.

Long they gazed  
About them, standing silent and amazed  
Upon the summit. West and north and east  
They saw too far. But mystery, at least,  
Was in the south, where still the smoke con-  
cealed

The landscape. Vistas of the unrevealed  
Invited Hope to stray there as it please.  
And presently there came a little breeze  
Out of the dawn. As of a crowd that waits  
Some imminent revealment of the Fates  
That toil behind the scenes, a murmur 'woke  
Amid the hollow hush. And now the smoke  
Mysteriously stirs, begins to flow,  
And giant shadow bulks that loom below  
Seem crowding downward. One by one they lift  
Above the reek, and trail the ragged drift  
About their flanks. A melancholy scene!  
Gray buttes and giddy gulfs that yawn between —

106 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

A Titan's labyrinth! But see afar  
Where yonder canyon like a purple scar  
Cuts zigzag through the waste! Is that a gleam  
Of water in its deeps?

A stream! A stream!

Now scrambling down the runnels of the rain,  
They struck across the devastated plain  
Where losers of the night's mad race were strewn  
To wait the wolves and crows.

Mid-afternoon

Beheld them stripping at the river's bank.  
They wallowed in the turbid stream and drank  
Delicious beakers in the liquid mud;  
Nor drank alone, for here the burning flood  
Had flung its panting driftage in the dark.  
The valley teemed with life, as though some Ark  
That rode the deluge, spewed its cargo here:  
Elk, antelope, wolves, bison, rabbits, deer,  
Owls, crows — the greatest mingled with the least.  
And when the men had drunk, they had a feast  
Of liver, bolted dripping from a cow  
Dead at the water's lip.

Blue shadow now

Was mounting slowly up the canyon steep;  
So, seeking for a better place to sleep,

They wandered down the margin of the stream.  
'Twas scarce more real than walking in a dream  
Of lonely craters in a lunar land  
That never thrilled with roots. On either hand  
The dwarfing summits soared, grotesque, austere,  
And jagged fissures, sentinelled with fear,  
Led back to mysteries of purple gloom.

They came to where a coulee, like a flume,  
Rose steeply to the prairie. Thither hurled,  
A roaring freshet of the herd had swirled,  
Cascading to the river bed; and there,  
Among the trampelled carcasses, the mare  
Lay bloated near the water. She had run  
With saddle, panniers, powder-horn and gun  
Against the wind-thewed fillies of the fire,  
And won the heat, to perish at the wire —  
A plucky little brute!

## VIII

### VENGEANCE

They made a camp  
Well up above the crawling valley damp,  
And where no prowling beast might chance to  
come.

There was no fuel; but a flask of rum,  
Thanks to the buckskin, dulled the evening chill.  
And both grew mellow. Memories of Bill  
And other nights possessed the little man;  
And on and on his reminiscence ran,  
As 'twere the babble of a brook of tears  
Gone groping for the ocean of dead years  
Too far away to reach. And by and by  
The low voice sharpened to an anguished cry:  
"O Mike! I said you couldn't miss the cup!"

Then something snapped in Fink and, leaping up,  
He seized Talbeau and shook him as a rat  
Is shaken by a dog. "Enough of that!"  
He yelled; "And, 'faith, I'll find ye afther Bill  
Fer wan more wurrd! Ye fool! I mint to kill!  
And, moind me now, ye'd better howld yer lip!"

Talbeau felt murder shudder in the grip  
That choked and shook and flung him. Faint  
and dazed,  
He sprawled upon the ground. And anger blazed  
Within him, like the leaping Northern Light  
That gives no heat. He wished to rise and  
fight,  
But could not for the horror of it all.  
Wild voices thronged the further canyon wall  
As Fink raved on; and every word he said  
Was like a mutilation of the dead  
By some demonic mob.

And when at length  
He heard Mike snoring yonder, still the strength  
To rise and kill came not upon Talbeau.  
So many moments of the Long Ago  
Came pleading; and the gentle might thereof  
United with the habit of old love  
To weave a spell about the sleeping man.  
Then drowsily the pondered facts began  
To merge and group, as running colors will,  
In new and vaguer patterns. Mike and Bill  
Were bickering again. And someone said:  
"Let's flip a copper; if it's tails, he's dead;  
If heads, he's living. That's the way to tell!"  
A spinning copper jangled like a bell.

110 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

But even as he stooped to pick it up,  
Behold! the coin became a whisky cup  
Bored smoothly through the center! "Look at  
this!"  
He seemed to shout: "I knew Mike couldn't  
miss!  
Bill only played at dying for a joke!"

Then laughter filled his dream, and he awoke.  
The dawn was like a stranger's cold regard  
Across the lifeless land, grotesquely scarred  
As by old sorrow; and the man's dull sense  
Of woe, become objective and immense,  
Seemed waiting there to crush him.

Fink still slept;  
And even now, it seemed, his loose mouth kept  
A shape for shameless words, as though a breath,  
Deep drawn, might set it gloating o'er the death  
Of one who loved its jesting and its song.  
And while Talbeau sat pondering the wrong  
So foully done, and all that had been killed,  
And how the laughter of the world was stilled  
And all its wine poured out, he seemed to hear  
As though a spirit whispered in his ear:  
*You won't forget I gave my gun to you!*  
And instantly the deep conviction grew

That 'twas a plea for justice from the slain.  
Ah, not without a hand upon the rein,  
Nor with an empty saddle, had the mare  
Outrun the flame that she might carry there  
The means of vengeance !

Yet — if Mike were dead !  
He shuddered, gazing where the gray sky bled  
With morning, like a wound. He couldn't kill ;  
Nor did it seem to be the way of Bill  
To bid him do it. Yet the gun was sent.  
For what ? — To make Mike suffer and repent ?  
But how ?

Awhile his apathetic gaze  
Explored yon thirst- and hunger-haunted maze,  
As though he might surprise the answer there.  
The answer came. That region of despair  
Should be Mike's Purgatory ! More than Chance  
Had fitted circumstance to circumstance  
That this should be ! He knew it ! And the plan,  
Thus suddenly conceived, possessed the man.  
It seemed the might of Bill had been reborn  
In him.

He took the gun and powder horn,  
The water flasks and sun-dried bison meat  
The panniers gave ; then climbing to a seat

112 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Above the sleeper, shouted down to him :  
"Get up !" Along the further canyon rim  
A multitude of voices swelled the shout.  
Fink started up and yawned and looked about,  
Bewildered. Once again the clamor ran  
Along the canyon wall. The little man,  
Now squinting down the pointed rifle, saw  
The lifted face go pale, the stubborn jaw  
Droop nervelessly. A twinge of pity stirred  
Within him, and he marvelled as he heard  
His own voice saying what he wished unsaid :  
"It's Bill's own rifle pointing at your head ;  
Go east, and think of all the wrong you've  
done !"

Fink glanced across his shoulder where the sun  
Shone level on the melancholy land ;  
And, feigning that he didn't understand,  
Essayed a careless grin that went awry.  
"Bejasus, and we'll not go there, me b'y,"  
He said ; "for shure 'tis hell widout the lights !"  
That one-eyed stare along the rifle sights  
Was narrowed to a slit. A sickening shock  
Ran through him at the clucking of the lock.  
He clutched his forehead, stammering : "Tal  
beau,  
I've been yer frind —."



“I’ll give you three to go,”  
The other said, “or else you’ll follow Bill !  
One — two —.”

Fink turned and scuttled down the hill;  
And at the sight the watcher’s eyes grew dim,  
For something old and dear had gone from him —  
His pride in one who made a clown of Death.  
Alas, how much the man would give for breath !  
How easily Death made of him the clown !

Now scrambling for a grip, now rolling down,  
Mike landed at the bottom of the steep,  
And, plunging in the river belly deep,  
Struck out in terror for the other shore.  
At any moment might the rifle’s roar  
Crash through that rearward silence, and the  
lead

Come snarling like a hornet at his head —  
He felt the spot ! Then presently the flood  
Began to cool the fever in his blood,  
And furtive self-derision stung his pride.  
He clambered dripping up the further side  
And felt himself a fool ! He wouldn’t go !  
That little whiffet yonder was Talbeau !  
And who was this that he, Mike Fink, had feared ?  
He’d go and see.

114 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

A spurt of smoke appeared  
Across the river, and a bullet struck —  
*Spat ping* — beside him, spewing yellow muck  
Upon his face. Then every cliff and draw  
Rehearsed the sullen thunders of the law  
He dared to question. Stricken strangely weak,  
He clutched the clay and watched the powder reek  
Trail off with glories of the level sun.  
He saw Talbeau pour powder in his gun  
And ram the wad. A second shot might kill !  
That brooding like a woman over Bill  
Had set the fellow daft. *A crazy man!*  
The notion spurred him. Springing up, he ran  
To where a gully cleft the canyon rim  
And, with that one-eyed fury after him,  
Fled east.

The very buttes, grotesque and weird,  
Seemed startled at the sight of what he feared  
And powerless to shield him in his need.  
'Twas more than man he fled from ; 'twas a deed,  
Become alive and subtle as the air,  
That turned upon the doer. Everywhere  
It gibbered in the echoes as he fled.  
A stream of pictures flitted through his head :  
The quiet body in the hearth-lit hall,  
The grinning ghost, the flight, the stallion's fall,

The flame girt isle, the spectral morning sun,  
And then the finding of the dead man's gun  
Beside the glooming river. Flowing by,  
These fused and focused in the deadly eye  
He felt behind him.

Suddenly the ground  
Heaved up and smote him with a crashing  
    sound;  
And in the vivid moment of his fall  
He thought he heard the snarling rifle ball  
And felt the one-eyed fury crunch its mark.  
Expectant of the swooping of the dark,  
He raised his eyes. — The sun was shining  
    still;  
It peeped about the shoulder of a hill  
And viewed him with a quizzifying stare.  
He looked behind him. Nothing followed  
    there;  
But Silence, big with dread-begotten sound,  
Dismayed him; and the steeps that hemmed him  
    round  
Seemed plotting with a more than human guile.  
He rose and fled; but every little while  
A sense of eyes behind him made him pause;  
And always down the maze of empty draws  
It seemed a sound of feet abruptly ceased.

116 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Now trotting, walking now, he labored east ;  
And when at length the burning zenith beat  
Upon him, and the summits swam with heat,  
And on the winding gullies fell no shade,  
He came to where converging gulches made  
A steep-walled basin for the blinding glare.  
Here, fanged and famished, crawled the prickly  
pear ;

Malevolent with thirst, the soap weed thrust  
Its barbed stilettos from the arid dust,  
Defiant of the rain-withholding blue :  
And in the midst a lonely scrub oak grew,  
A crooked dwarf that, in the pictured bog  
Of its own shadow, squatted like a frog.  
Fink, panting, flung himself beneath its boughs.  
A mighty magic in the noonday drowse  
Allayed the driving fear. A waking dream  
Fulfilled a growing wish. He saw the stream  
Far off as from a space-commanding height.  
And now a phantasy of rapid flight  
Transported him above the sagging land,  
And with a sudden swoop he seemed to stand  
Once more upon the shimmering river's brink.  
His eyes drank deep ; but when his mouth would  
drink,

A giant hornet from the other shore —  
The generating center of a roar  
That shook the world — snarled by.

He started up,  
And saw the basin filling as a cup  
With purple twilight! Gazing all around  
Where still the flitting ghost of some great sound  
Troubled the crags a moment, then was mute,  
He saw along the shoulder of a butte,  
A good three hundred paces from the oak,  
A slowly spreading streak of rifle smoke  
And knew the deadly eye was lurking there.  
He fled again.

About him everywhere  
Amid the tangled draws now growing dim,  
Weird witnesses took cognizance of him  
And told abroad the winding way he ran.  
He halted only when his breath began  
To stab his throat. And lo, the staring eye  
Was quenched with night! No further need he  
fly  
Till dawn. And yet —. He held his breath to  
hear  
If footsteps followed. Silence smote his ear,  
The gruesome silence of the hearth-lit hall,  
More dread than sound. Against the gully wall  
He shrank and huddled with his eyes shut tight,  
For fear a presence, latent in the night,  
Should walk before him.

118 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Then it seemed he ran  
Through regions alien to the feet of Man,  
A weary way despite the speed of sleep,  
And came upon a river flowing deep  
Between black crags that made the sky a well.  
And eerily the feeble starlight fell  
Upon the flood with water lilies strown.  
But when he stooped, the stream began to moan,  
And suddenly from every lily pad  
A white face bloomed, unutterably sad  
And bloody browed.

A swift, erasing flame  
Across the dusky picture, morning came.  
Mike lay a moment, blinking at the blue;  
And then the fear of yesterday broke through  
The clinging drowse. For lo, on every side  
The paling summits watched him, Argus-eyed,  
In hushed anticipation of a roar.  
He fled.

All day, intent to see once more  
The open plain before the night should fall,  
He labored on. But many a soaring wall  
Annulled some costly distance he had won;  
And misdirected gullies, white with sun,  
Seemed spitefully to baffle his desire.

The deeps went blue; on mimic dome and spire  
The daylight faded to a starry awe.  
Mike slept; and lo, they marched along the  
draw —  
Or rather burned — tall, radiantly white!  
A hushed procession, tunnelling the night,  
They came, with lips that smiled and brows that  
bled,  
And each one bore a tin cup on its head,  
A brimming cup. But ever as they came  
Before him, like a draught-struck candle flame  
They shuddered and were snuffed.

'Twas deep night yet  
When Mike awoke and felt the terror sweat  
Upon his face, the prickling of his hair.  
Afraid to sleep, he paced the gully there  
Until the taller buttes were growing gray.  
He brooded much on flowing streams that day.  
As with a weight, he stooped; his feet were slow;  
He shuffled. Less and less he feared Talbeau  
Behind him. More and more he feared the  
night  
Before him. Any hazard in the light,  
Or aught that might befall 'twixt living men,  
Were better than to be alone again  
And meet that dream!

120 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

The deeps began to fill  
With purple haze. Bewildered, boding ill,  
A moaning wind awoke. 'Twould soon be dark.  
Mike pondered. Twice Talbeau had missed the  
mark.

Perhaps he hadn't really meant to hit.  
And surely now that flaring anger fit  
Had burned away. It wasn't like the man  
To hold a grudge. Mike halted, and began  
To grope for words regretful of the dead,  
Persuasive words about a heart that bled  
For Bill. 'Twas all a terrible mistake.  
"Plase now, a little dhrop fer owld toime's sake!"  
With troublesome insistence, that refrain  
Kept running through the muddle of his brain  
And disarranged the words he meant to speak.  
The trickle of a tear along his cheek  
Consoled him. Soon his suffering would end.  
Talbeau would see him weeping for his friend —  
Talbeau had water!

Now the heights burned red  
To westward. With a choking clutch of dread  
He noted how the dusk was gathering  
Along the draws — a trap about to spring.  
He cupped his hands about his mouth and cried:  
"Talbeau! Talbeau!" Despairing voices died



Among the summits, and the lost wind pined.  
It made Talbeau seem infinitely kind —  
The one thing human in a ghostly land.  
Where was he? Just a touch of that warm hand  
Would thwart the dark! Mike sat against a wall  
And brooded.

By and by a skittering fall  
Of pebbles at his back aroused the man.  
He scrambled to his feet and turned to scan  
The butte that sloped above him. Where the  
glow  
Still washed the middle height, he saw Talbeau  
Serenely perched upon a ledge of clay!  
And Mike forgot the words he meant to say,  
The fitted words, regretful of his deed.  
A forthright, stark sincerity of need  
Rough hewed the husky, incoherent prayer  
He shouted to that Lord of water there  
Above the gloom. A little drop to drink  
For old time's sake!

Talbeau regarded Fink  
Awhile in silence; then his thin lips curled.  
"You spilled the only drink in all the world!  
Go on," he said, "and think of what you've  
done!"  
Beyond the pointed muzzle of his gun

122 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

He saw the big man wither to a squat  
And tremble, like a bison when the shot  
Just nips the vital circle. Then he saw  
A stooping figure hurry down the draw,  
Grow dim, and vanish in the failing light.

'Twas long before Talbeau could sleep that night.  
Some questioner, insistently perverse,  
Assailed him and compelled him to rehearse  
The justifying story of the friend  
Betrayed and slain. But when he reached the  
end,  
Still unconvinced the questioner was there  
To taunt him with that pleading of despair —  
For old time's sake! Sleep brought him little  
rest;  
For what the will denied, the heart confessed  
In mournful dreams. And when the first faint  
gray  
Aroused him, and he started on his way,  
He knew the stubborn questioner had won.  
No brooding on the wrong that Mike had done  
Could still that cry: "Plase now, fer owld  
toime's sake,  
A little dhrop!" It made his eyeballs ache  
With tears of pity that he couldn't shed.  
No other dawn, save that when Bill lay dead

And things began to stare about the hall,  
Had found the world so empty. After all,  
What man could know the way another trod ?  
And who was he, Talbeau, to play at God ?  
Let one who curbs the wind and brews the  
rain  
Essay the subtler portioning of pain  
To souls that err ! Talbeau would make amends !  
Once more they'd drink together and be friends.  
How often they had shared !

He struck a trot,  
Eyes fixed upon the trail. The sun rose hot ;  
Noon poured a blinding glare along the draws ;  
And still the trail led on, without a pause  
To show where Mike had rested. Thirst began  
To be a burden on the little man ;  
His progress dwindled to a dragging pace.  
But when he tipped the flask, that pleading  
face  
Arose before him, and a prayer denied  
Came mourning back to thrust his need aside —  
A little drop ! How Mike must suffer now !  
“ I'm not so very thirsty, anyhow,”  
He told himself. And almost any bend  
Might bring him on a sudden to his friend.  
He'd wait and share the water.

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Every turn  
Betrayed a hope. The west began to burn;  
Flared red; went ashen; and the stars came out  
Dreams, colored by an unacknowledged doubt,  
Perplexed the trail he followed in his sleep;  
And dreary hours before the tallest steep  
Saw dawn, Talbeau was waiting for the day.

Till noon he read a writing in the clay  
That bade him haste; for now from wall to wall  
The footmarks wandered, like the crabbéd scrawl  
An old man writes. They told a gloomy tale.  
And then the last dim inkling of a trail  
Was lost upon a patch of hardened ground!

The red west saw him, like a nervous hound  
That noses vainly for the vanished track,  
Still plunging into gullies, doubling back,  
And pausing now and then to hurl a yell  
Among the ululating steeps. Night fell.  
The starlit buttes still heard him panting by,  
And summits weird with midnight caught his cry  
To answer, mocking.

Morning brought despair;  
Nor did he get much comfort of his prayer:  
"God, let me find him! Show me where to go!"  
Some greater, unregenerate Talbeau

Was God that morning; for the lesser heard  
His own bleak answer echoed word for word :  
*Go on, and think of all the wrong you've done !*

His futile wish to hasten sped the sun.  
That day, as he recalled it in the dark,  
Was like the spinning of a burning arc.  
He nodded, and the night was but a swoon;  
And morning neighbored strangely with the noon;  
And evening was the noon's penumbral haze.

No further ran the reckoning of days.  
'Twas evening when at last he stooped to stare  
Upon a puzzling trail. A wounded bear,  
It seemed, had dragged its rump across the sands  
That flooded the gullies now. But sprawling  
    hands  
Had marked the margin! Why was that? No  
    doubt  
Mike too had tarried here to puzzle out  
What sort of beast had passed. And yet — how  
    queer —  
'Twas plain no human feet had trodden here!  
A trail of hands! That throbbing in his brain  
Confused his feeble efforts to explain;  
And hazily he wondered if he slept  
And dreamed again. Tenaciously he kept

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His eyes upon the trail and labored on,  
Lest, swooping like a hawk, another dawn  
Should snatch that hope away.

A sentry crow,  
Upon a sunlit summit, saw Talbeau  
And croaked alarm. The noise of many wings,  
In startled flight, and raucous chatterings  
Arose. What feast was interrupted there  
A little way ahead? 'Twould be the bear!  
He plodded on. The intervening space  
Sagged under him; and, halting at the place  
Where late the flock had been, he strove to break  
A grip of horror. Surely now he'd wake  
And see the morning quicken in the skies!

The thing remained! — It hadn't any eyes —  
The pilfered sockets bore a pleading stare!

A long, hoarse wail of anguish and despair  
Aroused the echoes. Answering, arose  
Once more the jeering chorus of the crows.

## THE SONG OF HUGH GLASS

### TO SIGURD, SCARCELY THREE

When you are old enough to know  
The joys of kite and boat and bow  
And other suchlike splendid things  
That boyhood's rounded decade brings,  
I shall not give you tropes and rhymes ;  
But, rising to those rousing times,  
I shall ply well the craft I know  
Of shaping kite and boat and bow,  
For you shall teach me once again  
The goodly art of being ten.

Meanwhile, as on a rainy day  
When 'tis not possible to play,  
The while you do your best to grow  
I ply the other craft I know  
And strive to build for you the mood  
Of daring and of fortitude  
With fitted word and shapen phrase,  
Against those later wonder-days  
When first you glimpse the world of men  
Beyond the bleaker side of ten.



# THE SONG OF HUGH GLASS

## I

### GRAYBEARD AND GOLDHAIR

The year was eighteen hundred twenty three.

'Twas when the guns that blustered at the Ree  
Had ceased to brag, and ten score martial clowns  
Retreated from the unwhipped river towns,  
Amid the scornful laughter of the Sioux.  
A withering blast the arid South still blew,  
And creeks ran thin beneath the glaring sky;  
For 'twas a month ere honking geese would fly  
Southward before the Great White Hunter's face:  
And many generations of their race,  
As bow-flung arrows, now have fallen spent.

It happened then that Major Henry went  
With eighty trappers up the dwindling Grand,  
Bound through the weird, unfriending barren-land  
For where the Big Horn meets the Yellowstone;  
And old Hugh Glass went with them.

Large of bone,

Deep-chested, that his great heart might have  
play,

Gray-bearded, gray of eye and crowned with gray  
Was Glass. It seemed he never had been young;  
And, for the grudging habit of his tongue,  
None knew the place or season of his birth.  
Slowly he 'woke to anger or to mirth;  
Yet none laughed louder when the rare mood  
fell,

And hate in him was like a still, white hell,  
A thing of doom not lightly reconciled.  
What memory he kept of wife or child  
Was never told; for when his comrades sat  
About the evening fire with pipe and chat,  
Exchanging talk of home and gentler days,  
Old Hugh stared long upon the pictured blaze,  
And what he saw went upward in the smoke.

But once, as with an inner lightning stroke,  
The veil was rent, and briefly men discerned  
What pent-up fires of selfless passion burned  
Beneath the still gray smoldering of him.  
There was a rakehell lad, called Little Jim,  
Jamie or Petit Jacques; for scarce began  
The downy beard to mark him for a man.  
Blue-eyed was he and femininely fair.  
A maiden might have coveted his hair

That trapped the sunlight in its tangled skein :  
 So, tardily, outflowered the wild blond strain  
 That gutted Rome grown overfat in sloth.  
 A Ganymedes haunted by a Goth  
 Was Jamie. When the restive ghost was laid,  
 He seemed some fancy-ridden child who played  
 At manliness 'mid all those bearded men.  
 The sternest heart was drawn to Jamie then.  
 But his one mood ne'er linked two hours together.  
 To schedule Jamie's way, as prairie weather,  
 Was to get fact by wedding doubt and whim ;  
 For very lightly slept that ghost in him.  
 No cloudy brooding went before his wrath  
 That, like a thunder-squall, recked not its path,  
 But raged upon what happened in its way.  
 Some called him brave who saw him on that day  
 When Ashley stormed a bluff town of the Ree,  
 And all save beardless Jamie turned to flee  
 For shelter from that steep, lead-harrowed slope.  
 Yet, hardly courage, but blind rage agrope  
 Inspired the foolish deed.

'Twas then old Hugh  
 Tore off the gray mask, and the heart shone  
 through.  
 For, halting in a dry, flood-guttered draw,  
 The trappers rallied, looked aloft and saw

That travesty of war against the sky.  
Out of a breathless hush, the old man's cry  
Leaped shivering, an anguished cry and wild  
As of some mother fearing for her child,  
And up the steep he went with mighty bounds.  
Long afterward the story went the rounds,  
How old Glass fought that day. With gun for  
club,  
Grim as a grizzly fighting for a cub,  
He laid about him, cleared the way, and so,  
Supported by the firing from below,  
Brought Jamie back. And when the deed was  
done,  
Taking the lad upon his knee: "My Son,  
Brave men are not ashamed to fear," said Hugh,  
"And I've a mind to make a man of you;  
So here's your first acquaintance with the law!"  
Whereat he spanked the lad with vigorous paw  
And, having done so, limped away to bed;  
For, wounded in the hip, the old man bled.

It was a month before he hobbled out,  
And Jamie, like a fond son, hung about  
The old man's tent and waited upon him.  
And often would the deep gray eyes grow dim  
With gazing on the boy; and there would go —  
As though Spring-fire should waken out of snow —

A wistful light across that mask of gray.  
 And once Hugh smiled his enigmatic way,  
 While poring long on Jamie's face, and said :  
 "So with their sons are women brought to bed,  
 Sore wounded !"

Thus united were the two :  
 And some would dub the old man 'Mother Hugh';  
 While those in whom all living waters sank  
 To some dull inner pool that teemed and stank  
 With formless evil, into that morass  
 Gazed, and saw darkly there, as in a glass,  
 The foul shape of some weakly envied sin.  
 For each man builds a world and dwells therein.  
 Nor could these know what mocking ghost of  
     Spring  
 Stirred Hugh's gray world with dreams of blossom-  
     ing  
 That wooed no seed to swell or bird to sing.  
 So might a dawn-struck digit of the moon  
 Dream back the rain of some old lunar June  
 And ache through all its craters to be green.  
 Little they know what life's one love can mean,  
 Who shrine it in a bower of peace and bliss :  
 Pang dwelling in a puckered cicatrice  
 More truly figures this belated love.  
 Yet very precious was the hurt thereof,  
 Grievous to bear, too dear to cast away.

Now Jamie went with Hugh; but who shall say  
If 'twas a warm heart or a wind of whim,  
Love, or the rover's teasing itch in him,  
Moved Jamie? Howsoe'er, 'twas good to see  
Graybeard and Goldhair riding knee to knee,  
One age in young adventure. One who saw  
Has likened to a February thaw  
Hugh's mellow mood those days; and truly so,  
For when the tempering Southwest wakes to blow  
A phantom April over melting snow,  
Deep in the North some new white wrath is  
    brewed.

Out of a dim-trailed inner solitude  
The old man summoned many a stirring story,  
Lived grimly once, but now shot through with  
    glory  
Caught from the wondering eyes of him who  
    heard —

Tales jagged with the bleak unstudied word,  
Stark saga-stuff. "A fellow that I knew,"  
So nameless went the hero that was Hugh —  
A mere pelt merchant, as it seemed to him;  
Yet trailing epic thunders through the dim,  
Whist world of Jamie's awe.

    And so they went,  
One heart, it seemed, and that heart well content  
With tale and snatch of song and careless laughter.

Never before, and surely never after,  
The gray old man seemed nearer to his youth —  
That myth that somehow had to be the truth,  
Yet could not be convincing any more.

Now when the days of travel numbered four  
And nearer drew the barrens with their need,  
On Glass, the hunter, fell the task to feed  
Those four score hungers when the game should  
fail.

For no young eye could trace so dim a trail,  
Or line the rifle sights with speed so true.  
Nor might the wistful Jamie go with Hugh;  
“For,” so Hugh chaffed, “my trick of getting  
game

Might teach young eyes to put old eyes to  
shame.

An old dog never risks his only bone.”  
‘Wolves prey in packs, the lion hunts alone’  
Is somewhat nearer what he should have meant.

And so with merry jest the old man went;  
And so they parted at an unseen gate  
That even then some gust of moody fate  
Clanged to betwixt them; each a tale to spell —  
One in the nightmare scrawl of dreams from hell,  
One in the blistering trail of days a-crawl,

Venomous footed. Nor might it ere befall  
These two should meet in after days and be  
Graybeard and Goldhair riding knee to knee,  
Recounting with a bluff, heroic scorn  
The haps of either tale.

'Twas early morn  
When Hugh went forth, and all day Jamie rode  
With Henry's men, while more and more the  
    goad  
Of eager youth sore fretted him, and made  
The dusty progress of the cavalcade  
The journey of a snail flock to the moon;  
Until the shadow-weaving afternoon  
Turned many fingers nightward — then he fled,  
Pricking his horse, nor deigned to turn his head  
At any dwindling voice of reprimand;  
For somewhere in the breaks along the Grand  
Surely Hugh waited with a goodly kill.  
Hoofbeats of ghostly steeds on every hill,  
Mysterious, muffled hoofs on every bluff!  
Spurred echo horses clattering up the rough  
Confluent draws! These flying Jamie heard.  
The lagging air droned like the drowsy word  
Of one who tells weird stories late at night.  
Half headlong joy and half delicious fright,  
His day-dream's pace outstripped the plunging  
    steed's.



Lean galloper in a wind of splendid deeds,  
Like Hugh's, he seemed unto himself, until,  
Snorting, a-haunch above a breakneck hill,  
The horse stopped short — then Jamie was aware  
Of lonesome flatlands fading skyward there  
Beneath him, and, zigzag on either hand,  
A purple haze denoted how the Grand  
Forked wide 'twixt sunset and the polar star.

A-tiptoe in the stirrups, gazing far,  
He saw no Hugh nor any moving thing,  
Save for a welter of cawing crows, a-wing  
About some banquet in the further hush.  
One faint star, set above the fading blush  
Of sunset, saw the coming night, and grew.  
With hand for trumpet, Jamie gave halloo;  
And once again. For answer, the horse neighed.  
Some vague mistrust now made him half afraid —  
Some formless dread that stirred beneath the will  
As far as sleep from waking.

Down the hill,  
Close-footed in the skitter of the shale,  
The spurred horse floundered to the solid vale  
And galloped to the northwest, whinnying.  
The outstripped air moaned like a wounded thing,  
But Jamie gave the lie unto his dread.  
"The old man's camping out to-night," he said,

"Somewhere about the forks, as like as not;  
And there'll be hunks of fresh meat steaming hot,  
And fighting stories by a dying fire!"

The sunset reared a luminous phantom spire  
That, crumbling, sifted ashes down the sky.

Now, pausing, Jamie sent a searching cry  
Into the twilit river-skirting brush,  
And in the vast denial of the hush  
The champing of the snaffled horse seemed loud.

Then, startling as a voice beneath a shroud,  
A muffled boom woke somewhere up the stream  
And, like vague thunder hearkened in a dream,  
Drawled back to silence. Now, with heart a-  
bound,

Keen for the quarter of the perished sound,  
The lad spurred gaily; for he doubted not  
His cry had brought Hugh's answering rifle shot.  
The laggard air was like a voice that sang,  
And Jamie half believed he sniffed the tang  
Of woodsmoke and the smell of flesh a-roast;  
When presently before him, like a ghost,  
Upstanding, huge in twilight, arms flung wide,  
A gray form loomed. The wise horse reared and  
shied,

Snorting his inborn terror of the bear!  
And in the whirlwind of a moment there,  
Betwixt the brute's hoarse challenge and the  
charge,  
The lad beheld, upon the grassy marge  
Of a small spring that bullberries stooped to scan,  
A ragged heap that should have been a man,  
A huddled, broken thing — and it was Hugh!

There was no need for any closer view.  
As, on the instant of a lightning flash  
Ere yet the split gloom closes with a crash,  
A landscape stares with every circumstance  
Of rock and shrub — just so the fatal chance  
Of Hugh's one shot, made futile with surprise,  
Was clear to Jamie. Then before his eyes  
The light whirled in a giddy dance of red;  
And, doubting not the crumpled thing was dead  
That was a friend, with but a skinning knife  
He would have striven for the hated life  
That triumphed there: but with a shriek of fright  
The mad horse bolted through the falling night,  
And Jamie, fumbling at his rifle boot,  
Heard the brush crash behind him where the brute  
Came headlong, close upon the straining flanks.  
But when at length low-lying river banks —  
White rubble in the gloaming — glimmered near,

A swift thought swept the mind of Jamie clear  
Of anger and of anguish for the dead.  
Scarce seemed the raging beast a thing to dread,  
But some foul-playing braggart to outwit.  
Now hurling all his strength upon the bit,  
He sank the spurs, and with a groan of pain  
The plunging horse, obedient to the rein,  
Swerved sharply streamward. Sliddering in the  
sand,

The bear shot past. And suddenly the Grand  
Loomed up beneath and rose to meet the pair  
That rode a moment upon empty air,  
Then smote the water in a shower of spray.  
And when again the slowly ebbing day  
Came back to them, a-drip from nose to flank,  
The steed was scrambling up the further bank,  
And Jamie saw across the narrow stream,  
Like some vague shape of fury in a dream,  
The checked beast ramping at the water's rim.  
Doubt struggled with a victor's thrill in him,  
As, hand to buckle of the rifle-sheath,  
He thought of dampened powder; but beneath  
The rawhide flap the gun lay snug and dry.  
Then as the horse wheeled and the mark went by—  
A patch of shadow dancing upon gray —  
He fired. A sluggish thunder trailed away;  
The spreading smoke-rack lifted slow, and there,

Floundering in a seethe of foam, the bear  
Hugged yielding water for the foe that slew!

Triumphant, Jamie wondered what old Hugh  
Would think of such a "trick of getting game"!  
"Young eyes" indeed! — And then that memory  
came,

Like a dull blade thrust back into a wound.  
One moment 'twas as though the lad had swooned  
Into a dream-adventure, waking there  
To sicken at the ghastly land, a-stare  
Like some familiar face gone strange at last.  
But as the hot tears came, the moment passed.  
Song snatches, broken tales — a troop forlorn,  
Like merry friends of eld come back to mourn —  
O'erwhelmed him there. And when the black  
bulk churned

The star-flecked stream no longer, Jamie turned,  
Recrossed the river and rode back to Hugh.

A burning twist of valley grasses threw  
Blar light about the region of the spring.  
Then Jamie, torch aloft and shuddering,  
Knelt there beside his friend, and moaned: "O

Hugh,

If I had been with you — just been with you!  
We might be laughing now — and you are dead."

With gentle hand he turned the hoary head  
That he might see the good gray face again.  
The torch burned out, the dark swooped back, and  
then

His grief was frozen with an icy plunge  
In horror. 'Twas as though a bloody sponge  
Had wiped the pictured features from a slate!  
So, pillaged by an army drunk with hate,  
Home stares upon the homing refugee.  
A red gout clung where either brow should be;  
The haughty nose lay crushed amid the beard,  
Thick with slow ooze, whence like a devil leered  
The battered mouth convulsed into a grin.

Nor did the darkness cover, for therein  
Some torch, unsnuffed, with blear funereal flare,  
Still painted upon black that alien stare  
To make the lad more terribly alone.

Then in the gloom there rose a broken moan,  
Quick stifled; and it seemed that something  
stirred

About the body. Doubting that he heard,  
The lad felt, with a panic catch of breath,  
Pale vagrants from the legendry of death  
Potential in the shadows there. But when  
The motion and the moaning came again,

Hope, like a shower at daybreak, cleansed the  
dark,  
And in the lad's heart something like a lark  
Sang morning. Bending low, he crooned:  
"Hugh, Hugh,  
It's Jamie — don't you know? — I'm here with  
you."

As one who in a nightmare strives to tell —  
Shouting across the gap of some dim hell —  
What things assail him; so it seemed Hugh heard,  
And flung some unintelligible word  
Athwart the muffling distance of his swoon.

Now kindled by the yet unrisen moon,  
The East went pale; and like a naked thing  
A little wind ran vexed and shivering  
Along the dusk, till Jamie shivered too  
And worried lest 'twere bitter cold where Hugh  
Hung clutching at the bleak, raw edge of life.  
So Jamie rose, and with his hunting-knife  
Split wood and built a fire. Nor did he fear  
The staring face now, for he found it dear  
With the warm presence of a friend returned.  
The fire made cozy chatter as it burned,  
And reared a tent of light in that lone place.  
Then Jamie set about to bathe the face

With water from the spring, oft crooning low,  
"It's Jamie here beside you — don't you know?"  
Yet came no answer save the labored breath  
Of one who wrestled mightily with Death  
Where watched no referee to call the foul.

The moon now cleared the world's end, and the  
owl

Gave voice unto the wizardry of light;  
While in some dim-lit chancel of the night,  
Snouts to the goddess, wolfish corybants  
Intoned their wild antiphonary chants —  
The oldest, saddest worship in the world.

And Jamie watched until the firelight swirled  
Softly about him. Sound and glimmer merged  
To make an eerie void, through which he urged  
With frantic spur some whirlwind of a steed  
That made the way as glass beneath his speed,  
Yet scarce kept pace with something dear that fled  
On, ever on — just half a dream ahead:  
Until it seemed, by some vague shape dismayed,  
He cried aloud for Hugh, and the steed neighed —  
A neigh that was a burst of light, not sound.  
And Jamie, sprawling on the dewy ground,  
Knew that his horse was sniffing at his hair,  
While, mumbling through the early morning air,



There came a roll of many hoofs — and then  
He saw the swinging troop of Henry's men  
A-canter up the valley with the sun.

Of all Hugh's comrades crowding round, not one  
But would have given heavy odds on Death;  
For, though the graybeard fought with sobbing  
breath,

No man, it seemed, might break upon the hip  
So stern a wrestler with the strangling grip  
That made the neck veins like a purple thong  
Tangled with knots. Nor might Hugh tarry long  
There where the trail forked outward far and  
dim;

Or so it seemed. And when they lifted him,  
His moan went treble like a song of pain,  
He was so tortured. Surely it were vain  
To hope he might endure the toilsome ride  
Across the barrens. Better let him bide  
There on the grassy couch beside the spring.  
And, furthermore, it seemed a foolish thing  
That eighty men should wait the issue there;  
For dying is a game of solitaire  
And all men play the losing hand alone.

But when at noon he had not ceased to moan,  
And fought still like the strong man he had been,

There grew a vague mistrust that he might win,  
And all this be a tale for wondering ears.  
So Major Henry called for volunteers,  
Two men among the eighty who would stay  
To wait on Glass and keep the wolves away  
Until he did whatever he should do.  
All quite agreed 'twas bitter bread for Hugh,  
Yet none, save Jamie, felt in duty bound  
To run the risk — until the hat went round,  
And pity wakened, at the silver's clink,  
In Jules Le Bon.

‘He would not have them think  
That mercenary motives prompted him.  
But somehow just the grief of Little Jim  
Was quite sufficient — not to mention Hugh.  
He weighed the risk. As everybody knew,  
The Rickarees were scattered to the West:  
The late campaign had stirred a hornet's nest  
To fill the land with stingers (which was so),  
And yet —’

Three days a southwest wind may blow  
False April with no drop of dew at heart.  
So Jules ran on, while, ready for the start,  
The pawing horses nickered and the men,  
Impatient in their saddles, yawned. And then,  
With brief advice, a round of bluff good-byes

And some few reassuring backward cries,  
The troop rode up the valley with the day.

Intent upon his friend, with naught to say,  
Sat Jamie; while Le Bon discussed at length  
The reasonable limits of man's strength —  
A self-conducted dialectic strife  
That made absurd all argument for life  
And granted but a fresh-dug hole for Hugh.  
'Twas half like murder. Yet it seemed Jules knew  
Unnumbered tales accordant with the case,  
Each circumstantial as to time and place  
And furnished with a death's head colophon.

Vivaciously despondent, Jules ran on.  
'Did he not share his judgment with the rest?  
You see, 'twas some contusion of the chest  
That did the trick — heart, lungs and all that,  
mixed  
In such a way they never could be fixed.  
A bear's hug — ugh!'

And often Jamie winced  
At some knife-thrust of reason that convinced  
Yet left him sick with unrelinquished hope.  
As one who in a darkened room might grope  
For some beloved face, with shuddering  
Anticipation of a clammy thing;

So in the lad's heart sorrow fumbled round  
For some old joy to lean upon, and found  
The stark, cold something Jamie knew was there.  
Yet, womanlike, he stroked the hoary hair  
Or bathed the face; while Jules found tales to  
tell —

Lugubriously garrulous.

Night fell.

At sundown, day-long winds are like to veer;  
So, summoning a mood of relished fear,  
Le Bon remembered dire alarms by night —  
The swoop of savage hordes, the desperate fight  
Of men outnumbered: and, like him of old,  
In all that made Jules shudder as he told,  
His the great part — a man by field and flood  
Fate-tossed. Upon the gloom he limned in blood  
Their situation's possibilities:  
Two men against the fury of the Rees —  
A game in which two hundred men had failed!  
He pointed out how little it availed  
To run the risk for one as good as dead;  
Yet, Jules Le Bon meant every word he said,  
And had a scalp to lose, if need should be.

That night through Jamie's dreaming swarmed  
the Ree.

Gray-souled, he wakened to a dawn of gray,

And felt that something strong had gone away,  
Nor knew what thing. Some whisper of the will  
Bade him rejoice that Hugh was living still;  
But Hugh, the real, seemed somehow elsewhere.  
Jules, snug and snoring in his blanket there,  
Was half a life the nearer. Just so, pain  
Is nearer than the peace we seek in vain,  
And by its very sting compells belief.  
Jules woke, and with a fine restraint of grief  
Saw early dissolution. 'One more night,  
And then the poor old man would lose the fight —  
Ah, such a man!'

A day and night crept by,  
And yet the stubborn fighter would not die,  
But grappled with the angel. All the while,  
With some conviction, but with more of guile,  
Jules colonized the vacancy with Rees;  
Till Jamie felt that looseness of the knees  
That comes of oozing courage. Many men  
May tower for a white-hot moment, when  
The wild blood surges at a sudden shock;  
But when, insistent as a ticking clock,  
Blind peril haunts and whispers, fewer dare.  
Dread hovered in the hushed and moony air  
The long night through; nor might a fire be lit,  
Lest some far-seeing foe take note of it.  
And day-long Jamie scanned the blank sky rim

For hoof-flung dust clouds; till there woke in him  
A childish anger — dumb for ruth and shame —  
That Hugh so dallied.

But the fourth dawn came  
And with it lulled the fight, as on a field  
Where broken armies sleep but will not yield.  
Or had one conquered? Was it Hugh or Death?  
The old man breathed with faintly fluttering  
breath,

Nor did his body shudder as before.  
Jules triumphed sadly. 'It would soon be o'er;  
So men grew quiet when they lost their grip  
And did not care. At sundown he would slip  
Into the deeper silence.'

Jamie wept,  
Unwitting how a furtive gladness crept  
Into his heart that gained a stronger beat.  
So cities, long beleaguered, take defeat —  
Unto themselves half traitors.

Jules began  
To dig a hole that might conceal a man;  
And, as his sheath knife broke the stubborn sod,  
He spoke in kindly vein of Life and God  
And Mutability and Rectitude.  
The immemorial funerary mood  
Brought tears, mute tribute to the mother-dust;  
And Jamie, seeing, felt each cutting thrust  
Less like a stab into the flesh of Hugh.

The sun crept up and down the arc of blue  
And through the air a chill of evening ran;  
But, though the grave yawned, waiting for the  
man,  
The man seemed scarce yet ready for the grave.

Now prompted by a coward or a knave  
That lurked in him, Le Bon began to hear  
Faint sounds that to the lad's less cunning ear  
Were silence; more like tremors of the ground  
They were, Jules said, than any proper sound —  
Thus one detected horsemen miles away.  
For many moments big with fate, he lay,  
Ear pressed to earth; then rose and shook his  
head  
As one perplexed. "There's something wrong,"  
he said.

And — as at daybreak whiten winter skies,  
Agape and staring with a wild surmise —  
The lad's face whitened at the other's word.  
Jules could not quite interpret what he heard;  
A hundred horse might noise their whereabouts  
In just that fashion; yet he had his doubts.  
It could be bison moving, quite as well.  
But if 'twere Rees — there'd be a tale to tell  
That two men he might name should never hear.  
He reckoned scalps that Fall were selling dear,

In keeping with the limited supply.  
Men, fit to live, were not afraid to die!

Then, in that caution suits not courage ill,  
Jules saddled up and cantered to the hill,  
A white dam set against the twilight stream;  
And as a horseman riding in a dream  
The lad beheld him; watched him clamber up  
To where the dusk, as from a brimming cup,  
Ran over; saw him pause against the gloom,  
Portentous, huge — a brooder upon doom.  
What did he look upon?

Some moments passed;  
Then suddenly it seemed as though a blast  
Of wind, keen-cutting with the whips of sleet,  
Smote horse and rider. Haunched on huddled feet,  
The steed shrank from the ridge, then, rearing,  
wheeled  
And took the rubbly incline fury-heeled.

Those days and nights, like seasons creeping slow,  
Had told on Jamie. Better blow on blow  
Of evil hap, with doom seen clear ahead,  
Than that monotonous, abrasive dread,  
Blind gnawer at the soul-thews of the blind.  
Thin-worn, the last heart-string that held him  
kind;



Strung taut, the final tie that kept him true  
Now snapped in Jamie, as he saw the two  
So goaded by some terrifying sight.  
Death riding with the vanguard of the Night,  
Life dwindling yonder with the rear of Day!  
What choice for one whom panic swept away  
From moorings in the sanity of will?

Jules came and summed the vision of the hill  
In one hoarse cry that left no word to say:  
"Rees! Saddle up! We've got to get away!"

Small wit had Jamie left to ferret guile,  
But fumblingly obeyed Le Bon; the while  
Jules knelt beside the man who could not flee:  
For big hearts lack not time for charity  
However thick the blows of fate may fall.  
Yet, in that Jules Le Bon was practical,  
He could not quite ignore a hunting knife,  
A flint, a gun, a blanket — gear of life  
Scarce suited to the customs of the dead!

And Hugh slept soundly in his ample bed,  
Star-canopied and blanketed with night,  
Unwitting how Venality and Fright  
Made hot the westward trail of Henry's men.

## II

### THE AWAKENING

No one may say what time elapsed, or when  
The slumberous shadow lifted over Hugh :  
But some globose immensity of blue  
Enfolded him at last, within whose light  
He seemed to float, as some faint swimmer might,  
A deep beneath and overhead a deep.  
So one late plunged into the lethal sleep,  
A spirit diver fighting for his breath,  
Swoops through the many-fathomed glooms of  
    death,  
Emerging in a daylight strange and new.

Rousing a languid wonder, came on Hugh  
The quiet, steep-arched splendor of the day.  
Agrope for some dim memory, he lay  
Upon his back, and watched a lucent fleece  
Fade in the blue profundity of peace  
As did the memory he sought in vain.  
Then with a stirring of mysterious pain,

Old habit of the body bade him rise;  
But when he would obey, the hollow skies  
Broke as a bubble punctured, and went out.

Again he woke, and with a drowsy doubt,  
Remote unto his horizontal gaze  
He saw the world's end kindle to a blaze  
And up the smoky steep pale heralds run.  
And when at length he knew it for the sun,  
Dawn found the darkling reaches of his mind,  
Where in the twilight he began to find  
Strewn shards and torsos of familiar things.  
As from the rubble in a place of kings  
Men school the dream to build the past anew,  
So out of dream and fragment builded Hugh,  
And came upon the reason of his plight:  
The bear's attack — the shot — and then the  
    night  
Wherein men talked as ghosts above a grave.

Some consciousness of will the memory gave:  
He would get up. The painful effort spent  
Made the wide heavens billow as a tent  
Wind-struck, the shaken prairie sag and roll.  
Some moments with an effort at control  
He swayed, half raised upon his arms, until  
The dizzy cosmos righted, and was still.

Then would he stand erect and be again  
The man he was: an overwhelming pain  
Smote him to earth, and one unruly limb  
Refused the weight and crumpled under him.

Sickened with torture he lay huddled there,  
Gazing about him with a great despair  
Proportioned to the might that felt the chain.  
Far-flung as dawn, collusive sky and plain  
Stared bleak denial back.

Why strive at all? —

That vacancy about him like a wall,  
Yielding as light, a granite scarp to climb!  
Some little waiting on the creep of time,  
Abandonment to circumstance; and then —

Here flashed a sudden thought of Henry's men  
Into his mind and drove the gloom away.  
They would be riding westward with the day!  
How strange he had forgot! That battered leg  
Or some scalp wound, had set his wits a-beg!  
Was this Hugh Glass to whimper like a squaw?  
Grimly amused, he raised his head and saw —  
The empty distance: listened long and heard —  
Naught but the twitter of a lonely bird  
That emphasized the hush.

Was something wrong?

'Twas not the Major's way to dally long,  
And surely they had camped not far behind.  
Now woke a query in his troubled mind —  
Where was his horse? Again came creeping back  
The circumstances of the bear's attack.  
He had dismounted, thinking at the spring  
To spend the night — and then the grisly thing —  
Of course the horse had bolted; plain enough!  
But why was all the soil about so rough  
As though a herd of horses had been there?  
The riddle vexed him till his vacant stare  
Fell on a heap of earth beside a pit.  
What did that mean? He wormed his way to it,  
The newly wakened wonder dulling pain.  
No paw of beast had scooped it — that was plain.  
'Twas squared; indeed, 'twas like a grave, he  
thought.

A grave — a grave — the mental echo wrought  
Sick fancies! Who had risen from the dead?  
Who, lying there, had heard above his head  
The ghostly talkers deaf unto his shout?

Now searching all the region round about,  
As though the answer were a lurking thing,  
He saw along the margin of the spring  
An ash-heap and the litter of a camp.  
Suspicion, like a little smoky lamp

That daubs the murk but cannot fathom it,  
Flung blear grotesques before his groping wit.  
Had Rees been there? And he alive? Who  
then?

And were he dead, it might be Henry's men!  
How many suns had risen while he slept?  
The smoky glow flared wildly, and he crept,  
The dragged limb throbbing, till at length he  
found

The trail of many horses westward bound;  
And in one breath the groping light became  
A gloom-devouring ecstasy of flame,  
A dazing conflagration of belief!

Plunged deeper than the seats of hate and grief,  
He gazed about for aught that might deny  
Such baseness: saw the non-committal sky,  
The prairie apathetic in a shroud,  
The bland complacency of a vagrant cloud —  
World-wide connivance! Smilingly the sun  
Approved a land wherein such deeds were done;  
And careless breezes, like a troop of youth,  
Unawed before the presence of such truth,  
Went scampering amid the tousled brush.  
Then bye and bye came on him with a rush  
His weakness and the consciousness of pain,  
While, with the chill insistence of a rain

That pelts the sodden wreck of Summer's end,  
His manifest betrayal by a friend  
Beat in upon him. Jamie had been there;  
And Jamie — Jamie — Jamie did not care!

What no man yet had witnessed, the wide sky  
Looked down and saw; a light wind idling by  
Heard what no ear of mortal yet had heard:  
For he — whose name was like a magic word  
To conjure the remote heroic mood  
Of valiant deed and splendid fortitude,  
Wherever two that shared a fire might be, —  
Gave way to grief and wept unmanfully.  
Yet not as they for whom tears fall like dew  
To green a frosted heart again, wept Hugh.  
So thewed to strive, so engined to prevail  
And make harsh fate the zany of a tale,  
His own might shook and tore him.

For a span

He lay, a gray old ruin of a man  
With all his years upon him like a snow.  
And then at length, as from the long ago,  
Remote beyond the other side of wrong,  
The old love came like some remembered song  
Whereof the strain is sweet, the burden sad.  
A retrospective vision of the lad  
Grew up in him, as in a foggy night

The witchery of semilunar light  
Mysteriously quickens all the air.  
Some memory of wind-blown golden hair,  
The boyish laugh, the merry eyes of blue,  
Wrought marvelously in the heart of Hugh,  
As under snow the dæmon of the Spring.  
And momentarily it seemed a little thing  
To suffer; nor might treachery recall  
The miracle of being loved at all,  
The privilege of loving to the end.  
And thereupon a longing for his friend  
Made life once more a struggle for a prize —  
To look again upon the merry eyes,  
To see again the wind-blown golden hair.  
Aye, one should lavish very tender care  
Upon the vessel of a hope so great,  
Lest it be shattered, and the precious freight,  
As water on the arid waste, poured out.  
Yet, though he longed to live, a subtle doubt  
Still turned on him the weapon of his pain:  
Now, as before, collusive sky and plain  
Outstared his purpose for a puny thing.

Praying to live, he crawled back to the spring,  
With something in his heart like gratitude  
That by good luck his gun might furnish food,  
His blanket, shelter, and his flint, a fire.



For, after all, what thing do men desire  
To be or have, but these condition it?  
These with a purpose and a little wit,  
And howsoever smitten, one might rise,  
Push back the curtain of the curving skies,  
And come upon the living dream at last.

Exhausted, by the spring he lay and cast  
Dull eyes about him. What did it portend?  
Naught but the footprints of a fickle friend,  
A yawning grave and ashes met his eyes!  
Scarce feeling yet the shock of a surprise,  
He searched about him for his flint and knife;  
Knew vaguely that his seeking was for life,  
And that the place was empty where he sought.  
No food, no fire, no shelter! Dully wrought  
The bleak negation in him, slowly crept  
To where, despite the pain, his love had kept  
A shrine for Jamie undefiled of doubt.  
Then suddenly conviction, like a shout,  
Aroused him. Jamie — Jamie was a thief!  
The very difficulty of belief  
Was fuel for the simmering of rage,  
That grew and grew, the more he strove to gage  
The underlying motive of the deed.  
Untempered youth might fail a friend in need;  
But here had wrought some devil of the will,

Some heartless thing, too cowardly to kill,  
That left to Nature what it dared not do !

So bellowsed, all the kindled soul of Hugh  
Became a still white hell of brooding ire,  
And through his veins regenerating fire  
Ran, driving out the lethargy of pain.  
Now once again he scanned the yellow plain,  
Conspirant with the overbending skies ;  
And lo, the one was blue as Jamie's eyes,  
The other of the color of his hair —  
Twin hues of falseness merging to a stare,  
As though such guilt, thus visibly immense,  
Regarded its effect with insolence !

Alas for those who fondly place above  
The act of loving, what they chance to love ;  
Who prize the goal more dearly than the way !  
For time shall plunder them, and change betray,  
And life shall find them vulnerable still.

A bitter-sweet narcotic to the will,  
Hugh's love increased the peril of his plight ;  
But anger broke the slumber of his might,  
Quickened the heart and warmed the blood that  
ran  
Defiance for the treachery of Man,

Defiance for the meaning of his pain,  
Defiance for the distance of the plain  
That seemed to gloat, 'You can not master me.'  
And for one burning moment he felt free  
To rise and conquer in a wind of rage.  
But as a tiger, conscious of the cage,  
A-smoulder with a purpose, broods and waits,  
So with the sullen patience that is hate's  
Hugh taught his wrath to bide expedience.

Now cognizant of every quickened sense,  
Thirst came upon him. Leaning to the spring,  
He stared with fascination on a thing  
That rose from giddy deeps to share the draught—  
A face, it was, so tortured that it laughed,  
A ghastly mask that Murder well might wear;  
And while as one they drank together there,  
It was as though the deed he meant to do  
Took shape and came to kiss the lips of Hugh,  
Lest that revenge might falter. Hunger woke;  
And from the bush with leafage gray as smoke,  
Wherein like flame the bullberries glinted red  
(Scarce sweeter than the heart of him they fed),  
Hugh feasted.

And the hours of waiting crept,  
A-gloom, a-glow; and though he waked or slept,  
The pondered purpose or a dream that wrought,

By night, the murder of his waking thought,  
Sustained him till he felt his strength returned.  
And then at length the longed-for morning burned  
And beckoned down the vast way he should crawl—  
That waste to be surmounted as a wall,  
Sky-rims and yet more sky-rims steep to climb —  
That simulacrum of enduring Time —  
The hundred empty miles 'twixt him and where  
The stark Missouri ran !

Yet why not dare ?

Despite the useless leg, he could not die  
One hairsbreadth farther from the earth and sky,  
Or more remote from kindness.

### III

#### THE CRAWL

STRAIGHT away  
Beneath the flare of dawn, the Ree land lay,  
And through it ran the short trail to the goal.  
Thereon a grim turnpikeman waited toll :  
But 'twas so doomed that southering geese should  
flee

Nine times, ere yet the vengeance of the Ree  
Should make their foe the haunter of a tale.

Midway to safety on the northern trail  
The scoriac region of a hell burned black  
Forbade the crawler. And for all his lack,  
Hugh had no heart to journey with the suns :  
No suppliant unto those faithless ones  
Should bid for pity at the Big Horn's mouth.

The greater odds for safety in the South  
Allured him ; so he felt the midday sun  
Blaze down the coulee of a little run

That dwindled upward to the watershed  
Whereon the feeders of the Moreau head —  
Scarce more than deep-carved runes of vernal  
rain.

The trailing leg was like a galling chain,  
And bound him to a doubt that would not pass.  
Defiant clumps of thirst-embittered grass  
That bit parched earth with bared and fang-like  
roots;

Dwarf thickets, jealous for their stunted fruits,  
Harsh-tempered by their disinheritance —  
These symbolized the enmity of Chance  
For him who, with his fate unreconciled,  
Equipped for travel as a weanling child,  
Essayed the journey of a mighty man.

Like agitated oil the heat-waves ran  
And made the scabrous gulch appear to shake  
As some reflected landscape in a lake  
Where laggard breezes move. A taunting reek  
Rose from the grudging seepage of the creek,  
Whereof Hugh drank and drank, and still would  
drink.

And where the mottled shadow dripped as ink  
From scanty thickets on the yellow glare,  
The crawler faltered with no heart to dare  
Again the torture of that toil, until

The master-thought of vengeance 'woke the will  
To goad him forth. And when the sun quiesced  
Amid ironic heavens in the West —  
The region of false friends — Hugh gained a rise  
Whence to the fading cincture of the skies  
A purpling panorama swept away.  
Scarce farther than a shout might carry, lay  
The place of his betrayal. He could see  
The yellow blotch of earth where treachery  
Had digged his grave. O futile wrath and toil!  
Tucked in beneath yon coverlet of soil,  
Turned back for him, how soundly had he slept!  
Fool, fool! to struggle when he might have crept  
So short a space, yet farther than the flight  
Of swiftest dreaming through the longest night,  
Into the quiet house of no false friend.

Alas for those who seek a journey's end —  
They have it ever with them like a ghost:  
Nor shall they find, who deem they seek it most,  
But crave the end of human ends — as Hugh.

Now swooping the world of dream broke through  
The figured wall of sense. It seemed he ran  
As wind above the creeping ways of man,  
And came upon the place of his desire,  
Where burned, far-luring as a beacon-fire,

The face of Jamie. But the vengeful stroke  
Bit air. The darkness lifted like a smoke —  
And it was early morning.

Gazing far,  
From where the West yet kept a pallid star  
To thinner sky where dawn was wearing through,  
Hugh shrank with dread, reluctant to renew  
The war with that serene antagonist.  
More fearsome than a smashing iron fist  
Seemed that vast negativity of might;  
Until the frustrate vision of the night  
Came moonwise on the gloom of his despair.  
And lo, the foe was naught but yielding air,  
A vacancy to fill with his intent!  
So from his spacious bed he 'rose and went  
Three-footed; and the vision goaded him.

All morning southward to the bare sky rim  
The rugged coulee zigzagged, mounting slow;  
And ever as it 'rose, the lean creek's flow  
Dwindled and dwindled steadily, until  
At last a scooped-out basin would not fill;  
And thenceforth 'twas a way of mocking dust.  
But, in that Hugh still kept the driving lust  
For vengeance, this new circumstance of fate  
Served but to brew more venom for his hate,  
And nerved him to avail the most with least.



Ere noon the crawler chanced upon a feast  
Of bread-root sunning in a favored draw.  
A sentry gopher from his stronghold saw  
Some three-legged beast, bear-like, yet not a bear,  
With quite misguided fury digging where  
No hapless brother gopher might be found.  
And while, with striped nose above his mound,  
The sentinel chirped shrilly to his clan  
Scare-tales of that anomaly, the man  
Devoured the chance-flung manna of the plains  
That some vague reminiscence of old rains  
Kept succulent, despite the burning drouth.

So with new vigor Hugh assailed the South,  
His pockets laden with the precious roots  
Against that coming traverse, where no fruits  
Of herb or vine or shrub might brave the land  
Spread rooflike 'twixt the Moreau and the Grand.

The coulee deepened; yellow walls flung high,  
Sheer to the ragged strip of blinding sky,  
Dazzled and sweltered in the glare of day.  
Capricious draughts that woke and died away  
Into the heavy drowse, were breatht as flame.  
And midway down the afternoon, Hugh came  
Upon a little patch of spongy ground.  
His thirst became a rage. He gazed around,

Seeking a spring; but all about was dry  
As strewn bones bleaching to a desert sky;  
Nor did a clawed hole, bought with needed  
strength,

Return a grateful ooze. And when at length  
Hugh sucked the mud, he spat it in disgust.  
It had the acrid tang of broken trust,  
The sweetish, tepid taste of feigning love!

Still hopeful of a spring somewhere above,  
He crawled the faster for his taunted thirst.  
More damp spots, no less grudging than the first,  
Occurred with growing frequency on the way,  
Until amid the purple wane of day  
The crawler came upon a little pool!  
Clear as a friend's heart, 'twas, and seeming cool —  
A crystal bowl whence skyey deeps looked up.  
So might a god set down his drinking cup  
Charged with a distillation of haut skies.  
As famished horses, thrusting to the eyes  
Parched muzzles, take a long-sought water-hole,  
Hugh plunged his head into the brimming bowl  
As though to share the joy with every sense.  
And lo, the tang of that wide insolence  
Of sky and plain was acrid in the draught!  
How ripplingly the lying water laughed!  
How like fine sentiment the mirrored sky

Won credence for a sink of alkali!  
So with false friends. And yet, as may accrue  
From specious love some profit of the true,  
One gift of kindness had the tainted sink.  
Stripped of his clothes, Hugh let his body drink  
At every thirsting pore. Through trunk and  
limb

The elemental blessing solaced him;  
Nor did he rise till, vague with stellar light,  
The lone gulch, buttressing an arch of night,  
Was like a temple to the Holy Ghost.  
As priests in slow procession with the Host,  
A gusty breeze intoned — now low, now loud,  
And now, as to the murmur of a crowd,  
Yielding the dim-torched wonder of the nave.  
Aloft along the dusky architrave  
The wander-tale of drifting stars evolved;  
And Hugh lay gazing till the whole resolved  
Into a haze.

It seemed that Little Jim  
Had come to share a merry fire with him,  
And there had been no trouble 'twixt the two.  
And Jamie listened eagerly while Hugh  
Essayed a tangled tale of bears and men,  
Bread-root and stars. But ever now and then  
The shifting smoke-cloud dimmed the golden hair,  
The leal blue eyes; until with sudden flare

The flame effaced them utterly — and lo,  
The gulch bank-full with morning!

Loath to go,

Hugh lay beside the pool and pondered fate.  
He saw his age-long pilgrimage of hate  
Stretch out — a fool's trail; and it made him  
cringe;

For still amid the nightly vision's fringe  
His dull wit strayed, companioned with regret.  
But when the sun, a tilted cauldron set  
Upon the gulch rim, poured a blaze of day,  
He rose and bathed again, and went his way,  
Sustaining wrath returning with the toil.

At noon the gulch walls, hewn in lighter soil,  
Fell back; and coulees dense with shrub and vine  
Climbed zigzag to the sharp horizon line,  
Whence one might choose the pilotage of crows.  
He labored upward through the noonday doze.  
Of breathless shade, where plums were turning  
red

In tangled bowers, and grapevines overhead  
Purpled with fruit to taunt the crawler's thirst.  
With little effort Hugh attained the first;  
The latter bargained sharply ere they sold  
Their luscious clusters for the hoarded gold  
Of strength that had so very much to buy.

Now, having feasted, it was sweet to lie  
Beneath a sun-proof canopy; and sleep  
Came swiftly.

Hugh awakened to some deep  
Star-snuffing well of night. Awhile he lay  
And wondered what had happened to the day  
And where he was and what were best to do.  
But when, fog-like, the drowse dispersed, he knew  
How from the rim above the plain stretched far  
To where the evening and the morning are,  
And that 'twere better he should crawl by night,  
Sleep out the glare. With groping hands for  
sight,

Skyward along the broken steep he crawled,  
And saw at length, immense and purple-walled —  
Or sensed — the dusky mystery of plain.  
Gazing aloft, he found the capsized Wain  
In mid-plunge down the polar steep. Thereto  
He set his back; and far ahead there grew,  
As some pale blossom from a darkling root,  
The star-blanced summit of a lonely butte,  
And thitherward he dragged his heavy limb.

It seemed naught moved. Time hovered over  
him,

An instant of incipient endeavor.

'Twas ever thus, and should be thus forever —

This groping for the same armful of space,  
An insubstantial essence of one place,  
Extentless on a weird frontier of sleep.  
Sheer deep upon unfathomable deep  
The flood of dusk bore down without a sound,  
As ocean on the spirits of the drowned  
Awakened headlong leagues beneath the light.

So lapsed the drowsy æon of the night —  
A strangely tensile moment in a trance.  
And then, as quickened to somnambulance,  
The heavens, imperceptibly in motion,  
Were altered as the upward deeps of ocean  
Diluted with a seepage of the moon.  
The butte-top, late a gossamer balloon  
In mid-air tethered hovering, grew down  
And rooted in a blear expanse of brown,  
That, lifting slowly with the ebb of night,  
Took on the harsh solidity of light —  
And day was on the prairie like a flame.

Scarce had he munched the hoarded roots, when  
came

A vertigo of slumber. Snatchy dreams  
Of sick pools, inaccessible cool streams,  
Lured on through giddy vacancies of heat  
In swooping flights; now hills of roasting meat

Made savory the oven of the world,  
Yet kept remote peripheries and whirled  
About a burning center that was Hugh.  
Then all were gone, save one, and it turned blue  
And was a heap of cool and luscious fruit,  
Until at length he knew it for the butte  
Now mantled with a weaving of the gloam.

It was the hour when cattle straggle home.  
Across the clearing in a hush of sleep  
They saunter, lowing; loiter belly-deep  
Amid the lush grass by the meadow stream.  
How like the sound of water in a dream  
The intermittent tinkle of yon bell.  
A windlass creaks contentment from a well,  
And cool deeps gurgle as the bucket sinks.  
Now blowing at the trough the plow-team drinks;  
The shaken harness rattles. Sleepy quails  
Call far. The warm milk hisses in the pails  
There in the dusky barn-lot. Crickets cry.  
The meadow twinkles with the glowing fly.  
One hears the horses munching at their oats.  
The green grows black. A veil of slumber floats  
Across the haunts of home-enamored men.

Some freak of memory brought back again  
The boyhood world of sight and scent and sound:  
It perished, and the prairie ringed him round,

Blank as the face of fate. In listless mood  
Hugh set his face against the solitude  
And met the night. The new moon, low and  
far,

A frail cup tilted, nor the high-swung star,  
It seemed, might glint on any stream or spring  
Or touch with silver any toothsome thing.  
The kiote voiced the universal lack.  
As from a nether fire, the plain gave back  
The swelter of the noon-glare to the gloom.  
In the hot hush Hugh heard his temples boom.  
Thirst tortured. Motion was a languid pain.  
Why seek some further nowhere on the plain?  
Here might the kiotes feast as well as there.  
So spoke some loose-lipped spirit of despair;  
And still Hugh moved, volitionless — a weight  
Submissive to that now unconscious hate,  
As darkling water to the hidden moon.

Now when the night wore on in middle swoon,  
The crawler, roused from stupor, was aware  
Of some strange alteration in the air.  
To breathe became an act of conscious will.  
The starry waste was ominously still.  
The far-off kiote's yelp came sharp and clear  
As through a tunnel in the atmosphere —  
A ponderable, resonating mass.



The limp leg dragging on the sun-dried grass  
Produced a sound unnaturally loud.

Crouched, panting, Hugh looked up but saw no  
cloud.

An oily film seemed spread upon the sky  
Now dully staring as the open eye  
Of one in fever. Gasping, choked with thirst,  
A childish rage assailed Hugh, and he cursed :  
'Twas like a broken spirit's outcry, tossed  
Upon hell's burlesque sabbath for the lost,  
And briefly space seemed crowded with the voice.

To wait and die, to move and die — what  
choice ?

Hugh chose not, yet he crawled; though more  
and more

He felt the futile strife was nearly o'er.  
And as he went, a muffled rumbling grew,  
More felt than heard; for long it puzzled Hugh.  
Somehow 'twas coextensive with his thirst,  
Yet boundless; swollen blood-veins ere they burst  
Might give such warning, so he thought. And  
still

The drone seemed heaping up a phonic hill  
That towered in a listening profound.  
Then suddenly a mountain peak of sound

Came toppling to a heaven-jolting fall!  
The prairie shuddered, and a raucous drawl  
Ran far and perished in the outer deep.

As one too roughly shaken out of sleep,  
Hugh stared bewildered. Still the face of night  
Remained the same, save where upon his right  
The moon had vanished 'neath the prairie rim.  
Then suddenly the meaning came to him.  
He turned and saw athwart the northwest sky,  
Like some black eyelid shutting on an eye,  
A coming night to which the night was day!  
Star-hungry, ranged in regular array,  
The lifting mass assailed the Dragon's lair,  
Submerged the region of the hounded Bear,  
Out-topped the tall Ox-Driver and the Pole.  
And all the while there came a low-toned roll,  
Less sound in air than tremor in the earth,  
From where, like flame upon a windy hearth,  
Deep in the further murk sheet-lightning flared.  
And still the southern arc of heaven stared,  
A half-shut eye, near blind with fever rheum;  
And still the plain lay tranquil as a tomb  
Wherein the dead reck not a menaced world.

What turmoil now? Lo, ragged columns hurled  
Pell-mell up stellar slopes! Swift blue fires leap

Above the wild assailants of the steep !  
Along the solid rear a dull boom runs !  
So light horse squadrons charge beneath the guns.  
Now once again the night is deathly still.  
What ghastly peace upon the zenith hill,  
No longer starry ? Not a sound is heard.  
So poised the hush, it seems a whispered word  
Might loose all noises in an avalanche.  
Only the black mass moves, and far glooms blanch  
With fitful flashes. The capricious flare  
Reveals the butte-top tall and lonely there  
Like some gray prophet contemplating doom.

But hark ! What spirits whisper in the gloom ?  
What sibilation of conspiracies  
Ruffles the hush — or murmuring of trees,  
Ghosts of the ancient forest — or old rain,  
In some hallucination of the plain,  
A frustrate phantom mourning ? All around,  
That e'er evolving, ne'er resolving sound  
Gropes in the stifling hollow of the night.

Then — once — twice — thrice — a blade of  
blinding light  
Ripped up the heavens, and the deluge came —  
A burst of wind and water, noise and flame  
That hurled the watcher flat upon the ground.

A moment past Hugh famished; now, half  
drowned,  
He gasped for breath amid the hurtling drench.

So might a testy god, long sought to quench  
A puny thirst, pour wassail, hurling after  
The crashing bowl with wild sardonic laughter  
To see man wrestle with his answered prayer!

Prone to the roaring flaw and ceaseless flare,  
The man drank deeply with the drinking grass;  
Until it seemed the storm would never pass  
But ravin down the painted murk for aye.  
When had what dreamer seen a glaring day  
And leagues of prairie pantingly aquiver?  
Flame, flood, wind, noise and darkness were a  
river  
Tearing a cosmic channel to no sea.

The tortured night wore on; then suddenly  
Peace fell. Remotely the retreating Wrath  
Trailed dull, reluctant thunders in its path,  
And up along a broken stair of cloud  
The Dawn came creeping whitely. Like a  
shroud  
Gray vapors clung along the sodden plain.  
Up rose the sun to wipe the final stain

Of fury from the sky and drink the mist.  
Against a flawless arch of amethyst  
The butte soared, like a soul serene and white  
Because of the katharsis of the night.

All day Hugh fought with sleep and struggled on  
Southeastward; for the heavy heat was gone  
Despite the naked sun. The blank Northwest  
Breathed coolly; and the crawler thought it best  
To move while yet each little break and hollow  
And shallow basin of the bison-wallow  
Begrudged the earth and air its dwindling store.  
But now that thirst was conquered, more and  
more

He felt the gnaw of hunger like a rage.  
And once, from dozing in a clump of sage,  
A lone jackrabbit bounded. As a flame  
Hope flared in Hugh, until the memory came  
Of him who robbed a sleeping friend and fled.  
Then hate and hunger merged; the man saw red,  
And momentarily the hare and Little Jim  
Were one blurred mark for murder unto him —  
Elusive, taunting, sweet to clutch and tear.  
The rabbit paused to scan the crippled bear  
That ground its teeth as though it chewed a  
root.

But when, in witless rage, Hugh drew his boot

And hurled it with a curse, the hare loped off,  
Its critic ears turned back, as though to scoff  
At silly brutes that threw their legs away.

Night like a shadow on enduring day  
Swooped by. The dream of crawling and the  
act

Were phases of one everlasting fact:  
Hugh woke, and he was doing what he dreamed.  
The butte, outstripped at eventide, now seemed  
Intent to follow. Ever now and then  
The crawler paused to calculate again  
What dear-bought yawn of distance dwarfed the  
hill.

Close in the rear it soared, a Titan still,  
Whose hand-in-pocket saunter kept the pace.

Distinct along the southern rim of space  
A low ridge lay, the crest of the divide.  
What rest and plenty on the other side!  
Through what lush valleys ran what crystal  
brooks!

And there in virgin meadows wayside nooks  
With leaf and purple cluster dulled the light!

All day it seemed that distant Pisgah Height  
Retreated, and the tall butte dogged the rear.

At eve a stripéd gopher chirping near  
Gave Hugh an inspiration. Now, at least,  
No thieving friend should rob him of a feast.  
His great idea stirred him as a shout.  
Off came a boot, a sock was ravelled out.  
The coarse yarn, fashioned to a running snare,  
He placed about the gopher's hole with care,  
And then withdrew to hold the yarn and wait.  
The nightbound moments, ponderous with fate,  
Crept slowly by. The battered gray face leered  
In expectation. Down the grizzled beard  
Ran slaver from anticipating jaws.  
Evolving twilight hovered to a pause.  
The light wind fell. Again and yet again  
The man devoured his fancied prey: and then  
Within the noose a timid snout was thrust.  
His hand unsteadied with the hunger lust,  
Hugh jerked the yarn. It broke.

Down swooped the night,  
A shadow of despair. Bleak height on height,  
It seemed, a sheer abyss enclosed him round.  
Clutching a strand of yarn, he heard the sound  
Of some infernal turmoil under him.  
Grimly he strove to reach the ragged rim  
That snared a star, until the skyey space  
Was darkened with a roof of Jamie's face.

And then the yarn was broken, and he fell.  
A-tumble like a stricken bat, his yell  
Woke hordes of laughers down the giddy yawn  
Of that black pit — and suddenly 'twas dawn.

Dream-dawn, dream-noon, dream-twilight! Yet,  
    possest  
By one stern dream more clamorous than the  
    rest,  
Hugh headed for a gap that notched the hills,  
Wherethrough a luring murmur of cool rills,  
A haunting smell of verdure seemed to creep.  
By fits the wild adventure of his sleep  
Became the cause of all his waking care,  
And he complained unto the empty air  
How Jamie broke the yarn.

                                    The sun and breeze  
Had drunk all shallow basins to the lees,  
But now and then some gully, choked with mud,  
Retained a turbid relict of the flood.  
Dream-dawn, dream-noon, dream-night! And  
    still obsessed  
By that one dream more clamorous than the rest,  
Hugh struggled for the crest of the divide.  
And when at length he saw the other side,  
'Twas but a rumpled waste of yellow hills!



The deep-sunk, wiser self had known the rills  
And nooks to be the facture of a whim ;  
Yet had the pleasant lie befriended him,  
And now the brutal fact had come to stare.

Succumbing to a langorous despair,  
He mourned his fate with childish uncontrol  
And nursed that deadly adder of the soul,  
Self-pity. Let the crows swoop down and feed,  
Aye, batten on a thing that died of need,  
A poor old wretch betrayed of God and Man !  
So peevishly his broken musing ran,  
Till, gluttled with the luxury of woe,  
He turned to see the butte, that he might know  
How little all his striving could avail  
Against ill-luck. And lo, a finger-nail,  
At arm-length held, could blot it out of space !  
A goading purpose and a creeping pace  
Had dwarfed the Titan in a haze of blue !  
And suddenly new power came to Hugh  
With gazing on his masterpiece of will.  
So fare the wise on Pisgah.

Down the hill,  
Unto the higher vision consecrate,  
Now sallied forth the new triumvirate —  
A Weariness, a Hunger and a Glory —

Against tyrannic Chance. As in a story  
Some higher Hugh observed the baser part.  
So sits the artist throned above his art,  
Nor recks the travail so the end be fair.  
It seemed the wrinkled hills pressed in to stare,  
The arch of heaven was an eye a-gaze.  
And as Hugh went, he fashioned many a phrase  
For use when, by some friendly ember-light,  
His tale of things endured should speed the night  
And all this gloom grow golden in the sharing.  
So wrought the old evangel of high daring,  
The duty and the beauty of endeavor,  
The privilege of going on forever,  
A victor in the moment.

Ah, but when

The night slipped by and morning came again,  
The sky and hill were only sky and hill  
And crawling but an agony of will.  
So once again the old triumvirate,  
A buzzard Hunger and a viper Hate  
Together with the baser part of Hugh,  
Went visionless.

That day the wild geese flew,  
Vague in a gray profundity of sky;  
And on into the night their muffled cry  
Haunted the moonlight like a far farewell.  
It made Hugh homesick, though he could not tell

For what he yearned; and in his fitful sleeping  
The cry became the sound of Jamie weeping,  
Immeasurably distant.

Morning broke,  
Blear, chilly, through a fog that drove as smoke  
Before the booming Northwest. Sweet and sad  
Came creeping back old visions of the lad —  
Some trick of speech, some merry little lilt,  
The brooding blue of eyes too clear for guilt,  
The wind-blown golden hair. Hate slept that  
day,

And half of Hugh was half a life away,  
A wandering spirit wistful of the past;  
And half went drifting with the autumn blast  
That mourned among the melancholy hills;  
For something of the lethargy that kills  
Came creeping close upon the ebb of hate.  
Only the raw wind, like the lash of Fate,  
Could have availed to move him any more.  
At last the buzzard beak no longer tore  
His vitals, and he ceased to think of food.  
The fighter slumbered, and a maudlin mood  
Foretold the dissolution of the man.  
He sobbed, and down his beard the big tears ran.  
And now the scene is changed; the bleak wind's  
cry

Becomes a flight of bullets snarling by

From where on yonder summit skulk the Rees.  
Against the sky, in silhouette, he sees  
The headstrong Jamie in the leaden rain.  
And now serenely beautiful and slain  
The dear lad lies within a gusty tent.

Thus vexed with doleful whims the crawler went  
Adrift before the wind, nor saw the trail;  
Till close on night he knew a rugged vale  
Had closed about him; and a hush was there,  
Though still a moaning in the upper air  
Told how the gray-winged gale blew out the day.  
Beneath a clump of brush he swooned away  
Into an icy void; and waking numb,  
It seemed the still white dawn of death had come  
On this, some cradle-valley of the soul.  
He saw a dim, enchanted hollow roll  
Beneath him, and the brush thereof was fleece;  
And, like the body of the perfect peace  
That thrall'd the whole, abode the break of day.  
It seemed no wind had ever come that way,  
Nor sound dwelt there, nor echo found the place.  
And Hugh lay lapped in wonderment a space,  
Vexed with a snarl whereof the ends were lost,  
Till, shivering, he wondered if a frost  
Had fallen with the dying of the blast.  
So, vaguely troubled, listlessly he cast

A gaze about him : lo, above his head  
The gray-green curtain of his chilly bed  
Was brodered thick with plums ! Or so it seemed,  
For he was half persuaded that he dreamed ;  
And with a steady stare he strove to keep  
That treasure for the other side of sleep.

Returning hunger bade him rise ; in vain  
He struggled with a fine-spun mesh of pain  
That trammelled him, until a yellow stream  
Of day flowed down the white vale of a dream  
And left it disenchanted in the glare.  
Then, warmed and soothed, Hugh rose and  
    feasted there,  
And thought once more of reaching the Moreau.

To southward with a painful pace and slow  
He went stiff-jointed ; and a gnawing ache  
In that hip-wound he had for Jamie's sake  
Oft made him groan — nor wrought a tender  
    mood :  
The rankling weapon of ingratitude  
Was turned again with every puckering twinge.

Far down the vale a narrow winding fringe  
Of wilted green betokened how a spring  
There sent a little rill meandering ;

And Hugh was greatly heartened, for he knew  
What fruits and herbs might flourish in the  
    slough,  
And thirst, henceforth, should torture not again.

So day on day, despite the crawler's pain,  
All in the windless, golden autumn weather,  
These two, as comrades, struggled south to-  
    gether —

The homeless graybeard and the homing rill:  
And one was sullen with the lust to kill,  
And one went crooning of the moon-wooded  
    vast;

For each the many-fathomed peace at last,  
But oh the boon of singing on the way!  
So came these in the golden fall of day  
Unto a sudden turn in the ravine,  
Wherefrom Hugh saw a flat of cluttered green  
Beneath the further bluffs of the Moreau.

With sinking heart he paused and gazed below  
Upon the goal of so much toil and pain.  
Yon green had seemed a paradise to gain  
The while he thirsted where the lonely butte  
Looked far and saw no toothsome herb or fruit  
In all that yellow barren dim with heat.  
But now the wasting body cried for meat,

And sickness was upon him. Game should pass,  
Nor deign to fear the mighty hunter Glass,  
But curiously sniffing, pause to stare.

Now while thus musing, Hugh became aware  
Of some low murmur, phasic and profound,  
Scarce risen o'er the border line of sound.  
It might have been the coursing of his blood,  
Or thunder heard remotely, or a flood  
Flung down a wooded valley far away.  
Yet that had been no weather-breeding day;  
'Twould frost that night; amid the thirsty land  
All streams ran thin; and when he pressed a  
hand  
On either ear, the world seemed very still.

The deep-worn channel of the little rill  
Here fell away to eastward, rising, rough  
With old rain-furrows, to a lofty bluff  
That faced the river with a yellow wall.  
Thereto, perplexed, Hugh set about to crawl,  
Nor reached the summit till the sun was low.  
Far-spread, shade-dimpled in the level glow,  
The still land told not whence the murmur grew;  
But where the green strip melted into blue  
Far down the winding valley of the stream,  
Hugh saw what seemed the tempest of a dream

At mimic havoc in the timber-glooms.  
As from the sweeping of gigantic brooms,  
A dust cloud deepened down the dwindling river;  
Upon the distant tree-tops ran a shiver  
And huddled thickets writhed as in a gale.

On creeps the windless tempest up the vale,  
The while the murmur deepens to a roar,  
As with the wider yawning of a door.  
And now the agitated green gloom gapes  
To belch a flood of countless dusky shapes  
That mill and wrangle in a turbid flow —  
Migrating myriads of the buffalo  
Bound for the winter pastures of the Platte!

Exhausted, faint with need of meat, Hugh sat  
And watched the mounting of the living flood.  
Down came the night, and like a blot of blood  
The lopped moon weltered in the dust-bleared  
East.

Sleep came and gave a Barmecidal feast.  
About a merry flame were simmering  
Sweet haunches of the calving of the Spring,  
And tender tongues that never tasted snow,  
And marrow bones that yielded to a blow  
Such treasure! Hugh awoke with gnashing teeth,  
And heard the mooing drone of cows beneath,



The roll of hoofs, the challenge of the bull.  
So sounds a freshet when the banks are full  
And bursting brush-jams bellow to the croon  
Of water through green leaves. The ragged  
moon

Now drenched the valley in an eerie rain :  
Below, the semblance of a hurricane;  
Above, the perfect calm of brooding frost,  
Through which the wolves in doleful tenson  
tossed

From hill to hill the ancient hunger-song.  
In broken sleep Hugh rolled the chill night long,  
Half conscious of the flowing flesh below.  
And now he trailed a bison in the snow  
That deepened till he could not lift his feet.  
Again, he battled for a chunk of meat  
With some gray beast that fought with icy  
fang.

And when he woke, the wolves no longer sang;  
White dawn athwart a white world smote the  
hill,  
And thunder rolled along the valley still.

Morn, wiping up the frost as with a sponge,  
Day on the steep and down the nightward plunge,  
And Twilight saw the myriads moving on.  
Dust to the westward where the van had gone,

And dust and muffled thunder in the east !  
Hugh starved while gazing on a Titan feast.  
The tons of beef, that eddied there and swirled,  
Had stilled the crying hungers of the world,  
Yet not one little morsel was for him.

The red sun, pausing on the dusty rim,  
Induced a panic aspect of his plight :  
The herd would pass and vanish in the night  
And be another dream to cling and flout.  
Now scanning all the summit round about,  
Amid the rubble of the ancient drift  
He saw a boulder. 'Twas too big to lift,  
Yet he might roll it. Painfully and slow  
He worked it to the edge, then let it go  
And breathlessly expectant watched it fall.  
It hurtled down the leaning yellow wall,  
And bounding from a brushy ledge's brow,  
It barely grazed the buttocks of a cow  
And made a moment's eddy where it struck.

In peevish wrath Hugh cursed his evil luck,  
And seizing rubble, gave his fury vent  
By pelting bison till his strength was spent :  
So might a child assail the crowding sea !  
Then, sick at heart and musing bitterly,  
He shambled down the steep way to the creek,  
And having stayed the tearing buzzard beak

With breadroot and the waters of the rill,  
Slept till the white of morning o'er the hill  
Was like a whisper groping in a hush.  
The stream's low trill seemed loud. The tumbled  
brush

And rumpled tree-tops in the flat below,  
Upon a fog that clung like spectral snow,  
Lay motionless; nor any sound was there.  
No frost had fallen, but the crystal air  
Smacked of the autumn, and a heavy dew  
Lay hoar upon the grass. There came on Hugh  
A picture, vivid in the moment's thrill,  
Of martialled corn-shocks marching up a hill  
And spiked fields dotted with the pumpkin's  
gold.

It vanished; and, a-shiver with the cold,  
He brooded on the mockeries of Chance,  
The shrewd malignity of Circumstance  
That either gave too little or too much.

Yet, with the fragment of a hope for crutch,  
His spirit rallied, and he rose to go,  
Though each stiff joint resisted as a foe  
And that old hip-wound battled with his will.  
So down along the channel of the rill  
Unto the vale below he fought his way.  
The frore fog, rifting in the risen day,

Revealed the havoc of the living flood —  
The river shallows beaten into mud,  
The slender saplings shattered in the crush,  
All lower leafage stripped, the tousled brush  
Despoiled of fruitage, winter-thin, aghast.  
And where the avalanche of hoofs had passed  
It seemed nor herb nor grass had ever been.  
And this the hard-won paradise, wherein  
A food-devouring plethora of food  
Had come to make a starving solitude!

Yet hope and courage mounted with the sun.  
Surely, Hugh thought, some ill-begotten one  
Of all that striving mass had lost the strife  
And perished in the headlong stream of life —  
A feast to fill the bellies of the strong,  
That still the weak might perish. All day long  
He struggled down the stricken vale, nor saw  
What thing he sought. But when the twilight  
awe

Was creeping in, beyond a bend arose  
A din as though the kiotes and the crows  
Fought there with shrill and raucous battle cries.

Small need had Hugh to ponder and surmise  
What guerdon beak and fang contended for.  
Within himself the oldest cause of war

Brought forth upon the instant fang and beak.  
He too would fight! Nor had he far to seek  
Amid the driftwood strewn about the sand  
For weapons suited to a brawny hand  
With such a purpose. Armed with club and  
stone  
He forged ahead into the battle zone,  
And from a screening thicket spied his foes.

He saw a bison carcass black with crows,  
And over it a welter of black wings,  
And round about, a press of tawny rings  
That, like a muddy current churned to foam  
Upon a snag, flashed whitely in the gloam  
With naked teeth; while close about the prize  
Red beaks and muzzles bloody to the eyes  
Betrayed how worth a struggle was the feast.

Then came on Hugh the fury of the beast —  
To eat or to be eaten! Better so  
To die contending with a living foe,  
Than fight the yielding distance and the lack.  
Masked by the brush he opened the attack,  
And ever where a stone or club fell true,  
About the stricken one an uproar grew  
And brute tore brute, forgetful of the prey,  
Until the whole pack tumbled in the fray

With bleeding flanks and lacerated throats.  
Then, as the leader of a host who notes  
The cannon-wrought confusion of the foe,  
Hugh seized the moment for a daring blow.

The wolf's a coward, who, in goodly packs,  
May counterfeit the courage that he lacks  
And with a craven's fury crush the bold.  
But when the disunited mass that rolled  
In suicidal strife, became aware  
How some great beast that shambled like a bear  
Bore down with roaring challenge, fell a hush  
Upon the pack, some slinking to the brush  
With tails a-droop; while some that whined in pain  
Writhed off on reddened trails. With bristled  
mane

Before the flying stones a bolder few  
Snarled menace at the foe as they withdrew  
To fill the outer dusk with clamorings.  
Aloft upon a moaning wind of wings  
The crows with harsh, vituperative cries  
Now saw a gray wolf of prodigious size  
Devouring with the frenzy of the starved.  
Thus fell to Hugh a bison killed and carved;  
And so Fate's whims mysteriously trend —  
Woe in the silken meshes of the friend,  
Weal in the might and menace of the foe.

But with the fading of the afterglow  
The routed wolves found courage to return :  
Amid the brush Hugh saw their eye-balls burn ;  
And well he knew how futile stick and stone  
Should prove by night to keep them from their  
own.

Better is less with safety, than enough  
With ruin. He retreated to a bluff,  
And scarce had reached it when the pack swooped  
in  
Upon the carcass.

All night long, the din  
Of wrangling wolves assailed the starry air,  
While high above them in a brushy lair  
Hugh dreamed of gnawing at the bloody feast.

Along about the blanching of the east,  
When sleep is weirdest and a moment's flight,  
Remembered coextensive with the night,  
May teem with hapful years ; as light in smoke  
Upon the jumble of Hugh's dreaming broke  
A buzz of human voices. Once again  
He rode the westward trail with Henry's men —  
Hoof-smitten leagues consuming in a dust.  
And now the nightmare of that broken trust  
Was on him, and he lay beside the spring,  
A corpse, yet heard the muffled parleying

Above him of the looters of the dead :  
But when he might have riddled what they said,  
The babble flattened to a blur of gray —  
And lo, upon a bleak frontier of day,  
The spent moon staring down! A little space  
Hugh scrutinized the featureless white face,  
As though 'twould speak. But when again the  
    sound

Grew up, and seemed to come from under ground,  
He cast the drowse, and peering down the slope,  
Beheld what set at grapple fear and hope —  
Three Indian horsemen riding at a jog!  
Their ponies, wading belly-deep in fog,  
That clung along the valley, seemed to swim,  
And through a thinner vapor moving dim,  
The men were ghost-like.

    Could they be the Sioux?

Almost the wish became belief in Hugh.  
Or were they Rees? As readily the doubt  
Withheld him from the hazard of a shout.  
And while he followed them with baffled gaze,  
Grown large and vague, dissolving in the haze,  
They vanished westward.

    Knowing well the wont  
Of Indians moving on the bison-hunt,  
Forthwith Hugh guessed the early riders were  
The outflung feelers of a tribe a-stir



Like some huge cat gone mousing. So he lay  
Concealed, impatient with the sleepy day  
That dawdled in the dawning. Would it bring  
Good luck or ill? His eager questioning,  
As crawling fog, took on a golden hue  
From sunrise. He was waiting for the Sioux,  
Their parfleche panniers fat with sun-dried  
maize

And wasna! From the mint of evil days  
He would coin tales and be no begging guest  
About the tribal feast-fires burning west,  
But kinsman of the blood of daring men.  
And when the crawler stood erect again —  
O Friend-Betrayer at the Big Horn's mouth,  
Beware of someone riding from the South  
To do the deed that he had lived to do!

Now when the sun stood hour-high in the blue,  
From where a cloud of startled blackbirds rose  
Down stream, a panic tumult broke the doze  
Of windless morning. What unwelcome news  
Embroidered the parliament of feathered shrews?  
A boiling cloud against the sun they lower,  
Flackering strepent; now a sooty shower,  
Big-flaked, squall-driven westward, down they  
flutter  
To set a clump of cottonwoods a-sputter

With cold black fire! And once again, some  
    shock  
Of sight or sound flings panic in the flock —  
Gray boughs exploding in a ruck of birds!

What augury in ornisopic words  
Did yon swart sibyls on the morning scrawl?

Now broke abruptly through the clacking  
    brawl  
A camp-dog's barking and a pony's neigh;  
Whereat a running nicker fled away,  
Attenuating to a rearward hush;  
And lo! in hailing distance 'round the brush  
That fringed a jutting bluff's base like a beard  
Upon a stubborn chin out-thrust, appeared  
A band of mounted warriors! In their van  
Aloof and lonely rode a gnarled old man  
Upon a piebald stallion. Stooped was he  
Beneath his heavy years, yet haughtily  
He wore them like the purple of a king.  
Keen for a goal, as from the driving string  
A barbed and feathered arrow truly sped,  
His face was like a flinty arrow-head,  
And brooded westward in a steady stare.  
There was a sift of winter in his hair,  
The bleakness of brown winter in his look.

Hugh saw, and huddled closer in his nook.  
Fled the bright dreams of safety, feast and rest  
Before that keen, cold brooder on the West,  
As gaudy leaves before the blizzard flee.  
'Twas Elk Tongue, fighting chieftain of the Ree,  
With all his people at his pony's tail —  
Full two-score lodges emptied on the trail  
Of hunger!

On they came in ravelled rank,  
And many a haggard eye and hollow flank  
Made plain how close and pitilessly pressed  
The enemy that drove them to the West —  
Such foeman as no warrior ever slew.  
A tale of cornfields plundered by the Sioux  
Their sagging panniers told. Yet rich enough  
They seemed to him who watched them from the  
bluff;  
Yea, pampered nigh the limit of desire!  
No friend had filched from them the boon of  
fire  
And hurled them shivering back upon the beast.  
Erect they went, full-armed to strive, at least;  
And nightly in a cozy ember-glow  
Hope fed them with a dream of buffalo  
Soon to be overtaken. After that,  
Home with their Pawnee cousins on the Platte,  
Much meat and merry-making till the Spring.

On dragged the rabble like a fraying string  
Too tautly drawn. The rich-in-ponies rode,  
For much is light and little is a load  
Among all heathen with no Christ to save!  
Gray seekers for the yet begrudging grave,  
Bent with the hoeing of forgotten maize,  
Wood-hewers, water-bearers all their days,  
Toiled 'neath the life-long hoarding of their packs.  
And nursing squaws, their babies at their backs  
Whining because the milk they got was thinned  
In dugs of famine, strove as with a wind.  
Invincibly equipped with their first bows  
The striplings strutted, knowing, as youth knows,  
How fair life is beyond the beckoning blue.  
Cold-eyed the grandsires plodded, for they knew,  
As frosted heads may know, how all trails merge  
In what lone land. Raw maidens on the verge  
Of some half-guessed-at mystery of life,  
In wistful emulation of the wife  
Stooped to the fancied burden of the race;  
Nor read upon the withered granddam's face  
The scrawled tale of that burden and its woe.  
Slant to the sagging poles of the travaux,  
Numb to the squaw's harsh railing and the goad,  
The lean cayuses toiled. And children rode  
A-top the household plunder, wonder-eyed  
To see a world flow by on either side,

From blue air sprung to vanish in blue air,  
A river of enchantments.

Here and there  
The camp-curs loped upon a vexing quest  
Where countless hoofs had left a palimpsest,  
A taunting snarl of broken scents. And now  
They sniff the clean bones of the bison cow,  
Howl to the skies; and now with manes a-rough  
They nose the man-smell leading to the bluff;  
Pause puzzled at the base and sweep the height  
With questioning yelps. Aloft, crouched low in  
fright,

Already Hugh can hear the braves' guffaws  
At their scorned foeman yielded to the squaws'  
Inverted mercy and a slow-won grave.  
Since Earth's first mother scolded from a cave  
And that dear riddle of her love began,  
No man has wrought a weapon against man  
To match the deadly venom brewed above  
The lean, blue, blinding heart-fires of her love.  
Well might the hunted hunter shrink aghast!  
But thrice three seasons yet should swell the past,  
So was it writ, ere Fate's keen harriers  
Should run Hugh Glass to earth.

The hungry curs  
Took up again the tangled scent of food.  
Still flowed the rabble through the solitude —

A thinning stream now of the halt, the weak  
And all who had not very far to seek  
For that weird pass whereto the fleet are slow,  
And out of it keen winds and numbing blow,  
Shrill with the fleeing voices of the dead.  
Slowly the scattered stragglers, making head  
Against their weariness as up a steep,  
Fled westward; and the morning lay asleep  
Upon the valley fallen wondrous still.

Hugh kept his nook, nor ventured forth, until  
The high day toppled to the blue descent,  
When thirst became a master, and he went  
With painful scrambling down the broken scarp,  
Lured by the stream, that like a smitten harp  
Rippled a muted music to the sun.

Scarce had he crossed the open flat, and won  
The half-way fringe of willows, when he saw,  
Slow plodding up the trail, a tottering squaw  
Whose years made big the little pack she bore.  
Crouched in the brush Hugh watched her. More  
and more  
The little burden tempted him. Why not?  
A thin cry throttled in that lonely spot  
Could bring no succor. None should ever know,  
Save him, the feasted kiote and the crow,

Why one poor crone found not the midnight fire.  
Nor would the vanguard, quick with young desire,  
Devouring distance westward like a flame,  
Regret this ash dropped rearward.

On she came,  
Slow-footed, staring blankly on the sand —  
So close now that it needed but a hand  
Out-thrust to overthrow her; aye, to win  
That priceless spoil, a little tent of skin,  
A flint and steel, a kettle and a knife!  
What did the dying with the means of life,  
That thus the fit-to-live should suffer lack?

Poised for the lunge, what whimsy held him  
back?

Why did he gaze upon the passing prize,  
Nor seize it? Did some gust of ghostly cries  
Awaken round her — whisperings of Eld,  
Wraith-voices of the babies she had held,  
Guarding the milkless paps, the withered womb?  
Far down a moment's cleavage in the gloom  
Of backward years Hugh saw her now — nor saw  
The little burden and the feeble squaw,  
But someone sitting haloed like a saint  
Beside a hearth long cold. The dream grew  
faint;

And when he looked again, the crone was gone  
Beyond a clump of willow.

Crawling on,  
He reached the river. Leaning to a pool  
Calm in its cup of sand, he saw — a fool!  
A wild, wry mask of mirth, a-grin, yet grim,  
Rose there to claim identity with him  
And ridicule his folly. Pity? Faugh!  
Who pitied this, that it should spare a squaw  
Spent in the spawning of a scorpion brood?

He drank and hastened down the solitude,  
Fleeing that thing which fleered him, and was  
Hugh.

And as he went his self-accusing grew  
And with it, anger; till it came to seem  
That somehow some sly Jamie of a dream  
Had plundered him again; and he was strong  
With lust of vengeance and the sting of wrong,  
So that he travelled faster than for days.

Now when the eve in many-shaded grays  
Wove the day's shroud, and through the lower  
lands

Lean fog-arms groped with chilling spirit hands,  
Hugh paused perplexed. Elusive, haunting, dim,  
As though some memory that stirred in him,



Invasive of the real, outgrew the dream,  
There came upon the breeze that stole up stream  
A whiff of woodsmoke.

'Twixt a beat and beat  
Of Hugh's deluded heart, it seemed the sweet  
Allure of home. — A brief way, and one came  
Upon the clearing where the sumach flame  
Ran round the forest-fringe; and just beyond  
One saw the slough grass nodding in the pond  
Unto the sleepy troll the bullfrogs sung.  
And then one saw the place where one was  
young —

The log-house sitting on a stumpy rise.  
Hearth-lit within, its windows were as eyes  
That love much and are faded with old tears.  
It seemed regretful of a life's arrears,  
Yet patient, with a self-denying poise,  
Like some old mother for her bearded boys  
Waiting sweet-hearted and a little sad. —  
So briefly dreamed a recrudescient lad  
Beneath gray hairs, and fled.

Through chill and damp  
Still groped the odor, hinting at a camp,  
A two-tongued herald wooing hope and fear.  
Was hospitality or danger near?  
A Sioux war-party hot upon the trail,  
Or laggard Rees? Hugh crawled across the vale,

Toiled up along a zigzag gully's bed  
And reached a bluff's top. In a smudge of red  
The West burned low. Hill summits, yet alight,  
And pools of gloom anticipating night  
Mottled the landscape to the dull blue rim.  
What freak of fancy had imposed on him?  
Could one smell home-smoke fifty years away?  
He saw no fire; no pluming spire of gray  
Rose in the dimming air to woo or warn.

He lay upon the bare height, fagged, forlorn,  
And old times came upon him with the creep  
Of subtle drugs that put the will to sleep  
And wreak doom to the soothing of a dream.  
So listlessly he scanned the sombrous stream,  
Scarce seeing what he scanned. The dark in-  
creased;  
A chill wind wakened from the frowning east  
And soughed along the vale.

Then with a start  
He saw what broke the torpor of his heart  
And set the wild blood free. From where he lay  
An easy point-blank rifle-shot away,  
Appeared a mystic germinating spark  
That in some secret garden of the dark  
Upreared a frail, blue, nodding stem, whereon  
A ruddy lily flourished — and was gone!

What miracle was this? Again it grew,  
The scarlet blossom on the stem of blue,  
And withered back again into the night.

With pounding heart Hugh crawled along the  
height

And reached a point of vantage whence, below,  
He saw capricious witch-lights dim and glow  
Like far-spent embers quickened in a breeze.  
'Twas surely not a camp of laggard Rees,  
Nor yet of Siouan warriors hot in chase.  
Dusk and a quiet bivouacked in that place.  
A doddering vagrant with numb hands, the Wind  
Fumbled the dying ashes there, and whined.  
It was the day-old camp-ground of the foe!

Glad-hearted now, Hugh gained the vale below,  
Keen to possess once more the ancient gift.  
Nearing the glow, he saw vague shadows lift  
Out of the painted gloom of smouldering logs —  
Distorted bulks that bristled, and were dogs  
Snarling at this invasion of their lair.  
Hugh charged upon them, growling like a bear,  
And sent them whining.

Now again to view  
The burgeoning of scarlet, gold and blue,  
The immemorial miracle of fire!  
From heaped-up twigs a tenuous smoky spire

Arose, and made an altar of the place.  
The spark-glow, faint upon the grizzled face,  
Transformed the kneeling outcast to a priest;  
And, native of the light-begetting East,  
The Wind became a chanting acolyte.  
These two, entempled in the vaulted night,  
Breathed conjuries of interwoven breath.  
Then, hark! — the snapping of the chains of  
Death!

From dead wood, lo! — the epiphanic god!

Once more the freightage of the fennel rod  
Dissolved the chilling pall of Jovian scorn.  
The wonder of the resurrection morn,  
The face apocalyptic and the sword,  
The glory of the many-symboled Lord,  
Hugh, lifting up his eyes about him, saw!  
And something in him like a vernal thaw,  
Voiced with the sound of many waters, ran  
And quickened to the laughter of a man.

Light-heartedly he fed the singing flame  
And took its blessing: till a soft sleep came  
With dreaming that was like a pleasant tale.

The far white dawn was peering up the vale  
When he awoke to indolent content.  
A few shorn stars in pale astonishment

Were huddled westward; and the fire was low.  
Three scrawny camp-curs, mustered in a row  
Beyond the heap of embers, heads askew,  
Ears pricked to question what the man might do,  
Sat wistfully regardant. He arose;  
And they, grown canny in a school of blows,  
Skulked to a safer distance, there to raise  
A dolorous chanting of the evil days,  
Their gray breath like the body of a prayer.  
Hugh nursed the sullen embers to a flare,  
Then set about to view an empty camp  
As once before; but now no smoky lamp  
Of blear suspicion searched a gloom of fraud  
Wherein a smirking Friendship, like a bawd,  
Embraced a coward Safety; now no grief,  
'Twixt hideous revelation and belief,  
Made womanish the man; but glad to strive,  
With hope to nerve him and a will to drive,  
He knew that he could finish in the race.  
The staring impassivity of space  
No longer mocked; the dreadful skyward climb,  
Where distance seemed identical with time,  
Was past now; and that mystic something, luck,  
Without which worth may flounder in the ruck,  
Had turned to him again.

So flamelike soared  
Rekindled hope in him as he explored

Among the ash-heaps; and the lean dogs ran  
And barked about him, for the love of man  
Wistful, yet fearing. Surely he could find  
Some trifle in the hurry left behind —  
Or haply hidden in the trampled sand —  
That to the cunning of a needy hand  
Should prove the master-key of circumstance:  
For 'tis the little gifts of grudging Chance,  
Well husbanded, make victors.

Long he sought  
Without avail; and, crawling back, he thought  
Of how the dogs were growing less afraid,  
And how one might be skinned without a blade.  
A flake of flint might do it: he would try.  
And then he saw — or did the servile eye  
Trick out a mental image like the real?  
He saw a glimmering of whetted steel  
Beside a heap now washed with morning light!

Scarce more of marvel and the sense of might  
Moved Arthur when he reached a hand to take  
The fay-wrought brand emerging from the lake,  
Whereby a kingdom should be lopped of strife,  
Than Hugh now, pouncing on a trader's knife  
Worn hollow in the use of bounteous days!

And now behold a rich man by the blaze  
Of his own hearth — a lord of steel and fire!

Not having, but the measure of desire  
Determines wealth. Who gaining more, seek  
    most,  
Are ever the pursuers of a ghost  
And lend their fleetness to the fugitive.  
For Hugh, long goaded by the wish to live,  
What gage of mastery in fire and tool! —  
That twain wherewith Time put the brute to  
    school,  
Evolving Man, the maker and the seer.

'Twixt urging hunger and restraining fear  
The gaunt dogs hovered round the man; while  
    he  
Cajoled them in the language of the Ree  
And simulated feeding them with sand,  
Until the boldest dared to sniff his hand,  
Bare-fanged and with conciliative whine.  
Through bristled mane the quick blade bit the  
    spine  
Below the skull; and as a flame-struck thing  
The body humped and shuddered, withering;  
The lank limbs huddled, wilted.

    Now to skin  
The carcass, dig a hole, arrange therein  
And fix the pelt with stakes, the flesh-side up.  
This done, he shaped the bladder to a cup

On willow withes, and filled the rawhide pot  
With water from the river — made it hot  
With roasted stones, and set the meat a-boil.  
Those days of famine and prodigious toil  
Had wrought bulimic cravings in the man,  
And scarce the cooking of the flesh outran  
The eating of it. As a fed flame towers  
According to the fuel it devours,  
His hunger with indulgence grew, nor ceased  
Until the kettle, empty of the feast,  
Went dim, the sky and valley, merging, swirled  
In subtle smoke that smothered out the world.  
Hugh slept.

And then — as divers, mounting, sunder  
A murmuring murk to blink in sudden wonder  
Upon a dazzling upper deep of blue —  
He rose again to consciousness, and knew  
The low sun beating slantly on his face.

Now indolently gazing round the place,  
He noted how the curs had revelled there —  
The bones and entrails gone; some scattered  
hair  
Alone remaining of the pot of hide.  
How strange he had not heard them at his side!  
And granting but one afternoon had passed,  
What could have made the fire burn out so fast?



Had daylight waned, night fallen, morning crept,  
Noon blazed, a new day dwindled while he  
slept?

And was the friendlike fire a Jamie too?  
Across the twilit consciousness of Hugh  
The old obsession like a wounded bird  
Fluttered.

He got upon his knees and stirred  
The feathery ash; but not a spark was there.  
Already with the failing sun the air  
Went keen, betokening a frosty night.  
Hugh winced with something like the clutch of  
fright.

How could he bear the torture, how sustain  
The sting of that antiquity of pain  
Rolled back upon him — face again the foe,  
That yielding victor, fleet in being slow,  
That huge, impersonal malevolence?

So readily the tentacles of sense  
Root in the larger standard of desire,  
That Hugh fell farther in the loss of fire  
Than in the finding of it he arose.  
And suddenly the place grew strange, as grows  
A friend's house, when the friend is on his bier,  
And all that was familiar there and dear  
Puts on a blank, inhospitable look.

Hugh set his face against the east, and took  
That dreariest of ways, the trail of flight.  
He would outcrawl the shadow of the night  
And have the day to blanket him in sleep.  
But as he went to meet the gloom a-creep,  
Bemused with life's irrational rebuffs,  
A yelping of the dogs among the bluffs  
Rose, hunger-whetted, stabbing; rent the pall  
Of evening silence; blunted to a drawl  
Amid the arid waterways, and died.  
And as the echo to the sound replied,  
So in the troubled mind of Hugh was wrought  
A reminiscent cry of thought to thought  
That, groping, found an unlocked door to life:  
The dogs — keen flint to skin one — then the knife  
Discovered. Why, that made a flint and steel!  
No further with the subtle foe at heel  
He fled; for all about him in the rock,  
To waken when the needy hand might knock,  
A savior slept! He found a flake of flint,  
Scraped from his shirt a little wad of lint,  
Spilled on it from the smitten stone a shower  
Of ruddy seed; and saw the mystic flower  
That genders its own summer, bloom anew!

And so capricious luck came back to Hugh;  
And he was happier than he had been

Since Jamie to that unforgiven sin  
Had yielded, ages back upon the Grand.  
Now he would turn the cunning of his hand  
To carving crutches, that he might arise,  
Be manlike, lift more rapidly the skies  
That crouched between his purpose and the mark.  
The warm glow housed him from the frosty dark,  
And there he wrought in very joyous mood  
And sang by fits — whereat the solitude  
Set laggard singers snatching at the tune.  
The gaunter for their hunt, the dogs came soon  
To haunt the shaken fringes of the glow,  
And, pitching voices to the timeless woe,  
Outtailed the lilting. So the Chorus sings  
Of terror, pity and the tears of things  
When most the doomed protagonist is gay.  
The stars swarmed over, and the front of day  
Whitened above a white world, and the sun  
Rose on a sleeper with a task well done,  
Nor roused him till its burning topped the blue.

When Hugh awoke, there woke a younger Hugh,  
Now half a stranger; and 'twas good to feel  
With ebbing sleep the old green vigor steal,  
Thrilling, along his muscles and his veins,  
As in a lull of winter-cleansing rains  
The gray bough quickens to the sap a-creep.

It chanced the dogs lay near him, sound asleep,  
Curled nose to buttock in the noonday glow.  
He killed the larger with a well-aimed blow,  
Skinned, dressed and set it roasting on a spit;  
And when 'twas cooked, ate sparingly of it,  
For need might yet make little seem a feast.

Fording the river shallows, south by east  
He hobbled now along a withered rill  
That issued where old floods had gashed the hill —  
A cyclopean portal yawning sheer.  
No storm of countless hoofs had entered here:  
It seemed a place where nothing ever comes  
But change of season. He could hear the plums  
Plash in the frosted thicket, over-lush;  
While, like a spirit lispig in the hush,  
The crisp leaves whispered round him as they fell.  
And ever now and then the autumn spell  
Was broken by an ululating cry  
From where far back with muzzle to the sky  
The lone dog followed, mourning. Darkness  
came;

And huddled up beside a cozy flame,  
Hugh's sleep was but a momentary flight  
Across a little shadow into light.

So day on day he toiled: and when, afloat  
Above the sunset like a stygian boat,

The new moon bore the spectre of the old,  
He saw — a dwindling strip of blue outrolled —  
The valley of the tortuous Cheyenne.  
And ere the half moon sailed the night again,  
Those far lone leagues had sloughed their garb of  
    blue,  
And dwindled, dwindled, dwindled after Hugh,  
Until he saw that Titan of the plains,  
The sinewy Missouri. Dearth of rains  
Had made the Giant gaunt as he who saw.  
This loud Chain-Smasher of a late March thaw  
Seemed never to have bellowed at his banks;  
And yet, with staring ribs and hollow flanks,  
The urge of an indomitable will  
Proclaimed him of the breed of giants still;  
And where the current ran a boiling track,  
'Twas like the muscles of a mighty back  
Grown Atlantean in the wrestler's craft.

Hugh set to work and built a little raft  
Of driftwood bound with grapevines. So it fell  
That one with an amazing tale to tell  
Came drifting to the gates of Kiowa.

## IV

### THE RETURN OF THE GHOST

Not long Hugh let the lust of vengeance gnaw  
Upon him idling; though the tale he told  
And what report proclaimed him, were as gold  
To buy a winter's comfort at the Post.

"I can not rest; for I am but the ghost  
Of someone murdered by a friend," he said,  
"So long as yonder traitor thinks me dead,  
Aye, buried in the bellies of the crows  
And kiotes!"

Whereupon said one of those  
Who heard him, noting how the old man shook  
As with a chill: "God fend that one should look  
With such a blizzard of a face for me!"  
For he went grayer like a poplar tree  
That shivers, ruffling to the first faint breath  
Of storm, while yet the world is still as death  
Save where, far off, the kenneled thunders bay.

So brooding, he grew stronger day by day,  
Until at last he laid the crutches by.  
And then one evening came a rousing cry

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From where the year's last keelboat hove in view  
Around the bend, its swarthy, sweating crew  
Slant to the shouldered line.

Men sang that night  
In Kiowa, and by the ruddy light  
Of leaping fires amid the wooden walls  
The cups went round; and there were merry  
brawls  
Of bearded lads no older for the beard;  
And laughing stories vied with tales of weird  
By stream and prairie trail and mountain pass,  
Until the tipsy Bourgeois bawled for Glass  
To 'shame these with a man's tale fit to hear.'

The graybeard, sitting where the light was blear,  
With little heart for revelry, began  
His story, told as of another man  
Who, loving late, loved much and was betrayed.  
He spoke unwitting how his passion played  
Upon them, how their eyes grew soft or hard  
With what he told; yet something of the bard  
He seemed, and his the purpose that is art's,  
Whereby men make a vintage of their hearts  
And with the wine of beauty deaden pain.  
Low-toned, insistent as October rain,  
His voice beat on; and now and then would flit  
Across the melancholy gray of it

A glimmer of cold fire that, like the flare  
Of soundless lightning, showed a world made bare,  
Green Summer slain and all its leafage stripped.

And bronze jaws tightened, brawny hands were  
gripped,

As though each hearer had a fickle friend.  
But when the old man might have made an end,  
Rounding the story to a peaceful close  
At Kiowa, songlike his voice arose,  
The grinning gray mask lifted and the eyes  
Burned as a bard's who sees and prophesies,  
Conning the future as a time long gone.  
Swaying to rhythm the dizzy tale plunged on  
Even to the cutting of the traitor's throat,  
And ceased — as though a bloody strangling smote  
The voice of that gray chanter, drunk with  
doom.

And there was shuddering in the blue-smeared  
gloom

Of fallen fires. It seemed the deed was done  
Before their eyes who heard.

The morrow's sun,  
Low over leagues of frost-enchanted plain,  
Saw Glass upon his pilgrimage agair,  
Northbound as hunter for the keelboat's crew.  
And many times the wide autumnal blue



Burned out and darkened to a deep of stars;  
 And still they toiled among the snags and bars —  
 Those lean up-stream men, straining at the rope,  
 Lashed by the doubt and strengthened by the  
     hope

Of backward winter — engines wrought of bone  
 And muscle, panting for the Yellowstone,  
 Bend after bend and yet more bends away.  
 Now was the river like a sandy bay  
 At ebb-tide, and the far-off cutbank's boom  
 Mocked them in shallows; now 'twas like a flume  
 With which the toilers, barely creeping, strove.  
 And bend by bend the selfsame poplar grove,  
 Set on the selfsame headland, so it seemed,  
 Confronted them, as though they merely dreamed  
 Of passing one drear point.

So on and up

Past where the tawny Titan gulps the cup  
 Of Cheyenne waters, past the Moreau's mouth;  
 And still wry league and stubborn league fell  
     south,  
 Becoming haze and weary memory.  
 Then past the empty lodges of the Ree  
 That gaped at cornfields plundered by the Sioux;  
 And there old times came mightily on Hugh,  
 For much of him was born and buried there.  
 Some troubled glory of that wind-tossed hair

Was on the trampled corn; the lonely skies,  
So haunted with the blue of Jamie's eyes,  
Seemed taunting him; and through the frosted  
wood

Along the flat, where once their tent had stood,  
A chill wind sorrowed, and the blackbirds' brawl  
Amid the funeral torches of the Fall  
Ran raucously, a desecrating din.

Past where the Cannon Ball and Heart come in  
They labored. Now the Northwest 'woke at last.  
The gaunt bluffs bellowed back the trumpet blast  
Of charging winds that made the sandbars smoke.  
To breathe now was to gulp fine sand, and choke:  
The stinging air was sibilant with whips.  
Leaning the more and with the firmer grips,  
Still northward the embattled toilers pressed  
To where the river yaws into the west.  
There stood the Mandan village.

Now began

The chaining of the Titan. Drift-ice ran.  
The wingéd hounds of Winter ceased to bay.  
The stupor of a doom completed lay  
Upon the world. The biting darkness fell.  
Out in the night, resounding as a well,  
They heard the deckplanks popping in a vise  
Of frost; all night the smithies of the ice

Reëchoed with the griding jar and clink  
 Of ghostly hammers welding link to link :  
 And morning found the world without a sound.  
 There lay the stubborn Prairie Titan bound,  
 To wait the far-off Heraclean thaw,  
 Though still in silent rage he strove to gnaw  
 The ragged shackles knitting at his breast.

And so the boatman won a winter's rest  
 Among the Mandan traders: but for Hugh  
 There yet remained a weary work to do.  
 Across the naked country west by south  
 His purpose called him at the Big Horn's mouth —  
 Three hundred miles of winging for the crow;  
 But by the river trail that he must go  
 'Twas seven hundred winding miles at least.

So now he turned his back upon the feast,  
 Snug ease, the pleasant tale, the merry mood,  
 And took the bare, foot-sounding solitude  
 Northwestward. Long they watched him from  
                   the Post,  
 Skied on a bluff-rim, fading like a ghost  
 At gray cock-crow; and hooded in his breath,  
 He seemed indeed a fugitive from Death  
 On whom some tatter of the shroud still clung.  
 Blank space engulfed him.

Now the moon was young

When he set forth; and day by day he strode,  
His scarce healed wounds upon him like a load;  
And dusk by dusk his fire outflared the moon  
That waxed until it wrought a spectral noon  
At nightfall. Then he came to where, awhile  
With Spring's wild rage, the snow-born Titan girl,  
A skyey wonder on her virgin face,  
Receives the virile Yellowstone's embrace  
And bears the lusty Seeker for the Sea.  
A bleak, horizon-wide serenity  
Clung round the valley where the twain lay dead.  
A winding sheet was on the marriage bed.

'Twas warmer now; the sky grew overcast;  
And as Hugh strode southwestward, all the vast  
Gray void seemed suddenly astir with wings  
And multitudinary whisperings —  
The muffled sibilance of tumbling snow.  
It seemed no more might living waters flow,  
Moon gleam, star glint, dawn smoulder through,  
bird sing,  
Or ever any fair familiar thing  
Be so again. The outworn winds were furled.  
Weird weavers of the twilight of a world  
Wrought, thread on kissing thread, the web of  
doom.  
Grown insubstantial in the knitted gloom,

The bluffs loomed eerie, and the scanty trees  
Were dwindled to remote dream-traceries  
That never might be green or shield a nest.

All day with swinging stride Hugh forged south-  
west

Along the Yellowstone's smooth-paven stream,  
A dream-shape moving in a troubled dream;  
And all day long the whispering weavers wove.  
And close on dark he came to where a grove  
Of cottonwoods rose tall and shadow-thin  
Against the northern bluffs. He camped therein  
And with cut boughs made shelter as he might.

Close pressed the blackness of the snow-choked  
night

About him, and his fire of plum wood purred.  
Athwart a soft penumbral drowse he heard  
The tumbling snowflakes sighing all around,  
Till sleep transformed it to a Summer sound  
Of boyish memory — susurrant bees,  
The Southwind in the tousled apple trees  
And slumber flowing from their leafy gloom.

He wakened to the cottonwoods' deep boom.  
Black fury was the world. The northwest's roar,  
As of a surf upon a shipwreck shore,

Plunged high above him from the sheer bluff's  
verge;  
And, like the backward sucking of the surge,  
Far fled the sobbing of the wild snow-spray.

Black blindness grew white blindness — and 'twas  
day.

All being now seemed narrowed to a span  
That held a sputtering wood fire and a man;  
Beyond was tumult and a whirling maze.  
The trees were but a roaring in a haze;  
The sheer bluff-wall that took the blizzard's  
charge

Was thunder flung along the hidden marge  
Of chaos, stridden by the ghost of light.  
White blindness grew black blindness — and 'twas  
night

Wherethrough nor moon nor any star might grope.

Two days since, Hugh had killed an antelope  
And what remained sufficed the time of storm.  
The snow, banked round his shelter, kept him warm  
And there was wood to burn for many a day.

The third dawn, oozing through a smudge of gray,  
Awoke him. It was growing colder fast.  
Still from the bluff high over boomed the blast,

But now it took the void with numbing wings.  
 By noon the woven mystery of things  
 Frayed raggedly, and through a sudden rift  
 At length Hugh saw the beetling bluff-wall lift  
 A sturdy shoulder to the flying rack.  
 Slowly the sense of distances came back  
 As with the waning day the great wind fell.  
 The pale sun set upon a frozen hell.  
 The wolves howled.

Hugh had left the Mandan town  
 When, heifer-horned, the maiden moon lies down  
 Beside the sea of evening. Now she rose  
 Scar-faced and staring blankly on the snows  
 While yet the twilight tarried in the west;  
 And more and more she came a tardy guest  
 As Hugh pushed onward through the frozen  
     waste  
 Until she stole on midnight shadow-faced,  
 A haggard spectre; then no more appeared.

'Twas on that time the man of hoary beard  
 Paused in the early twilight, looming lone  
 Upon a bluff-rim of the Yellowstone,  
 And peered across the white stream to the south  
 Where in the flatland at the Big Horn's mouth  
 The new fort stood that Henry's men had built.

What perfect peace for such a nest of guilt,  
What satisfied immunity from woe!  
Yon sprawling shadow, pied with candle-glow  
And plumed with sparkling wood-smoke, might  
    have been

A homestead with the children gathered in  
To share its bounty through the holidays.  
Hugh saw their faces round the gay hearth-blaze:  
The hale old father in a mood for yarns  
Or boastful of the plenty of his barns,  
Fruitage of honest toil and grateful lands;  
And, half a stranger to her folded hands,  
The mother with October in her hair  
And August in her face. One moment there  
Hugh saw it. Then the monstrous brutal fact  
Wiped out the dream and goaded him to act,  
Though now to act seemed strangely like a dream.

Descending from the bluff, he crossed the stream,  
The dry snow fiving to his eager stride.  
Reaching the fort stockade, he paused to bide  
The passing of a whimsey. Was it true?  
Or was this but the fretted wraith of Hugh  
Whose flesh had fed the kiotes long ago?

Still through a chink he saw the candle-glow,  
So like an eye that brazened out a wrong,  
And now there came a flight of muffled song,



The rhythmic thudding of a booted heel  
 That timed a squeaking fiddle to a reel!  
 How swiftly men forget! The spawning Earth  
 Is fat with graves; and what is one man worth  
 That fiddles should be muted at his fall?  
 He should have died and did not — that was  
 all.

Well, let the living jig it! He would turn  
 Back to the night, the spacious unconcern  
 Of wilderness that never played the friend.

Now came the song and fiddling to an end,  
 And someone laughed within. The old man  
 winced,  
 Listened with bated breath, and was convinced  
 'Twas Jamie laughing! Once again he heard.  
 Joy filled a hush 'twixt heart-beats like a bird;  
 Then like a famished cat his lurking hate  
 Pounced crushingly.

He found the outer gate,  
 Beat on it with his shoulder, raised a cry.  
 No doubt 'twas deemed a fitful wind went by;  
 None stirred. But when he did not cease to  
 shout,  
 A door creaked open and a man came out  
 Amid the spilling candle-glimmer, raised  
 The wicket in the outer gate and gazed

One moment on a face as white as death,  
Because the beard was thick with frosted breath  
Made mystic by the stars. Then came a gasp,  
The clatter of the falling wicket's hasp,  
The crunch of panic feet along the snow;  
And someone stammered huskily and low:  
"My God! I saw the Old Man's ghost out  
there!"

'Twas spoken as one speaks who feels his hair  
Prickle the scalp. And then another said —  
It seemed like Henry's voice — "The dead are  
dead:

What talk is this, Le Bon? You saw him die!  
Who's there?"

Hugh strove to shout, to give the lie  
To those within; but could not fetch a sound.  
Just so he dreamed of lying under ground  
Beside the Grand and hearing overhead  
The talk of men. Or was he really dead,  
And all this but a maggot in the brain?

Then suddenly the clatter of a chain  
Aroused him, and he saw the portal yawn  
And saw a bright rectangled patch of dawn  
As through a grave's mouth — no, 'twas candle-  
light  
Poured through the open doorway on the night;

And those were men before him, bulking black  
Against the glow.

Reality flashed back;  
He strode ahead and entered at the door.  
A falling fiddle jangled on the floor  
And left a deathly silence. On his bench  
The fiddler shrank. A row of eyes, a-blench  
With terror, ran about the naked hall.  
And there was one who huddled by the wall  
And hid his face and shivered.

For a spell  
That silence clung; and then the old man:  
"Well,

Is this the sort of welcome that I get?  
'Twas not my time to feed the kiotes yet!  
Put on the pot and stew a chunk of meat  
And you shall see how much a ghost can eat!  
I've journeyed far if what I hear be true!"

Now in that none might doubt the voice of  
Hugh,

Nor yet the face, however it might seem  
A blurred reflection in a flowing stream,  
A buzz of wonder broke the trance of dread.  
"Good God!" the Major gasped; "We thought  
you dead!  
Two men have testified they saw you die!"

"If they speak truth," Hugh answered, "then I lie  
Both here and by the Grand. If I be right,  
Then two lie here and shall lie from this night.  
Which are they?"

Henry answered: "Yon is one."

The old man set the trigger of his gun  
And gazed on Jules who cowered by the wall.  
Eyes blinked, expectant of the hammer's fall;  
Ears strained, anticipative of the roar.  
But Hugh walked leisurely across the floor  
And kicked the croucher, saying: "Come, get up  
And wag your tail! I couldn't kill a pup!"  
Then turning round: "I had a faithful friend;  
No doubt he too was with me to the end!  
Where's Jamie?"

"Started out before the snows  
For Atkinson."

## V

### JAMIE

THE Country of the Crows,  
Through which the Big Horn and the Rosebud  
run,

Sees over mountain peaks the setting sun;  
And southward from the Yellowstone flung wide,  
It broadens ever to the morning side  
And has the Powder on its vague frontier.  
About the subtle changing of the year,  
Ere even favored valleys felt the stir  
Of Spring, and yet expectancy of her  
Was like a pleasant rumor all repeat  
Yet none may prove, the sound of horses' feet  
Went eastward through the silence of that land.  
For then it was there rode a little band  
Of trappers out of Henry's Post, to bear  
Dispatches down to Atkinson, and there  
To furnish out a keelboat for the Horn.  
And four went lightly, but the fifth seemed worn  
As with a heavy heart; for that was he  
Who should have died but did not.

Silently

He heard the careless parley of his men,  
And thought of how the Spring should come  
again,

That garish strumpet with her world-old lure,  
To waken hope where nothing may endure,  
To quicken love where loving is betrayed.  
Yet now and then some dream of Jamie made  
Slow music in him for a little while;  
And they who rode beside him saw a smile  
Glimmer upon that ruined face of gray,  
As on a winter fog the groping day  
Pours glory through a momentary rift.  
Yet never did the gloom that bound him, lift;  
He seemed as one who feeds upon his heart  
And finds, despite the bitter and the smart,  
A little sweetness and is glad for that.

Now up the Powder, striking for the Platte  
Across the bleak divide the horsemen went;  
Attained that river where its course is bent  
From north to east: and spurring on apace  
Along the wintry valley, reached the place  
Where from the west flows in the Laramie.  
Thence, fearing to encounter with the Ree,  
They headed eastward through the barren land  
To where, fleet-footed down a track of sand,

The Niobrara races for the morn —  
A gaunt-loined runner.

Here at length was born  
Upon the southern slopes the baby Spring,  
A timid, fretful, ill-begotten thing,  
A-suckle at the Winter's withered paps:  
Not such as when announced by thunder-claps  
And ringed with swords of lightning, she would  
ride,  
The haughty victrix and the mystic bride,  
Clad splendidly as never Sheba's Queen,  
Before her marching multitudes of green  
In many-bannered triumph! Grudging, slow,  
Amid the fraying fringes of the snow  
The bunch-grass sprouted; and the air was  
chill.  
Along the northern slopes 'twas winter still,  
And no root dreamed what Triumph-over-Death  
Was nurtured now in some bleak Nazareth  
Beyond the crest to sunward.

On they spurred  
Through vacancies that waited for the bird,  
And everywhere the Odic Presence dwelt.  
The Southwest blew, the snow began to melt;  
And when they reached the valley of the Snake,  
The Niobrara's ice began to break,

And all night long and all day long it made  
A sound as of a random cannonade  
With rifles snarling down a skirmish line.

The geese went over. Every tree and vine  
Was dotted thick with leaf-buds when they saw  
The little river of Keyapaha  
Grown mighty for the moment. Then they came,  
One evening when all thickets were aflame  
With pale green witch-fires and the windflowers  
blew,

To where the headlong Niobrara threw  
His speed against the swoln Missouri's flank  
And hurled him roaring to the further bank —  
A giant staggered by a pigmy's sling.  
Thence, plunging ever deeper into Spring,  
Across the greening prairie east by south  
They rode, and, just above the Platte's wide  
mouth,  
Came, weary with the trail, to Atkinson.

There all the vernal wonder-work was done:  
No care-free heart might find aught lacking there.  
The dove's call wandered in the drowsy air;  
A love-dream brooded in the lucent haze.  
Priapic revellers, the shrieking jays  
Held mystic worship in the secret shade.  
Woodpeckers briskly plied their noisy trade



Along the tree-boles, and their scarlet hoods  
Flashed flame-like in the smoky cottonwoods.  
What lacked? Not sweetness in the sun-lulled  
breeze;

The plum bloom murmurous with bumblebees  
Was drifted deep in every draw and slough.  
Not color; witcheries of gold and blue  
The dandelion and the violet  
Wove in the green. Might not the sad forget,  
The happy here have nothing more to seek?  
Lo, yonder by that pleasant little creek,  
How one might loll upon the grass and fish  
And build the temple of one's wildest wish  
'Twixt nibbles! Surely there was quite enough  
Of wizard-timber and of wonder-stuff  
To rear it nobly to the blue-domed roof!

Yet there was one whose spirit stood aloof  
From all this joyousness — a gray old man,  
No nearer now than when the quest began  
To what he sought on that long winter trail.

Aye, Jamie had been there; but when the tale  
That roving trappers brought from Kiowa  
Was told to him, he seemed as one who saw  
A ghost, and could but stare on it, they said:  
Until one day he mounted horse and fled

Into the North, a devil-ridden man.  
"I've got to go and find him if I can,"  
Was all he said for days before he left.

And what of Hugh? So long of love bereft,  
So long sustained and driven by his hate,  
A touch of ruth now made him desolate.  
No longer eager to avenge the wrong,  
With not enough of pity to be strong  
And just enough of love to choke and sting,  
A gray old hulk amid the surge of Spring  
He floundered on a lee-shore of the heart.

But when the boat was ready for the start  
Up the long watery stairway to the Horn,  
Hugh joined the party. And the year was shorn  
Of blooming girlhood as they forged amain  
Into the North; the late green-mantled plain  
Grew fallow; and the ruthless golden shower  
Of Summer wrought in lust upon the flower  
That withered in the endless martyrdom  
To seed. The scarlet quickened on the plum  
About the Heart's mouth when they came thereto;  
Among the Mandans grapes were turning blue,  
And they were purple at the Yellowstone.  
A frosted scrub-oak, standing out alone  
Upon a barren bluff top, gazing far  
Above the crossing at the Powder's bar,

Was spattered with the blood of Summer slain.  
So it was Autumn in the world again,  
And all those months of toil had yielded nought  
To Hugh. (How often is the seeker sought  
By what he seeks — a blind, heart-breaking  
game!)

For always had the answer been the same  
From roving trapper and at trading post:  
Aye, one who seemed to stare upon a ghost  
And followed willy-nilly where it led,  
Had gone that way in search of Hugh, they said —  
A haggard, blue-eyed, yellow-headed chap.

And often had the old man thought, 'Mayhap  
He'll be at Henry's Post and we shall meet;  
And to forgive and to forget were sweet:  
'Tis for its nurse that Vengeance whets the tooth!  
And oh the golden time of Jamie's youth,  
That it should darken for a graybeard's whim!  
So Hugh had brooded, till there came on him  
The pity of a slow rain after drouth.

But at the crossing of the Rosebud's mouth  
A shadow fell upon his growing dream.  
A band of Henry's traders, bound down stream,  
Who paused to traffic in the latest word —  
Down-river news for matters seen and heard

In higher waters — had not met the lad,  
Not yet encountered anyone who had.

Alas, the journey back to yesterwhiles!  
How tangled are the trails! The stubborn miles,  
How wearily they stretch! And if one win  
The long way back in search of what has been,  
Shall he find aught that is not strange and new?

Thus wrought the melancholy news in Hugh,  
As he turned back with those who brought the  
news;

For more and more he dreaded now to lose  
What doubtful seeking rendered doubly dear.  
And in the time when keen winds stripped the  
year

He came with those to where the Poplar joins  
The greater river. There Assinoboines,  
Rich from the Summer's hunting, had come down  
And flung along the flat their ragged town,  
That traders might bring goods and winter there.

So leave the heartsick graybeard. Otherwhere  
The final curtain rises on the play.  
'Tis dead of Winter now. For day on day  
The blizzard wind has thundered, sweeping wide  
From Mississippi to the Great Divide

Out of the North beyond Saskatchewan.  
Brief evening glimmers like an inverse dawn  
After a long white night. The tempest dies;  
The snow-haze lifts. Now let the curtain rise  
Upon Milk River valley, and reveal  
The stars like broken glass on frosted steel  
Above the Piegan lodges, huddled deep  
In snowdrifts, like a freezing flock of sheep.  
A crystal weight the dread cold crushes down  
And no one moves about the little town  
That seems to grovel as a thing that fears.

But see! a lodge-flap swings; a squaw appears,  
Hunched with the sudden cold. Her footsteps  
    creak

Shrill in the hush. She stares upon the bleak,  
White skyline for a moment, then goes in.  
We follow her, push back the flap of skin,  
Enter the lodge, inhale the smoke-tanged air  
And blink upon the little faggot-flare  
That blossoms in the center of the room.  
Unsteady shadows haunt the outer gloom  
Wherein the walls are guessed at. Upward,  
    far,

The smoke-vent now and then reveals a star  
As in a well. The ancient squaw, a-stoop,  
Her face light-stricken, stirs a pot of soup

That simmers with a pleasant smell and sound.  
A gnarled old man, cross-legged upon the ground,  
Sits brooding near. He feeds the flame with  
sticks;

It brightens. Lo, a leaden crucifix  
Upon the wall! These heathen eyes, though dim,  
Have seen the white man's God and cling to Him,  
Lest on the sunset trail slow feet should err.

But look again. From yonder bed of fur  
Beside the wall a white man strives to rise.  
He lifts his head, with yearning sightless eyes  
Gropes for the light. A mass of golden hair  
Falls round the face that sickness and despair  
Somehow make old, albeit he is young.  
His weak voice, stumbling to the mongrel tongue  
Of traders, flings a question to the squaw:  
"You saw no Black Robe? Tell me what you  
saw!"

And she, brief-spoken as her race, replies:  
"Heaped snow — sharp stars — a kiote on the  
rise."

The blind youth huddles moaning in the furs.  
The firewood spits and pops, the boiled pot purrs  
And sputters. On this little isle of sound  
The sea of winter silence presses round —  
One feels it like a menace.

Now the crone

Dips out a cup of soup, and having blown  
Upon it, takes it to the sick man there  
And bids him eat. With wild, unseeing stare  
He turns upon her: "Why are they so long?  
I can not eat! I've done a mighty wrong;  
It chokes me! Oh no, no, I must not die  
Until the Black Robe comes!" His feeble cry  
Sinks to a whisper. "Tell me, did they go —  
Your kinsmen?"

"They went south before the snow."

"And will they tell the Black Robe?"

"They will tell."

The crackling of the faggots for a spell  
Seems very loud. Again the sick man moans  
And, struggling with the weakness in his bones,  
Would gain his feet, but can not. "Go again,  
And tell me that you see the bulks of men  
Dim in the distance there."

The squaw obeys;

Returns anon to crouch beside the blaze,  
Numb-fingered and a-shudder from the night.  
The vacant eyes that hunger for the light  
Are turned upon her: "Tell me what you saw!  
Or maybe snowshoes sounded up the draw.  
Quick, tell me what you saw and heard out there!"

"Heaped snow — sharp stars — big stillness everywhere."

One clutching at thin ice with numbing grip  
Cries while he hopes; but when his fingers slip,  
He takes the final plunge without a sound.  
So sinks the youth now, hopeless. All around  
The winter silence presses in; the walls  
Grow vague and vanish in the gloom that crawls  
Close to the failing fire.

The Piegans sleep.  
Night hovers midway down the morning steep.  
The sick man drowns. Nervously he starts  
And listens; hears no sound except his heart's  
And that weird murmur brooding stillness makes.  
But stealthily upon the quiet breaks —  
Vague as the coursing of the hearer's blood —  
A muffled, rhythmic beating, thud on thud,  
That, growing nearer, deepens to a crunch.  
So, hungry for the distance, snowshoes munch  
The crusted leagues of Winter, stride by stride.  
A camp-dog barks; the hollow world outside  
Brims with the running howl of many curs.

Now wide-awake, half risen in the furs,  
The youth can hear low voices and the creak  
Of snowshoes near the lodge. His thin, wild  
shriek



Startles the old folk from their slumberings :

"He comes! The Black Robe!"

Now the door-flap swings,  
And briefly one who splutters Piegan, bars  
The way, then enters. Now the patch of stars  
Is darkened with a greater bulk that bends  
Beneath the lintel. "Peace be with you, friends!  
And peace with him herein who suffers pain!"  
So speaks the second comer of the twain —  
A white man by his voice. And he who lies  
Beside the wall, with empty, groping eyes  
Turned to the speaker: "There can be no peace  
For me, good Father, till this gnawing cease —  
The gnawing of a great wrong I have done."

The big man leans above the youth: "My son —"  
(Grown husky with the word, the deep voice  
breaks,

And for a little spell the whole man shakes  
As with the clinging cold) "— have faith and  
hope!

'Tis often nearest dawn when most we grope.  
Does not the Good Book say, Who seek shall  
find?"

"But, Father, I am broken now and blind,  
And I have sought, and I have lost the way."  
To which the stranger: "What would Jesus say?"

Hark! In the silence of the heart 'tis said —  
By their own weakness are the feeble sped;  
The humblest feet are surest for the goal;  
The blind shall see the City of the Soul.  
Lay down your burden at His feet to-night."

Now while the fire, replenished, bathes in light  
The young face scrawled with suffering and care,  
Flinging ironic glories on the hair  
And glinting on dull eyes that once flashed blue,  
The sick one tells the story of old Hugh  
To him whose face, averted from the glow,  
Still lurks in gloom. The winds of battle blow  
Once more along the steep. Again one sees  
The rescue from the fury of the Rees,  
The graybeard's fondness for the gay lad; then  
The westward march with Major Henry's men  
With all that happened there upon the Grand.

"And so we hit the trail of Henry's band,"  
The youth continues; "for we feared to die:  
And dread of shame was ready with the lie  
We carried to our comrades. Hugh was dead  
And buried there beside the Grand, we said.  
Could any doubt that what we said was true?  
They even praised our courage! But I knew!  
The nights were hell because I heard his cries  
And saw the crows a-pecking at his eyes,

The kiotes tearing at him. O my God !  
I tried and tried to think him under sod ;  
But every time I slept it was the same.  
And then one night — I lay awake — he came !  
I say he came — I know I hadn't slept !  
Amid a light like rainy dawn, he crept  
Out of the dark upon his hands and knees.  
The wound he got that day among the Rees  
Was like red fire. A snarl of bloody hair  
Hung round the eyes that had a pleading stare,  
And down the ruined face and gory beard  
Big tear-drops rolled. He went as he appeared,  
Trailing a fog of light that died away.  
And I grew old before I saw the day.  
O Father, I had paid too much for breath !  
The Devil traffics in the fear of death,  
And may God pity anyone who buys  
What I have bought with treachery and lies —  
This rat-like gnawing in my breast !

“ I knew

I couldn't rest until I buried Hugh ;  
And so I told the Major I would go  
To Atkinson with letters, ere the snow  
Had choked the trails. Jules wouldn't come  
along ;  
He didn't seem to realize the wrong ;

He called me foolish, couldn't understand.  
I rode alone — not south, but to the Grand.  
Daylong my horse beat thunder from the sod,  
Accusing me; and all my prayers to God  
Seemed flung in vain at bolted gates of brass.  
And in the night the wind among the grass  
Hissed endlessly the story of my shame.

"I do not know how long I rode: I came  
Upon the Grand at last, and found the place,  
And it was empty. Not a sign or trace  
Was left to show what end had come to Hugh.  
And oh that grave! It gaped upon the blue,  
A death-wound pleading dumbly for the slain.  
I filled it up and fled across the plain,  
And somehow came to Atkinson at last.  
And there I heard the living Hugh had passed  
Along the river northward in the Fall!  
O Father, he had found the strength to crawl  
That long, heart-breaking distance back to life,  
Though Jules had taken blanket, steel and knife,  
And I, his trusted comrade, had his gun!

"They said I'd better stay at Atkinson,  
Because old Hugh was surely hunting me,  
White-hot to kill. I did not want to flee  
Or hide from him. I even wished to die,  
If so this aching cancer of a lie

Might be torn out forever. So I went,  
As eager as the homesick homeward bent,  
In search of him and peace.

But I was cursed.

For even when his stolen rifle burst  
And spewed upon me this eternal night,  
I might not die as any other might;  
But God so willed that friendly Piegans came  
To spare me yet a little unto shame.  
O Father, is there any hope for me?"

"Great hope indeed, my son!" so huskily  
The other answers. "I recall a case  
Like yours — no matter what the time and  
place —

'Twas somewhat like the story that you tell;  
Each seeking and each sought, and both in hell;  
But in the tale I mind, they met at last."

The youth sits up, white-faced and breathing  
fast:

"They met, you say? What happened? Quick!  
Oh quick!"

"The old man found the dear lad blind and sick  
And both forgave — 'twas easy to forgive —  
For oh we have so short a time to live —"

Whereat the youth: "Who's here? The Black  
Robe's gone!  
Whose voice is this?"

The gray of winter dawn  
Now creeping round the door-flap, lights the  
place  
And shows thin fingers groping for a face  
Deep-scarred and hoary with the frost of years  
Whereover runs a new springtide of tears.

"O Jamie, Jamie, Jamie — I am Hugh!  
There was no Black Robe yonder — Will I do?"

## THE SONG OF JED SMITH

FOR SIGURD'S WIFE  
MAXINE



## I

The valley was beginning to forget  
The dead June day, but southward clearly yet  
The peaks remembered.

Trappers by their gear,  
With four trail-weary horses grazing near,  
Two men were sitting, leaning on their packs.  
Still as the shadows purpling at their backs,  
They gazed upon the smoke that rose between,  
Thin-fingered. From the canyon of the Green,  
Low-toned but mighty in the solitude,  
A never-never moaning voiced the mood  
Some reminiscent waking dream had cast  
Upon them. Henry's Fork that hurried past  
Ran full of distant voices, muffled mirths.  
A meadowlark, in gratitude for Earth's  
Lush shielding, with a mounting bar that broke,  
Enriched the quiet.

And the elder spoke,  
Stirring the embers into sudden fire:  
"Well, that's a queer one! Was I nodding, Squire?  
I swear I saw it!"

Lifted in surprise,  
With thick, black beard belying boyish eyes,  
A flame-bright face regarded him. "What's queer?  
I wasn't looking, Art; just sitting here  
And seeing things myself."

The failing flare,  
Across the elder's grizzling beard and hair,  
Revealed the mien of one whom many snows  
Would leave green-hearted. "No, I didn't doze,"  
He said; "and I was thinking nothing more  
Than what to do about that saddle sore  
The old mare's got; and it was only now,  
All still and empty. Suddenly, somehow,  
I tell you, it was eighteen twenty-five!  
This valley came alive with fires, alive  
With men and horses! Rings on glowing rings  
Of old-time faces sang as liquor sings  
After a drouth; and laughter shook the night  
Where someone, full of meat and getting tight,  
Spun lies the way Black Harris used to do.  
Then it was now again, and only you  
Were sitting yonder."

"Art, you make me dry,"  
The other said, "you make me want to cry  
Into my whiskers. Thirteen years away!  
That's better than a million miles, I'd say,  
Without a horse, and all the country strange!"

Now while they mused there came an eerie  
change

Upon the world. From where the day lay dead  
The ghost thereof in streamered glory fled  
Across the sky, transfiguring the scene.  
Amazed amidst the other-worldly green  
That glowed along the flat, as though a shout  
Had startled them, they stood and stared about,  
Searching the muted landscape of a dream.

There *was* a cry. The bluffs along the stream  
Awoke to mock it. On a low rise there  
To westward, vivid in the radiant air,  
They saw a horseman coming at a jog,  
A pack-mule plodding after, and a dog  
That rushed ahead now, halted, muzzle high,  
And howled.

The light-blown bubble of the sky,  
As with a final strain of splendor, broke.  
The peaks forgot; and like a purple smoke  
Night settled in the valley.

Looming dim,  
The rider neared the shadows greeting him  
Beside the embers, while the outer gloam  
Neighed welcome. "Hitch and make yourself at  
home,"  
One bantered: "Hang your hat upon a star,

The house is yours. Whatever else you are,  
It's not a horsethief by the nag you've got!"

The stranger laughed. "If supper's in the pot,  
The nag has served me well enough," he said,  
Dismounting. To the growling dog, "Down, Jed,  
Old-timer! They've invited us to eat."

Now hand found hand. "Except for beaver meat,  
And jerked at that, you'll find the cupboard bare,"  
One said; "and, short of Taos, we'll have to share  
Our drinking yonder with the bird and beast."

"I never make this valley but to feast,  
And water won't keep ghosts away," replied  
The stranger, fumbling at the horse's side  
And stripping off the saddle. "Anyhow,  
The hump and haunches of a yearling cow  
Have fagged the old mule here. If that won't do  
To make a good old-fashioned rendezvous,  
I've come from Taos—the jug's full!"

Bluffs to heights  
Hurrahed with glee, and in the outer night's  
Star-bearing silence troubled for a space  
The somber summits.

"Come and show your face!"  
The elder cried. "I'll swear, if I don't know  
That voice—though he went wolfing years ago—

My name's not Black!" He seized the other's hand  
And drew him to the embers. Stirred and fanned,  
They reddened till the fed twigs took the spark,  
And, cut upon the onyx of the dark,  
A shaven face shone—sensitive and lean,  
With eyes that narrowed less upon the seen  
Than with some inward gazing. Leather-skinned,  
It was, hard-bitten by the worldly wind;  
But more the weather of a mind that seeks  
In solitude had etched upon the cheeks  
A cryptic story.

“Holy smoke!” cried Black;  
“Look, Squire! Unless it be a spook come back  
To haunt us, old Bob Evans hasn’t fed  
The kiotes yet!”

A joyful warwhoop fled  
Along the valley. Eager voices, blent  
In greeting, quickened into merriment.  
The dog barked gaily and the horses neighed.  
Impatiently the laden pack-mule brayed  
Sardonic comment.

## II

Now the jug went round  
The glowing circle, while the fat hump browned  
And sputtered, dripping. Night, immense and still,  
With stars keen-whetted by the mountain chill,  
Dreamed deep around the trio, snugly housed  
In living light. From where the horses browsed,  
The blowing loudened in a lapse of speech.  
A wolf howled, and the farthest empty reach  
Of vastness mourned, as though God dreamed in  
vain  
And 'wakened, filling with a wail of pain  
The nightmare void of uncreated good.

The dog whined, bristling.

Cozy in the wood,  
The tongued flame purred content. Again the  
bright,  
Brief moment vanquished the appalling night  
Of timelessness.

The youngest laughed, and said:  
"Is this a wake? If one of us is dead,

Just count me in among the other two  
And cut a chunk of meat!"

"A rendezvous,"

Mused Evans, with a far, unfocussed gaze  
Upon the other. "Ghosts of better days,  
With laughters never to be laughed again,  
And singing from the lips of lusty men  
Gone dust forever! Listen! Can you hear?  
I ought to know. I've heard them year by year  
With every June!"

"Well, let them drink with us!"

The youngest chuckled. "Bob, you loony cuss,  
I like you; but you always lived too far  
Above the belly where the doin's are  
That make men happy. This child ought to know!"  
With jug presented, "Spooks of long ago,"  
He mocked, "here's looking at you! Bye and bye  
We'll be as dead as you! But now, we're dry,  
And men at that! Tough luck to be a ghost!  
Old-timers, skoal! Here's how!"

He drank the toast

And snorted.

"Squire," laughed Black, "as Milton wrote,  
The place for education—mind, I quote!—  
The place for education in your head

Ain't there at all! According to old Jed,  
Bob's half a poet! Why, that look of his  
Can see what never was and really is  
Because it isn't—if you get the way  
My stick floats! It was on the Snake one day.  
Alone and far from home, we sat there glum,  
Remembering how many friends had come  
To crow meat since we crossed the Great Divide;  
And, after long, he looked at me and sighed  
And said: 'I wish I knew where Evans went.  
The man's a scholar. Only accident  
Has made him less than poet.' Who but he  
Was like to know?"

The Squire laughed merrily.

"Be easy with me, Art, until I'm tight.  
You'll be surprised, come later in the night,  
And nothing in the jug, how clear and quick  
I get the drift of any crazy stick  
A man can float! Why, Boys, I used to grieve  
And weep for men too sober to believe  
Black Harris when he squared away to lie,  
And me well educated! Hope to die,  
I could believe him better when he lied!  
You mind his forest that was putrified?  
Him peeking through that underbrush of hair  
And whiskers at the whole gang howling there,  
Short-breath't with meat and three sheets in the  
wind,



Save only Jed, the man that never sinned,  
Stone-sober, looking down his long, thin nose!  
You mind? Old Harris and the 'Rapahoes  
Hell-bent for hair—and plenty!—had a race.  
The old man won, and came upon a place  
Where trees soared taller than a tree can soar,  
And then some taller! And the queerest roar  
Ran high among them—pines in stormy weather—  
And like a million castanets together,  
The green leaves clicked, though not a zephyr  
stirred.

And in the branches, on his holy word,  
Queer birds, like none this side of Jordan, sang.  
'And would ye think,' says he, 'the whole  
shebang

Was putrified!' 'It must've made a smell  
To kill a polecat!' someone says. 'Aw, hell!'  
Says he, disgusted; 'How could such rock be?  
The place was putrified, and every tree  
Was agate and the birds was agate too!  
That roar up yonder was a wind that blew  
Before God's whiskers sprouted—yes, and man  
Was only mud yet. When the place began  
To putrify, the thing came on so strong  
And fast, it caught that wind and every song  
Them birds was singing at the time, you see!'"  
The far-flung, many-echoed gaiety  
Became a chuckle. "Harris never wed—  
For long. 'The truth and me is hitched,' he said;

'I'll lick the man that tries to put asunder!'  
Bob, who poured lightning in that jug, I wonder?  
I half believe him! Pretty soon I will!  
Let's have the meat now, Shakespeare!"

Silent still,  
The other brooded with an empty stare.

"I mind," Black said. "We sat right over there  
Beyond the horses. . . . What a bunch of men!  
This valley will not see their like again  
Until the evening and the dawn swap places  
And days run backwards! I can see their faces  
While Harris took his time to be exact  
And dealt with each new whopper like a fact  
That 'twould have been dishonest to forget!  
Fitzpatrick, Ashley, Jackson, and Sublette!  
Jim Bridger, newly bearded, half a boy  
For all his doings! Hanna and McCoy,  
La Plant, Reubasco, Harry Rogers, Ranne,  
Luzano, Gobel, Gaither—man by man,  
I see them laughing yonder, soon to die,  
The men who followed Smith—and you and I  
Return alone, Bob, out of thirty-two!  
Jim Beckwourth, filled with tales of derring-do,  
And hero of them all, to let him say,  
Guffawing at the very sober way  
That Harris had of flirting with his wife!  
And old Jed Smith—!"

He drew his hunting knife,  
And absently awhile he whetted it  
Upon his boot. Then, having carved a spit  
For each, he sliced the succulently rare  
Fat meat and passed it.

“I can see him there—  
The way his wide-set eyes turned slits of blue  
When he was thinking; how his brown hair grew  
In waves that broke like surf about his ears.  
I knew him longest in his hardest years,  
And seldom did he fail to keep it trim  
And shave—as though he felt God’s eye on him,  
No matter what the hardship or the weather.  
I see the way his straight brows grew together,  
And knitted at a run of scurvy talk;  
The nose that made you think about a hawk;  
The lean six feet of man-stuff, shouldered wide,  
Too busy with a dream that grew inside  
For laughter. He was seeing all the white  
Map westward as a page on which to write,  
For men to read, the story of a land  
Still lying empty as the Maker’s hand  
Before creation. From the Great Salt Lake,  
Between the Colorado and the Snake,  
From burning sand to high Sierra snow,  
He wrote it. Some day men will read and know  
The man he was. It does me good to boast  
I knew him longest.”

“But I loved him most,”  
Said Evans, rousing with a weary air  
Of slow return, his heart still elsewhere,  
Remote and lonely; and the low voice took,  
As from the gentle burning of his look,  
A hint of smoke. “I loved him most; and yet  
I failed him.”

“Aw, drink hearty and forget!  
You’re far too sober, Bob!” the younger said,  
Passing the jug. “Too bad about old Jed!  
'Twas seven years ago we heard somewhere  
A parcel of Comanches got his hair  
Away down yonder on the Cimarrone.”

“He died alone,” the other said; “alone;  
And where his bones are lying no one knows.  
The fed wolves sang his dirge, and feasting crows  
Were his ironic mourners.”

“Let him rest  
In peace,” the younger bantered. “At the best,  
Dying’s a one-man job! Hurrah for now!  
He must have gone to heaven anyhow;  
I never saw him having any fun!  
That’s right, old-timer! Have another one,  
And send the O-be-joyful ’round the ring!  
We’ll drink to good old Jed gone angeling—  
But he won’t like it if he’s looking down!

He'll cock that one scarred brow of his, and frown  
Without a word; the scar he got that day  
He argued with the bear up Big Horn way  
And came off best—a bit the worse for wear—  
Some ribs caved in. But when you saw the bear,  
Heart-stabbed and belly-slashed—well, you began  
To know that Jedediah was a man  
For all his Bible-reading, parson ways!  
And so here's to you, 'Diah! Happy days!  
Meat in the pot and sign in every stream!"

He drank, and passed the jug.

“And some great dream  
To lead, and may the strange trail never end!”  
The elder added.

“And no faithless friend,”  
The other murmured, drinking.

### III

Now the deep,  
Tremendous silence of the night asleep  
Possessed the little tent of light again.  
A-haunch, head cocked, the dog surveyed the men.  
One drooping ear for doubt and one pricked ear  
For hope, he watched the red meat disappear  
In alien mouths, commenting with a hurt,  
Ingratiating whimper, and alert  
To catch the morsels casually thrown.  
The muted thunder of the canyon's moan,  
The Fork's low murmur, the contented sound  
Of grazing in the dark, made more profound  
The sense of silence heavy on the world.

The feasting done, the dog lay down and curled  
A tawny back against the ember light,  
The slender, wolfish muzzle snuggled tight  
Against a shaggy buttock. One eye slept,  
And one, upon the verge of slumber, kept  
Uneasy vigil lest the feast resume.

Now slowly shrank the circle of the gloom,  
Chill-edged. Aroused from indolent content,

The Squire arose, yawned lazily, and went  
Into the dark. An ax's *clink* and *chock*  
Broke brittle on the everlasting rock  
Of stillness, bluff and peak with flying shard  
Resounding. Stooping low and breathing hard,  
He reappeared at length; and having shed  
His burden on the fire, sat down and said:  
"That turn deserves another! Pass the juice!"

He took a swig, then made his girdle loose,  
Sighed with eupeptic pleasure, being sated,  
And chuckled: "Boys, I'm going educated,  
The way you don't get cross-eyed with a book!  
Just now out yonder when I stopped to look  
Around and listen, all at once there came  
A funny sort of feeling. 'Twas the same  
Old 'Diah used to give me years ago:  
A feel of something you could never know,  
Except that it was big and still and dim  
And had a secret. If you stuck with him,  
Most any minute everything would change.  
The mountains and the valleys would be strange,  
And there'd be rivers like no common river—  
A sort of evening-before-Christmas shiver  
All up the backbone, like a youngster knows.

It was the time we wintered with the Crows  
In 'twenty three and 'four, when I first felt  
That way about him. Snow began to melt

Along Wind River. Winter wasn't done,  
But in the soft late February sun  
You heard the gulches roar. A big chinook  
Was booming when we saddled up and took  
The trail that led across the Great Divide.  
And who had ever seen the other side  
The Shining Mountains? Indians, and such  
Assorted varmints, didn't matter much,  
We being humans! It was waiting yet,  
Since God A'mighty finished it, to get  
The first real, honest seeing from our eyes!

We followed up Sweetwater. No surprise!  
A frozen crick, and everything was old  
About it. But we felt it getting cold  
And colder as we rode along the flat,  
Smooth valley westward, and we knew from that  
How we were climbing. Mountains fell away—  
Just sort of melted. Then the second day,  
The word came down the line: 'We're in the Pass!'

But there was only common yellow grass  
And sagebrush on a prairie, rolling wide  
From common hills along the nearer side  
To far peaks looking like a broken saw  
Ahead and to the right across the draw  
Along Sweetwater. Antelope were there  
Beside the crick—like critters anywhere  
In anybody's meadow. Empty skies



Were straight ahead above a little rise  
Notched crooked like a hind-sight out of true.  
There wasn't any shoutingful to-do  
About it! But I galloped to the head  
To have a look, and rode beside old Jed.  
He didn't see me, didn't say a word  
To anybody. Pretty soon he spurred  
A ways ahead, reined suddenly, and stopped.  
From where we sat and looked, the prairie  
dropped  
Along the easy shoulder of a hill  
Into a left-hand valley. Things got still  
And kind of strange. The others, gathered  
round,  
Quit talking, and there wasn't any sound  
Except a bridle made it. Then it came—  
That funny sort of feeling, just the same  
I had out there a little while ago—  
A feel of something you could never know,  
But it was something big and still and dim  
That wouldn't tell. It seemed to come from him  
Just looking down the Sandy towards the Green  
That had been waiting yonder to be seen  
A million winters and a million springs  
And summers! 'Twas the other side of things—  
Another world!

You gather I was wet  
Behind the ears; a pea-green youngster yet,

Just turning seventeen, and wild as hell.  
That river had been doing pretty well  
Without us; and, as any beaver knows,  
A river is a ditch where water flows,  
And any side's the other where you ain't!  
I mind I wondered was he going to faint,  
Or was he praying, maybe, when he bent  
His head. I caught him at it in his tent  
That winter once! But even if he was,  
It seemed the sort of thing a fellow does  
With just that sort of feeling . . . Well, they say  
We live to learn."

"It's just the other way,"  
Said Evans dryly. "Mostly we forget;  
But 'Diah never did."

"A few nips yet,  
And you'll be even wiser than your 'teens,"  
The elder chaffed. "I know what Evans means.  
There's something sort of thrilling that you know  
Until you learn so much that isn't so,  
There's no room left inside for what you knew!  
I felt a bit like that about him, too,  
And me an oldster. He was hard and grim  
And man a-plenty; but he had in him  
What made you feel the world had just begun!  
Queer how we call him old! Just thirty one—  
Or maybe two—the year that he went under!"

"He had the humble wisdom that is wonder,"  
Mused Evans.

"Well, let's have another smile,"  
The younger countered, laughing. "Afterwhile,  
The way I'm getting wise and wiser still,  
I'll bawl for milk! Where was I? Oh—the hill  
Above the Promised Land—and 'Diah praying!  
Leastwise, he didn't faint. Then he was saying  
How that was where the water ran both ways,  
And over there beyond the valley haze  
The great Pacific rolled! I heard it roar—  
Almost!

It was a couple years before  
That funny feeling left me. All the way  
Down Little Sandy and the Big next day,  
It grew and grew till it was everywhere,  
And not a 'tarnal thing but sagebrush there,  
And sage hens! Every time a covey broke  
From cover—like a gun-shot lacking smoke—  
It hit me like a signal something queer  
Around us had been waiting for, to hear  
And happen—if you gather what I mean!  
And when we struck the valley of the Green,  
'Twas beaver heaven!

Listen to it moan  
Out yonder, like a dog without a bone!

Lend me your bosom, Arthur, if I weep!  
I'd give a leg to see the slow Spring creep  
Among the willows by the stream once more  
The way it did that year of 'twenty four  
And everything brand new! Them days are dead,  
And gone forever—followed after Jed  
To heaven! Mind to quit and settle down,  
And keep a cow and wife somewheres near town  
And be a Christian!"

"Well, why don't you quit?"

The elder chuckled.

"Had a spell of it,"  
The other answered. "Wasn't nothing there!  
And even if it just ain't anywhere,  
Out this way it's got room enough to be!  
Get humpbacked looking for a living! Me?  
What for? To have a funeral, and all  
The neighbors happy for a chance to bawl  
About how much they always thought of you—  
And mostly didn't! Such a nice grave too,  
With posies on it! When I rise to shine,  
I'll take the belly of a wolf for mine,  
The same as Jed!"

Rejecting with disgust  
This wrinkled desert of our mortal dust,  
He tapped the fount of phantom youth again,

And raised a war-whoop. Blackfeet fighting men  
Flung far defiance, then no longer prowled  
The silence. And the dog leaped up and growled  
Through bared teeth ready for the throat of harm;  
Then, looking sheepish at the false alarm,  
Lay down and grumbled. Hard to understand—  
These men were!

“Better raise this child by hand  
On water, Bob?” Black anxiously inquired.  
And, with the high disdain of the inspired,  
Expansively the younger gestured. “Art,”  
He said, “you old pig-eater<sup>1</sup> in your heart,  
And hardly yet half wintered at the best,  
You’ve got no tender feelings in your breast,  
No tender feelings! Telling me to quit!  
Been drinking, eh? And just can’t carry it  
The way a mountain man like me can do!

Well, to resume, as I was telling you  
Before you up and started telling me,  
If things could be the way they used to be  
Them days with Jed, I’d give a leg or so  
And run barefooted! Art, I’d even throw  
Your mare in, and the sore upon her back,  
If boot was needed!”

<sup>1</sup> *Mangeur de lard*, signifying a greenhorn in the mountains—  
one who had not yet wintered in the country and lived on wild  
game.

“Why the boot?” said Black;  
“You’ve traded all your legs off.”

Mournfully

The other shook his head. “And you and me  
Old pardners, Arthur! Now, as like as not,  
We’ll never see them days. And all for what?  
A bag of bones!”

He wiped away a tear

That wasn’t there—but might have been, to  
hear  
The timbre of a changing mood that came  
Into his voice. “’Twill never be the same  
Till Jed comes riding that cayuse of his.  
I wonder where in hell this Heaven is!  
A long ways off, and nary blade of grass  
Nor water hole beyond the narrow pass  
Across the Shining Mountains; and the snow  
Horse-deep and getting deeper, maybe! . . . No,  
Not even Jed could make it back alive!

’Twas just the same the year of ’twenty five.  
A summer and a winter and a spring—  
And still the other side of everything  
Was Christmas for the shaver that was me.  
Who knew what might be hanging on the  
tree?  
If God and ’Diah did, they wouldn’t tell!

We had been trapping westward quite a spell,  
With sign a-plenty. Beaver packs had put  
The whole caboodle, mostly, flat a-foot,  
And made the Crow cayuses cuss our luck,  
If horses can. And then one day we struck  
A river in the mountains flowing west  
Among thick brush—so thick, we climbed a crest  
To have a look at where the canyon led.

And, holy smoke! The way I thought of Jed  
Had turned into a picture! Still and dim  
And big with secrets! No horizon rim,  
So far it was! You looked and looked, and then  
From where you ended you began again  
And looked a little farther. Bye and bye,  
The country—just—got—thinner—and was sky,  
Blue hazy, and the secrets hiding yet.  
You fumbled round inside of you to get  
A word, and drew a lungful fit to shout it;  
But there was nothing you could do about it,  
Except to look. Nohow, it couldn't be—  
And there it was! You rubbed your eyes to see  
Queer ranges to the southward, built of smoke,  
As if you'd just been dreaming them, and 'woke  
And couldn't quite remember. Pretty soon  
You'd wake all over, and 'twould be the moon  
That you were in, or anywhere not made  
To pasture human critters. Half afraid,  
You looked a little nearer there below;

And there was snow that couldn't have been snow  
Around a sea of ice that wasn't ice,  
Or was it? When you blinked and saw it twice,  
'Twas more like water foaming at the lip,  
And yet it didn't move. A crazy ship  
That was an island had been sailing there  
Forever—hadn't gotten anywhere,  
And wouldn't. Wasn't any use in motion—  
No place to go to!

Could it be the ocean—  
The Great Pacific? All at once, it could!  
You held your breath—it *was*! From where we  
stood  
And saw the sky and water mix, almost  
You got a glimmer of the China coast,  
Low-lying! Just look hard enough, you might!

Well, there was plenty arguing that night!  
It was, it wasn't, and it was again  
All over. But the was-ers won it when  
We made the lake shore, even though it wasn't!  
If lakes taste salty and the ocean doesn't,  
Why 'twasn't ocean! Try it on your tongue!  
The very sand was salt! The water stung,  
Lead-heavy with it!

Nothing seemed to care,  
Excepting us and sea-gulls screaming there



Above us that it *was* the ocean too!  
The rest just went on knowing what it knew  
And being what it was, and didn't take  
No interest in whether 'twas a lake  
Or ocean, neither one! It sort of slept,  
The way it had a million years, and kept  
A secret you were half-way scared to know!  
Seems funny! Only thirteen years ago,  
And nary secret hiding anywhere!  
You're only here again when you get there,  
And then it's there again when you get here!  
A bag of tricks!

He went away the year  
Of 'twenty six. We rendezvoused in June,  
And then he left. Some river of the moon  
That he went chasing after, seemed to me—  
The wonderfulest river that could be,  
Because there wasn't any where it flowed  
Off westward there and made an easy road  
To the Pacific—which we knew by then  
The salt lake wasn't. Saw him once again,  
On Bear Lake, when you three came back half dead  
From California, Bob. And what a Jed!  
A buzzard wouldn't eat him! Made me glad  
He didn't take me!

Now I wish he had—  
I wish he had."

#### IV

“You’re getting sober, Squire,”  
Black said, and, sighing, stirred the dreamy fire  
Until the dozing logs awoke in flame;  
“Or else—which seems to figure out the same—  
It’s only getting human makes you sad.  
You wish he’d taken you, and if he had  
You’d know, with inside knowledge of the thing,  
How buzzards soar, what makes the kiotes sing  
Such mournful ditties, what the crows regret  
With all their cawing. Maybe so—and yet,  
Who ever saw a wolf with bowels of brass  
Or bird with iron gizzard? Let it pass,—  
Or, rather, let the jug!”

He rose and scanned  
The stars awhile, eyes shaded with a hand  
Against the groundling dazzle. “Night is new,”  
He yawned; “and there’s another nip or two  
Left in the Dipper yonder, tipped to pour  
Whatever angels drink. There’s even more  
Left in the jug. So here’s regards to those  
Bone-scattered where the Colorado flows

Among the damned Mojaves, and beside  
The Umpqua where it bitters with the tide  
Among the marshes—Jedediah's men!  
And may they rise and follow him again  
The other side of Jordan! Drink the toast,  
Bob Evans!"

"—Even to the cosmic coast,"  
The other said, and drank, "where all stars cease,  
And seas of silence answer with their peace  
The petulant impertinence of life!"

"And here's to when I keep that cow and wife,"  
The youngest bantered, "—just as like to be!"

"But when," said Black, "we started for the sea  
That summer, Bob, not one of seventeen,  
I'll warrant, cared to know what life might mean.  
To ask that question is a kind of dying.  
What matters to a bird a-wing is flying;  
What matters to a proper thirst is drinking.  
A tree would wither if it got to thinking  
Of what the summers and the winters meant!  
There was a place to go to, and we went,  
High-hearted with a hunger for the new.  
The fifty mules and horses felt so too  
For all their heavy packs. The brutes are wise  
Beyond us, Bob. They can't philosophize  
And get the world all tangled in their skulls.

At Utah Lake the mourning of the gulls  
Had seemed the last of what was known and  
    dear;  
And when we struck the bend of the Sevier  
To follow eastward where it cuts the range,  
The canyon seemed the doorway to a strange  
New world. The ridden critters and the led,  
Strung out along the river after Jed,  
Pricked ears and listened. Nothing but the whine  
Of saddle leather down the toiling line,  
Until some cayuse at the canyon's mouth  
Neighed; and the empty valley, rising south,  
Was full of horses answering the din  
Of horses where no horse had ever been  
Forever. And the mules brayed, walking faster.  
What need of any pasture, greener, vaster,  
To pay them for the eager joy of striving?  
If living is a matter of arriving,  
Why not just start to rotting at the first,  
And save the trouble? Thirty died of thirst  
And hunger yonder in the desert hells.  
Ask God why, when you see Him. If He tells,  
You'll hardly be the wiser. Furthermore,  
I'll gamble that He won't.

    The valley bore  
Southeastward, and there wasn't any game.  
Our packs got lighter fast. So when we came  
To where a small creek entered from the west,

We followed up along it to a crest,  
And saw what fed our hunger for the new  
But couldn't satisfy it; for it grew  
Beyond the feeding. Where a high plateau  
Stretched southwardly, a million years or so  
Of rain had hewed a great unearthly town  
With colored walls and towers that looked down  
On winding streets not meant for men to tread.  
You half believed an angel race, long dead,  
Had built with airy, everlasting stuff  
They quarried from the sunrise in the rough  
And spent their lives in fashioning, and died  
Before the world got old.

The other side  
Of ranges west and south, a dim world ran  
Uphill to where eternity began  
And time died of monotony at last.  
And when that rim of nothing had been passed,  
Why surely 'twould be California then;  
But would we all be long-gray-whiskered men  
Before we got there? No one seemed to mind.  
God only knew what wonders we might find,  
And how He must be weary with His knowing!  
No curiosity at all for going  
And nothing new to look for anywhere!

Into the clutter of the foothills there  
Below, we wound a weary way, and crossed

The valley of a stream we called the Lost—  
And lost it was, if ever it had run!  
The bare slopes focussed the September sun  
Upon the blistering rubble. Round the few  
And shallow holes that kept a brackish brew  
The fifty critters pawed and fought and screamed,  
Blaming each other; and the echoes seemed  
To ape the clatter of the hoofs like laughter.

It wasn't any better soon thereafter  
Among the tumbled hills gone bald with age  
Millenniums ago. The scrubby sage  
Was making out to live on memory yet,  
But even it had started to forget  
What rain was like. Our grub was getting low.  
For days we hadn't even seen a crow  
To shoot at; but we didn't seem to care,  
For we were learning our first lesson there  
In what thirst means; and we were walking  
now.

My roan was pulling like a stubborn cow  
Not halter-broke, when, with a shivering slump,  
He just sat down awhile upon his rump,  
And then keeled over with a tired sigh.  
So there was meat we couldn't stop to dry,  
For need of water. Little we could eat!  
It takes a proper tongue to relish meat,  
And not some dead cow's crammed into your  
mouth!

The balance of the day we hurried south—  
A creeping hurry; anyway, as fast  
As we could snake the nags along. At last  
'Twas night again, and not a blade of grass  
Or drop of water. Seemed 'twould never pass.  
You dozed, dog-weary, and the dreams you  
    had  
Of creeks and springs were just about as bad  
As even waking was. A horse would dream—  
Of wading, maybe, in a mountain stream—  
And neigh himself and all the herd awake;  
And there'd be panic neighing, and a break  
That ended, in a flounder, with the ropes.  
It surely didn't much revive our hopes,  
When morning came, to find three others dead.

I thought 'twas kind of funny about Jed  
That day. You see, I didn't know him then.  
And there was peevish talk among the men  
Of how he didn't seem to realize.  
There'd be a freshness in his face and eyes  
When he came striding from a spell of straying  
Off trail somewhere. I know now he'd been  
    praying.  
You'd swear he knew a spring along the way,  
And kept it for himself! He'd smile and say  
We shouldn't doubt, but we should trust and  
    know  
There'd soon be water.

And, by God, 'twas so—  
'Twas so that afternoon!

We struck a draw—  
The toughest going mortal ever saw—  
A dazzling oven, crooked as a snake  
And full of boulders. But it seemed to make  
Downhill and southward, so we shuffled in.  
To think that such a flood had ever been  
As rolled those boulders, almost drove you crazy!  
I mind that everything was dizzy-hazy  
When someone said that Louis Pombert's mare  
Was down. What of it? No one seemed to care  
Enough to save the saddle.

Bye and bye—  
Hours later or the batting of an eye  
Was all the same, for time just sort of stood  
And wobbled like a drunk—a mule sawed wood  
Down yonder. Then they all began to saw,  
And horses whinnied up along the draw,  
If they could manage better than a nicker.  
The weakest of them whimpered, stepping  
quicker,  
And when they stumbled, staggered up again  
With bloody noses. Presently the men  
Were hollering down yonder like a flock  
Of addled crows. Another jut of rock,  
And there it was—a world of running water!”



“Aw, Arthur, make it just a little hotter!”  
The younger pleaded; “just a little drier,  
So I can raise a thirst!”

“You grieve me, Squire,”  
The elder said; “I thought you’d had enough  
To be half human! Water’s holy stuff,  
Direct from heaven! When the grass gets green,  
That’s worship! Bob here gathers what I mean,  
Eh Bob? You mind that day; you had the most  
Tough water-scrapes with Jed!”

“The Holy Ghost,  
The dove descending,” Evans mused aloud.

The youngest laughed. “This go-to-meeting crowd  
Should rise and let the kiotes lead a hymn!”

“We might be singing with the seraphim,”  
Said Evans.

“Well, there was a church that night,”  
Continued Black. “We circled in the light  
Of one big fire; and when we had our fill  
Of horse meat, which we didn’t have to kill,  
Because too much is deadly as the lack,  
He got his Bible with the leather back  
(That looked a worn-out boot-top, like as not,)  
And fuzzy pages bulging with a lot

Of heavy reading. For a little while  
He thumbed it, silent. No one cracked a smile  
Or said a word, and there were godless cusses,  
Whose on'ry fracas and rakehell musses  
Had sent them where they were, among the others.  
Like pious little boys who mind their mothers,  
They sat there waiting, mannerly and prim.  
And if they hadn't, there was that in him  
To whale the devil out of any man.  
I've seen him do it.

Well, when he began  
To read out loud, 'twas not as parsons do.  
He said it just like anything that's true—  
'The sun is shining,' maybe, or 'the birds  
Are singing.' Something got into the words  
That made them seem they couldn't be the same  
That you remembered. For the Lord became  
A gentle shepherd, real as Mr. Jones,  
And he had made us rest our weary bones  
In that green pasture by the waters there!  
Laugh, Squire, and show your raising—I don't  
care;  
I like to see you happy, bless your heart!"

"I didn't mean to spoil your story, Art,"  
Explained the other. "Who am I to doubt it?  
But what would those dead horses say about it,  
Back yonder in the swelter?"

“Well, you see,”  
Black countered; “that was lack of piety.  
I guess they hadn’t gone to Sunday schools!”

“You reckon all of your Missouri mules  
Were Holy Rollers? Not a one was dead!”  
The younger chuckled.

“Just the same,” Black said,  
“It wasn’t funny and nobody snickered.  
It scared me when a happy cayuse nickered,  
The place had got so still when he was through.  
And then he didn’t preach, as parsons do;  
He just sat silent, for the Book had said it.  
What else was there to do when he had read it,  
But let it soak like rain? And if he prayed,  
You couldn’t hear him do it.

There we stayed  
A couple days to let the critters eat,  
And jerk the leavings of the pony meat  
Against the chance there’d not be game enough.  
For we were down to traps and trading stuff—  
Red bolted goods and blankets, fufaraws,  
Like beads and looking glasses, for the squaws,  
And knives and arrow metal for the men,  
So be it we should ever see again  
A human face but ours.

And then we took  
Down river—just a wider sort of brook,  
But 'Diah named it for the President,  
The Adams River. No fine compliment,  
We came to think; but not so bad at first.  
'Twas still a blessing to be shut of thirst  
So long as you remembered how it felt;  
But when you saw the packs of jerked horse melt  
To nothing, and the red-walled canyon wound,  
Until you only rambled round and round  
From nowhere, nowhere—not a thing to eat,  
But now and then a bite of rabbit meat—  
You wondered was there treason in the name!

About to kill a pony when we came  
At last to where a little creek broke through  
And made a valley. There a garden grew  
With tasseled corn and punkin vines between!  
You stood and stared, misdoubting you had seen,  
But there it flickered, sure as you were born—  
The yellow-bellied crawlers and the corn  
Late earing in the green!

We yelled hurrah  
For good old garden sass. And then we saw  
A little Indian woman running there,  
All wibble-wobble and a mess of hair,  
Hell-bent for cover—and she needed some,  
Not having any more on than your thumb,

But one important patch of rabbit fur!  
And, like the devils that she thought we were,  
Young hellions cheered her, laughing: 'Go it,  
Gert!'  
And 'Hump it, Maggie!' But the words of dirt  
They flung at her stopped quick enough, when Jed  
Came riding, looking like a thunder-head  
With lightning in it just about to break.  
'Respect a woman for your mothers' sake,'  
He said, 'or take a licking!'

Well, he took  
Some knives and looking glasses, and the Book  
For luck, no doubt, and vanished up the creek  
Among the brush. It seemed a weary week  
We held the herd till he appeared again,  
About a dozen lousy-looking men  
And women at his heels, with not a thing  
Upon them but an apron and a string  
Of rabbit hide. If that was human mud,  
'Twas badly baked and furnished with the blood  
Of rabbits. 'Diah treated them the same  
As folks.

And while we feasted, others came,  
Like cringing cur-dogs that apologize  
For being curs, to see with their own eyes  
The four-legged spirit-critters and the gods  
That rode them; for we made our thunder-rods

Spout cloud and lightning. Anyone would say  
We celebrated Independence Day,  
If there had been a barrel of lemonade!  
For pretty soon nobody was afraid.  
The women brought us cakes of pounded seeds  
Messed up with cane, and strutted in the beads  
They got from us. God-awful homely lasses  
And scrawny grandmas peeped at looking glasses  
And giggled. Men went running to their wives,  
Like tickled boys, to show their shiny knives;  
And wee, pot-bellied rascals dared to sneak  
Just near enough to give our shirts a tweak  
And show their little sisters who was scared!

It kind of looked as if the Lord prepared  
A table for us!

Well, the thought of it  
Still fed us—anyway a little bit—  
Down river. Anything might happen next,  
The way it had, to fit the Bible text  
He read that night. And, soon enough, it did!

The canyon narrowed, towering, and hid  
The friendly day. A scary twilight fell.  
As from the dusky bottom of a well,  
We saw the blood-red rim-rock swimming high  
Along the jagged knife-scar of a sky,  
And dim stars mocked the middle afternoon!

We thought at first the place would broaden  
soon.

The few stars only brightened in the cut,  
And, like a heavy snow of kettle-smut,  
Night smothered down.

'Twas long before we slept.  
Serenely in the diary he kept,  
Jed scribbled by the fire without a word.  
Unless a horse complained, you almost heard  
Your thinker thinking. All the while the stream  
Was like a sick man moaning in a dream  
Of dying.

We were plodding on our way  
When first the rim-rock reddened with the day,  
But up until the noon 'twas early morning.  
It seemed that any minute, without warning,  
The worst might happen. Maybe one more bend,  
And there we'd come upon the canyon's end,  
Some cave without a bottom, yawning black.

There was no hope of 'Diah turning back;  
He wouldn't listen to the gloomy talk  
Among the men. 'Yea, even though I walk  
The valley of the shadow,' said the Book.  
His face and eyes would have that freshened look,  
When he'd been riding out of sight a spell,  
As though he knew some good he wouldn't tell,

Just wanting to surprise us pretty soon.  
The whole late evening that was afternoon  
We plodded till the few trapped stars were bright.

The weakest of the horses went that night  
To fill the pots. It didn't really matter  
Which one we ate—unless the leather's fatter  
In either of your boot-soles than the other.  
The driftwood made a sickly sort of smother;  
And while we watched the kettles in despair,  
Jed asked old Rogers would he offer prayer;  
And Harry would—but offer's not the word.  
He took no chances that Jehovah heard,  
Or interrupted with an old man's 'Eh?'—  
The off ear cupped the hard-of-hearing way—  
'Wha's that?' He bellered. 'Twas a fine oration!

Well, when we'd feasted on our transportation  
And felt a little better, 'Diah read  
Some verses from the Scripture where it said  
The whole earth was the Lord's. A sneaking  
doubt  
If that was anything to brag about  
Grew big enough to dare you to deny it.  
Then all at once the canyon got so quiet  
The water didn't moan, the soggy wood  
Quit wheezing. And the whole round earth was  
good,  
The fulness of it—and it made you glad!



No, Squire, 'twas not the bellyful we had  
Of leather soup. 'Twas far above the belt.  
'Twas like old summers and the way you felt  
A barefoot shaver—white clouds going over,  
And apple trees and bumblebees and clover,  
And warm dust feeling pleasant to your toes,  
And wheat fields flowing and the corn in rows,  
And stars to twinkle when the day was done,  
While people rested, certain of the sun,  
All safe and cozy!

Words are mighty queer!  
They try to tell you something, and you hear  
Some old familiar rattle in your head  
That isn't any nearer what they said  
Than mules and mothers; but you think you know!  
Then maybe, all at once, *they're simply so—*  
*And always were!* They sprout like seeds and  
thrive!  
If all the words men gargle came alive,  
I wonder what would happen! 'Diah's sprouted.

And then he talked. Seemed foolish that we  
doubted,  
So near the Spanish settlements might be.  
And soon we ought to make the Siskadee  
Old Ashley tried that spring to navigate,  
But, getting nearer to St. Peter's gate  
Than to the ocean, had to give it up.

And California! That was where the cup  
Ran over!

Well, we stumbled down that maze  
And counted horses dying. —Also days  
Since we had fed in yonder Indian heaven;  
And number five was slow, but six and seven  
Hung on so long they almost never quit.  
The earth was needing axle grease a bit  
Before we finished counting nine and ten!  
Do you remember, Bob, what happened then,  
And what we saw?"

"The day broke overhead.  
The endless canyon ended," Evans said;  
And there was desert to the setting sun!"

"I guess we'd better have another one,"  
Remarked the Squire, "before we undertake it!  
Unless we do, I doubt if we can make it.  
We've et an awful lot of harness leather!"

"The skin-rack horses nickered all together,"  
The elder mused, as though he didn't hear;  
"And up the haunted canyon in the rear  
It seemed the dead ones answered. Starving mules  
Heehawed, as if to jeer the two-legged fools  
Who brought them there. We didn't make a sound;  
Just looked across that country, hellward bound,

And filled our eyes with nothing, flabbergasted.  
You made up stories while the canyon lasted,  
But yonder was the story God had made.  
It looked like even Harry hadn't prayed  
Quite loud enough!

Jed didn't seem to care.  
Spoke quietly of California there,  
And pointed to the white sun blazing down  
Beyond that waste! There'd be an Indian town  
Along the river we were coming to,  
And there we'd rest. He spoke as if he knew,  
And made hope certain as geography.  
Why, come to think about it, you could see  
The corn fields waving by the riverside!

Well, two more horses and a mule had died,  
With others on the ragged edge of dying,  
Before the Adams finally quit trying  
To justify the wearing of the name.  
And in the dragging afternoon we came  
Upon the Colorado.

Greasewood throve  
Along the valley, and a stunted grove,  
That huddled yonder by the river, made  
The only promise of a little shade  
In all that bowl of glare. Two yapping dogs  
Came bristling; and we saw a house of logs

Squat-roofed with 'dobe in among the trees.  
A nursing woman, hobbled at the knees  
With frightened young ones, peeked at us and ran  
Behind the cabin. Then an oldish man,  
We took to be a Piute, filled the door.  
If anything surprised him any more,  
You didn't guess it by the look he had.  
Was he amused or just a little sad  
Or maybe both? The quiet, puckered way  
He looked us over didn't seem to say  
A thing for sure, except he didn't scare.  
And when we sign-talked at him, asking where  
The village was, he waved his hand around  
The whole horizon, pointed to the ground,  
Then tapped his chest and chuckled pleasantly.  
'Twas Crusoe with the desert for a sea,  
And he had built an island with his labors  
Where there were only well-behaving neighbors—  
The sun and moon and stars!

We feasted there  
On garden stuff, and Jed paid more than fair  
With trading goods. The mules and horses had  
Their fodder, and the little ones were glad  
With bells to tinkle, while their mother chose,  
With happy little noises in her nose,  
The gaudiest of cloth. But all the while  
Old Crusoe smiled a pleasant little smile,  
Observing with that quiet squint of his,

As though he sort of knew what really is  
And always was and shall be evermore,  
So that he wasn't bothered looking for  
What isn't, wasn't, and will never be."

"Another sort of turnip, seems to me,"  
The younger said; "just dumb and half asleep."

"And maybe," Evans added, "rooted deep  
In what I call the other side of things,  
Where running feet are stilled and eager wings  
Are folded, and all seeking is forsaken,  
Because there's nothing to be overtaken  
In such a peace of being."

"Well," said Black,  
"I've often kind of hankered to go back  
And see if I could gather what he knew.  
It must have worked on all the others too;  
Nobody joked about him. All the way  
Down river, when the going, day by day,  
Grew harder, with the done-out critters dying,  
I thought and thought of how you go on trying  
And suffering to find, until you're dead,  
When maybe all the while it's in your head  
The way it was in his, if you could see.

But when we came to where the Siskadee  
Broke out into a valley fat with tillage,

And saw the populous Mojave village  
Among the trees, he didn't seem so wise;  
For hadn't we arrived at Paradise,  
However we had paid in Purgatory?  
You're always wanting life to be a story  
With some pat end to show what it's about.  
Somebody's torn a lot of pages out,  
If that's the case! You never quite arrive.

Well, it was mighty good to be alive  
Among those gardens yellowing with plenty,  
And see our critters, dwindled now to twenty,  
Contented in the meadows, making fat.

Could we have read, just one year after that,  
The bloody page that would be written, when  
With eighteen more, Jed came that way again  
From Bear Lake, fought with devils, met as friends,  
And fled with eight! I guess the story ends  
When anybody turns an empty page—  
An ending without end. You'd swear old age  
Had found them when they reached our camp  
    beside  
The Stanislaus, and told how ten had died  
Bare-handed in the treacherous attack.

'Twas lucky, Bob, you didn't try it back  
With Jed and Silas Gobel, your old friend

Of desert days. But what a rousing end  
Old Silas made before his page went blank!  
The eight had crossed, and from the western bank  
They saw it happen on the further shore—  
The whole tribe swarming inward, with the roar  
A cloudburst makes, upon the helpless ten—  
Men drowning quickly in a flood of men,  
Save where old Silas, hardened at the forge,  
And looming like a boulder in a gorge  
Bankfull with freshet, labored with a limb  
Of mesquite for a hammer at his grim  
Last smithing job. If God has set the Right  
To prove its mettle in the losing fight  
Forever, 'twas another score for God!  
Not all the horses Silas ever shod  
Outweighed the burden of the spears that bowed  
Those blacksmith shoulders; and the milling crowd  
Rained arrows till the club no longer whirled  
About him. When a howling eddy swirled  
And slowly closed at last above his head,  
The watchers yonder knew that he was dead  
As any coward. Then the running fight—  
Few rifles, many bows. And all that night  
They fled until the desert blazed with day.

But that was still a good long year away,  
And we were happy, being richly fed  
With more than garden stuff. For Rumor said,  
And 'twas the clearer being vague, somewhere

Far off beyond the jealous desert there  
The ripened days of all the wide world went  
To make a lazy country of content  
Where it was always Spring—a dream of Spain,  
Come true forever! Not a wish was vain  
In yonder climate kind to all desires!  
Hard-bitten youngsters, squatting 'round the fires,  
Half tight already with imagined wine,  
Discussed it, till you felt the soft sun shine  
On drowsy vineyards; heard beneath the stars  
The castanets, the strumming of guitars,  
The singing señoritas! There it lay,  
And only Boston clippers knew the way—  
Ten thousand miles down under 'round the  
Horn!  
To think that we, of all our breed, were born  
To see it first by land!

Our luck was good.  
You, Squire, would say Jehovah understood  
We'd lack for horses, and provided some.  
Well, anyway, some Indians had come  
Across the desert with a stolen herd  
Of Spanish Mission horses! Seemed absurd  
Such scurvy rascals hailed from Paradise!  
What scenes had filled their slinking, sleepy eyes  
That didn't seem to care! Reubasco knew  
Their Spanish lingo; and the wonder grew  
The bigger for the little that they told.



'Twas late October, and the moon was old,  
As we were, when we hit Mojave town.  
'Twas young again, as we were, going down  
The trail of sunset to the Promised Land,  
Our first camp out. We scooped the seeping sand  
Along a wash to make a little spring,  
And didn't sleep much, for the whinnying  
Of horses, waiting for the hole to fill  
Again and yet again.

The blue-black chill

Wore out and whitened to a withering blaze;  
And after that we didn't count the days  
Or nights of endless plodding, nor the sleeps  
That ran to tangled dreams of water seeps  
Clawed out in vain. We only counted drinks.  
Dry washes running into empty sinks,  
Bankfull with starlight, mocked us when we  
tramped  
From sunset to the white of dawn, and camped,  
Holed up in sand against the blistering light,  
Until the purple chill came. Mind the night  
We found the lake, Bob?"

"I can see it yet,"

The other mused. "The moon about to set;  
The ghostly yucca trees around us there,  
Transfigured by some ultimate despair  
That filled the stillness of the solitude;

The slimy cabbage cactus that I chewed;  
The rasping, hollow sound of critters panting;  
The sudden clearing, and the low moon slanting—  
The low moon slanting on a lake! Dry salt!  
A crazy notion 'twas the yuccas' fault  
Seemed true, and yet I couldn't make it track!"

"Well, even though it wasn't wet," said Black,  
"It made the going easy. Anyway,  
You mind it ended with the break of day  
And how that cool spring sparkled in the sun  
There where the river that forgot to run  
Spread wide to fill the lake that wasn't wet!  
'Twas something queer you wouldn't soon forget—  
The spooky yucca trees that seemed to know  
The end of us and didn't care—the low  
Half moon across the salt! But Oh, the night  
We saw the full moon glitter on the white  
Peaks yonder!"

"I remember," Evans said.  
"The journey's end! And yet, the day when Jed  
Went hunting water for us seems to glow  
The brighter now. With burning sand for snow,  
The blizzard booming down the empty river,  
And 'Diah calmly praying to the Giver  
Of all good things, before he left us there  
Among the huddled horses! Could a prayer  
Make headway yonder where the sun at noon

Ran through the howling smother like a moon  
Gone mad with thirst? It seemed a cruel joke.  
Yet there was something in the way he spoke  
Of finding water—something in his face—”

“As if,” Black said; “it might be any place  
For anybody who could look that way!”

“And I believed the balance of the day,”  
The other said. “But when the storm was through  
At sundown, and the still cold moonlight grew  
Around us, I forgot enough to doubt him.  
The moon denied it knew a thing about him;  
The silence said he wasn’t coming back.”

“It didn’t know old ’Diah!” chuckled Black.  
“Remember how he made us kneel to thank  
The Giver of Good Things before we drank,  
There where the river, hiding underground,  
Came up as if to have a look around  
And made a pool before it hid again?”

“The very horses kneeling with the men,  
Eye-deep in joy! The moon near full and sinking,  
And morning coming on while we were drinking,”  
The other mused. “I like that picture better  
Than yours, Art.”

“Well, that water did seem wetter  
Somehow,” Black said, “than any other brew

This side of where the Squire is going to,  
Unless he mends his ways. He won't, alas!  
But what about the day we topped the pass  
And stopped to stare—with all of that behind us,  
And only missing horses to remind us  
Of what it cost? The Promised Land at last!  
And when we climbed the mountain, saw the vast  
Land lazing there with nothing left to seek  
Forevermore—the high, thin silver streak  
That must have been the ocean—scattered droves  
In happy meadows—greenery of groves  
And vineyards! Wasn't that a better sight?  
And yonder, drowsing in the golden light,  
The Mission of the Padres! Journey's end!"

He thought awhile in silence. "No, my friend,"  
He said, "you win. The men and horses kneeling  
Around the pool, the white of morning stealing—  
It's better. Queer the way a man remembers!"

He gazed awhile upon the dreaming embers,  
With silent laughter mounting to his eyes.  
"And so," he chuckled, "there was Paradise,  
And all us lanky, ragamuffin scamps  
A-faunching! What does 'Diah do? He camps  
To shave his whiskers!"

## V

Chin to chest and nodding,  
The younger, startled by the elder's prodding,  
Jerked back to waking with a hostile glare  
That softened to a silly grin. "We're there!  
Wake up!" Black shouted.

Leaving with a leap  
Some rabbit heaven of his broken sleep,  
The dog lit snarling, shook himself to clear  
The addled world, sat up and pricked an ear  
To point the question of an injured whine.

"Where?" growled the Squire.

"The Land of Corn and Wine!"  
Laughed Black; "and dark-eyed senoritas too!  
But here you squat, you lazy loafer you,  
And snooze!"

"Why, Arthur, I was only thinking  
Of what's the use in talking about drinking,"  
Explained the other. "Why not have a drink?  
You just don't realize how hard I think

When I think hard. To prove I was awake,  
I saw you all go swimming in that lake  
To scrub yourselves. I'll bet you needed peeling!  
And I know all about the fellow stealing  
The horses at the come-to-glory meeting!  
Well then, we're there! So how about some eating  
And maybe just a gurgle? Woo! I'm froze!"

He shook himself, dog-fashion, as he 'rose,  
And, yawning, vanished creekward. Snapping brush  
Upon the treble of the harplike hush  
Plucked desultory discord. He returned  
Arm-laden; nursed the embers till they burned,  
Blue-stemming into blossom round the logs;  
Then moved the slashed hump nearer, with the  
dog's  
High, whimpering approval. "There!" said he,  
Now pass the moonshine, so as I can see  
Your senoritas!"

Edging nearer while  
The trio drank, the fourth, with tongueful smile  
Of ready gratitude, and both intense  
Ears focussed on the simmering succulence,  
Leaned hard as though his patience were a chain.  
The humblest, prayerful whimpers proving vain,  
He snapped the leash, and, with explosive barks,  
Made pointed, if not impious, remarks  
Upon the doings of Divinity.

Whereat the youngest of the Trinity  
Gave heed at last and opened heaven's gate.

The Fork's returning chatter, as they ate,  
Made bold against the canyon's phasic moaning—  
Time troubling and Eternity intoning  
The never and forever that are one.  
It grew upon them when the feast was done;  
And each sat silent, suddenly alone,  
Negotiating, as the dog the bone,  
Some all but meatless leaving of the past.

A warwhoop shattering the spell at last,  
The lonely little worlds flowed back together.  
"I sure do like this California weather,"  
The Squire remarked, with hands before the flame.  
"I'll need more educating, just the same,  
Before I see your *senoritas* clear.  
If yonder's any pleasanter than here,  
I wonder why you beggars didn't stay."

"Well, take the donkey and his bait of hay."  
Black stroked his whiskers sagely. "Round the mill  
He chases fodder that is yonder still  
Regardless of how far or fast he goes.  
And why? Because a proper donkey knows  
If he just chases hard enough, he'll beat it.  
And maybe, when he's too done out to eat it,  
He'll come to fodder heaven if he's pious!"

"Jed told me once God gave us goals to try us,"  
Said Evans; "living was a kind of weaning.  
We needed sugar-teats of worldly meaning  
For some unworldly purpose of the soul.  
It seemed the goal was learning that a goal  
Is just the fleeing shadow that you cast,  
Until pursuing teaches you at last  
What mattered was the light upon your back."

"Just like old 'Diah," meditated Black,  
Scarce breaking silence—"just the way he'd be  
When there was no one left but him and me  
And we'd be camping, maybe on the Snake.  
All still, but for the sound the fire would make,  
And then you'd notice he was looking through  
you,  
That way he had. You wondered if he knew you.  
You wondered if you knew him, even more.  
And then he'd tell what he'd been groping for  
Down deep inside of him; and while he told,  
Like dreaming, something in him very old  
And gentle made you happy to be sad.  
For suddenly some precious thing you had  
Or thought you had or would have, wasn't so;  
And yet the very hurt of letting go  
Was like a joy—till he turned young again.  
Just thirty-eight now, counting nine from  
then!  
You somehow just can't think of him as dead."



"I saw him very old once," Evans said,  
"And gentle. Often when I sleep I see  
Again, between a white-hot sky and me,  
That look of glowing rain—like joy and tears.  
I've lived upon it all these lonely years  
From dream to dream. And when I see and  
wake,  
It seems awhile that nothing is opaque  
Or commonplace, but luminously new  
With what it was that I saw coming through  
His face that morning."

"Must have been the time,"  
Said Black, "the whole caboodle tried to climb  
The high Sierras for the shorter way  
Back yonder to the Lake from San Jose,  
The spring of 'twenty-seven. Peak on peak,  
And not a pass! A snow-hell of a week,  
With horses balking in the drifts to drowse  
And stiffen, standing. Camped on Stanislaus  
To wait and wonder how could he and you  
And Silas ever live to make it through.  
And then the desert yonder! Seemed to be  
He never wanted much to talk to me  
About it."

"Yes," said Evans, "it was hell;  
But there was heaven too. I want to tell  
About the lives we lived, the deaths we died



Shallowing by noon,  
With sloping walls, the canyon promised soon  
To reach a pass. The tall pines crowding round  
Appeared to know, and watched without a sound  
Our sweating labor in the biting glare.  
Loud in the knife-edge thinning of the air,  
The panting of the horses only made  
The muffled stillness deeper. And the grade  
Grew steeper with the waning of the day.

The pack mules had no quarrel with the hay  
That night.

We scooped a clearing in the snow,  
And, dozing with their muzzles to the glow  
Of logs, the mules and horses made a wall  
About us. 'Twasn't any time at all  
Until the peaks were floating in the dawn;  
And when they glittered, we were wading on,  
Knee-deep.

The stunted pines were getting scant,  
And more and more the critters balked to pant  
With straining nostrils, when we made a bend,  
And there ahead we saw the canyon's end—  
A sheer-walled pocket!

Nothing else to do  
But double back to where a gulch broke through

The southward wall. And 'twas a stubborn climb  
Before we scrambled out by camping time  
Upon a granite shoulder. In the last  
Of day, we stared dumbfounded at a vast  
White mountain maze beyond. The west went out,  
And blue night came upon us like the doubt  
That kept us silent. It was crystal cold.  
A single squatting pine, that looked as old  
And weathered as the granite, gave us fire.  
God only knows what maniac desire  
To live and flourish, packed into a cone,  
Could bite into that rock and fight alone  
For centuries! Gnarled, flattened like a flame  
By ancient winds, it fought until we came  
To burn it!"

"Surely does sound queer enough,"  
Remarked the elder, "for the sort of stuff  
To make religion out of. 'Diah could,  
I'll warrant!"

"When you think of all it stood,"  
Said Evans, "seems a crazy waste of trouble  
For one warm night! He'd say we're seeing double,  
The striving of the Spirit being one.  
Well, howsoever, ours had just begun  
Next morning; for the shoulder fell abrupt,  
A swimmy distance, into valleys cupped  
With crowding peaks that glittered blinding white.

We got the outfit down at fall of night  
By angling back beneath the granite crest  
To where the mountain steepened south and west  
Into a canyon winding south and east.  
Halfway to noon it seemed that neither beast  
Nor man could make it to the canyon bed,  
Unless a goat might. Bothered even Jed,  
Until we came to where a rubble slide  
Broke through the wall-rim. Looked like suicide  
To try it; but the only chance was there.

It took some coaxing for the little mare  
To lead the way. She pawed and shook her head,  
All nervous like a woman—but she led,  
Stiff-kneed and mincing, sliding on her tail.  
A-slither in the wallow of her trail,  
The horses followed; but the mules agreed  
That horses were an idiotic breed,  
And wouldn't budge without a lot of booting.  
Well, finally they started out a-scooting  
To get it over—and they did it brown!

Old 'Diah and the mare were half way down  
And right side up, when, mortally insulted  
And fighting mad, those critters catapulted  
Against the rear. The rest of it was snow,  
A little blizzard roaring there below  
With heads and tails and hoofs and squealing in it!  
It got to be a mighty long half minute

Before it ended, and the canyon thundered  
Far off and dim.

We held our breaths and wondered  
How Jed was faring in the drift that churned  
With scrambled horses."

"That was where you learned  
It's hard to kill a Christian, I'll allow,"  
The younger bantered.

"Didn't, anyhow,"  
Said Evans. "Saw him crawling out as cool  
As ever—maybe more so! Not a mule  
Or horse had suffered in the cushioned tumble.  
The mules appeared to be a bit more humble,  
I noticed, when we skidded down the slope  
And finished rolling.

There's a lift of hope  
In climbing, even though you want to drop,  
Done out. A sort of something at the top,  
That isn't there, is going to be good.  
But yonder was the top, and there we stood  
Spilled out along the bottom of a pit.  
No way at all to climb back out of it,  
If we'd a mind to. Had to go ahead;  
And into what new trap that canyon led,  
God knew; and He was keeping deathly still.

We mended cinches broken in the spill,  
Re-set the packs, and waded on again.  
The going wasn't very bad, and when  
The pines had gathered round us, and the blue  
Of twilight came, the canyon widened through  
The cliffside of the valley we had seen  
At sunrise.

    If you gather what I mean,  
It sent a scary tickle up your spine  
To feel that snow-hushed solitude of pine  
Grow darker, darker, darker, listening.  
And 'twasn't any sort of mortal thing,  
That made you almost glad to be afraid.  
It came on me that night, while 'Diah prayed,  
That maybe 'twas the Everlasting Word—  
That silence; maybe something really heard—  
Not Sunday-like, but really!

                    All the same,  
We wakened just as there when morning came.  
The forest listened on without a sound.  
If God had heard, He hadn't got around  
To doing anything about it yet!  
But all day long you couldn't quite forget  
That feeling, even when the snow had deepened.  
And when the way grew rockier and steepened  
Against the coming mountain, it was night.

There wasn't any blueing of the light;  
It grayed and blackened: for the sky began  
To cloud near evening. And a moaning ran  
Across the forest-roof that dusted snow  
Upon us in the quiet far below—  
That waiting quiet.

Wakened in the black  
Of dying fires, we heard the timber crack  
And groan above a steady ocean roar,  
And spindrift scudded on the forest floor  
In gusty whirls.

Thank God it wasn't snowing,  
With hell a-popping and a high wind blowing,  
When finally the long night faded gray.  
We couldn't wait. There wasn't any hay;  
There wasn't anything a horse could eat,  
Except the precious bags of Spanish wheat  
They carried—not enough, for all we knew,  
To see them to the Salt Lake rendezvous  
Across a land no man had ever seen.

We struck an open where we had to lean  
Against the howling suck along a draw  
That led us upward. Straight ahead we saw,  
By snatches in the blur of stinging sight,  
The jumble of the mountains, height on height  
At hide-and-seek behind the broken flurries.



But we were willing that tomorrow's worries  
Should worry us tomorrow; for the hollow  
Was drifting bad. The string began to wallow  
Breast-deep by middle day, and we were walking,  
If that is what you'd call it!

No use talking,  
We couldn't make it—and we couldn't camp.  
And so we headed up a rocky ramp  
Along the mountain's flank upon our right;  
And if we had a stiffer wind to fight,  
It swept the footing cleaner.

Leaning low  
And stopping often for the nags to blow,  
We climbed. The hollow sagged away from under  
And was a canyon flowing snow and thunder  
A dizzy drop beneath a granite ledge  
We snaked along. The precipice's edge  
Was coming nearer. Pausing often, pinned  
Between a wall of rock and wall of wind,  
We fought to breathe.

There was a jutting bend  
To leftward, where the ledge appeared to end  
In nothing. I can see old 'Diah there,  
Lean inward, leading. I can see the mare  
Step daintily and study with her nose  
The doubtful trail; three horses after those,

And looming in the middle of the string  
The bulk of Gobel. I was following  
The willing mule and tugging at the other,  
A balky brute.

Above the howling smother  
I heard old Silas, saw the stumbling critter  
He guided, scramble in the pebble-skitter  
To get its footing. Then it disappeared,  
Hoofs up. The next two horses screamed and  
reared  
Against the mule ahead of me. I guess  
'Twas over in the telling time or less;  
And there was Silas staring back at me,  
Mouth open. There was nothing else to see  
But empty ledge, between, and flying snow!

The steady thunder loudened there below  
A rumbling moment. Then I heard Jed shout  
My name, and saw him yonder, leaning out  
Around the mare. He seemed about to fall.  
And when he saw me huddled by the wall,  
His frosted face went empty of the wild,  
Scared look it had. It gentled, and he smiled—  
By God, he smiled, and I can see him now!

We made it round the jutting point somehow,  
And there the ledge swung rightward, and we saw  
The rim-rock of a deep confluent draw

Slope up to where the mountain sagged away  
To eastward. We were yonder when the day  
Began to muddy; and the black night found us  
Well down the ridge, a forest roaring round us,  
The snow scooped back to make a cozy wall  
About our fire.

                    We hardly talked at all  
Before we swooned into a heavy sleep.  
I wakened when the cold began to creep  
About the smouldering logs. The wind was  
                    dead.  
I listened. Not a whisper overhead.  
It seemed that something knew that nothing  
                    mattered.  
I hurried with the fire until it chattered  
About the logs. I didn't want to hear  
A meaning in the stillness. 'Twasn't fear  
Of storm and cold and hunger or of dying.  
'Twas doubt if there was any use in trying:  
And maybe if the Everlasting Word  
Was silence, and its meaning could be heard,  
'Twould be there was no meaning anywhere.  
I watched the others sleeping soundly there  
And wondered at the peace on 'Diah's face,  
The look of nothing being out of place  
In his world. Not a doubt what he would say!  
And Gobel getting ready for the day  
That was to come, with all that might of his

Unloosened; wise the way a good horse is  
Without a thought of wisdom! So I slept.

The cold was not so bad when morning crept  
Among the pines. The edge of it was round,  
Or sort of cotton-muffled, like the sound  
Of pot and skillet and the pawing feet  
Of horses begging us for more to eat  
Than we dared give them now.

The sun seemed warm,  
By midday, in a sky swept clean with storm;  
And yet the ghostly summer that we felt  
Upon our backs was not enough to melt  
The crusted drifts we broke and sweated in.

A valley forest had begun to thin  
Against a granite rise, and we could see,  
Ahead and to the right, southeastwardly,  
A maze of summits floating in the blue—  
The same it seemed that we were coming to  
Before we lost the critters. To the left,  
Northeastward, where a barren hollow cleft  
The rise ahead, there soared a single peak  
Above a roll of shoulders.

'Twas a week  
That morning since the critters tasted grass,  
And it was time we happened on a pass

Into a greener land. Their lightened packs  
Grew heavier—ribs getting to be racks  
To hang a skin. The water that they got  
Had been the snow we melted in a pot  
For days now. It was time to find a way.

We topped the drifted hollow when the day  
Had faded out. With only brush to burn,  
And scant at that, one kept the fire by turn,  
And it was mine to wait the morning in,  
That stretched-out moment when the wall is  
thin

Between two worlds, a brief forevermore  
When time sleeps. Even Gobel didn't snore;  
The mule and horses seemed to hold their  
breaths  
While some hushed answer, more profound than  
death's,

Made starry splendor out of old despair.  
Then suddenly the peaks were all a-stare  
To southward, and the morning star was dim  
Above the whitening horizon rim  
Without a mountain! We had found a pass!

By noon the snow gave out, and there was grass  
Along a canyon brook. Before the night  
Came on us, we had made it from the height  
Of January into blooming May  
Among the foothills.

So we camped a day  
Beside a brook. The critters grazed their fill,  
And, groaning with pot bellies, greedy still,  
Rolled in the lush green, hungry to the hide.  
Deer stole upon us, gazing Eden-eyed  
And wondering, to make a pleasant feast;  
And we gave thanks that night.

A day northeast  
We came upon a little river's mouth  
And camped there by a lake. Then, riding south  
And east by north, we kept the water's edge,  
Where many a wild-fowl paradise of sedge,  
All clack and chatter with another Spring's  
Old promises, exploded into wings  
That dimmed the sun.

A range of barren breaks  
Loomed eastward in the twilight from the lake's  
Far border. We could hardly wait to see  
What sort of country it was going to be  
The other side. Before the morning broke  
We wakened when the ducks and geese awoke  
To gossip drowsily along the shore;  
And wingéd thunders, roar on dimming roar,  
Fled in the starlight when I filled the pot.  
The venison was fried, the coffee hot  
Before the starry dusk began to pale;  
And yonder at the summit of the trail

Across the breaks, we faced the level night  
Of sunrise.

Vaguer for the blast of light,  
Appalling vastness lay before us there.  
No echo answered when the little mare  
Neighed nervously. We cupped our eyes to gaze.  
Deep in the bleary transparency of haze,  
Yet strangely near, the saw-tooth silhouette  
Of mountains, black with day behind them yet,  
Began abruptly to the east and ran  
To southward. Far beyond where they began  
We made out others, patterned on the high  
Horizon in the very stuff of sky,  
Where earth and air were getting to be one.

We headed downward straight into the sun;  
For yonder, if our reckoning was true,  
A crow would fly to find the rendezvous  
Beyond the world's end. Little likelihood,  
You'd say, that any ever did or could,  
To look across that country.

All forenoon  
It almost seemed we'd pass those mountains soon,  
So near they blackened, featureless and flat  
Against the dazzling sky. But after that,  
They turned to light and shadow, floating there  
As little solid as the oily air

They drifted on to keep the pace we made.  
'Twas blazing hot, without a wisp of shade  
To spell the horses in; and far ahead  
As where it seemed the floating mountains fled,  
It looked as if they'd had to wait for water.

But when it seemed the slanting day grew hotter,  
Before the sudden coming of the cool,  
We found a seeping spring that fed a pool  
Sun-steeping in a gully, where the land  
Of broken ridges gave away to sand  
And sage-brush flats. We called it ' 'Diah's luck.'

And while the critters drank, blue shadow  
    struck  
The world, as though you saw the sudden chill.  
It slowly climbed the mountains there, until  
The tallest blued and deepened into black.  
A thin new moon was floating on its back  
Above the peaks behind us, gleaming white  
With day yet, when already it was night  
Upon the desert."

Evans stirred the fire  
And gazed upon it. "Bob," remarked the Squire,  
"We'll need a better drink before we start  
Across that country. How about it, Art?  
Bob's gully stew ain't fit for man or beast!"  
They passed the jug around.



“ ’Twas wet, at least,”  
Said Evans. “And I doubt, if we had known  
What that would mean when yonder moon had  
grown  
And waned and darkened and was new again,  
If even ’Diah would have ventured then  
With all that lake and paradise of snow  
Behind us. Now I’m glad we didn’t know,  
Because of what I saw when I had learned.”

“It sounds like something Arthur’s donkey  
earned,”  
The younger chuckled.

“But he ground the grain,”  
Laughed Black; “he turned the mill!”

“The mill of pain,”  
Mused Evans, poring on the flame that curled  
About the logs. As though a tortured world  
Moaned in its sleep, the distant canyon took  
The vast night silence from the nearby brook  
And filled it.

“Well, you’d swear that while we slept,”  
Continued Evans, “yonder range had crept  
Upon us to surprise us when we woke,  
So sharply near it loomed when morning broke  
Behind it. And before that day was done,

It towered in the slanting of the sun,  
A bare black wall behind us to the right.

Jed thought we'd better travel on that night,  
For straight ahead as far as we could see  
To where the shimmering immensity  
Dissolved in air and hazy mountains rose  
From nothing, there was nothing short of those  
That promised water. Was it even there?

We stopped to rest the horses when the air  
Was chilling blue again, where they could eat  
Their fill of greasewood, for it saved the wheat  
And, being green, was wetter than the grain.

The black wall yonder loosened from the plain  
And hovered with the growing of the gloom.  
'Twas queer the way it seemed a trap of doom  
About to close, just pausing to remind us  
The water of the world was left behind us  
Forever with the disappointed hope  
When we had crossed that broken northern slope,  
Searching the bone-dry gullies for a hole.  
And when the day-old slice of moon, a bowl  
Of phantom water, slowing sinking, slipped  
Behind the range, it seemed the trap was tripped  
In silence.

We had walked a lot that day  
To save the nags, and by the wheezing way

They breathed it wasn't time for riding then.  
God only knew when they would drink again,  
If ever; while we had a sup or two  
Still hoarded in the horns—and that might do  
Until we reached the mountains we had seen.

I told myself the country might be green  
Beyond the range. How could you ever guess,  
I argued with the dragging weariness  
That wasn't me, about the lake and snow  
Back yonder? But the very mule said no,  
And balked by fits.

—You didn't climb the range;  
You sort of floated over with a strange  
Convincingness, and there it was. You knew  
The pasture that the creek went winding through  
To where the big elm, leaning to the pond,  
Made cool blue lace; the mumbling mill beyond  
The shady quiet; cattle feeding, lazy—  
The brindle cow that kicked, and good old Daisy  
With speckled face and crumpled water-horn  
With nothing in it; weary earing corn  
Beyond the fence, nid-nodding; time for bed;  
The new moon going down behind the shed  
To fill itself back yonder at the lake;  
And suddenly you stumbled broad awake  
And walking yet. Or were you still asleep?  
No, that was 'Diah wading shoulder-deep

In darkness yonder. What a killing stride!  
Because the meadow on the other side  
Was green, and sparkled dewy in the cool  
Of morning!

—Damn a hammer-headed mule  
That wouldn't let you sleep!

—The tripping sage,  
The slipping sand, and every other age  
A pause to spell the horses.

—Getting cold.  
You thought of frost. The night was turning old  
And looked it. Tired stars that didn't care  
At all if we were getting anywhere  
Or if there'd ever be another dawn.

Then, all at once, you knew the night was gone,  
And wondered vaguely when and where it went.  
Somehow it should have been a big event  
When finally the costly morning came.  
The black range looming near us seemed the same  
We left behind us when the moon was setting;  
But, like some dream the desert was forgetting,  
The other was a blur along the west  
To southward, lying low.

We stopped to rest  
And have a bite; but when we spilled the wheat

Upon the blankets, not a nag would eat;  
Just nuzzled it and wilted, standing propped  
And dead asleep. The way the mule's ears flopped,  
His long-drawn look of gloating in his plight,  
Abandoned to the curse of being right  
In all our quarrels, wakened, half and half,  
A catch of fellow feeling and a laugh  
Too weak for sound. Between a breath and breath,  
It seemed I slept a sleep as deep as death  
And long as weary time; for when Jed shook  
The unchanged landscape back, it had the look  
Of something that had happened lives away.  
He spoke of water yonder where the day  
Was like a wild beast crouching for the leap  
Across the black wall. Wasn't time to sleep  
Until the horses drank. And when I said  
The rigmarole that grumbled in my head,  
How I'd believe in water that I saw,  
There came that flint-hard setting of the jaw,  
That long-range hawk-gaze penetrating through  
you,  
The way you said, Art,—wondered if he knew you  
Or you knew him. And then his eyes went kind.  
"That saying, Bob," he said, "is for the blind.  
Believing is a better way to see."

It didn't make a bit more sense to me  
Than to the mule I jerked and kicked awake.  
The horns bone-dry and hell about to break

The black dam yonder, and the going tougher!  
The plain wore out; the land was getting  
rougher—

Low ridges, crookéd, cactus-haunted draws  
On fire with day, and no less dry because  
You couldn't see a drink that wasn't there.

By noon you almost tried to touch the bare  
Black walls and shoulders where a canyon yawned,  
Moon-empty. Would they always stare beyond  
That glass of distance there? We didn't talk—  
Just moved. The very mule forgot to balk.  
The ganted horses in a panting doze,  
With hoofs too slow to overtake a nose,  
Just kept on trying in a feeble way.

Now mind you, Squire, I don't pretend to say  
It had a meaning. Who am I to know?  
I'm only saying that it happened so,  
And you can say no wonder that I wondered—  
A bit heat-crazy, maybe.

But it thundered—  
Right in the empty hell of afternoon!  
I guess we'd all been sort of in a swoon  
And busy with the stagger of the ground,  
Or we'd have seen before. 'Twas less like sound  
Than white-hot stillness throbbing, or the dull  
Blood-mumble in the hollow of your skull,

Until a roar and tumbling rumble shook  
The earth; and there was 'Diah shouting, 'Look!  
Rain in the mountain, boys!'

You tried to doubt,  
But sure enough a peak was blotted out  
With cloud that poured, the way molasses does,  
To where the canyon wasn't now, but was,  
Moon-empty, just a look or two ago.  
It sounded like stampeding buffalo  
Where yonder patch of darkness boiled, and blazed  
With slashers from the hidden height that raised  
A thousand-bellied bawling in the herd.  
We just stood gawking at it—not a word  
For quite a spell—till Silas looked at Jed  
As though a mule had kicked him. 'Well!' he said,  
'By God!'

Now, Squire, I'm willing to confess  
That when I heard old 'Diah mutter, 'Yes,  
Who else, indeed?' it struck me he'd been praying  
And 'twas the answer. Maybe what I'm saying  
Sounds loony; but that empty glare of sky  
And desert—all the nags about to die—  
And then it thundered!—Was I loony, Art?"

"Well," chuckled Black, "not being very smart, I wouldn't know, because I wonder too. I mind a black old codger of the Sioux

Who seemed to make it rain. The Squire would say  
He had a weather eye, and didn't pray  
Until it had a mind to rain without him!  
But I don't know.—Yes, 'Diah had about him  
A way that made things wonderful and strange."

"Come on now, let's be getting to the range!"  
The younger bantered. "Argufying whether  
God did it, or the two of them together,  
Won't make the water wetter, you'll allow!"

"But there was something in the thought, some-  
how,"  
Continued Evans, "like a lift of wings;  
As though the stubborn stuff of earthly things  
Was thinner than you knew, or only seemed,  
And suddenly the agony you dreamed  
Evaporated in a waking wonder.

Arousing to the miracle of thunder  
The little mare, with pricked ears, whinnied shrill  
And set the horses nickering, until  
The slow-believing mule awakened too  
And, lifting up the only song he knew,  
Mourned hopefully.

It met us on the run;  
Against a broad arroyo's blast of sun  
It rushed to meet us in a tumbling flood,



The tousled, rowdy water, full of mud  
And sand and laughter. God! but it was good!  
And then, as though the mountains understood  
And said it for us, where the thunder-smoke  
Trailed off along the range, a rainbow broke  
And spanned the canyon with a gate of awe;  
And you could hear the waters cry hurrah,  
Beneath the glory of it far away.

We made the canyon in the slant of day  
And fed the nags, but didn't eat a bite—  
Just drank. And then—there wasn't any night.  
The white sun blazing yonder never set;  
You rubbed your eyes, and it was blazing yet—  
But it was blazing on the other side  
Above the mountain!

Seemed that you had died,  
And found the way back, half a life the younger  
And all a-tingle with a happy hunger,  
Into a world that, after all, was kind.

I've often wondered what it is you find  
Down yonder at the bottom of a sleep—  
Not shoaling slumber, but the ocean-deep  
And dreamless sort. There's something that you  
touch,  
And what you call it needn't matter much  
If you can reach it. Call it only rest,

And there is something else you haven't guessed—  
The Everlasting, maybe. You can try  
To live without it, but you have to die  
Back into it a little now and then.  
And maybe praying is a way for men  
To reach it when they cannot sleep a wink  
For trouble. Surely I was on the brink  
Of knowing what I mean a blink or two  
That morning there; and what I nearly knew  
Gave everything a wonder-haunted look.

When we had eaten, 'Diah thumbed the Book  
And read us snatches, letting silence speak  
While he went on thumb-hunting others.—Seek  
And you would find. You only had to knock,  
And it would open. Water from the rock.  
The hills of help. 'Twas what his silence said  
Between the snatches, more than what he read—  
As if some wise old-timer really meant  
A plenty that he didn't just invent,  
But something in the saying wasn't true  
Until the words turned inside out for you,  
And there it was, less meaning than a thrill  
Upon the edge of meaning. In the still  
Cool morning shadow of the canyon walls  
It lingered; and the little waterfalls  
Made singing of it when he prayed awhile,  
His still lips saying with a happy smile  
Whatever 'twas the reading hadn't told.

And then he shaved his whiskers, two-days old,  
Discussing, while he slowly reappeared,  
Boy-eager, from behind the mask of beard  
And lather, certain stories rumor knew  
About the country we were coming to—  
About the Buenaventure, for the most.  
We know that river was the kind of ghost  
That likes to wander where a map is blank;  
But there's no other river I can thank  
As I can thank that happiest of streams.  
It kept me going, singing in my dreams  
By day and night out yonder in the waste,  
And such bright water I will never taste  
This side of Jordan. 'Diah made you feel  
At least 'twas so deserving to be real  
That we could hardly miss its upper reach.  
I mind that even Silas made a speech  
About it, catching 'Diah's eagerness.  
He must have said a dozen words or less  
That morning!

When the sun was overhead  
We started up the canyon, and it led,  
Box-walled and boulder-cluttered, to a pass  
That gashed the granite of the mountain mass,  
A sheer and narrow gorge. We made it through  
And saw, below, a canyon brimming blue  
With swimming haze and shadow from the height;  
And, farther on, the crawling edge of night

Upon some vast dead valley of a star  
Where only emptiness and silence are  
Forever and forever. Seeming steep  
From where we stood, the desert, rising deep  
Into the distance, faded to a line  
Of mountains gleaming in the level shine  
Of evening.

Nothing like a river there.  
It should have fetched a feeling of despair,  
But somehow didn't, and I wondered why.  
There wasn't any difference in the sky;  
There wasn't any difference in the earth;  
But something that had never suffered birth  
And couldn't die, lived mighty in the scene  
Of desolation; and I think I mean  
The very same that trees appear to know.  
You've seen the still, enchanted way they grow.  
It wasn't in the desert we had crossed;  
But now it seemed you never could be lost,  
For always you were in it any place;  
And by the look that came upon his face,  
I knew what 'Diah called it, gazing there.

We scrambled down a gulch that led to where  
The purple canyon deepened, and the change  
Upon the desert and the distant range  
Was like a revelation. Red as blood  
Above the lavender, transparent flood

Of twilight, every summit was a rose,  
And half the heavens quickened back of those  
With ghostly colors. Maybe it was Jed  
And how he felt; but 'twas as though it said,  
'With this, and only this, to die into,  
How can it matter what becomes of you  
Or when, or where?' "

He pored upon the flame  
A little while and then, "When daylight came,  
We heard the wind across the canyon rim;  
And when we reached the mouth and saw the dim  
Range yonder streaked against the dirty dawn,  
It wasn't easy to go plodding on,  
With quiet places and the pools of rain  
Behind us there.

By noon the sagebrush plain  
Became a stinging smother in the dun  
Sand-scurry and the swelter of the sun,  
Moon-dim and hurrying.

Our camp was dry  
That night. There was no wonder in the sky.  
We knew the sun was setting by the weird  
And sickly half-light breaking in the bleared  
Abruptly chilling air that darkened soon.  
The wind gave out and died. The dusty moon  
Hung dry above the rain pools far away.

It must have been the first or second day  
Thereafter—no, I guess it was the first—  
We lost another horse. It wasn't thirst—  
We drank at noon. It happened after that.  
A spring pool stewing in a sagebrush flat—  
We stumbled on it in the stifling blow.  
The roan went shoulder-lame and wouldn't go;  
Gave up, done out with limping in the sand.  
And Silas—well he never was a hand  
For talking. Did his thinking dumb and hid it;  
But when the time to do it came, he did it,  
Stone-cold. I see that vise of hairy paw  
Upon the horse's nose; the other draw  
The hunting knife; the bubbling gush of red  
Along a bulging forearm. Nothing said,  
Excepting what the wind-pipe tried to say.

Against the strangled moaning of the day  
We plodded, silent. Couldn't stop for meat;  
And one nag yonder had a bag of wheat  
He wouldn't need.

As I remember now,  
About the killing of the roan, somehow,  
Or drinking at the puddle in the smother,  
The changing of one life into another  
Began for me. It may have been that luck  
Forgot us there—three days before we struck  
Another water hole—or was it two?

It must have been the stifling wind that blew  
Three days on end. Another range to climb,  
And, like a picture of forgotten time,  
That emptiness beyond! The days of hope  
And of despair begin to telescope  
In there, as I remember. Dawns and noons  
And sunsets tangle with the icy moons;  
And ranges loom and vanish, yet remain  
Forever rising from the rim of plain  
Asleep with heavy heat. But in the mixed,  
Unsteady flow are pictures strangely fixed  
And sharp with vivid colors that are fast.  
A moment, maybe, when you felt at last  
The miracle of water singing through you,  
And suddenly it seemed the desert knew you  
And was a breast that pitied, and the blind,  
Wide stare of heaven softened and was kind.

I mind the stillness, mightier than wind,  
That dizzy noon we squatted there and skinned  
The sorrel in the blister of the sun,  
Because the days of hunger had begun,  
And nights of phantom feasting. Couldn't eat  
For swollen tongues. The scarlet strips of meat  
Draped round us in the cactus patch to dry.  
The heat-dim desert empty to the sky,  
Blue-fretted with the everlasting range.  
It's queer the way the picture doesn't change.  
The strips don't blacken, and the sorrel's eyes

In everlasting, terrified surprise  
Still look at me. The high sun doesn't set,  
But I can see the way the moon looked yet,  
Beyond the half that night. The purple air,  
The glassy hush, the horses drooping there,  
The ghostly cactuses and 'Diah praying;  
And I can hear the mule's tongue-muffled braying  
Like sorrow breaking into devil laughter.

I know it had to be the day thereafter  
We drank—altho' I'm vague about the setting—  
For how could I be sitting here forgetting,  
By half, a story never to be told?  
It must have been the day was getting old  
Before we drank. I feel the driving sun  
Upon my back. I see my shadow run  
And reach ahead, unwearyingly swift,  
Because it hadn't any feet to lift  
Or any wooden tongue it couldn't swallow.  
'Twas hard to follow, cruel hard to follow,  
Because it had to keep the drunken road  
That led to where the Buenaventure flowed  
Bright waters in a heaven of a valley.  
It didn't tally—something didn't tally  
About the fleeing shadow that you cast,  
Until pursuing teaches you at last  
That nothing matters but the driving light  
Behind you. I can feel the burly might  
Of Gobel's arm, the hairy fingers close



About my shoulder—no, the sorrel's nose,  
Or maybe it was roan. No matter whether.  
Then three of us were dancing on together,  
And they were saying that it wasn't far.

There was a drop of water like a star  
That glowed back yonder where the sorrel bled  
Along the sky-rim. Mountain overhead,  
A burning mountain fading into sleep.  
Of all the jumbled pictures that I keep,  
That seems to be the one that fits the best.

Suns glaring in the east and in the west;  
The swift nights turning into ghostly days  
With growing moons; the same blue range to raise,  
So often set behind us, yet the same.  
And in that blurred eternity we came  
To where a sharpened moment lingers still  
And doesn't blur. There was a rocky hill  
Beyond a soda flat. It seemed to float  
Upon a bright white water. Creosote  
And greasewood grew and gaudy cactus bloomed  
All over it. Beyond, the mountains loomed  
Not very far away. And when we neared  
The gray-green hill, there suddenly appeared  
A man and woman, standing to the waist  
In brush. Clear-cut against the sky, they faced  
The sloping day. A moment they were there  
Above us, withered faces, tangled hair

And scrawny bodies blackened by the sun.  
But while we gaped, there wasn't anyone  
In all the world but us. We climbed to see  
If there might be a village. Seemed to me  
That we had dreamed those faces. Nothing stirred.  
The broken land stared emptily. We heard  
Our shortened breath. But, coming down, we  
found

A hollow rock they'd squatted by to pound  
Grasshoppers! Made it easier to eat  
The leather leavings of the sorrel meat  
There in the haunted silence of a draw  
That evening. Might have doubted what we saw  
But for the footprints crowding in the sand  
Below a spring. They made the lonely land  
Seem lonelier and more remote from men.

It gets to be a troubled dream again  
Beyond that range. The days of windy smother  
And burning stillness overlap each other  
And run together wearily the same.  
But Oh! the valley where the deer were tame  
And many, and the Buenaventure made  
So cool a road of silver in the shade  
Of leaning elm and rustling cottonwood!  
No other meat can ever be so good  
As that meat was, so tender and so fat!  
Just one more range to cross, and, after that,  
The tame deer feeding belly-deep in grass!

One night holds changeless—blown of purple  
glass

And haunted with a deathly hush of light.  
I never saw the full moon burn so bright  
Before or since. The cactus looked appalled;  
And I can see the way our shadows crawled  
Like living things. You sort of floated on,  
A dream of torture, with a dream of dawn  
And food and water floating on ahead  
Forever. Maybe you were lying dead  
Back yonder, staring sightless at the sky,  
But what you died of couldn't ever die  
And had to wander on forever so.  
The ghostly desert's mockery of snow,  
The cold moon's ghostly mockery of day,  
The sound of feet forever on the way  
To emptiness, the hollow-sounding breath  
Of horses in the stillness that was death  
And didn't hear! What was it that you knew—  
With this and only this to die into?—  
But that was far away before you died,  
Past memory beyond the other side  
Of mountains, many past remembering.

Now if you say it was a foolish thing  
That happened there, I will not blame you, Squire.  
There's half of me here sitting by the fire  
Will share your laughter if you want to laugh,  
Without denying that the other half

May somehow be the wiser, just the same.

Tall, out of purple emptiness it came  
Serenely slow, and stopped to look at me.  
It should have been a common yucca tree,  
And was, except for something it was saying  
Without a sound. That yucca tree was praying,  
And had to pray forevermore in vain  
With wide arms waiting wearily for rain—  
A ghost that didn't know that it had died  
Of thirst, and went on waiting, crucified  
Forever!

Then from very far away,  
There was a voice remembered—*Though He*  
*slay*—  
Why, it was 'Diah reading!

Say it seemed  
I came awake then, have it that I dreamed;  
But still it's something that the dream was good;  
And in a world so little understood,  
There should be room for two to be mistaken.  
Well, if I dreamed, the yucca seemed to waken,  
And wasn't waiting any more in vain.  
The lifted arms were drinking in a rain  
Of living glory, like no earthly shower;  
And now I saw the yucca was in flower—  
Tall beauty pluming in a quiet light!

I don't know how much came to me that night,  
And how much later when I mulled it o'er.  
I know I wasn't weary any more  
Till moondown faded in the morning.

Well,

I see it's like a dream you try to tell,  
And wonder why it seemed to mean so much;  
But if a dream can be a sort of crutch,  
I leaned upon it often—till I 'woke.  
Again; or did I only dream it broke  
And left three scarecrows limping in despair?—  
No Buenaventure river anywhere,  
No haunted yucca drinking in a rain  
Of glory, making beauty out of pain  
And ugly need!

But often, broad awake,  
It seized me. Once it was a rattlesnake  
That brought it back! The very devil's land  
It was—all tumbled rock and shale and sand  
Where squatty cactus starved and no sage grew.  
It was the time the moon was starving too  
And came up late and feeble, withering  
Because there was a curse on everything  
In all the world. There was a whirring sound  
That made the land be still—and there he wound,  
A deadly puddle stewing in the sun,  
Head up to end what hunger had begun,

And weariness and thirst. A rage to kill  
One foe at least just left me staring still  
And wondering. Then suddenly it came!  
It was the same, it was the very same  
Still beauty saying what I couldn't hear,  
So far away it was; with fangs of fear  
Or thorns of bitter need to guard some good  
Against a strange world neither understood  
Nor understanding. Like a flower he grew,  
Slow waving in a breeze that never blew  
This side of heaven. Then he crawled away,  
Still beautiful with what he couldn't say,  
And scared because it never could be said.

It happened when the starved old moon was  
    dead  
And all our little talk was of the Lake,  
There was a ridge ahead. Beyond would break  
The sky-wide gleam of it; and there would be  
Deer grazing by the rivers of that sea,  
A little way beyond the ridge's brow.  
The Buenaventure was behind us now;  
And maybe if it really had been there,  
The buzzards would have banqueted somewhere  
This side of hope.

    There was a little spring  
In yonder ridge, but not a living thing,  
It seemed, had ever found that blessed pool

Until three men, two horses and a mule  
Came staggering—or ever would again.

We saw it from the ridge's summit when  
The day began to brighten. Was it land  
Or water there beyond the tumbled sand—  
That still white sheet of nothing sloping high  
Until it was the nothing of the sky  
On fire again? One look at 'Diah told  
The answer that I knew. It was an old,  
Old man I saw a moment in his place,  
The look of something broken in his face  
That wasn't to be mended any more.  
I see that I had never known before  
How much I'd leaned upon him like a child,  
Until he turned that face on me and smiled—  
When nothing but the smile of it was Jed.  
'You see, it's just beyond the salt,' he said,  
'A little way.' And for a moment there,  
Not anything but hearing Silas swear  
Beneath his breath was left to fill the lack,  
Until I saw that hawk-gaze coming back,  
That long-range look of something that he saw  
Beyond you; and the setting of the jaw  
Was cruel in the face that it denied.  
I didn't know how lean and hollow-eyed  
It was until the light of it went dim,  
That quicksand moment when I pitied him—  
The leaner on his pity—even I!

Well, yonder looked as good a place to die  
As any other then. But now I know  
I went because he wanted me to go;  
For more than pity happened in that bleak,  
Forsaken moment when I saw him weak  
Upon that ridge. I'd just begun to love him,  
And something in the breaking manhood of him  
Was stronger than his old unbroken might.

By noon the very hush was blinding white;  
The world had shrunk to a tiny, round  
White island, floating lost in a profound  
White dazzle of a sea without a shore.  
The more we toiled, the island moved the more,  
To keep us toiling in the center still.  
I think what drove me wasn't hope or will,  
But just the stagger and the baffled stare  
Of Silas, striving like a wounded bear  
To crush a foe he couldn't overtake;  
And 'Diah's haunted eyes upon a lake  
He didn't see, those hollow, haunted eyes.

There's something happens when your last wish  
dies  
I wish I could remember—something good;  
But just about when it is understood  
There isn't anything to tie it to  
Of all the tangled wishes that were you;  
But surely it is good.



I still can see  
The mule, like something in a comedy  
Beyond the mere indecency of mirth;  
The horse's muzzle to the lifeless earth,  
Negotiating where to leave a skin  
Too big and heavy for the bones within  
To carry long. I see the little mare.  
That woman-patience in her eyes of care,  
The drooping head, the placing of her feet  
Just so—and so—brought back the chimney seat  
At home, and me a boy, with Granny sitting  
Forever there, her nose among her knitting  
For fear the feeble fingers might forget.

It must have been the sun about to set  
That conjured there ahead of us the ghost  
Of breakers beating silent on a coast  
Of silence. That was where the tumbled sand  
Began again.

We made the broken land  
Beyond it, where the cold stars whirled away.  
And there was nothing—there was dazzling day  
On sandy, cedar-spotted hills that ran  
To northward where the higher range began,  
Patched black with cedar scrub.

I wonder still,  
Sometimes, what really happened on a hill,

Unsteady with the burden of the sun  
That day; if truly there was anyone  
Below us in the draw, and if we dreamed  
That Indian woman and the way she screamed  
As though we'd come upon her by surprise.  
But in the mirror of her face and eyes  
I still can see the horrors that she saw;  
And surely there were youngsters in the draw,  
With frightened faces peeping from the brush.  
She offered weed seed messed into a mush,  
And tried to tell us it was all she had,  
While, plainly starving and as clearly mad,  
Three nightmare creatures croaked a single  
word  
The louder, hoping if she only heard  
She'd give them water. Surely it was true,  
For I can see the knowing look that grew  
Upon her black face, terror-frozen still,  
And how she pointed off across a hill,  
Then took another look at us, and ran!  
There must have been a tall tale for a man  
To hear that night!

There was another side  
To those hot hills, somehow; and by a wide  
Sun-swimming flat, with cedar hills beyond,  
The dizzy dazzle focussed in a pond  
Of water—water—water! It was wet;  
But I can see the whimpering critters fret

And slobber over it—the mule, with curled  
Lip skyward, making faces at the world  
To tell it what he hadn't breath to bray.

We weren't any better off next day,  
Remembering that sickly tang of brine;  
And if the horse's belly felt like mine,  
'Twas little wonder he was satisfied,  
At last, with any place to dump a hide,  
And did it in the sand without a fuss.

I mind the antelope that stared at us  
And vanished, floating. Didn't make you think  
Of eating—only where they went to drink;  
And so you floated after them, and came  
Upon it, swooping giddily—the same  
Sick pool back there.

I know now we had turned  
Northeastward, heading for a peak that burned  
Away off yonder. When the twilight grew,  
We stood upon a rise and saw a blue  
Unending valley running north and south;  
And 'Diah, talking of the valley's mouth  
To northward and the lake that might be there,  
Seemed far away—as far away as where  
That snowy summit slowly lost the glow  
And kept the secret that it seemed to know  
In everlasting silence.

Down that slope,  
'Twas gravity that moved us more than hope  
Of water short of yonder paling height.  
But deeper in the blueing of the light  
Upon the still, cool sage-brush solitude,  
We stopped to listen. Was it doves that cooed?  
Doves in the desert? Water must be near  
If there were doves about! But did we hear  
Or dream the yearning homesick ache of it?  
We stood there wondering what to make of it,  
And gaped upon each other's faces. *There!*  
Doves in the cool blue hush! The little mare  
Heard too and whimpered; but the mule forgot  
His burden of a head, and, doves or not,  
Slept heavily.

We didn't find the spring,  
For all our dragging search—not anything  
But sage; and when it grew too dark to seek,  
We headed up the valley where the peak  
Had vanished with the secret that it knew.

Last year I found it, camped there in the blue  
Of twilight when the doves began to moan—  
For 'Diah yonder by the Cimarrone  
And Silas by the Siskadee, asleep  
With all their might unloosened. It was deep  
And wide enough to swim us! By the cool  
Sweet water, homesick for the very mule,

And thirsting just for thirst with Jed again,  
I marvelled, if we hadn't missed it then,  
How much I would have missed!

The whole night through

We stumbled toward a vanished peak that knew  
The reason why the doves kept mourning so—  
Beyond the barn lot, dim and far ago  
At twilight—just before the crickets wake—  
The rusty pulley grieving at the lake,  
The well, the lake, the well—the bucket sinking,  
*Blub*—and the greedy gurgle of it drinking—  
A dusty bucket in a well gone dry.

And all at once, the peak was gleaming high  
Up yonder in a lake the sorrel bled—  
The roan—the sorrel. 'Diah there ahead  
And Silas in between the mule and mare—  
All hunting with a microscopic care  
For doves among the sage brush long ago.

But why was 'Diah talking like a crow  
And pointing at the peak? Because it swam  
And tossed so with the breaking of the dam,  
The flood of fire.—

I wakened in the shade

And quiet that a stunted cedar made.  
I know it was a little cedar now;

But then I wasn't anywhere, somehow,  
And it was chilly. Stooping there above,  
An old, old man was looking for a dove,  
And it was someone that I used to know;  
But he had lost the dove so long ago,  
I couldn't find the waste of bone and skin  
His hunting, sunken eyes were burning in—  
I couldn't find it in the sage at all.  
But he was leaning from a canyon wall  
And smiling, and a storm of doves moaned by;  
And very far away I heard him cry  
A name I knew—and every one of those  
Dim mountains far away became a rose,  
And he was blooming—like a yucca tree—  
All gentle light. And leaning over me  
Was 'Diah."

Evans brooded for a space,  
Until the glow that came upon his face,  
And wasn't from the embers, died away.  
"I lived upon it waiting there that day,"  
He said at length "—that look of joy and tears.  
I've lived upon it all these lonely years  
From dream to dream. And I have seen it break  
Upon the drab world, even when awake,  
As though the common hills and valleys knew  
In some deep way. And when it seems they do,  
I almost know what happens in a seed,  
How cactuses can make of bitter need  
Such beauty; and there's something in the look

Like hearing 'Diah with the dog-eared Book,  
Still reading, on the further side of sound:  
'Take off thy shoes. The place is holy ground  
Whereon thou standest.'

Day was nearly done,  
And I was troubled for a sinking sun  
That couldn't rise again, it grew so weak.  
Then there was 'Diah, back from yonder peak,  
With water in a kettle!

Noon was pouring  
White-hot on Silas when we found him snoring  
Beside the spring, the mule and little mare  
Drooped over him.

Another day from there—  
Or was it more?—it seems like many more—  
A lone butte rising from the valley floor  
Was looking northward into empty sky.  
I still can see Jed climbing, hear him cry  
'The lake! the lake!'

That night the moon was new."

## VI

The low intoning of the canyon grew,  
Filling the silence of a story told  
With something immemorially old,  
Beyond all telling; till the Squire arose  
And with a boot heel broke the glowing doze  
Of gutted logs that startled into flame.  
"I still can see the five of you that came  
To Bear Lake camp," he said. "If you had died,  
No buzzard would have thanked you for the hide  
And rags you packed!—We'll need another log."  
He melted into darkness; and the dog,  
'Roused by the quiet of the brooding pair,  
Sat up, limp-eared, and with a surly air  
Flopped down again and snuggled into sleep.

The brittle mock of axes, biting deep  
Into the crystal distances of night,  
Died out. The Squire stooped back into the light,  
Cast down his load upon the flame, and said:  
"It's queer the way the night seems full of Jed  
Out yonder—sort of hiding everywhere,  
As though you'd maybe see him standing there  
Behind you, if you just turned quick enough—



Taller than men and made of starry stuff  
And stillness."

While they passed the jug around  
The silence deepened with the busy sound  
The new wood made. "When he turned up again,"  
Said Black at length, "with less than half his men,  
Beside the Stanislaus, it seems to me  
The graybeard that he wouldn't live to be  
Had somehow come to haunt him like a ghost.  
I felt it all the way along the coast  
To Oregon. And when we camped beside  
The Umpqua where it bitters with the tide,  
You know what happened. We had gone that day,  
Just he and I, to find a solid way  
Among the marshes. Two escaped to tell,  
Of all our comrades, how the Umpquas fell  
Upon the camp—a scrambled tale and queer,  
As though they'd had a nightmare; nothing clear  
But Rogers towering and the axe he plied  
Before he died the way old Silas died  
Down yonder on the Colorado shore.

I felt the other 'Diah more and more  
Until we met the others up the Snake  
About the forks. Sometimes he'd seem to take  
A trail I couldn't follow, all alone—  
Who knows?—somewhere beyond the Cimarrone  
As like as not. Beside a fire together,

Or maybe rubbing knees and saddle leather,  
I'd know he'd gone exploring far away.  
And then he'd get that long-range look and say  
What made me feel 'twas good where he had been,  
But 'twas no country I was ever in,  
Or likely would be; something wise and old  
As light and growing, but, in being told,  
As new as morning or the first green grass.  
'Twould be like seeing darkly in a glass,  
Then face to face, the way he often read it;  
And you would feel, the gentle way he said it,  
A little shaver listening to his mother.  
Between the common 'Diah and the other  
There might have been a thousand years or two.  
I often wonder if the other knew  
That he was getting near to where he is.  
Concerned, for all that might and youth of his,  
About the vanity of worldly gain!  
And making worldly trouble seem like rain  
Upon the desert of our mortal stuff!  
He used to tell me that he had enough  
Of worldly goods to help his folks and others—  
So no more beaver!”

“Had a mess of brothers,”  
Observed the Squire. “I hear 'twas on the way  
To set them up in trade with Santa Fé  
He got his hair raised.”

“Going to retire,”  
Mused Black, “—and did.”

“I wonder,” yawned the squire,  
With lazy stretching. “Got a horse to bet  
He’s nowhere or there’s blue horizon yet  
He’s chasing after with that hungry stride!”

“I should have been there with him,” Evans  
sighed;  
“I should have followed anywhere he went.”  
With grave and unintentional assent  
The elder nodded, and the canyon’s moan  
Took up the old regret—*alone, alone,*  
*Alone.* The younger, slumped upon his pack,  
Blinked dreamily. “But when he started back  
For California with another band—  
And Silas—all the torture of that land  
Came on me like a nightmare. I was gray  
And old inside. And so he went away  
Forever, maybe; but a thrilling doubt  
Has grown upon me.

Well, I knocked about  
Among the mountains, hunting beaver streams,  
Alone—no, not alone, for there were dreams  
And memories that grew. And more and more  
I knew, whatever I was hunting for,  
It wasn’t beaver. When the evening blued,  
The listening stillness of the solitude  
Would come alive with something he had read,  
Or just a passing word or two he said,

Too trivial for memory till then.  
And all our story would begin again  
Self-spinning in the quiet—always new,  
And more like longing livingly come true  
Than memory. Or maybe on a rise  
I'd see that look of breaking in his eyes  
Far off; or suddenly a hill or draw  
Would sadden with the vision that I saw  
Beside the stunted cedar.

Well, I spent  
That winter down at Santa Fé, and went  
Back to the mountains trapping in the Spring,  
And all that Summer didn't hear a thing  
Of 'Diah. I was hunting beaver sign  
Along this way, the Fall of 'twenty-nine,  
Before I heard about him from a pair  
Of trappers—him and all the band somewhere  
Up Teton way. But yonder up the Green  
Beyond the Sandy, Indians had seen  
The white men cross the Pass a moon ago  
With many horses.

Wasn't time for snow,  
Not heavy snow, although 'twas getting late  
For proper mountain doings. It was fate  
That I would never see him any more;  
And so an early blizzard shut the door  
Behind him, and I couldn't make it through.

I wintered at the Bear Lake rendezvous  
With half a dozen men of Hudson Bay,  
Who met the band up north and heard them say  
He planned to winter at the Powder's mouth,  
And calculated to be heading south  
Back to the States for good, come early grass.

And winter getting deeper in the Pass,  
And deeper! Hardest that I ever saw,  
That winter! Didn't even fix to thaw  
Till 'way along in March sometime, and then  
It caught its breath and started in again  
To snow and bluster. Seemed the hand of God  
Was in it."

Jerking backward from a nod,  
The elder muttered: "Stayed until July—  
Wind River—."

"Hadn't heart enough to try  
To overtake him when at last the snows  
Were gone!" said Evans.

Studying his nose,  
The younger brooded owl-like, breathing deep.

"But there was one more rendezvous to keep,"  
Continued Evans; "one more rendezvous.  
It wasn't till July of 'thirty-two

I heard, and 'twas a year ago that May  
It happened! I was down at Santa Fé—  
A brawling mess of traders from the Plains  
And mountain men and tangled wagon trains  
From Independence. Just an idle word  
Across the glasses, and it seemed absurd!  
So many Smiths! It couldn't have been Jed!  
For when I tried to think of him as dead,  
It wouldn't fit the picture anyhow.  
It isn't fitting better even now,  
These lonely years away! But, bit by bit,  
The tale grew bigger than the doubt of it,  
And ended in the emptiness of air.  
Killed southward of the wagon trail, some-  
where  
Along the Cimarrone! And it was told  
With half an air of being rather old  
To matter in the brawling summertime  
Of lusty, living men. But where he died  
His brothers, even, didn't rightly know,  
Recalling, with already seasoned woe,  
How he went hunting water for the train,  
And how they watched until the lonely plain  
Went empty in the shimmer of the sun—  
Forever. But they had his rifle gun  
And silver-mounted pistols, dearly bought  
From certain hangdog Mexicans who brought  
The news to Santa Fé. And, word by word,  
I bought their tale through, feeling, as I heard,

'Twas measured for the market or they knew  
Too much by plenty.

One more rendezvous—  
And only silence waiting after all!

The nights were nippy with a tang of Fall  
Along the lone road leading to the States—  
The season when the dying Summer waits  
To listen for the whisper of the snow  
A long way off. Three horseback days below  
The Arkansaw, and twelve from Santa Fé  
I crossed the Cimarrone; another day  
Beyond the waterholes, and that was where  
He left the wagons.

All around me there  
Was empty desert, level as a sea,  
And like a picture of eternity  
Completed for the holding of regret.  
But I could almost see the oxen yet  
Droop, panting, in the circled wagon train;  
The anxious eyes that followed on the plain  
A solitary horseman growing dim;  
And, riding south, I almost sighted him  
Along the last horizon—many moons  
Ahead of me.

Beyond a strip of dunes  
I came upon the Cimarrone once more,

A winding flat no wetter than the shore,  
Excepting when you clawed a hole, it filled.  
But hunting for the spot where he was killed  
Was weary work. There had to be a ledge  
Of sandstone jutting from the river's edge  
Southwestwardly; and, balanced at the tip,  
A boulder, waiting for a flood, to slip  
And tumble in the stream; and just below,  
Not any farther than a good knife-throw,  
A hiding place behind a point of clay.

But there was sand—and sand.

The second day,

When I was sure the Mexicans had sold  
The buyer's wish, with twilight getting cold  
And blue along a northward bend, I came  
Upon it with a start—the very same,  
Except the boulder bedded in the stream!  
And like one helpless in an evil dream,  
I seemed to see it all. The burning glare,  
The pawing horse, and 'Diah clawing there  
Beneath the ledge, beyond the reach of sound  
To warn him of the faces peering round  
The point of clay behind; a sheath-knife thrown,  
Bows twanging; 'Diah fighting all alone,  
A-bristle with the arrows and the knife—  
Alone, alone, and fighting for his life  
With twenty yelling devils; left for dead,



The bloody, feathered huddle that was Jed,  
Half buried in Comanches, coming to;  
The slow red trail, the hard, last trail that grew  
Behind him, crawling up the bank to seek  
The frightened horse; too dizzy sick and weak  
To make it past the sepulcher of shade  
The sandstone ledge and balanced boulder made  
Against the swimming dazzle of the sun;  
The band returning for the horse and gun  
To find him there, still moaning, in his tomb  
And roll the boulder on him.

—*Only gloom*

*And silence left!"*

The voice of sorrow rose  
And ceased. Assenting in a semi-doze,  
The elder nodded sagely; and the Squire  
Breathed deeper. Feeling by the fallen fire  
The mystery of sorrow in the cry,  
The dog sat up and, muzzle to the sky,  
Mourned for the dear one mourning.

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Poetry/History

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