

THE RAMBLINGS OF CHUCK WEISS

“An Old Guy with a Memory”

Ramble 3

Remembering My Grandmother, Happy

My grandmother, Rowena, Wilma, Henrietta Menn, was born in Joplin, Missouri sometime in the latter part of the first decade of the Twentieth Century. Her childhood friends called her Happy, because she was always “Happy-go-Lucky.” The name stuck, and she carried it with her throughout her life.

She was the youngest of six children, and her siblings were all boys. As she put it, she had to become a “tomboy” and learn to fight, if she was to earn their respect. It was a time when all women and their daughters grew their hair as long as possible, and brushed their manes a hundred strokes or more each day. In defiance of her mother, Happy went into town and talked a barber into cutting her hair short. He was hesitant at first, but Happy reassured him that her mother had said it was ok. When she got home her mother was livid, and demanded to know who had done the dastardly deed. Happy never gave him up, and her mother had to resign herself to the fact that her daughter would never be like other girls.

Halloween is a time for mischief, and Happy relished the holiday. She told me once of a Halloween prank she and her friends did when they were young. With the aid of block and tackle, they hosted a cow (belonging to a particularly grumpy neighbor) up into a tree, and left it there for the neighbor find the next morning.

Being a Tomboy suited Happy well, and she did learn to fight. A friend of her’s was being bullied by two boys every day, as she walked home after school. “You go home like always,” Happy told her, “It’ll be ok.” She followed a block behind her friend, and when the two boys approached, she started running. “I could run on my toes really fast,” Happy told me, “and no one would hear me coming.” She ran up behind them, grabbed one and threw him to the ground. She jumped on him and bloodied his nose. The other boy started running, and Happy got up and went after him. She followed him home, through the back door into his house, and beat him up in front of his mother. As she left, Happy heard the mother admonish her son, “If you let a girl beat you up, you deserve it!”

When she was old enough to leave home and be on her own, she found she was more comfortable with the undesirables of any town she lived in (people of color, or with dubious backgrounds), rather than respectable society. During Prohibition, she worked as a bartender in a speakeasy. When they had conduct a raid, the police would turn on their sirens a few block away, so as to let most of the people get away before they arrived. “They liked us,” she said.

There was another girl who hung around a lot,” Happy told me. “No body liked her, and we got into a fight one day.” Happy said she always carried a “churchkey” can opener, you know the kind that leaves a triangle-shaped hole in the top of the can. “It fit in the palm of my hand, and I always kept it sharp in case I had to defend myself.” When the

other girl started fighting dirty, Happy palmed the churchkey and cut her face up pretty bad. The police came by the next day, not to arrest her, but to warn her to leave town for a while until things blew over.

Later she met and married the “black sheep” of a wealthy family, and my mother was born. Things didn’t work out, and Happy later divorced him. I don’t know the reason. Back then, you had to have a reason to obtain a divorce.

Then came the Great Depression. Happy had no money, so mother and daughter had to live in a tent on a bank of the Mississippi River. The Depression was especially hard on children, and Mary (I think she was about five or six.) was having to spend the day alone, while her mother went to work in town. It was no way to raise a little girl, so Happy went hat-in-hand to her ex-husband’s mother, and asked her to take care of Mary until things got better. The grandmother hated Happy for her son having married beneath his class, but she agreed. She insisted, though, that while Mary stayed with her, Happy couldn’t visit. Happy had to agree she thought, for her daughter’s sake. She wrote often, but her letters were never given to Mary.

What Happy didn’t know was that the grandmother was abusing her psychologically, making her life miserable. Mother never went into details, but said she felt utterly alone, and abandoned. She admitted to me that she carried that feeling of abandonment throughout her life, but was finally able to talk to Happy about it just a couple of years before she died. Mother was glad she did, and an old wound was allowed to heal.

When Happy eventually found out about the abuse, she went and got Mary back. But where to go? Living in a tent with a kid was still not an option. Happy decided that California was the land of opportunity, and besides, she said, “It didn’t look to be that far, just a few inches on the map.”

With no money to afford a Greyhound Bus, they were going to have to hitch-hike to California. To ward off trouble along the way, Happy cut her hair short and deepened her voice to pass as a man. Somewhere along Route 66 (in one of the Southwestern states, Arizona or New Mexico I think), they were stopped by the police. It seemed that a little girl had been kidnapped in the vicinity, and it looked like they had cracked the case when they found Happy and Mary on the road. It wasn’t until Mary got frightened and blurted out, “Mommy!” that the officers realized that Happy was a woman. The two officers got her a job in town, so mother and daughter could continue on their way to California by bus.

During World War II, my mother was a teenage, working as a waitress at a roadside cafe, while Happy joined the war effort as a “Rosie the Riveter.” She told me of a time when she had to climb down a rope ladder into the darkened hold of an oil tanker, to lean off to one side and weld something that needed repair.

It was shortly after the war that she met her second husband, the only grandfather I ever knew, Abdundio (“Bobby”) Catolos, a recent immigrant from the Philippine Islands. At the time, he was a small time hood looking for a man he wanted to kill in a Vendetta. Happy put a quick end that when she pawned his gun for a carton of cigarettes, and he was so smitten with her that he allowed himself to be “reformed.”

It was around that time that my mother met and married my father. Happy felt that it was probably time for her to settle down as well, so she married Bobby and they moved to Oklahoma City. Actually, they were on the way to New Orleans to set down roots, when their car broke down and they had to find work to get it repaired. In the mean time they got a good deal on a house, and decided to stay. (Funny, the little things that can dictate the course of our lives.)

In the years that followed, Bobby became the head chef of one of the better restaurants in Oklahoma, cooking and managing the kitchen staff. Happy became a baker, and a very good one. She said she made it her mission to get the secret receipt of every baker she ever worked for.

Of course, she was not the typical grandmother. When I was about five or so, Happy sat down on the floor with me and taught me how to shoot craps, and on Halloween she would take me downtown late at night (way past my bedtime), where we would soap the windows of the business there. She was my best friend.

Happy died in 1974. She had spent the day doing what she loved best, fishing at a stream not far from the house, when she started getting terrible headaches. They got so bad, Bobby drove her to the emergency room. "It's just a migraine," she was told. "Take some aspirin, and it will be gone by morning." But back home the headaches got worse, and she died suddenly of what we later learned was a brain aneurism. My mother and I were very angry and were considering a wrongful death lawsuit, but had to abruptly stop any talk about that when Bobby spoke up and said, "If the doctor killed Happy, then I have to kill him."

Let me close with this memory of my grandmother. I came home one day from school, crying. "What's wrong, Charlie," Happy asked. "Jimmy Rains said I have to meet him down by the railroad tracks for a rock fight. He said he's going to bring his gang, and I have to bring my gang. But (sniffle, sniffle) . . . I don't have a gang." After a short pause, Happy said, "Come on, I'm your gang!"

I followed my grandmother to the railroad tracks, where we gathered a pile of rocks and waited for Jimmy to arrive. A short time later, he showed up with two of his friends and saw me with my grandmother, both of us holding rocks in our hands. After a few seconds, they turned and left. I never had a problem with Jimmy after that. In fact, years later he set me up on a blind date with him and his girlfriend at the local drive-in movie, where I made out with a girl for the first time in the backseat of his car. But that's another story.

Happy kept a journal most of her adult life. In it, she described where she traveled throughout the country, and the people she met. She also wrote poetry, and copied poems she liked that others had written. They're all actually quite good, and reproduced below.

HAPPY'S JOURNAL

My grandmother kept a journal during the Great Depression, WWII, and the years that followed. She wrote in pencil and since then many of the pages have faded, leaving some words undecipherable. In such cases, I've inserted a question mark [?]. My comments are bracketed and in italics.

Most of the entries in her journal are poems. The first eight are hers. A couple of them are about the people she knew, written using their voice (the prostitute and the Moonshiner).

The others are poems she thought worthy of being remembered. Two were written by prisoners, describing the despair that comes from being caged like an animal, and another by an admitted drug addict. She saw the humanity in everyone, including the "down and out."

The slang she used in her poetry came from a bygone era, and transcribing them helped to give me a sense of her generation.

Our immortality lies in the memories of those we leave behind. I hope this helps her to live forever. — Chuck Weiss

This book is dedicated to Life, a "Slap-Happy Life"

While a cigarette was burning, our hearts were burning too.
We blew pretty smoke dreams, hoping they would come true.
All goes up in smoke! Love is just a joke!
Hearts were made for breaking, while the cigarette burns.

Thoughts, pure and clean, smiles, bright and dear.
Mix them half and half in a quart of good cheer.
Cold and clear, stir them to a laugh!

People don't grow apart. They grow together, and then split apart!
Almost all our thoughts are more pardonable, than the methods we think up to hide them.
Many of us spend half of our time wishing for things we could have, if we didn't spend half of our time wishing.

He's not too short. He's not too tall.
He has my heart, and that's not all.

The world's a stage, the moon a spotlight.

DO YOU KNOW . . .

that red wines are made from dark grapes fermented with the skins, white wines from the juice of grapes fermented without the skins, or that one of the original grape vines planted by the

Spanish padres 170 years ago are still producing 10 tons of grapes a year, or that rotating the wine in your glass helps release its delicate bouquet?

A Shopping List

| | |
|--------------------|------|
| Target 3pks | .25 |
| Sunday Paper | .10 |
| Detective Magazine | .10 |
| Radio | 1.00 |

[Note: Target was a brand of cigarettes, and the radio was probably a small crystal set.]

Worry is interest paid on trouble before it falls due.

Poise is the art of raising an eyebrow, instead of the roof.

The right temperature at home is maintained by warm hearts, not by hotheads.

“We’ve come to stay” (sign at a graveyard)

ARKANSAS

Ft. Smith: Negros and Indians.

Eureka Springs: Very hilly. Hotels and all buildings build on hills, so that each floor opens onto a different street. Band practice in the Basin on Saturday nights.

ARIZONA

Kingman: Near Bolder Dam.

Flagstaff: Set in a valley, friendly people. It has the most picturesque nightclub of its state! A fork of a gigantic tree forms the entrance. The front room is a plain bar, but as you step into the ballroom the resemblance to a hunting lodge with take your breath away. Hanging on the walls you will find a bear skin, deer skin, lion’s head, also wildcat skins and buffalo. Bracing the ceiling are trees, minus the bark, and deer and antelope horns take the place of branches. Overhead you will find the feathered flock, such as three different kinds of owls, a vulture, an eagle, pelicans, cranes, and many kinds of birds. The bar also extends into the ballroom. All sorts of mixed drinks are served. They have an orchestra every night. The proprietor is a big game hunter.

Holbrook: Near Petrified Forest.

Tucson: Indian stores and novelty shops, a clean, pretty town. Mexicans: They also have a small Mexico City there. It’s composed of small adobe houses. Flat roofs everywhere. In the Mexican district is the “Wishing Well,” made of three iron racks on which 50 candles are kept burning. The ground is covered with wax, and they go there to make their wishes. A rich Mexican gambler was killed on this spot years ago. The Mexican district at one time had a wall around it, and about six months ago they were prepared to make a motion picture of it, then we had this war scare so they stopped their preparations. The Catalina Mountains are near Tucson. Harold Bell Wright pitched a tent on the top of these mountains, and lived in it for three years while writing. Later he built a home in the valley which still stands.

Florence: The 3/5 Ranch is near there. Most of the ranchers raise cotton. The children of Arizona are taught to sing songs about their state. The Superstitious Mountains are near Coolidge, Az. It is quite a desert country. The Giant Cactus grows taller than man. The Indians used to get their water from the Barrel Cactus. They ground the cone in the center for flour to make their breads. There are also rattle snakes and tarantulas, Vinegar Horn bugs [*Vinegaroon*] and gila monsters, all very poisonous.

Winslow: Has a very exclusive hotel, Mexican architecture, covers one square block. Mary and I sat in one of their foyers one summer moon-light night, listening to their dance music. The population is composed of Indians, Mexicans and Negros, few white people.

CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles: The finest rollerskating rink in the world is located on the Warner Brothers old studio lot, off Hollywood Blvd.

ILLINOIS

Quincy: Located on the Mississippi River, which has a new and beautiful dam (their locks open at a steamboat's whistle) and two tall bridges. Boats of every description. The town itself is composed of old brick buildings, some of which are fifty years or more. Their parks are many and beautiful. The people are German and Jews. The wages, small.

Chicago: Art museum, The Loop.

IOWA

Davenport: Connected to Rock Island by a bridge. A hilly, but pretty city.

KANSAS

Junction City: Army Headquarters. A pretty tough town.

Wichita: A pretty city.

Salina: A beautiful town, very dull now. A kindly bunch of people. Kansas itself is windblown and sandy.

Albuquerque: Just a city, clean and pretty, hemmed in by the Rocky Mountains.

Gallup: Typical border town, tough looking people.

MICHIGAN

Detroit: Located on Lake Erie. A huge underground tunnel connects it with Canada.

MISSOURI

Hannibal: Tough and dirty.

St. Louis: A smokey city, nice people.

Waynesville: A hitching post, summer resort.

Springfield: A college town.

Branson: On White River, summer resort.

Carthage: Clean little town, friendly people. Kangaroo Court!

NEBRASKA

Ralston: 5 miles from Omaha, connected by interurban. Seymour Lake Country Club is there, ice skating and sled riding. Very hilly.

OKLAHOMA

Tulsa: Clean, friendly people.

Oklahoma City: Same way.

Shawnee: Dirty, small town.

OHIO

Toledo: A clean little city, very friendly people. Businesses good.

TEXAS

The people in Texas can't be beat. Dallas, El Paso, Galveston, Ft. Worth, San. Antonio, Texas City, Ft. Sam Huston, Gulf of Mexico. Plenty of work in lower Texas.

WEST VIRGINIA

The Blue Ridge Mountains. Tangled up with a cross of farm women.

PENNSYLVANIA

Philadelphia: Navy Yards. Watched them making torpedos, saw submarines and went aboard a battleship. It carried two airplanes. Saw my first automat there.

MISSOURI

So little has been said about Missouri, my home state. I have the hills and rivers and the wooded country side. I spent many happy months living in a tent, set on a hill above the river. A large spring was near. I had two dogs, and rode three miles to and from work on my bicycle. I spent the winter of 1941 in the same tent pitched in Waynesville. Missouri. That is a very hilly town. The farms, they set up edgewise. You can plant on either side. Twas during the building of Ft. Leonard Wood. It was crowded, to say the least. Then there was Camp Crowder, Neosho Missouri. I lived two miles from Goodman. Made some good friends there. I had a Police Dog [*German Shepard*] named Lucky. This is fat rolling country. The people here are very friendly.

THREE YEARS LATER

Where to begin? Carthage, Missouri, I guess, the town of friendly people. Came into town a total stranger with 25 cents, my first job as a waitress. The gang - Stella, Roy and Maxine Matthews, their cabin on the river, fog legs, boats. Mary and I rowing upstream, the bike rides out after work. Bill Tompkins' place where I worked for 3 months. Casey's death, New Year's Eve. The Maypole Dance. Jack and Jewel Green, Roy, May, and Jake Miller. Slug and Sandy and Violet and Six and Roy McLaury, and "Droopy Drawers," and Maxine Haren. Mrs. Yarbrough and Lucky.

WINTER IN OLD MISSOURI

This month of January 1940 has been so cold, we had to put woolen socks on all the footprints.

We put the cat out one night, and the next morning he was frozen so stiff we had to carry him in with a pair of ice tongs!

Mrs. Smith froze to death while bathing. When they found her, she was sitting in a cake of ice.

Mr. Hill's cook stove froze and broke while there was a fire in it.

Velma couldn't blow out her lamp one night upon retiring, so she broke off the flame and tossed it out the window.

Roy Mathews went frogging one night. The frogs dove into the icy river to escape him. Of course, they froze with their hind legs sticking straight up out of the water! He broke them off and tossed them onto his sack.

Canada has nothing on us this winter!

LIFE

Were you ever out in the Great Alone, when the moon shone cold and clear,
And the icy mountains hemmed you in, with a silence you [*could al*]most hear?

As free as the birds in the trees, following your heart's desire,
From coast to coast if you please, finding contentment everywhere!

The rugged beauty of the mountains, the dreamy solitude of the streams,
Both strive to make you realize the true substance of your dreams.

Those scenes can soon be forgotten, and the money can be spent,
But true friends are everlasting. It's time to pitch your tent!

— Happy

THE ROLLING STONE

The reason I can never quit the road is a reason plain and clear.
It's because no matter where I step, whether it's far or near,

There is a place beyond the place I am, wherever I may be at.
And then beyond is a place beyond, and the world beyond all that.

And as long as a man has eyes to see, and a brain that wants to know,
I figure there are things he is bound to miss if he doesn't up and go!

No, there's always a place beyond that place I happen to hang my hat,
And another place beyond that place, and the world beyond all that!

— Happy

JUST THINKING

Standing up here on the fire step, looking ahead in the mist,
With a tin hat over your ivory [*head*], and a rifle clinched in your fist.

Waiting and watching and wondering if the hun's [*Germans*] coming over tonight.
Say, aren't the things you think of enough to give you a fright?

Things you ain't even thought of for a couple of months or more,
Things that will set you laughing, things that will make you sore,

Things that you saw in the movies, things you saw on the street,
Things that you're really proud of, things that are not so sweet,
Debts that are past collection, stories that you hear and forget,
Ballgames and birthday parties, hours of drill in the wet,
Headlines, recruiting posters, sunsets way out at sea,
Evenings of paydays. Golly, it's a queer thing, this memory.
Faces of pals from the home burg, voices of women folks,
Verses you learn in school days, pop up in the mist and smoke.
As you stand there griping that rifle, standing and chillin' to the bone,
Wondering and wondering and wondering, just thinking there, all alone.
When will the war be over? When will the gang break through?
What will the U.S. look like? What will there be left to do?
Where will the bashes [*parties*] be then? Who will have married Nell?
When's that relief coming up? Gosh, but this thinking is Hell!

— Happy

AFTER THE RAID

Listen dearie, stop your crying cause they've locked you in a cell.
Don't make noises like you're dying. Oh, I know it's simply hell.
Crying, dear, won't move the jailer, won't make him unlock the door.
Use some rouge; you're looking paler. I've been in these raids before.
A dozen times I guess they nailed me. Where others used to have a line,
The ward boss came and bailed me, sometimes even paid my fine.
Never mind that press, sob-sister. Dry your eyes and play the game.
Ain't no story to beat it mister. Good lord, dear, don't give your name.
Don't tell them a damn thing, honey. Hush now, dear, I know your tale.
Just like me you needed money, and stepped out to grab the kale [*money*].
Lost your job, a slack season? Didn't have the price to eat?
Maybe not, but that's the reason most girls hit the street.
Homeless, hungry, maybe freezing, soon you found the business paid.
And there's no slack season, or no lay-offs in our trade.
Conscience hurt when long-faced preachers said as how you've come to hell.
Dear, the sons of those same teachers came to buy the thing you sell.
Just forget those salaried prayers, when they tell you all those things.
Tell them that those low waged prayers don't grow no angel's wings.
Gosh now dearie, come on stopper. Cut the weeps and be a sport.
Fix your hair, here comes the copper for to take us into court.
See the judge, he's been out all night. See how he's got the jerks.
We're up now. What's that he's saying? Holy cow, we got the works!

— Happy

HERE'S TO THE DRYS!

Listen to a story I'm going to tell, of some bold bad men on the road to hell.
The reason I tell this story to you is because I'm one of that bold bad crew.

Now, whiskey I make and whiskey I sell, and that's the reason I'm going to hell.
She's a soft old road and easy to go, and into my pockets the dollars did flow.

So here's to the "Drys." Hurrah for their flag
Believe me boys, she's a grand old rag.

I play all day, without ever a care.
If it lasts long enough, I'm millionaire.

Now, all these Drys are friends of mine,
For in days gone by I worked in a mine.

When the country was wet, it was truly said,
I toiled like a slave for my daily bread.

Many are the stories and tales that are told
of me when I worked as a miner bold.

But I don't work now, or do I spin.
I take life easy while the dollars rolls in.

I jingle my jack and sing a song.
I'm idle, and play the whole day long.

At six in the morning, I rise no more
To toil, as in the days of yore.

Hurrah for the Drys, with heads of wood!
It's an ill wind that blows nobody no good.

So a toast to the Drys with ivory dome.
Let's keep us dry until the cows come home!

— Happy

THE LAND OF GEE AND HAW

I have a home I'm not ashamed of in the Land of Gee and Haw,
Where Jeff Davis found a pile of rocks and called it Arkansas.

And I'm going back to Flat Rock, where the corned fed people stay.
They make a little moon-shine just to pass the time away.

I can see old Hank and Siles firin' up the drum
to run a drink that's guaranteed to put sorrow on the run.

It glistens like the dew drops, and keeps you feeling fine,
Like everybody was owing you, and you didn't need a dime.

It's the land of satisfaction, where peace, love and feuds reside,

And the farms they set up edgeways, so you can farm on either side!
Where they dance from dark to daylight, calling swing and balance all,
With the fiddler full o' pine top, playing "Turkey in the Straw."
When you read these lines, yours truly will be there evermore,
Wading through the moonshine, singing "Sailor on the Shore."
My address should you want me will be Flat Rock, Arkansas,
Care of "Wild Cat" Hiram Johnson, in the land of Gee and Haw.
— Happy

DEDICATED TO LARRY SIMMONS

Brace up fellows on the outside. Take your hardships with a smile.
Better days will soon be coming, so have courage for a while.
Though your purse is slightly busted, and you miss your cup of tea,
There's no use feeling disgusted, for you still have liberty!
Sometimes you feel unlucky, and you're getting all the blame.
That's the time to show you're plucky, and that you still play the game.
So buck up old pal, keep trying! Soon you will find some worthwhile pay,
For the boys that do the signing, always see the rainy day.
Anytime your heart feels weary, and you're giving up the chase,
Just recall that in jail are many, who would gladly take your place.
— Happy

FOR BOBBY

You are to me my everything.
Deep in your eyes my heart takes wing.
Your lips are like sparkling wine.
Give love a toast. You are mine!
— Happy

SINCE I'VE BEEN IN THE NAVY

I've been bawled out, bawled up, held up and held down,
Bulldozed, black jacked, walked on, cheated, squeezed and mocked,
Stuck for war tax, excess profit tax, dog tax and syntax.
Red Cross, Green Cross, and I've have been double-crossed.
I have worked like the Devil, and have been worked like hell.
Have been drunk, gotten others drunk. Last of all I had to part with my clothes.
And because I won't spend or lend all of the 500 dollars that I earn,
And go beg, borrow and steal, I've been cussed, talked to and talked about,
Lied to and lied about, held up and hung out, Robbed and damn near ruined.
And the only reason I'm sticking around now is to see what in the hell's coming next!

— Written by my friend, Jack Green

A PRISONER'S PRAYER

*On prayer has gone up through the ages
To a God who they say gave us souls,
But the fever of anger still rages.
The thunder of punishment rolls.*

*We are sheep that are driven to scatter.
We are dogs that are whipped in the street.
We are useless as poisonous water.
We are only for punishment meet.*

*So hear ye the prayers from the prison,
Where fever and famine are rife,
Where never one's soul has arisen,
Where myriads go down in strife.*

*Where the black wing of death hovers,
Lest its jesters make him unclean
And the soft fleecy clouds hurry over
To shut out God's sun from the scene.*

*Where the light of God's orb would be stricken
With shame as it passed in the sky,
To look in the cells where we sicken
To fall in the sod where we die.*

*If thou God, omnipotent being,
Can pierce the prison's pale gloom
And grow not sick of the seeing
This charnel, this soul reeking tomb.*

*If thou hand stretch not forth in its anger
To smite this damn den of despair
Whose evil is rampant and languor
Is lord of the prison lair.*

*Then God take back your creation
And plunge it in infinite fire.
Your wrath is eternal damnation,
But man is more lastingly dire!*

— Carved in a prison wall at McNeil Island, Seattle Washington

ISLAND ARMY GARRISON - San Francisco

Only a short ride from Frisco, on a rock resting out in the sea,
A dungeon for soldier convicts, the home of the U.S.D.B.

Where we lay in our hard bed of [?], and think of our life among men,
Ever wishing our lives far distant, or could be lived over again.

The death colored chambers of madness, where all rights are evermore gone,
Oh, it's there no chance for freedom will ever again see the [light of] dawn.

To be beaten and thrown in a dungeon, where the eyes of mankind are blind,
To be left for dead in this hell-hold of dread, eternally losing your mind.

So hear ye the cries from the inmates, from the souls down in the strife,
Where souls are ever more striving, and thrown by the wayside of life.

Oh, list ye the cries from the inmates; assist in the hour that is blue,
For the ones that are good and the ones that are bad, are as good or as bad as you!

— Written by a soldier convict, serving time at the Army Discipline Barracks, Alcatraz Island, San Francisco. [Note: Alcatraz served as an army base until 1963.]

MARKET STREET [San Francisco]

I took a walk down Market Street, one misty afternoon.
Up to me came a buddy who acted like a loon.

His face was lined with wrinkles. I listened to his wine,
And when he told his story, he asked me for a dime.

Next day I saw a headline. The words were printed red.
A fund to build a monument for those who are now dead.

But why not build a mansion for those who are alive?
The one I met on Market Street sleeps in a lousy dive.

He went through hell at Flanders, but let me tell you what.
He's sleeping with the hopheads [drug addicts] just south of Market Slot.

— Happy wrote, "To the veteran who shot himself in a Howard Street lot, written by a hophead."

RATTLIN' JOE'S PRAYER

Just pile on some more of them pine knots, an squat yourself down on this skin,
An "Scotty" let up on your growling. The boys are all tired of yer chin.

"Allegheny," just pass around the bottle, and give them all a square drink,
An as soon as yer settled I'll tell ye a yarn that will please you, I think.

Twas the year of eighteen hundred and sixty, a day in the bright month of June,
When the Angel of Death from the [?] snatched "Monte Bill," known as McCone.

Bill was the favorite among us, in spite of the trade he had,
Which was gambling, but don't forget it, he oft made poor hearts glad.

An pards, while he lay in that coffin which we'd hewed from the trunk of a tree,
His face was as calm as an angel's, and as white as an angel's could be.

An there's where the trouble started, pards. There were no gospel sharks in camp.
An Joe said, "We can't drop him this way, without some directions or stamps."

Then up and spoke old Sandy McGregor. "Lookie here mates, I'm regular dead-strock.

I can't hold no hand at religion, and I'm feared Bill's gone in out o'luck.

If I'd knowed a darn thing about praying, I'd chip in and say him a mass,
But I ain't got no show in the layout. I can't beat the game, so I'll pass."

Rattling Joe were the next of the speakers, and Joe were a friend to the dead.
The salt water stood in his peepers, and these were the words that he said.

"Mates, ye know I ain't no Christian, and I'll gamble the good Lord don't know
That there lived such a rooster as I was, but that was a time long ago.

When I were a kid, I remember, when my mother sent me to school,
And to the little brown church every Sunday, where they said I was dumb as a mule.

And I reckon I've nearly forgotten 'bout all that I've ever known,
But still if you'll drop to my racket, I'll show ye just what I can do.

Hand me the cards off the rack. Now I'll show you my bible,"
said Joe, and he went to shuffling the pack.

He spread the cards out on the table, and began kinder, pious-like parbs.
"If you'll just cease your racket and listen, I'll show ya the prayer books in cards.

The Ace that reminds us of God, the Duce, the hearth and home,
The Tray, of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, for you see, the three are but one.

The Four spot is Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The Five spot, the virgins who trimmed
their lamps while yet it was light of the day, and the five foolish virgins who sinned.

The Six spot, in six days the Lord made the world, the seas, the stars in heaven.
He saw it were good, what he made, then said, "I'll just go and rest on the seven."

The Eight spot is Noah, his wife and three sons. God loved the whole mob,
So he bid 'em embark in the freshet [*flood from heavy rain*]. He saved all their lives.

The Nine are the Lepers of Biblical fame, a repulsive and hideous squad.
The Ten are the Holy Commandments which were given to us by God.

The Queen is from Sheba in old bible times. The King represents old King Sol.
She brought in a hundred young folks, to the king in his Government Hall.

They were dressed alike and she asked the old boy (she thought his wisdom as bosh) [*nonsense*]
Which were boys and which gals. Sol said, "How dirty their hands. Make them wash."

Then he showed that the boys only washed their hands and their wrists,
While the gals went up to their elbows in suds. Sheba weakened and shook the king's fists.

Now the Joker, that's the Devil, and God if you please, just keep his hands off poor Bill.
Now lady drop to your knees for a while, till I draw, and perhaps I can fill. [*as in Poker?*]

And heaven, no bible, I'll pray on the cards. For I've showed you they're all on the square.
And I think God will listen to all that I say, if I'm only sincere in my prayer.

Just give him a corner, good Lord, not on the stocks, for I ain't such a fool as that,
To ask you for anything worldly for Bill, cause you'd put me up then for flat.

I'm lost on the ropes of your game, but I'll ask for a seat for him back of the throne.

And I'll be me, hull-stack, that the boy behave, if your angels just leave him alone.
There's nothing bad about him, unless he gets riled. The Boys'll all back me on that.
But if you tread on his corns, then you bet he'll fight at the drop of your hat.
Just don't let your angles run over him, or shut off all at once his drink.
Break him in kinder, mild at the start, and he'll give you no trouble, I think.
And could you give him a pack of cards, to amuse himself once in a while?
But I warn you right here not to bet on his game, or he'll get right away with your pile.
Now Lord, I hope you took it all in, and listened to all that I've said.
I know that my praying is just a bit thin, but I've done all that I can for the dead.
And I hope I ain't troubled your Lordship too much, so I'll cheese it again,
That you won't let that knave get his grip on poor Bill. That's all Lord, yours truly, Amen.
— Author unknown¹

THE FACE ON THE BALLROOM FLOOR

T'was a balmy summer evening and a goodly crowd was there,
Which well-nigh filled Joe's barroom on the corner of the square,
And as songs and witty stories came through the open door,
A vagabond crept slowly in and posed upon the floor.
“Where did it come from?” someone said. “The wind has blown it in.”
“What does it want?” another cried. “Some whiskey, rum or gin?”
“Here, Toby, sic 'em, if your stomach's equal to the work”
“I wouldn't touch him with a fork, he's filthy as a Turk!”
This badinage [*witty conversation*] the poor wretch took with stoical good grace.
In face, he smiled as tho' he thought he'd struck the proper place.
“Come, boys, I know there's kindly hearts among so good a crowd.
To be in such good company would make a deacon proud.
“Give me a drink, that's what I want. I'm out of funds, you know.
When I had cash to treat the gang this hand was never slow.
What? You laugh as if you thought this pocket never held a sou [*a small amount of money*].
I once was fixed as well, my boys, as any one of you.
“There, thanks, that's braced me nicely; God bless you one and all;
Next time I pass this good saloon I'll make another call.
Give you a song? No, I can't do that; my singing days are past.
My voice is cracked, my throat's worn out, and my lungs are going fast.
“I'll tell you a funny story, and a fact, I promise, too.
Say, give me another whiskey and I'll tell what I'll do.

¹ The poem was written from a true story told by “California” Joe about the service he gave for his dead friend, Monte Bill. It was first recited by Captain Crawford in 1876, at Henry Ward Beecher's church in old Plymouth Brooklyn. Reverend Beecher pronounced it as “most innocently sacrilegious.”

That I was ever a decent man, not one of you would think,
But I was, some four or five years back. Say, give me another drink.

“Fill her up, Joe. I want to put some life into my frame.
Such little drinks to a bum like me are miserably tame.

Five fingers, there, that's the scheme, and corking whiskey, too.
Well, here's luck, boys, and landlord, my best regards to you.

“You've treated me pretty kindly and I'd like to tell you how
I came to be the dirty sot you see before you now.

As I told you, once I was a man with muscle, frame, and health,
And, but for a blunder, ought to have made considerable wealth.

"I was a painter, not one that daubed on bricks and wood,
But an artist, and for my age, was rated pretty good.

I worked hard at my canvas, and was bidding fair to rise,
For gradually I saw the star of fame before my eyes.

“I made a picture perhaps you've seen, 'tis called the `Chase of Fame.'
It brought me fifteen hundred pounds and added to my name,

And then I met a woman, now comes the funny part,
With eyes that petrified my brain, and sunk into my heart.

“Why don't you laugh? 'Tis funny that the vagabond you see
Could ever love a woman, and expect her love for me.

But 'twas so and, for a month or two, her smiles were freely given,
And when her loving lips touched mine, it carried me to Heaven.

“Boys, did you ever see a girl for whom your soul you'd give,
With a form like the Venus de Milo, too beautiful to live,

With eyes that would beat the Koh-i-noor, [*a famous diamond*] and a wealth of chestnut hair?
If so, 'twas she, for there never was another half so fair.

“I was working on a portrait, one afternoon in May,
Of a fair-haired boy, a friend of mine, who lived across the way,

And Madeline admired it, and much to my surprise,
Said she'd like to know the man that had such dreamy eyes.

“It didn't take long to know him, and before the month had flown
My friend had stole my darling, and I was left alone.

And 'ere a year of misery had passed above my head,
The jewel I had treasured so had tarnished and was dead.

“That's why I took to drink, boys. Why, I never see you smile,
I thought you'd be amused, and laughing all the while.

Why, what's the matter, friend? There's a tear-drop in you eye.
Come, laugh like me. 'Tis only babes and women that should cry.

“Say, boys, if you give me just another whiskey I'll be glad,
And I'll draw right here a picture of the face that drove me mad.

Give me that piece of chalk with which you mark the baseball score.
You shall see the lovely Madeline upon the barroom floor.”

Another drink, and with chalk in hand, the vagabond began
To sketch a face that well might buy the soul of any man.

Then, as he placed another lock upon the shapely head,
With a fearful shriek, he leaped and fell across the picture dead.

— Hugh Antoine D Arcy (1897)

DO IT NOW!

If with pleasure you are viewing any work a man is doing,
If you like him, or you love him, tell him now.

Don't withhold your approbation till the parson makes oration,
and he lies with snowy lilies on his brow.

For no matter how you shout it, he won't really care about it.
He won't know how many teardrops you have shed.

If you think some praise is due him, now's the time to slip it to him,
For he cannot read his tombstone when he's dead.

More than fame and more than money is the comment kind and sunny,
And the hearty, warm approval of a friend.

For it gives to life a savor, and it makes you strong and braver,
And it gives you heart and spirit to the end.

If he earns your praise, bestow it. If you like him, let him know it.
Let the words of true encouragement be said.

Do not wait till life is over, and he's underneath the clover,
For he cannot read his tombstone when he's dead.

— Berton Braley (1915)

THE KID'S LAST FIGHT

Us two was pals, the Kid and me. 'T'would cut no ice if some gayzee, as tough as hell,
jumped either one, We'd both light in and hand him some.

Both of a size, the Kid and me. We tipped the scales at thirty-three.
And when we'd spar 'twas give and take. I wouldn't slug for any stake.

One day we worked out in the gym. Some swell guy hangin' round called "Slim"
Watched us and got stuck on the Kid, then signed him up, that's what he did.

This guy called "Slim" he owned a string of lightweights, welters, everything.
He took the Kid out on the road, and where they went none of us knowed.

I guessed the Kid had changed his name, and fightin' the best ones in the game.
I used to dream of him at night. No letter came, he couldn't write.

In just about two months, or three, I signed up with Bucktooth McGee.
He got me matched with Denver Brown, I finished him in half a round.

Next month I fought with Brooklyn Mike, as tough a boy who hit the pike.

Then Frisco Jim and Battlin' Ben, and knocked them all inside of ten.
I took 'em all and won each bout. None of them birds could put me out.
Then sportin' writers watched me slug, and all the papers run my mug.
"He'd rather fight than eat," they said. "He's got the punch; he'll knock 'em dead,"
There's only one I hadn't met, that guy they called, "The Yorkshire Pet."
He'd cleaned 'em all around in France. No one in England stood a chance.
I was champ in the USA, and knocked 'em cuckoo every day.
Now all McGee and me could think, was how we'd like to cross the drink,
and knock this bucko for a row, and grab a wagon load of dough.
At last Mac got me matched all right, five thousand smackers for the fight.
Then me and him packed up our grip, and went to grab the championship.
I done some trainin' and the night set for the battle sure was right.
The crowd was wild, for this here bout was set to last till one was out.
The mob went crazy when the Pet came in. I'd never seen him yet,
And then I climbed up through the ropes, all full of fight and full of hopes.
The crowd gave me an awful yell. 'Twas even money at the bell.
They stamped their feet and shook the place. The Pet turned 'round. I saw his face!
My guts went sick, that's what they did, for Holy Gee, it was the Kid!
We just had time for one good shake, We meant it too, it wasn't fake.
Whang! went the bell, the fight was on, I clinched until the round was gone,
Beggin', that he'd let me take the fall for him, but he wouldn't fake.
Hell, no the Kid was on the square, and said we had to fight it fair.
The crowds had bet their dough on us, We had to fight, the honest cuss!
The referee was yellin', "Break." The crowd was sore and howlin', "Fake!"
They'd paid their dough to see a scrap, and so far we'd not hit a tap.
The second round, we both begin, I caught a fast one on the chin.
I stood like I was in a doze, Until I got one on the nose.
I started landin' body blows, He hooked another on my nose.
That riled my fightin' blood like hell, and we were sluggin' at the bell.
The next round started from the go. The millin' we did wasn't slow.
I landed hard on him, and then he took the count right up to ten.
He took the limit on one knee, A chance to get his wind and see.
At ten he jumped like a flash and on my jaw he hung a smash.
I'm fightin' too there, toe to toe, and hittin' harder, blow for blow,
I damn soon knowed he couldn't stay, He rolled his eyes, you know the way.
The way he staggered made me sick, I stalled and MacGee yelled, "Cop him quick!"
The crowd was wise and yellin', "Fake!" They'd see. the chance I didn't take.
The mob kept tellin' me to land, and callin' things I couldn't stand.
I stepped in close and smashed his chin, The kid fell hard. He was all in.
I carried him into his chair, and tried to bring him to for fair.

I rubbed his wrists, done everything. A doctor climbed into the ring.

And I was scared as I could be, The Kid was starin' and couldn't see.

The doctor turned and shook his head; I looked again... the Kid was dead!

— Anonymous

THE GIRL WITH THE BLUE VELVET BAND

In the city of wealth, beauty and fashion, dear old Frisco, where I first saw the light,
And the many frolics that I had there are still in my memory tonight.

One evening while out for a ramble, here or there, without thought or design
I chanced on a girl tall and slender, on the corner of Kearney and Pine.

On her face was the first flush of nature, her bright eyes seemed to expand,
While her hair fell in rich brilliant manner, was entwined with a blue velvet band.

After lunch to a well kept apartment, she invited me with a sweet smile,
And she seemed so refined, gay and charming, I thought I would linger awhile.

Then she shared with me a collection of wines of an excellent brand,
And conversed in politest language, this girl with the blue velvet band.

Her ladies taste was resplendent, from the graceful arrangement of things
From the pictures that stood on the bureau, to a little bronze Cupid with wings.

But what struck me most was an object, designed by an artistic hand,
The costly layout of a hop-fiend, and that fiend was my Blue Velvet Band.

'Tis months since that craven arm grasped me. In bliss did my life glide away.
From opium to dipping and thieving, she artfully led me by day.

One evening coming home wet and dreary, with the swag from a jewelry store,
I heard the soft voice of my loved one, as I gently opened the door.

If you'll give me a clue to convict him, said a stranger in accents so bland,
You'll then prove to me that you love me. "It's a go," said my Blue Velvet Band.

Oh how my heart filled with anger, at a woman so fair, false and vile.
And to think I once had adored her, brought my lips a contemptuous smile.

Our ill gotten gains she had squandered, And my life was hers to command,
But deserted and betrayed for another! Could this be my Blue Velvet Band?

I challenged this stranger I found there. The draw on him, I got first hand.
He identified himself as a Deputy. My gun on him, I held with firm hand.

The Law, not liking the glitter of the 44 Colt in my hand,
Hurriedly left through the window, leaving me with my Blue Velvet Band.

What happened to me I will tell you. I was ditched for a desperate crime.
There was hell in a bank about midnight, and my pal was shot down in his prime.

Just a few minutes before, I was hunted by the Laws who had wounded me too
My temper was none of the sweetest, as I swung myself into their view.

As a convict of hard reputation, ten years of this grind I did land,
And I often thought of the pleasures I had with my Blue Velvet Band.

Many months have passed since this happened, and this story belongs to the past.
I forgave her, but just retribution claimed this fair but false one at last.
She slowly sank lower and lower, down through life's shifting sands,
'Till finally she died in a hop joint, this girl with the blue velvet band.
If she had been true when I met her, a bright future for us was in store,
For I was an able mechanic, and hone" and square to the core.
But as sages of old have contended, what's decreed we mortals must stand,
So a grave in the Potter's Field, ended my romance with the Blue Velvet Band.
— Author unknown.²

FROM THE UNDERWORLD

Comes a cry from the night of the underworld, like the moan of a thing in pain,
And it calls to the heart of the maid imperiled, and to those of the spotless name.
How oft in the thick of the gathering gloom, when the curtains of night are drawn,
Have the cries from the souls in some dimly lit room, surged forth till the breaking of dawn.
To those who bask in a love-warmed home, and to those who have never suffered,
Comes the plaint [*moaning*] of despair that is like a groan, hard rung from the scarlet lipped.
We are the folks of the underworld. We're the queens in the realm of shame.
We were made for the sport of the soulless churl [*a mean-spirited person*], and we barter our
souls for gain.
Do you know that we dread your scornful nod, like the cut of slashing steel,
Or the stinging lash of the whip? Oh God, do you think we cannot feel?
Do you show us any pity? No, instead you say when you pass by,
"She has made her bed in the gutter, so there let her lie!"
And if God's in heaven, they pardoned will be, even though they fell,
So what if they sinned, remember they loved, not wisely, but too well.
— Anonymous

DOWN IN THE LEHIGH VALLEY

Let me sit down a minute, stranger. I ain't done a thing to you.
You needn't start your swearin'. A stone got in my shoe.
Yes, I'm a tramp, what of it? Some folks think we're no good,
But a tramp has to live, I reckon, though they say we never should.
Once I was young and handsome, dad plenty of cash and clothes,
But that was before I tripped, and booze colored up my nose.
It was down in Lehigh Valley, me and my people grew.
I was the village blacksmith, yes, and a good one, too.

² With a little research, I found that the poem was made famous when Bonnie Parker (of "Bonnie and Clyde" fame) wrote it down from memory, while she was in the Kaufman County Jail in 1932. She is often mistakenly named as the author — Chuck

Me and my daughter Nellie, Nellie was just sixteen,
And she was the prettiest creature the valley had ever seen.
Beaus, she had a dozen. They came from near and far,
But most of them were farmers, And none of them suited her.
Along came a stranger, young, handsome, straight and tall,
Damn him, I wish I had him strangled against that wall.
He was the man for Nellie. Nellie knew no ill.
Her mother tried to tell her, but you know how young girls will.
Well, it's the same old story, common enough you'll say.
He was a smooth-tongued devil, and he got her to run away.
It was less than a month later, that we heard from the poor young thing.
He had gone away and left her, without a wedding ring.
Back to our home we brought her, back to her mother's side.
Filled with a raging fever, she fell at our feet and died.
Frantic with grief and trouble, her mother began to sink.
Dead in less than a fortnight. That's why I took to drink.
Give me a drink, bartender, and I'll be on my way,
And I'll hunt the runt that stole my girl, If it takes 'til judgment day.

— Anonymous

HELL IN TEXAS

The devil, we're told, in hell was chained, and a thousand years he there remained,
and he never complained, nor did he groan, but determined to start a hell of his own
where he could torment the souls of men without being chained to a prison pen.
So he asked the lord if he had on hand anything left when he made the land.
The lord said, "yes, I had plenty on hand, but I left it down on the Rio Grande.
The fact is, old boy, the stuff is so poor, I don't think you can use it in hell anymore."
But the devil went down to look at the truck [*barter*], and said if it came as a gift, he was stuck.
For after examining it careful and well, he concluded the place was too dry for hell.
So in order to get it off his hands, god promised the devil to water the lands.
He had some water, or rather some dregs, a regular cathartic [*laxative*] that smelt like bad eggs.
Hence the deal was closed and the deed was given, and the lord went back to his place in heaven,
and the devil said, "I have all that is needed to make a good hell." And thus he succeeded.
He began to put thorns on all the trees, and he mixed the sand with millions of fleas,
he scattered tarantulas along all the roads, put thorns on the cacti and horns on the toads.
He lengthened the horns of the Texas steers, and put an addition on jack rabbit's ears.
He put little devils in the bronco steed and poisoned the feet of the centipede.
The rattlesnake bites you, the scorpion stings, the mosquito delights you by buzzing his wings.
The sand burrs prevail, so do the ants, and those who sit down need half soles on their pants.
The devil then said that throughout the land he'd manage to keep up the devil's own brand,
and all would be mavericks unless they bore the marks and scratches and bites by the score.
The heat in the summer is a hundred and ten, too hot for the devil and too hot for men.

The wild boar roams through the black chaparral, it's a hell of a place he has for hell.
The red pepper grows by the bank of the brook, the Mexicans use it in all that they cook.
Just dine with a Mexican and then you will shout, "I've a hell on the inside, as well as without."

— Anonymous

A SAILOR'S BELOVED

A gay and handsome man lay on a bed of pain,
All hope of his life ebbing fast. N'er would he rise again.

"Have you no sweetheart, fair and true," they whispered 'ore his bed,
"Whom you would tell a last adieu?" a young man softly said.

"There's Betty back in Bremerton. Juanita's in Mexico.

"There's Sally in Seattle, and Betty in Bordeaux.

"At Hampton Roads there's Harriet, who I must surly see,
And Nellie, too, at Newport News. Please bring them all to me!"

The watchers stared in wild surprise, and then they said once more,
"Come tell us pray, without delay, the girl you most adore.

"The girl whom you have sworn to love, and bring forth wealth and fame,
Your promised wife, your hope and life. Quick, Let us hear her name!"

"There's Lilly in Long Beach," he said, "and Daisy in San Diego.

There's Lucy in Los Angeles, and Pauline in San Pedro.

"Barbara dear in Brooklyn, and Susie in St. Paul."

The young man sighed, "It's time I died, for I've sworn to wed them all!"

— Anonymous

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