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SOUTH STAR

BY
JOHN GOULD FLETCHER

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Set up and electrotyped.

FIRST PRINTING.

To my sisters,
Adolphine and Mary;
To my first cousins,
Mary Pamela and Inez;
To my second cousins,
Tom, Barron, John Lathrop,
Alice, Alma, Amine, Dea, Olivia,
Holland Davis, Nan Miles;
To all my surviving Fletcher relatives,
This book is humbly dedicated.

NOTE: The "Story of Arkansas" first appeared in the "Arkansas Gazette," State Centennial Supplement, June 15, 1936, in a somewhat modified version from text used here. My thanks are due to Messrs. F. W. Allsopp and J. N. Heiskell, proprietors of the "Gazette," for permission to reprint it in its final form.

J.G.F.

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I

THE STORY OF ARKANSAS

BOOK I

DE SOTO DISCOVERS ARKANSAS

The forest abode
Rank beyond rank, unaltered, under the sky.
There was in it no road,

Nor path, nor trail:
Save where a bronzed and moccasined foot went by
Upon some errand, frail.

The forest kept
Its secret hidden behind a rampart of dense trees,
Which woke or slept

Unhewn by axmen, still
In the rains of April, loud in the autumn breeze,
By river, plain or hill.

That secret stirred
Vast tree-hid mounds behind old river banks;
It whistled like a bird

Through evening glades made cool,
Where trees shaped watchful ranks;
As some smoke-signal starred the sky's blue pool.

It leaned across
The corn by thatched stockaded villages,
Buried in trees; it wailed unearthly loss

In howl of dogs at night;
It pulsed in drumming dance above corn-fruited tillages,
It passed, proud, poised, aloof, a wheeling hawk in flight.



Then suddenly as the winter once more changed
Its face and over the somber maze of branches
There drifted tender lace of greening spring;
Upon a yellow bluff to east, overhanging
The vast deep-flooded plain where day and night
The mad brown river swirled and sullenly fell
Through bayou, chute, lagoon, there rose and stood
High in his stirrups, pointing a bronze-scabbarded sword,
An armored man — a knight of ancient Spain.



He had left behind
Pacific rollers foaming into night
Upon a coastline blind;

And the grim sight
Of the knights charging through the stone-walled square
Upon the Inca's litter, and the flight

Of the brown barbarous host in the noonday glare,
Under the Andes, half with hail-cloud covered;
Pizarro watchful there.

He had left behind
A room piled high with glittering spoils of gold,
The stone way wandering blind

Above the precipice; the dizzy, bold
Leap of an osier bridge above the abyss;
And where vast Sacsahuaman reared its cold

Gray monoliths, the sudden glittering bliss
Of the Sun Temple; and the marvelous flowers
Molded from plates of gold, amid the temple towers.

He had left behind
The rendezvous at Cadiz; and once more,
The oceans rolling blind;

And then the perfumed beauty of the shore
Of Florida that hung before his keels
Shrouded in soft spring rain, two years before.

The skirmishes in the swampland and the squeals
Of the swine herd driven on, the toilsome way
To where an Appalachian height reveals

A land of pearls and a queen's litter gay;
Painted brown warriors kneeling to him there;
The slow retreat to South; Mauvilla's dreadful day.



And now he looked beyond his last despair
Of the winter at Chicasa, when his men
Already having lost more than five score
Out of their ranks, and half a hundred horses,
Being clad in Indian blankets now, with furs
Lining their dinted armor, lay and snored
In wattled huts, while past the crude stockade
Three hundred savages crept with pots of clay
Piled deep with glowing charcoal, and with ropes
To bind the Christians with, to overthrow
With flames and arrows his last desperate strength
Carefully husbanded 'gainst disaster there;
Helped by a dream of honor none could know,
Till death should strike his sword-guard down at length.

Twice beaten, here was the third test. Now he reeled
Within his saddle as he sat and stared
At the vast river. Foaming, swirling, brown,

Seething with jostling logs it eddied down,
A light thin mist arising from its face,
Across two miles of landscape. And beyond
There was no bank. The trees stood out, half drowned
In boundless waters. Could there be gold that way?
Or must he check his onset, bid retrace
Once and for all this hopeless route? Disgrace
Now battled hard with honor. Fate might yet repay
With the fabulous gold about which tongues had lied
Since Cortez sacked the Aztecs, and before,
Since Colon's ships had sighted Salvador,
Scarce fifty years gone by. Here was a tide
Cast adverse to his hopes: so he must go
Against it; by the bluff, for many days,
His men hammered the frigates for his pride;
While war canoes hung in the stream below,
Clinging a bowshot's distance. So through swamp,
Where flitted the sulphur butterfly, where cried
The jade and scarlet parakeets from boughs
Of the funereal cypress, lank, rust-red,
Solemn as obelisks of Egypt old,
He passed to shallower waters where at night
Fireflies winked jeweled eyes and bullfrogs boomed
Their hollow utterance against the katydid;
And there he broke his ships up, saving bolts
Rude-fashioned out of spurs. A village there
Upon high ground, received him. And its chief
Had heard already of the mighty whites
Who rode bestriding monsters. Woods have ears.
He knelt, bowing his head to the dust to greet
The white god from the sunrise. Horses stalked
Between the wattled houses. They abode
There many days but heard no talk of gold:
There were mountains somewhere west. This folk was kind,

Gave deer and loaves of dried plums. Casqui was
Their chieftain, waged with Capaha some old war.



Bowed to the dust, he still, as dark De Soto passed,
Behaved as if a God, a spirit from the Sun,
Here shadowed the brown earth. So seeing the folk friendly,
Not like the red fiends at Mauvilla nor
The demons of Chicasa, he who led
His army thither, ordered a great cross hewn,
Set up upon a high ridge, where all folk
Might see it, underneath spoke words of Christ
Who died for all men, could make free men's hearts.



Cypress upon whose root
Crashed the steel axes thrust
By sun-tanned sinewy hands
Of Spain, what in your rust —
Lone cypress standing high,
A cross twixt earth and sky —

Could cast on men a spell,
Filling these naked folk
With wonder of heaven or hell,
So time began to choke
Their glory, and made gain;
Long tears and lingering pain?
Did some unearthly Christ
Live in you past the grave,
That it should have sufficed
To raise you up to prove
That He who said, "If you but cleave the wood,
You find Me?" brought here evil with the good?

Now since strong evil thrives
Unchecked; red tribes being gone;
The plague of gold yet strives
'Gainst man beneath the sun:
Cypress, on heaven's crest
Grant life undying rest!



Forth from that region they went, to sunset fared;
They rode past marsh and plain,
Through forests of somber pines where pattered down
the rain,
Through groves of oaks uprooted by high winds;
Through swamp and over prairie. On and on,
League after league, day upon endless day,
The shallow brown river, foaming over its sands
To left, and to the right the hills' array:
Then through more lofty mountains where the deer
Browsed in the dewy dawn, and turkeys rose
Gobbling from thicketed branches, till the hills
Rolled off at last, they saw an empty plain:
The shallow brown river snaking over its heart,
Wide folds of burnt earth linking sky to sky;
And there red men of another sort. No more
The log stockades, the straw-thatched villages
Of mud-daubed wattle. Now the skin tepees
Stood in wide circles, blue smoke curling out
Over the prairie in keen autumn air.



On a windswept prairie to west,
In the glare of the glittering sun,
Topping the brown earthcrest,
Which never rolls to rest,
The buffalo run.

With jarring and lumbering tread,
Nostrils that breath out fire,
Where the blackjacks quiver, red,
By the shallow stream, dry in its bed,
They gallop, and do not tire.

And the tattered troop, pressing spurs
To the flanks of their sweating steeds,
Will scramble through brambles and burrs
Where the rattlesnake slumbers or stirs,
To where their leader feeds.

The Spanish halberd will pass
Through the wooly hump to the heart;
And the blood will dye the long grass,
The great bulk topple and pass —
And the wheeling buzzards start.



Retreat, retreat, and the gold given over
To the mocking files of trees,
Yellowing in autumn air;
Retreat as the wild geese come
Swinging down from the north, and the hum
Of snow is heard on the breeze,
To mock our nakedness there:

Retreat down a long green river,
Winding twixt wooded banks
Where the wild deer feed.

Retreat to a mountainous valley
Filled with white steam and seething
Hot springs, bad for the horses.

Retreat as the winter comes south;
Mountain on mountain, plain after plain;
Retreat to the swampy red clay,
Where the palmetto sprouts and the moss
Begins to invade the dark branches again.

Retreat now no more;
For the villages once more appear,
Anilco, Autiamque;
Here was no word of the sea being close,
But there was corn and the dried flesh of deer.

Guachoya; De Soto lies racked
On his bed of fever, and now
The men stare unshaven and haggard,
Praying only for Spain.

The horses, unshod,
Gallop wild to the prairie apart:
Scarce anyone lifting a hand to save them.
And the Indians watch narrowly now,
Waiting their chance for a dart.

Now De Soto has bidden
Picked men ride to the southward and seek
The Gulf that cannot be so far:
The Gulf he has failed to discover.
They ride off, fevered and weak —
And the Indians watch closer, and hover.

Through the swamps, through the lakes, through the clay,
Sinking down to their bridle reins,
They stagger and slash, but they find not a way;
So they ride back again for their pains.



And now, as if held by some spirit of these trees,
On the banks of the great river, that for nearly a year gone by
He wandered west of, now De Soto's heart must yield
Its burden of vast endurance to the immense round of
the sky;

Sparsely strewn with the blue smoke of Indian villages
Among which he had wandered; now as cast
Out of the north from the winter gathering fast,
Death comes and sits beside him; death will try
His courage and hope; hope broken at the last.



They bore him at night, in a cloak
That the Indians gave, to the stream:
Wrapped deep in soft furs, to a boat —
A canoe, that went down to midstream;
He had passed the great river before,
Now his corpse was to sink in its depths.

Their torches lit up the vast spread
Of the seething eddies, the drift
Of the somber branches beyond:
In the muddy current, come swift,
From his golden dream hidden away,
He sank, and was lost in its depths.

Now the priests chanted low and intense
Their "Dies Irae"; beside
The clay bank, the katydids cried;
The forest gloomed, dark and immense.

His horses were sold and his slaves —
The Indian girls that he took
From Capaha — these, and his spears.
Even the blade of Toledo was struck
From his hand and was borne by another's hand.

The troop scattered southward and west;
Then returned, and with labor and pain,
Fashioned rude frigates at last,
Slaughtered their horses, drifted down to the foam of
the main.

But De Soto still dreams
By the shore of the river, under the southward-flung weight
Of the water. Root-deep in these streams,
The cypress complains of his fate.



“Fortune was his, and he had followed far
His fortune: roving restlessly through the dim
Aisles of dark woodlands haunted by a star
Which could not rise for him.

“Youth too was his and the hot blood of youth;
The lust for mastery, the pride of breed;
But youth is heedless, reckless; now in truth
Since he had failed, ’twas better to be dead.

“Courage was his and the undying faith
That kindles others’ courage, makes it new;
But the river running swiftly on to death,
Took courage with it too.

“I lift my boughs now, lonely over this land
Of stream and field, of marsh and flooded plain;
Now by a last defeat all things are spanned;
Till my forests rise again:

“Till the rivers surge and swiftly rage to south,
Unchecked by levee, unmarked by a field:
Till the brown tribes return, and the white drought
That held this land so long is forced to yield.”



And so De Soto through the cypress breathes;
From the remote green silence of our past he speaks:
Where the wild vine the ragged oak-branch wreathes,
And the Gulf storm goes northward, seeking the Ozark peaks,
Over the cotton, over the high-plumed grain,
De Soto rides anew, seeking his dream of Spain.

BOOK II

FRANCE FOUNDS ARKANSAS

Lightning licks the warm earth;
Over it springs the thunder,
Peal upon peal rebounding;
Out of the night they came,
Out of the north;
Riding the waves of lightning,
Canoe upon canoe.

Paddle to paddle spoke;
Into the heart of the South;
Trailing the lilies past,
Gold lilies of green France:
From the wild lakes to north
To where magnolia swamps
Lift to the southern sky
Their white-cupped towers of green.

Gone from the North and South,
Gone like a lightning-flash;
Yet leaving like the lightning
Unchanging marks behind:
Names of a peak, a stream;
A Latin twist to speech,
Some dream of chivalrous faith,
Some hope, not sown in dust.



So many times the world goes hid in dreams
Like a close bud tight-folded, till the hour
Strikes for it, it unfolds to perfect flower;

So here the land sleeps ever, wrapped in streams,
And its green garment of forests, while the flame
De Soto touched it with, wakes not its power:
The Indians rove it changelessly the same,
Holding the bowstring loose against an unsung dream;
A century and a quarter pass, the clock
Points midnight still, the darkness does not lift;
Until upon a July day, there drift
Two birch canoes along the vast brown bay
Lapping its eastern edge, and the light slow
Enkindles that will stamp its heart with France.



Long have the Tunicas gone
That gave De Soto meat;
Their stockades broken down,
Their warriors in retreat:
And on a sandspit now
The Quapaw villages running in a row.

The smiling gracious folk;
The best formed men, it was said,
Of all the Indians: deerlike head and throat:
How many Frenchmen fed
Here at this spot, drew soft
The calumet clouds aloft?

The "down-stream people" these;
Their river, brawling, brown,
Shallow and swift, runs down
Beyond the skin tepees
That star the prairie's heart;
Out of its sun-glared start
It splits the plain apart,
Where dwell the Osages.

Long now these folk have fled;
They too, went with the rest.
But the sky that knew them dead,
Holds yet, for warrior's rest,
Red plume and fiery crest
When sunset takes the west.



First then, these came, down the loose-gliding stream,
Brown between fawn sand banks, and bluffs of feathery
leaves:

Marquette the humble priest, to whom it seemed Heaven's
Queen

Smiled from Her unflecked sky; and Joliet
The tough fur trader, tricked out in buckskin clothes.
They sat down between the lodges and they passed
The smoking calumet from hand to hand
In the grave Indian fashion, after a feast
Of catfish, buffalo, and hominy.
They questioned of the sea; whereto their hosts replied
It was ten days paddling south. So they arose
And turned their prows to north again, and fared
Past laden wild-plum-thicket banks
And clustered hickories plumping out their shells
To where the slow green Illinois goes on
To the last portage beyond which the blue lake
Opens as over the horizons of the North
Blows the great breeze across the plains that way.
But Canada and France yet stayed remote,
Year after year, none took that path again:
Locked beyond steel blue bays of many lakes
And frozen lines of wild-rice fields stretching west;
Until at La Chine far beyond the pale
Of grim Fort Frontenac, amid the pines,
A marvelous vision cheered La Salle's stern heart.



Hard shall it be, La Salle,
To fasten firm this rainbow dream to earth.

Twice shall you break and fail
Before the wintry river banks give way.

From Frontenac, across ice-sheeted lakes,
There lay an Empire stocked with endless furs.

Where Jesuits had gone
With blue lips, bearing Christ to the wilderness;

And Iroquois had passed
Scattering rapine, torture, fire and sword,

Because the English knew
The Great League stood athwart the Frenchman's path.

There the vast Western land
Of the wild grape, the prairies where there passed

Huge herds of buffalo,
And skies were blackened with wild pigeon flights.

You stood your outpost watch, La Salle,
Lionlike, looking across the portages,

To where, said Indian lips,
There wallowed a mighty river, running south.

What was its unknown goal?
Some Sea of Vermillion stretching far to East?

Or the great bay to South
That washes Mexico, Spain's undying pride?

You were to see
'Spite failure, cold, starvation, all its length;

From the high frozen bluffs
To where the last brown eddy curls and blends,

About magnolia roots
Wreathed in wild smilax, drooping with gray moss.

The lilies of proud France,
The courtier and the explorer clasped in one!

Yes, you would see
From February to April, summer come

Up through the land; would hear the war-drums pound
In the dense fog, and take the western bank;

Only to find
As the sun rolled the mist back, there the tribes

Of Quapaws tall and kind,
Modest and gentle, marveling at your cross;

As if it held a spell
Not known before by their swift-dancing feet.

You would be first to see
The Natchez with their white robes and their disks
Of copper and the shrine where for the Sun

The victims each year died;
And the brown streams dividing and the banks
Grown low, aloof, remote;

Where the alligator hides, where through the sky
The vivid parakeets pass.

This yellow stain, La Salle,
Of river lay before you: now the sea
Led on into the helpless heart of Spain.

And the men sang,
"The banners of the kings go forth,
And the mystery of the cross gleams high and bright."

Hard was your fate, La Salle;
Failure on failure heaped, you yet went on:

Wrecked in the southwest bay,
Beyond the river on a barren shore;

With naught but salt grass waving
And buffalo wandering between sea and sky;

Upon this Texas plain
Struggling for Canada, your hopes now gone;

No Tonti now
Beside you, naught but treachery on the way;

The dagger thrust
Between your shoulders sinking to the heart.



Yet this your dream was caught up, carried on
By many a nameless wanderer of the woods,
Clad in brown buckskin with his rifle slung
Across his shoulders, some squaw by his side:
With his *Mardi Gras*, his *Jour de Rois*, his feasts

Of buffalo meat, washed down with *eau de vie*,
His old songs lilting from the heart of France,
His eagle-freedom under fiery skies.



With marten, mink and skunk,
Beaver and buffalo,
With raccoon, squirrel, elk,
Ermine and fox we go,
Towards the sunset land,
Which by no trail is spanned;
Huzza! Huzza! pour le beau pays sauvage!

Towards the rolling plains
Where the Indian paintbrush leans;
The beaver with his dams
Laces the brawling streams;
Where eagles wheeling go,
And drums the buffalo.
Huzza! Huzza! pour le beau pays sauvage!

We leave cold priests behind,
And laws for me and thee;
The Indian maids are kind;
One dram of *eau de vie*
Buys all their savage charms;
New France springs from their arms.
Huzza! Huzza! pour le beau pays sauvage!

Like kings we feast and die,
Like lords we leave the west;
Too swift to stoop and try
With plows earth's stubborn breast:
Maumelle and Magazine,

Mazzern and Petit Jean.

Huzza! Huzza! pour le beau pays sauvage!



Slowly from out the South,
From the rice swamps, the sugar lands, the palmetto-circled
plains,
About the river's muddy mouth,
They scatter north and west in casual trains;
Normans and Bretons, Basques, Acadians,
Alsations — to the land's last frontiers
They tramp and boat and go,
A-horseback though Versailles no longer heeds or hears.

D'Iberville now and Law
With visionary energy push them on
Over the bristly ridge, and down the draw
Where the river, snaking southward, long has gone;
A land where the lazy game
Waits for the rifle, none need guide a plow;
And fox and beaver keep up France's fame
Better than the populous colonies, in a row.

Meanwhile across the seas
The kings and cardinals gamble all away;
The empire of the raccoon crumbles down,
The elk and beaver fall in an affray
Where Montcalm measures swords with Wolfe; once more
Spain's banner waves here now beside a crumbling post;
That knew the mountainous lilies of Navarre;
Yet not for Spain's slack rule, can France be lost.

A denser host will drive
Through the Appalachian passes, till they come
To where the river's tide

Runs south and west; yet ere that day the drum
Will sound by many a staked fence and log wall,
Summoning the men to mount and quickly go
To where King's Mountain makes the redcoats fall;
But this the Westward land will scarcely know,

Sunk in its boundless dream
Behind its crumbling palisades, or past
Long trails across green prairies; by a stream
A farmhouse, or a field, is sparsely cast;
Along the river where La Harpe once rowed
Up to *Le Grand Rocher*, and saw, below,
A lesser crag outjutting, a mere node,
Yet the first rock along this current's flow.

They spread their songs afar;
Their quick and savage wit, their lithe fierce fire;
The lilt of fiddles under the evening star:
"*J'ai cueilli la belle rose*" — such their desire
To keep the sun-bronzed speech of vineyards that
Knew their forefathers, and the gusty roar
Of Rabelaisian laughter, gross and fat;
When logs upon the hearthstone blazed once more:

This cup to France! for without France how sad
Would have been for this land man's destiny!
The outlawed Celt within us running mad,
With prayer and psalm and bitterness of the sea;
Mon gars, I tell you there is something else:
A laugh, a kiss, a song for lazy hours,
A rose set high upon a rude pine shelf,
A tall magnolia rich with proud white flowers.



Now at the last the nerveless grip of Spain
Drops from the land it never tamed or cowed;
To east, the ragged rabble that defied
Its British king sees victory slowly come
After a long, relentless, searching war
Of anguish and defeat; above the peaks
That run from Blue Ridge westward eagles soar
Into the blazing sky above the drift
Of buffalo, the slow retreat of tribes
Before the Saxon onset; now at last
Where strong keel-boatmen touch the western shore,
The steady gaze of Jefferson is cast,
Hazel-gray, snapping fire beneath his brows,
Out to the unknown prairies spread beyond:
France goes up now in smoke. Another throne
Falls to the loud song of the *Carmagnole*
Tripping through Paris streets; and where was France,
A strange dark Corsican stretches out his hand;
Ready to seize a crown that tumbled far
Into the gutter; ready to ride high;
But not across the seas which England holds
Close-guarded; he is gazing off to East.

And through the seeing brain of Jefferson
There passes now this vision; flatboats poled
Down the Ohio; wagons canvas-hooped
Crowding the pass above Pittsburgh; settlements sprawled
Across Kentucky; the dark Natchez trace,
Robber-infested, running from Nashville down
To the French settlements south; Spain's dangerous game
Of bribery and threat at New Orleans;
Bundles of furs brought down to lie on wharves
Above which floats a foreign flag; the threat
Of the strange Corsican with the rising star.

Behind those hazel eyes a new thought stirs
Of a land stretching far to find the West;
And the blue peaks beneath which scattered tribes
Innumerable, gather to chase the buffalo:
All brought beneath this flag that newly dared
Hold its head high to England; from New York
To the Pacific, eagle fitted to fly
Towards freedom with one song to stir its wings;
And neither France nor Spain to block its path.
A vision which one force alone could check,
This new tricolor which he loves and fears.



At Arkansas Post,
Behind the oak stockade,
Where the Indian for six-score years had come, bringing his
bundles of furs,
To load into boats that slipped down the long river glade
Running 'twixt cypress roots, past Natchez and Baton Rouge,
To New Orleans, where they lade
The great ships for distant France;
Where the *coureurs de bois* had halted, to replenish their
stores of gunpowder,
For their long rifles; and where the priests had passed on
their way,
Bearing the Man on the Cross to the Indian tribes,
It happened by chance
That Spain, France and the United States ruled on the self-
same day.

First waved here the banner of Spain,
With its arrogant castles, its scarlet and yellow folds;
It dipped to the Bourbon lilies, silver on a blue field;
Then rose once again, but not the land to hold;

France then anew, ascended freely; over this spot,
The fierce tricolor snapped and vividly flared
From the jackstaff; though the people had known it not:
And now the handful of settlers a new Stars and Stripes had
prepared:

But they halted and said, "We will let this flag of our France,
This new tricolor of freedom, float till the sun goes down,
And the night is at an ending; we will leave it there to dance
Freely in the breeze till tomorrow brings a new dawn."
So while the wild March winds blew over the world,
The tricolor flapped on still in its wild, free flight,
Over the Arkansas shore, as the forests wakened and stirred
Towards another spring through the gathering night.

And now, as the new day dawned,
The star-sown flag that the lilies had once come to aid
Rose in the air, streaming westward; the symbol of France
was gone;
Yet the people looked on it proudly and none was afraid:
France was yet theirs in memory and in hope,
Free speech and salty wit, their trees and their vines;
Not to be lost; as the trumpet-vine goes up the oak,
So the fame of France blended with theirs, though the flags
had changed their lines.

BOOK III

THE PIONEERS IN ARKANSAS

Gray rock of the South,
Granite amid the green oaks loosely twining
Their scallop-work of leaves; the forest hides
Your sleepy strength; but he who sees, believes
How many waves of life have beat on you,
Gray brow uplifted to the sky, unstained.

At the equinox, when the southwest winds of the autumn
 come flying
Out of the low Gulf plains and dapple the sky with their
 spotted cloud,
Rose-red flaming to crimson, the free man's soul is trying
To stand aloof from the mob, to move apart from the crowd;
To ride into hills awakening to flame and to glory,
Remembering the fire and the passion, the life yet untold
That made them his own; feeling he is part of their story.
Beyond the dull hopes of the present, he may flaunt yet their
 scarlet and gold.

From Tennessee they came,
From Kentucky and the Carolinas, from the hillsides dark
 with the pines,
From the Blue Ridge, the Smoky Mountains, they brought to
 the West many a name:
Sevier, Conway, Crittenden, Scott; and the long wavering
 lines
Of their ox-wagons under hooped canvas went up many an
 Ozark pass
Where but a few years earlier the Indian war whoop had
 gone by;

And the watchful pines saw them creaking on, the forests
went down in a mass.

As they do in untraveled places, when a cyclone has swept
the sky;

So the first great wave that conquered fully the West
Poured into Southeast Missouri, where the vines and the
canes grew dense,

At the settlements by New Madrid clinging close to the great
river's breast,

And they heard the dull roar of the earthquake and saw the
sky grow tense

With rumor of desolation; the river thundered and stirred
In its bed and made lakes and channels where dry land had
been before;

It swept over fertile plowed acres, hurled islands high un-
heard,

Till the sunk lands of St. Francis clung deep to its westward
shore;

So they came on then to the South,

The land-hungry men, the lean men, ready for a feast or a
brawl;

And where Arkansas Post waited by the river's mouth

They spread across the Grand Prairie, seventy miles long
over all;

Their sparse settlements went up the river till at last the
forests knew

The sound of their long keen rifles, the glimmer that their
campfires cast;

The bear crawled into green thickets, the Indians withdrew.
And the broadax hacked at the logs, till the cabin stood fast.



By Lundy's Lane,
Eighteen fourteen, a July day,
With the roar of Niagara ringing in their ears,
The Twenty-first Connecticut Volunteers
Were standing in battle array,
When General Ripley, in command,
Called Colonel Miller to his hand,
For a British battery was pounding the Yankee line
From a height of the land.
He said, "Can you take that battery, make it mine?"
And Colonel Miller replied,
"I'll try, sir," and moved steadily forward,
His regiment offering a perfect target to the British
cannoneers;
As up the slope they went,
On death or glory bent,
And at the top they charged with the bayonet,
And the battery was theirs,
As the sun went down on splendid victory.
For the Yankee breed had prevailed
Over the Mistress of the Sea.

But, in Arkansas,
The Notrebes and the Vaugines, the Peyattes, the Phillippes,
the Lefaves,
Lived as they could in the wilderness; and some of them
never saw
The news of the battle of New Orleans; they gave to the
forest their graves;
And to oblivion their settlements; for who remembers now
Cadron or lost Lagrange, Rock Roe, or Zebulon?
History lavishes sometimes her laurels on a brow
That needs it not, while better men, who dared more, go
with none.



Then Woodruff came on,
Paddling his printing press into a land that Nuttall had
 found,
The spring of that year,
The haunt of the Indian still;
Where the mysterious mound
Stood by the bank of the river, and the Quapaws and
 Chickasaws fought,
As the Indians will,
By the shallow ford, troubled with hoofs of the passing deer.
But Woodruff saw clear
The future of this land,
So from Nashville onward he came,
Freighting his press from the Cumberland to the Ohio, from
 the Mississippi to Montgomery's Point;
And there he stopped for awhile,
Seeing the magnolia for the first time with its wealth of red-
 seeded burrs,
Its glossy green leaves,
Not finding any boat for the White River Cut-Off that went
 on up to the Post,
Till at last he obtained two log dugouts and lashed them
 together and set his outfit thereon:
And so traversed the long cut-off to find his far-off goal,
The place of some thirty log cabins sprawling about a sand
 bluff,
Where Lewis and Thomas on Front Street, merchantmen,
 sold
"Chambrays, Cassimeres, Bearskin Coatings, and Oznaburg
 stuff,"
As his types soon told to the world.

And James Miller too came,
On the day after Christmas, after a trip of seventy days,

Bearing the motto, "I'll try, sir," before him like a flag
To a place where the people had not lost their independent
ways;
Where Oden and Allen could meet on a sand bar, with
pistols, and settle their strife
With a shot which wounded Oden, and a shot whereby
Allen fell,
To die soon after; for the wild Southwest in these men came
to life
As the Missouri Compromise "shook the Nation like the
sound of an alarm bell."

And the people went wild
At the fertility of that land;
The vast pines and the cypresses, the oaks and the hickories
deep
Making their final stand,
Came to life from their sleep.
The mockingbird's ecstasy spanned
The woods like a squirrel's leap:
And man there, like a child,
Shook off his old ways and went
Rifle-armed, buckskin-clad,
About the new world he had.
Flocks of wild pigeons darkened the western skies,
Parakeets screamed in the woods,
Deer stepped shyly into a tree-lined pool,
Raccoons rambled about, staining their paws with pokeberry,
By the swamps of the Mississippi, the wild geese came on
in black floods.



Then Russell and Ashley fought
Their long-drawn legal battle over who should own the place
Designed for the Capital city, where the spring gushed forth
from the rock, and the trace

Led to the Red River settlements southward.

Beautiful there was the land's face,

With its great bluff of rock to north facing the river and to
the south the long swell

Of the low granite mountain beyond the bayou of Fourche,
And it grew and flourished — that town of Little Rock — may
God yet guard it well!

And the governors came,

Izard and Pope and Fulton; yet lawless was the land;

Getting along pretty much as it had; man's hand against
man's hand;

A word was a blow then: and the world would soon hear of
the fame

Of the "Arkansas toothpick," the knife that James Black
there had made

For the skilled hands of the Bowies: for the West had got
into men's blood,

After they crossed the Father of Waters: none there dared
be afraid

In that wilderness spanned by sparse settlements, at the
mercy of drought and of flood.



Now that road don't go nowheres; it's always thar when I
git up in the morning;

And it doesn't fork, but it splits up like the devil:

And my name mout be Tom or Dick, but it lacks a damn
sight of either:

And thar ain't but one dry spot in the cabin, and me and
Sall sleeps on it,

And I cain't fix me the roof when it rains, and when it's
dry it doesn't need no fixin',

And my whiskey's all gone, because Dick, that damned skulk-
ing skunk, he stole it;

But I don't keer, so long as I've got me a fiddle,
And life is still sweet, so long as I kin play me a tune,
And if you kin play any more to this one I'm fiddling,
 stranger,
Take a dozen cheers and sot down.



The mails were always late; at first, straight to the Post,
By river from Potosi, once a month they came;
But then the government made a post office at last
At Davidsonville, and dumped the mailbags there;
Each fortnight, no arrangement made at all to bring them
 south:
Which made poor Woodruff see his first gray hair.

At Little Rock it was often worse; the steamboats ran aground
Before they reached the place; roads were as good as un-
 known;
Lawyers rode circuit, preachers seldom came,
Washburn preached a sermon when the town
Was one log cabin standing by itself;
And Mrs. Cunningham was the first woman known
To brave the terrors of the wilderness.
(One wonders where she got that cap, that dress?)
Pigs rooted squealing where the town branch ran through
 town.

But every year,
The wharf at the foot of Commerce Street groaned deeper
 with new bales,
Steamboats came tooting up the river to take them away
To Memphis or New Orleans;
The old line of grizzled river-pilots turned from their twin-
 funneled craft,
To the bar at the Anthony House, near by which Ashley
 had made

His fine, new columned mansion, haughty upon its lawn,
Where the negroes made music at night when a dance was
afoot;

(Few of the old ways are left; few saw the last of them fade!)

And Albert Pike came, far from the West and yet farther
away

From his native New England: adventure and scholarship
blended;

As a maned horse from the prairie, all the way from Santa Fé,
To old Fort Smith and to Little Rock where his journey at
last ended:

To fight a duel with Roane, while smoking a cigar,
To battle in politics, to shine high in the law,
To put a song in our hearts, not easily cast away,
To be the first to carry our name beyond the pale of the seas,
Where it abided in "Blackwood's" dignified files,
By Edinburgh, the proud; to mark this land of the free!

And Colonel Elias Rector, the long-haired, fine
Old Arkansas gentleman living close to the Choctaw line,
"Who got drunk once a week on whiskey and immediately
sobered himself up completely on the very best of
wine,"

Once chartered a steamboat, or so I have heard,
And went on a spree all the way down to New Orleans;
(That rare old bird!)

Spending in a week of junketing the better part of his means,
For they knew how to be open-handed, there in that wilder-
ness, so,

Rector outdid them all; and fairly stole the show!

But in the backwoods, deep,
Where the people grew up with the canebrakes along the
green sluggish streams,

And were lonely and shy like the deer or the dogwood shak-
ing its blossoms at the April sky,
There was infare and wedding and birth as there always will
be,
And the slow oxen dragging the rude pine coffin up to the
top of the hill,
Lonely and still,
Solemn and free.
Life here was simple and crude,
But still it was good;
"An Arkansas fandango with trimmings of Missouri
etiquette."
When the tables were set
None went hungry from there —
And if there were shootings afterward, well, that was their
own affair.



Halley's Comet to the west stood high upon the sky,
When Congressman Crockett of Kentucky rode by;
Sing a song, shoot a bear, go-ahead Davy,
I'm sure you could grin a grin that would drive a coon crazy!

Crockett didn't want to stop, but people made him stay,
Gave him a big banquet there, wouldn't let him get away;
He stood up and roared, "Half-horse, half-alligator,
With a dash of snapping turtle! You're the right sort.
See you later!"

Crockett died a hero's death within the Alamo,
Besieged by yelling Mexicans; no man came from it. So,
When the bullets ran out and the rifles took their rest,
Dead Crockett had a bowie knife clasped tightly to his breast.



Out of the fullness of time,
Urged by the energy of Ambrose H. Sevier —
Since Michigan stood clamoring at the gates
Of the Union, why not this, the white man's last frontier,
Facing the Indian nations packed to west,
While Texas to the south shook itself free? —
Out of the fullness of time, this land of plain and crest
Took under the Union its new liberty.
Full-fledged, a state at last, stood Arkansas.
Its newborn star awoke and dazzlingly stood
Before the weary Congress battling on
Through an endless all-night sitting. So men saw
It kindle like a torch in the summer dawn.
And President Andrew Jackson took his pen
And signed his name. On June the fifteenth, 'thirty-six,
North and South equally grew great and fair;
Populus regnat! Thus the course ran plain;
Arkansas twenty-five and Michigan twenty-six.
The states and stars went westward in that life-quicken-
ing
air!



Then through the land
Ran deep the Trail of Tears,
Still unforgotten, despite waning years;
The miserable Cherokees,
Driven through swamps and dying
Of cholera, of starvation, rain and cold;
Their bodies given to the unquestioning mold.
With them the four great tribes;
Choctaws and Creeks, Chickasaws, Seminoles,
Broken by white man's greed,
By white man's broken word.
They went away and left
A page not often scanned in American history,

But if read fully, surely enough to turn
The blood from white to red.
They went and left a spell
Writ on the autumn land,
Seen when the wild grape mantles the trees and haze
Drifts from the south against the scarlet leaves
Standing, like painted warriors at command,
Against the onward-stealing winter breeze.



Slowly, across the earth
There spread a shadow in the smoke of towns;
The nation, shaken by Missouri's birth,
Scarce past these birth pangs, threatened to fall apart;
The lines of fate were drawn.

Garrison arose and shrieked
Defiance at the South;
Not law, not tolerance, not kindness should rule,
Till every slave was free.

And the deep South
Seethed because Texas gave to Mexico
Defiance for defiance, blow for blow;
An empire for the South might yet be won.

Empire of cotton, whitening under heat,
Too soon your beautiful fields were stained with blood!

And so the sound of war
Went through the Southern fields;
At Buena Vista, Yell fell in mad charge;
At Cerro Gordo, Lee unsheathed his sword.

At many and many a desperate desert fight
The South rode charging, and the Spanish hordes
Melted away as ice before the sun.
New England meanwhile merely sniffed and sneered.

But the South won this war.
War fought for sectional interests, yes, but still
Man's gallantry is still man's gallantry,
Not common on this earth; most hard to kill.

The South became
Heritor now to a vast untrammelled land
From California stretching to the coasts
Of old Virginia, rich in bygone dreams.

And men walked proud
Under the clustering states that marked the South:
Virginia and Kentucky, Tennessee,
The Carolinas, Georgia, Florida,
Old Alabama, Louisiana bold,
Missouri, Texas, Arkansas.

But the North grew more great
Despite the stirring South;
Her railroad lines held fate,
The factories swallowed men;
Her steamships vomited hordes
Of new blood trekking West;

Too far away, the South,
Dreaming behind its wall of cotton bales;
Guarded by faithful blacks who toiled and died,
Giving the best they had;

But the "sweet chariot" that came oft for them,
Found more well-coffined by white tender hands,
And sung to rest, than dead beneath the lash;
This for your lying, Stowe!

And the plain richness of great fertile fields
Was better for them than this world of mills
And strikes and lust and greed; and shameless lies;
That we see spread each day.

The shadow grew more deep
With Calhoun dead and Kansas at the door;
Rich lands of wheat and corn, great buffalo plains;
Was Kansas North or South?

So John Brown rode
Through Kansas, settling the issue in his way:
A rifle at the forehead and a shot;
The firing of the barns; to horse again.

And Lincoln, hating deep
The thought of slavery, stood, debated long
The growing breach with Douglas, found this word:
"No nation can abide half-slave, half-free."

But Arkansas
Played in the toils unwitting of its fate:
Some finer shades of color now were drawn
Across its frontier cloth;

And here and there
The columned mansions rose, the wide deep lawns
Decked with magnolias; mighty were the feasts
They knew, and dark the ghosts that followed fast.

Till now, at last
Divided in its purpose, strained to break,
With planter against squatter, peak against the plain,
The South began to crack.

And Lincoln found
The presidency he dreamed of in his hands;
Not given to him ever by the weight
Of votes, but willed by fate, or God, or chance.

Then the South flared
Into rebellion, gave into the hands
Of Davis in that last hour all its strength;
And, utterly unprepared,
Blundered into the last trap set by fate:

For Lincoln, shaken,
Finding his ship of state a riddled wreck,
Adrift in thundering seas, without a chart,
Held on, would not draw back.

So Sumter's guns
Thundered and Arkansas leapt into the breach;
As Lee leapt and Virginia leapt, to guard
Their brothers' threatened blood.



We rode, we rode the thunder,
At Bull Run we rode,
At Oak Hill we rode,
We rode, we rode the thunder.

At Shiloh we rode,
At Pea Ridge we rode,
At Prairie Grove we rode,
We rode, we rode the thunder.

At Stone's River we rode,
At Manassas and at Chancellorsville we rode,
At Gettysburg we rode,
We rode, we rode the thunder.

At Vicksburg we rode,
At bloody Chickamauga we rode,
At the Wilderness, at the long retreat we rode,
We rode, we rode the thunder.

To Atlanta we rode —
Echoes of thunderbolts dying fast, falling away!
To Petersburg we rode,
We rode the slackening thunder.

To Appomattox we rode,
Because we were South, because of a pledge unspoken
That none should ever have or win this land
But he, who in full loyalty loves its ways —

Furl that flag now, for 'tis weary!

BOOK IV

ARKANSAS FACES ITS FUTURE.

Weep, weep for the South;
Weep for the broken hopes,
Weep for the shattered lives,
Weep for the ravaged pride;
Let funeral trumpets speak
Our wrongs to the ends of the earth;
Let it never be forgot,
The things that the strangers did.

Weep for the lofty house,
Ruined and empty, its shelves
Despoiled of its books and the trail
Of muddy boots over the lawn;
Weep for the low log hut
In the hills where they brought at the dawn
Some starved shoeless farmer's youth
With a ragged red hole in his chest;

Weep, weep for the South;
Let it never be forgot
That the freedom which both sides sought
And fought for, was stolen by knaves
Under the cloak of the flag,
Under the Capitol Dome
Of the chief heart of our State;
Let the grief that has burned, burn on:
Let never the South forget!



Cleburne lay dead at Franklin; Pike had gone
To Washington from the defeated South, abandoning
the soil

On which he reared his fame; Hindman was shot
As he sat in his house in Helena; naught was left
But starving and despair; the South lay prone,
And over its body gathered a black brood
Like buzzards around a corpse, or wolves come back
Out of the woods, to flesh in life their fangs.

This is the winter of our discontent
While black militia roved throughout the State
Shooting and looting, doing their devil's work
At Powell Clayton's bidding: winter from 'sixty-eight
To 'seventy-four, as mild-eyed Murphy passed
From the governorship; poor hillbilly set by Lincoln
To rule the divided State. Now all being lost,
And our last flag surrendered long ago,
There was no Lincoln left to check the course
Of the victorious spoilsmen and their breed.

This is the hour when Thaddeus Stevens ruled
The Union; and poor Andrew Johnson, lost,
Fought on against impeachment, and bad laws,
Striving to do dead Lincoln's bidding; this is the hour
When Grant and Wall Street linked, began their work
Which has not ended yet, though we have heard
Of a shining great New Deal which soon may lift
The South and North to heights undreamed, unfared;

May it come soon! Meanwhile this is the hour
When Clayton, like a lion sprung from North,
Drew tight his martial law about the State,
Knowing full well these Arkansawyers fought
To death and never otherwise gave way.
So it was black militia, and good loot,
And shootings in the dark for four long years.



Out of that horrible darkness, from that night
Guarded by bayonets, the South reformed its power;
Out of that desolation by full right
It won again its freedom, hour on patient hour:
Breaking down walls of bayonets and walls
Of votes and walls of corruption, till at last
There were no freedoms which it dared not take, no falls
It could not conquer, till that hour too passed.

Merging in the great moment called today,
When east and west and north and south, now flies
One voice from the housetops, "You shall put away
Your childish toys; your golden vanities.
You shall abandon; you, America's breed,
Best gird your loins, and keep your sword sharp set,
Upon the unscabbarded hip; the Monster Greed
Has stalked this land too long; its hour must set."



We will not speak much of those desperate days
Since they were better lost in time's oblivion;
The evil that they did took long to mend
And, for that reason, it were better now
The actors' names were lost. There were many there
Who saw too late the crimes men wrought; while some
Held on despite the obviously evil course
Of conquering twice the conquered. For success
Even today some battle on, while others
Know that plain honesty without success
Works better than the highest triumph won
By baser means; so it proved hard to teach
Some people then that the South might yet live on
Despite the deeds they wrought, and wax in pride
And rancor for each fierce injustice parried
Or let go by, until the hour of dawn;

When once again the State might shape her course,
Washing away the traces of the past
As a river, in the spring, cuts through a bar,
Sweeping the sand and piled-up logs alike
To roll down elsewhere. After so many years
Of struggle and despair and patient hope
Much was undone that need not ever have been.

Nor shall we speak of that strange private war
Whipped up as misrule slackened, when the State
Sprang once more swift to arms; and Little Rock
Heard at its house-fronts tramp of marching men;
The songs of negroes cheering Baxter on,
The State House held for Brooks; these annals are
Writ in all history books for men to read
And ponder on; we own a higher task
To hold the singer's harp above the strife
And let its echoes rouse the well-tuned strings,
Treble or bass; to bring in harmony
The inner import of those tragic scenes
When the fusillade of rifles raked the street
By the Anthony House; when King White rode to war;
When the "Hallie," plowing upward in the stream,
As gardens blossomed through the heart of May,
Was raked by running fire and staggered out
Of range by Palarm Creek — when, out of need,
Siege guns long hidden were dug up again;
The "Lady Baxter" thundered its salute;
When manhood plainly said, "Misrule must cease."



O Arkansas is a doughty State,
But she was made to stagger
Under the burden set by fate,
The rule of the Carpet-bagger.

Brooks said he would deliver her,
And so did Baxter's army;
They made a mighty fuss and stir
Through days both bright and stormy.

Who was the governor, no one knew,
Or ever learned thereafter;
Bullets and jests like hailstones flew,
To cause both tears and laughter.

David F. Shall at the Anthony House;
New Gascony, half a dozen;
Two negroes killed at Baring Cross,
And the whole State a-buzzin'.

For Yankee Doodle set the tune,
But it was danced by Dixie;
And Southern men have nimble shoon,
And Southern feet are tricky.

Till Grant, the patient, heard at last
He had to end the fighting;
And Grant was wise and spoke full fast
To close the ill, the blighting.

O Arkansas is a fickle jade;
Although ten thousand axed her,
She warn't the tiniest mite afraid:
So she chose neither Brooks nor Baxter.



Peace at the last, and the slow healing-up
Of wounds of war and deeper wounds of hate;
Peace on the cotton fields,
Peace on the piney hills,

Peace on the south frontier,
Peace on the troubled State.

As once before, by Lexington,
So here too had the embattled farmers stood
For freedom and the right to rule themselves
And made the right to hold that power good.

Not without laughter, nor with cowardly tears,
But bravely and directly they could go
Down the long haunting vista of the years,
Towards a goal that none of them dreamed to know:

Out of that desperate stand, this great new hope:
The Constitution made anew, the will
Of the folk given again its greatest scope,
Whether they lived by plain or stream or hill:

Augustus Garland carried to the chair
Of the Governorship; the cannon gaily fired
That once were ranked for warfare; and the fair
Settlement of all so long delayed, desired.

Then Garland summoned to a loftier seat;
Our proud new Capitol rising on its site,
Though there are deeper thoughts like ghostly feet
That haunt the old and make its walls loom white.



No more the lonesome moonlight of the South,
No more the whispering of gaunt aged trees,
No more the whippoorwills' aloof lament,
No more the song of negroes on the breeze;

No more the stately house, its columns high
About its portal; no more the wild dawn
Of Christmas with its "Christmas gift" heard nigh;
No more the minstrelsy upon the lawn;

No more the steamboats tooting up the stream,
No more the mules dragging the laden drays
Down to the levees; riders no more gleam
Galloping crimson woods through the autumn days.

But highways of concrete that turn and run
North, east, south, west; the schoolhouse trimly piled
Beside the roadway; youth gleaming like the sun.
Here is at last the century of the child!

And may we make in it a sovereign mind
Fit for these young bright bodies and their fate;
For if we fail before this task designed,
We are not worthy of our high estate.



Winter has come, and the world
Is brown and burnt after harvest;
The long lines of the hills
Stretched like the bows of bygone Indian tribes
Under the rain-washed burning blue of sky,
Glow with the red coats of oaks,
The sheeted flame-splendor of hickories,
The scarlet dogwood, the sweetgum's crimson stars:
Soon to be caught by the wind and tossed
Once again to the earth.

Winter has come; the sky
Will be filled with the dark Gulf-cloud hurrying
Northward and eastward, shaking its long skirts again
Over the fat brown cotton fields.

Lights from the westering sun
Will kindle the ridge of the woods,
Weathered to somber russet, till they catch the old flame
Glow like great knights in dark bronze
To smolder and sing:

You, Arkansas,
Untamed and dangerous river,
Riding out of the swelling hills or into flatlands falling,
Over your sandbars brawling,
Roll over us your earth and water much commingled,
Till we may find in our hearts the fire and the force to
 resist it,
Till we may stand as trees unswayed by any tempest,
Till we are proud and free, unconquerable women and men!

Ford over which De Soto's captains splashed,
Be with us in memory always;
Give heed to our burdened hearts,
That they beat not here in vain!

Let us remember Hindman, assembling his scattered army,
Shoeless, weaponless, starving, most of them standing in rags,
Marching through the mountains thirty miles north in the
 dark days of midwinter
To strike his enemy at Prairie Grove and win one more
 victory.

Let us remember the example of David O. Dodd,
Caught and hanged as a spy at seventeen years of age;
Refusing to betray his own countrymen. As he mounted
 the scaffold at last,
He turned to his executioner and said: "You will find a
 handkerchief there in my pocket,"
Willing that his eyes be blinded since he held to his own
 inner light.

Last of them all to surrender, let us remember the Red
River men

Under Shelby, the undefeated, riding off to Mexico:
There to bury their flags and await the dawn of that day
When their cause could be vindicated in memory, and they
might again face the foe.



Life moves again, through still its wonted day
Of toil to many, and of ease to some;
And still across the hills in high array
There moves the far sound of a hollow drum.

Beaten perhaps by some Indian who in flight
Of all his tribe waited and lingered there;
Half-heard at dawn, half-guessed at fall of night:
Tuned to the pulse of awe or dull despair;

Now quickening slowly. Peal on peal on peal
War shakes the world anew; and now, afar,
An age is done that came close to reveal
What under heaven made the men we are.

The men of peace; born to self-government
Through English blood; by German effort vowed
To science and to invention; by the French
Warmed to the arts of life, not disallowed.

By native effort, pluck, and mother wit,
Woven to a nation here, a flag to fly
Where the long river of the plains has split
The granite hills, and opened up the sky.

The men who songless pass from birth to death:
Far westward still their eyes are cast; their hearts

Hold still the proud dream of the tragic South,
Long hoping through defeat, by fits and starts.

We do not know what destiny has willed
For them: the drumbeats rise. Under the sun there flows
Once more for them, from field to distant field,
White flame of cotton, falling in long rows.



He who is wise will ride the tides, today,
Not dreading the future much, nor shamed by the giant past;
He who is wise will take life as it comes
Proudly, superbly, caring not if death

Strikes as the thunder rises from the South
And the fierce lightning flickers. He who is wise
Will have more things than self before his eyes,
A greater thing than death within his heart.

Not in the dwindling instant, nor today,
Shall we be proud and high, to find our dream
Embodied in full life, a "wonder state"
Beyond our hopes, or some base greed's false gleam.
The fire burns in us slowly; let it come,
That day unthought of by the noblest heart;

When greatly daring, we stand up as one
Upon the summit of time, ere days depart.



Cease your fiddling and your scraping;
Draw up the lathstring, let the guests go home;
Tread out the smoldering fires,
Snuff up the guttering candles;
Tomorrow we shall ride beyond the hills
To seek our star.

1934-1935.
Revised, 1939.

II

ECHOES OF ARKANSAS

MY FATHER'S WATCH

My father's watch this is, and it is old;
Its case dates back to my grandfather's day.
It has seen frontier fights and Californian gold,
The fall of cotton, forests shorn away;

Log-cabins, black slaves toiling, brick-walled tombs;
Tallow-dips, railroads, and the South's defeat.
Sun-bonneted women with lax, laden wombs:
Under a bedquilt, rigor stiffened feet.

So many, many, changing, shifting scenes
Of human life tick-tocked to centuries;
No word I seek could tell me what it means,
No book or brain could hold so many memories.

And it must hold more crowded memories yet
As the years pass — and with slow, stuttering word
Measure out much that I would fain forget;
And to invincible seconds shatter all, unheard;

Shatter all things but time, which as we go
Gravewards in pain or joy shall yet abide;
Till with our fathers' fathers we shall know
What earth and heaven were, ere time began its stride.

IN MOUNT HOLLY

(J.G.F. and A.K.F., 1906-1910)

Here beyond hope is all that death shall take of me;
This brown Arkansas hillside, dreaming through depth of
midwinter, alone in the Southland;
Under the dove-gray low-swung cloud come up from the Gulf
to scatter
Its benediction of deep rain, endlessly flashing and pouring;
Here, in the drift of the years,
From the seas I have crossed, and the lands I have known,
and the struggles
I have faced with the steady tide-drift of time marching on
through my vitals,
I have come back to this point of repose, to these stones side
by side in the grass;
Turning as the earth turns against far Orion's fierce whirl-
wind of stars.

They greet me unseeing, these graves,
Mute symbols of life accomplished, made noiselessly perfect:
Quieted by the cold hands of death that suddenly seize on the
body
In an hour unexpected, as a thief in the night, running free
with the tale of man's days;
Now not to be loosed from the soil till the sphere splits its
core and is shattered
Like a ripe seed pod crammed full with thick seed of expect-
ancies, memories, and failures.
Their dumb thought trails on in the soil while I in the high
world above them
Lift up thin eager hands to the sky and cry to the sun's dying
splendor.

Here beyond hope is all that death shall take of me;
The blood that is mine, and yet theirs, the tower, the base
and the framework,
The building not reared by man's hands, but shaped in the
night and the silence,
The framework of the body fashioned as theirs, for the blood
through the generations
Repeats the same tale of Eden lost and Paradise darkly for-
gotten;
When the stars hang low in the sky and two souls become as
one body,
Stumbling past hope and despair to a timeless consummation,
Which is as the wedding song of God mating the stars with-
out number.
Here does the last life wait,
Crouched in its stronghold of bone behind the slow-vanishing
sinew,
A spark without issue, a last ache of lust, a slow tide merging
and dying
Into the running of quick-hidden sap and the thin dumb
flame of the grass.

Out of what chasms of fire,
Out of what lava-like torrents life sprang at the outset neither
I nor these graves can remember;
They have become turf-covered dumb mouths opening below
to the waters under the earth,
Which burst forth but once in the flood, and since then
have ever been silent.
Into what dark seas we flow
I know not at all — I remember
Only the sunlight that lays a soft pencil of shadow to sleep
on the grass;
The tramp of the black-clad pallbearers, the words spoken
and sung, the lowering of the coffins to earth.

Here beyond hope, beyond dreams,
Under this soft and lazy sky dreaming in depth of midwinter,
Where the sweetgum casts to the earth its brown prickly
balls, where the holly
Flashes its scarlet clusters, where the feathery pine sways its
long needles,
Where the redhaw blazes with berries threaded bright on
thin outspraying stems,
Where the conelike fount of the magnolia spreads down-
wards its star-clustered leaves,
Where the acorn lies split on the stone, its yellow sustenance
wasted:
Here was I fashioned and made
By those who now sleep in the earth at my feet, as they by
others forgotten.
Their speech was my speech, their dream was my dream, it
was given
Beyond the cloud's arbitrament of rain to create, or the slow
earth's power to destroy.

So I pause ere I go,
And stretch out my hands to these worn stones, smoothing
them over and over,
Repeating their names which no one but I now may utter,
Praying they may somehow bless me;
These who have given me life, and so many dreams
On this brown Arkansas hillside, quiet in depth of mid-
winter;
Out of this army of graves facing eastward I single out but
these two stones,
I wailingly beseech them
With tears of the spirit torn against life and its days,
In this place where so many tears have been shed and mortal
lives brought to the awe
Of the open portals of death, beyond hope, beyond dreams;

I kneel and weep as a man weeps,
I cry out loud as a man cries,
Let that which is mine and yet theirs, this memory transient,
 this passion,
Marked by the cross of Christ on these stones, marked in my
 heart by time's passing,
Be with me now forever wherever I go.

MAGNOLIA

Dusky and strong,
You lift high your branches,
Mighty magnolia;
Starred in rayed clusters,
Green, glossy, shining
With thousands of leaves;
Sixty feet high
From the base to the top,
Green cone of glory;
Waking in spring
With the beautiful cream-white cups of your blossom,
Charmed into opening
By the mocking-bird's mad bursts of song.

Gulfwards they know you,
Where the chocolate-brown rivers boiling and fretting
Sway silently southward,
Past the flat cotton fields;
De Soto stood under your branches
Whetting his sword;
Marquette tied his boat where you stood overshadowing some
 bayou,
Knelt there and prayed;
La Salle planted beside you the golden lilies of France
Proud and alone;
You are the dream of a forgotten empire,
Louisiana, and a lithe fiery quadron singing;
Leather-legged hunters stuck your leaves in their coonskin
 caps,
Calico-clad settlers tied your blooms to the bonnets of their
 wagons.

Dusky and strong,
You lift high your branches,
Mighty magnolia;
Forgetting, not knowing
How war raged once under your shade.
Iron guns of Vicksburg
Once boomed through your branches,
Whistling and whirling
Green leaves to the ground:
You were the hope of the South,
Here bugles blared, here flags were flung, here regiments
 raised a ragged cheer;
Here too the site of many a shallow grave,
Dug where some blue-eyed farmer's boy clutched at the
 bloody grass.

You guarded the stately house
With its white-fluted pillars;
Smooth-ruffled silks within were spread beneath the lusters,
Low bosoms gleamed, the fiddlers scraped like mad;
The music shook you as you dreamed within the moonlight,
Mad kisses and low murmurs thrilled your branches.
Spurs clinked as voices from the verandah started "Dixie,"
And long-curved gallants drank a toast to the new-born Stars
 and Bars.

Dusky and strong,
Dusky, deep green,
Jade green and faint gold,
You stand now apart.
Apart from this age and its impotent clamor,
Its ravening fury, its pillage of ultimate destruction;
Apart from all things, dreaming only
Of an empire lost and forgotten,

Blown like the faint perfume from your chalices of snow;
Spreading about your dark trunk and your deep heavy shade
to still draw me
In the stifling slow midsummer days to the red-brown South
I know.

THE CHRISTMAS TREE

I have lived long,
Longer by far than once my heart desired;
Have seen the race not given to the swift, nor the victory to
the strong,
Have felt the salty taste of kisses and the cold ache of being
tired:
Have watched the wide earth covered
With chaotic fury of motor cars,
Have known but little in the end, though much my mind
discovered,
Have passed through deadly peace and deadlier wars;
Yet this at least I find is surely mine,
After a long hard journey, and mighty cities seen:
The pure sweet scent of a southern long-leaved pine,
Dangling with chains and balls of glass and toys,
Into my nostrils breathed, soft, rich, and clean.

THE SCYTHE

Within the well-house through whose lattice fell
Long shafts of dusty sunlight, diamond-shaped
Patterning the uneven brickwork and the curb
Where the round cedar bucket, brimming high,
Rested upon its shelf with its cool freight,
Close by the door there hung a long lean scythe
Which, ere lawn-mowers came, was oft in play
Round the tree roots when summer heat and dew
Contended in the grass.

I've seen it swung
By negro hands as knotted and as old
As Father Time's himself. And I have heard
How the sweet chariot would swing low, swing low,
Cutting off man like grass. For life itself
Has in itself the power to shape death
Out of the failures and the ecstasies
We travel ever through, unsatisfied.

Now scythe and well
And hard brown hands are gone. No one at all
Goes there on still hot days to draw aloft
The dripping bucket on its rattling chain,
Or lift a dipper cloudless to the brim:
And yesterday I saw, within the house,
Surrounded by old faces I once knew,
How the keen scythe with its hard-whetted edge
Had mown away the flower of lives, like grass.

THE JOURNEY

Negro cabins, with their subtle roofs upcurving
Like the horns of the new moon;
Line after line of high up-spiralling cypress,
Plumed, stately, silent;
Cardinals, scarlet, darting beside the roadway
From swaying thickets of cane;
A silver-grey cotton gin with bales about it,
Black chimneys over gigantic sweetgum trees.
And, where the woods receded,
Flinging their gray files open,
Miles on miles of flamelike falling cotton,
Furrows that outwards spread in flight unending.
The muddy-brown breast of my South
Spreading itself in all its depth and glory.

BY OLD RIVER

This I remember,
Under the low-swung cloud that came up from the Gulf and
 was shattered
In pitiless rain on the cypresses standing as tents from the
 water:
A clapboarded shack with its porch filled with deep dusky
 faces
Smoldering with carefree laughter against the dull day.
And then, by low cotton fields,
Mist-shrouded, silent,
Smudged, purple-brown, sullen,
Down a long road driven straight through the upturned
 chaos of clay,
An old negro man mounted upon a mule without saddle,
His ragged blue trousers dangling, his coat pinned close to
 the throat,
His cotton umbrella held stiffly over his head,
Riding with the dignified air and easy unhurried movement
Of an ancient Egyptian king.

THE UNFAMILIAR HOUSE

To an unfamiliar house once more these feet have wandered,
That set forth on the road so many years gone by.
And once again as stranger have I pondered
On the serene blue depths of an unfamiliar sky.
Here where a dead youth passed, unspent yet shattered,
I walk my roads neglected once again;
And whether that strange past or the nearer past much
mattered
I do not know. Here I am loosed from pain.

Between me and the boy that held forlornly to his vision
Now stands a lofty shining unsurmountable wall;
I stare at it in vain. Neither sympathy nor derision
Alters its mass at all.
The oak trees stand as they have stood, unchanging;
The dumb stretch of the dusky sunbrowned earth
Still breathes in brooding unison with all my hopes, far
ranging,
As on that ever-vanished day when life first brought me birth.

And people come. They may have kept their places
In which they stood a dozen years ago;
But when I grasp their hands and stare into their faces
They seem more strange than once of old. I know
That time and the years sift wrinkles. Now I wonder
What lasts between us, changing day on day.
Once and for all my fate was this, to live though torn asunder
From all I might have shared — there was no other way.

And when I pass, from a dark hearthstone going,
Blue in the rosy dusk the chimney smoke will glide,
But I will be borne from it on the flowing
Drift of a darker tide.

No more than smoke can I blur still these blue skies' change-
less splendor,
No more than a faint blue cloud of smoke within these
hearts I last.
The mirror fronts me, frozen, cold, untender.
There are no ghosts left now; the past is but the past.

THE PIONEERS

Here let us halt. Let the car stop. Take breath.
Here, on this ridge of crumbling limestone thrown
Across the north as rampart, overgrown
With splay-limbed hickory, blue-berried cedar,
And rough-barked oaks. Here where the road dips down,
The slope is clear. To south, some miles away,
Another ridge runs up with mounting pines
Plumed like old warriors on its crest. Between,
A yellow road snakes out across the clay
Towards the valley, crossing a clear stream
Which slides to southward on smooth-gurgling stones
As we look down on it. Old, tattered, dry,
Long lines of cornstalks, held in winter's grip,
Stretch out to a low mound, upon which stands
A white-walled stately house with columns high
Surrounded by dense cedars. Now its floors
Are tenantless, abandoned to the rains
Which stream through shattered windows, day by day;
While near at hand, and neighboring the stream,
Beside a stake-and-rider fence overgrown
And tumbling into a wilderness of haws,
Stand roofless cabin walls. Logs two feet wide,
Twenty feet long, hewn by the axman's strength,
Stand rotting, marking now where human thought,
Having no other power than its pride,
Forced the first winter back that came this way.

Here let us pause. Let the car stop. Take breath.
Forget the mileage. Think of the years, the years,
Few in their number, rich in purpose that
Have passed since first along a scarce-blazed trail
Cumbered with stumps, the creak of wheels was heard,

And oxen tugged with steaming breaths while men,
Bearded and rangy, leapt from bonneted carts
Pointing with long whips to the vale below.
Then not a house was here. The hawk aloft
Swung in slow circles through the soft blue sky,
Cardinals flickered past. A flock of quail
Rose from the low deep plain where spreads the corn.

Think of their lives gone by. Great beyond doubt
Are now your cities, filled with towering weight
Of walls upheld by steel. Smooth polished marble
Will cover them, gilt ceilings, skylit domes,
And burnished floors where the foot sinks amid
The soft-piled carpets, and deep easy chairs
Stand ranked, whence smoke of cigarets steals out,
Wavering in air. Great are your factories, too,
Crowned with the plumes of smoke each morning where
Long lines of workers pass to fill their day;
But greater was the effort of these men
Abandoning wealth and happiness to seek far
Where naught but wilderness beckoned, a new hope;
Who hewed and delved therein to find a way,
Simple, august, as these great weathered logs.

Here rugged Saxon strength, and Norman will,
German tenacity, and Irish fire,
And fierce Scotch loyalty, and mother wit
From old French firesides wove for a western land
On rude great looms, the garments of a life
Heroic in its hardness, yet at last
Blossoming in the hues of long-lost song,
With tones of merriment, and brief lament
And newborn hope, and joy of man's full strength,
Of which some echoes still abide today,
Stirred by the wind amid these lazy pines.

Here let us halt. Let the car stop. Take breath.
What matter if the time at last goes by
Which should have found you back in town, deciding
On an oil contract or a dress to buy?
Was this the one thought speeding on those men
Of whom you take the inheritance and hope?
Better to stop and see light sink again
Through the thick pinetops, see the long hills settle
Into rich purple; better to hear the breeze
Grove through forgotten hopes, in laden cedar boughs.
Better to catch far echoes of faint song
Sung by dim ghosts that lurk back in the shadows:
"All in the merry month of May,
When young birds they were crying,
Sweet William on his death-bed lay,
For the love of Barbary Allen —"
Better to hear such song than think their faith
No greater than your baseless thirst for gold.

They were not lacking in rude health or strength;
Skill of their hands they had, and fiery power
To make the wilderness blossom. In their wagons,
Went fiddles that old horny hands drew down
And tuned and sounded, Bibles that old eyes
Looked at in hope or grief, ballads which memories
Brought forth to sing again. In simple faith
They drove their plows and purposes home to earth;
And heaped above the grave rough stones and slabs
To mark them theirs; poor was their life and plain,
But full of patience and the things of might:
Might of birth, sorrow, death. Your life is richer;
Yet somehow lacking in that charity
Which betters hope. They knew how great the powers
Of nature they must fight. We turn aside
To worship far too oft an idiot's dream

Unrooted in earth's heart, and without force
To make one day the finer. Be at rest,
Pause then and ask this question ere you go:
Can we attain the summit which they dreamed,
If for one hour we know not how they planned?
Better to treasure more than Parthenons
These hewn-log cabins, wagons, axes, plows,
Than worship dynamoes, multiply city lights
For vain distractions of a heart not eased
By sense of its earth contact. Safe our land is only
If it can still remember, cleanly keep
The character they gave it with their breath.
Lost is our land if ever it forgets
The hope expended here, the sacred gift
Of clear unwavering spiritual force and flame!

‘ ‘ L O S T C O R N E R ’ ’ *

Word that the whipporwill sobbed adown the mountain,
Amid the twisted oaks, the pines uprising;
“Lost Corner” where the wagons came to rest,
Because a spring gushed out beneath the stone.
Or because men were weary of their going
Back of beyond; the hills still hold some secrets.
There are some memories that the trees have taken,
Holloa them how you will, they will not yet come home.

Here time has stopped, and nothing ever changes:
Speech too has stopped with time; the hills and valleys,
Ridge beyond wooded ridge, have ceased to wait
A future, having never known a past.
Even the Indians never walked this country,
Where lazily like smoke, the frosty morning
Curls low mist-shapes around the dry creek-bottoms
That clasp the paintless shacks and will not let them go.

Back of beyond — “Lost Corner” — far off hiding
From the loud locomotive bell and whistle
That roars through clayey cuts, or over trestles
That look to where the mountains stand so dim
In humble darkness that their shapes seem only
Another world than this; too far to reckon;
What trail amid the hickories hides your chimneys?
I think no guide will ever show that way.

Here time is not, or cancels out; and space is
A mere vague string of sounds; gone over yonder;
Maybe; beyond that ridge; out of that valley;
Further along the creek; and still so far to go:
Only the deer knows, or the mountain holly

* From “Folk-Say, A Regional Miscellany,” edited by B. A. Botkin (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1931), copyright, 1931, by B. A. Botkin.

Has shown the path to these who found the prospect
More sweet than any gain; these stringy figures,
That seem as speechless as their sandy clay.

Sleep on the husk-filled mattress, let the evening
Rouse ague in your bones, or go and scabble
With the thin hoe about the paintless cabin;
“Git skeered” at night, or watch for days unchanging
The corn hang withered in the sizzling heat
Of mid-July; and then, perhaps you’ll tell me
Why should you, stripped of all but death, still value
Life more than death? Is there much left to make
A fuss about? The sky’s still there, the mountain;
The slow and gangling walk ’twixt birth and death;
Misery in the flesh — heaven over yonder —
And something else unsaid no one need know.

“Lost Corner” — lost to all but a dark freedom —
Some day we all must find you ere we go.

ON MY FATHER'S HUNDREDTH
BIRTHDAY

(6 January 1831 – 6 January 1931)

On the day the Magi came
To Bethlehem across brown deserts far,
In a hill country under a different star
You too were born, and took a human name.

No kings were on that earth
Where you were given life. Your father rode
Some ten miles off, to a half-built abode,
To summon help, the day that saw your birth.

A tallow dip through a chink
Between the rough-squared logs burned through the night;
The wolves howled far off. But for the moon's light,
The woods were utter ink.

And ghostly, gaunt, the trees
Unfelled as yet, waved their thin branches high;
Gustily teetering in the westward breeze
That had seen so many like them spring and die.

Slopes of red-orange clay,
Gashed by the plow, ran up the hillside. On
Them stood tough stalks of wizened cotton, gray,
And dryly rustling shocks of shriveled corn.

A brook leapt out below
By granite boulders. Once the redskin brave
Had stooped to quench his thirst there, but a few years ago.
Rude stones now marked an earlier settler's grave.

I think a kettle sang where, crackling, roared
The backlogs from the clay-daubed hearth aloft;
In a low lean-to your five brothers snored,
A Bible was dragged down from out the loft:

And there your father scrawled
With goose-quill pen, slowly, to make no slip,
Your name which was the same as that I now am called;
A brown jug passed around from lip to lip.

Now death has passed between
Two destinies. And yours was still to rise,
Patiently higher on this earthly scene
Winning the deep respect that men on earth most prize;

To pass through roar of throngs
And smoke of battles still unscathed, to stay
Tolerant, serene, unshattered by dark wrongs,
Loving and serving man to the end of your long day.

But mine was to have all
Given as by a god, yet still to lose
All but an aching memory. You rose as I fall;
What is there now between our fates to choose?

As in a land not yours,
Not wilderness newly tamed by ax and plow,
I watch a world whose life stream swiftly pours
Towards annihilation. None knows why or how.

Why was this tragedy played
By fate? Had you been given my life to bear,
A wiser course you might have planned and made
A better choice than mine. Were I set where

Your life work ran for seventy busy years,
I could not have done better. Dreams await
Only the dreamer. But the doer clears
His unplowed field and dies. Such is the law of fate.

Such is the law of fate that whoso spends
His strength the sooner, sooner ebbs. The frost
Checked you from too swift growth. My harvest ends
Too early reaped, upon an alien coast.

Now all too brief and brittle is the span
Of a mere century for sire and son
To measure out together, man to man,
That which together they might both have done.

GRANDFATHER'S GRAVE

*(In Memoriam, Henry Lewis Fletcher. Born Hawkins County,
Tennessee, 1787; died Saline County, Arkansas, 1855)*

By the great oak logs that yet burn
Here on this hearth, the undying light of the tribe
Is setting young hearts still to yearn,
Youth to seek for a bride;
By the slow smolder
Of fire through more than a century stubbornly cast,
We must go back, we who grow steadily older,
Towards the central flame of them all, lit far off in the past:

Where stand, weed-tangled, still,
Stake fences of the ancient country;
The vast weight of a hill
In the russet and red of November:
The slow drowsy cattle
Feeding by narrow creek bottoms,
And the knowledge that men may still,
Though they die out, give life to their sons:

Shapes to resume the weight
Of other days onward faring;
The change, the renewal of fate,
Come when the dead are past caring:
The hay piled high under eaves,
The doors shut tight against frost;
And the scarlet fall of the leaves
By the creek which the redskins lost;

The mounting brown flank of a hill
Where a thin path, twisting, ascends:
And there, beyond human will,

Is the place where human life ends.
There, as I saw it once,
Half buried in leaf-drift, now
It springs out again to the suns
And the silence — the place of the vow

Made by the body with earth;
The giving of life unto life
Unbounded — the grave, the rebirth,
After the sorrow and strife
Have passed all away. Who can tell
What new fires quicken the soil,
When the breath is gone like a spell,
And ended is all our toil?

Rude brick in a square-piled heap
Fallen, a wall overgrown,
With the mounting saplings that leap
From the mound overthrown;
This which hands raised when the day
Was done, and the light of the sky
Faded from out the array
Of neighbors' graves set there nigh;

This tomb to which had been driven
A life that had wandered afar,
By the peace of the rains dark-shriven
Under the low south star;
Not knowing what future might follow,
Only feeling the weight of the trees,
And hearing the ax-stroke, hollow,
Blown down, on the breast of the breeze —

This is his. Now it sleeps still, untroubled,
Deep-locked to its granite hillside;

As the spring that once chattered and bubbled
From his birth till the day when he died.
Hands smoothed the pine coffin, set in it
A body, and hands bore it high
Through the hickories. Minute by minute,
As I watch, now darkens the sky.

The gray sleepy land fades. And falters
The flame of these firebrands.
Yet ask the oak if it alters!
The dumb earth understands.
Through the gray ash over old embers,
Burns still the great blaze of a day
That loomed once so lofty. Now quivers
The last of its red sparks away.

CONVERSATION WITH
AN IMPORTANT GHOST

Go hence apart, my friends! Come never near;
For I have business that no words can clear.
Engagements set aside, the world well lost,
I have to do today with a familiar ghost.

I hear his footsteps following down the stair;
Yes, there he is! Those deep dark eyes that glare,
That ragged beard, long silvery locks outspread;
I mark him coming from the unseen dead.

And as Odysseus, in the long ago,
Held out his blade across the blood's dark flow,
Until Tiresias, like a wandering flame,
Came forth and told him of his after-fame;

So with my pen ready, I await
Here in this house that answer which my fate,
Mingled with his, can grant; a stranger thing
Than ever brooded here 'neath nightmare's wing!

His massive frame bears traces of the North;
Under his shaggy brows the West looks forth:
Great plains where countless hosts of buffalo,
Snorting and trampling wander to and fro:

The South is in his smile. His hand increased
With flesh and muscle might guide ships far East
Across Pacific rollers where through gales
About Magellan, rove gigantic whales.

He seems a captain or a king, come home
From far Valhalla's board across the foam;

A Viking of the Prairies, sprung once more
Where the great eagle cuts the torrent's roar:

And now he speaks to me, knitting his brows
To frown; his voice goes booming through the house:
"You, too, as I, though in a frailer guise,
Found a strange alien world before your eyes;

"You, too, as I, strove to put off, reverse
The weight of an undated ancient curse;
You, too, as I, unquenchably made strong,
Gave all your lips and life to love and song.

"Now you, too, have your answer. So, I come
For this brief moment, from a well-sealed tomb,
With you, for once, to seriously confer,
Since you have been too long Truth's worshiper.

"Truth's day has never dawned; 'Long ages are
The minutes of her twilight'*; not a star
Will ever serve to show you a true north,
Now you have come back to your setting-forth.

"The South will take you and consume like flame
All you held glorious but an empty name
Writ on a tombstone for some fool to find,
Who neither knew his body nor his mind,

"Nor had a soul. Such is the fate laid up
By the high Gods for those who here would sup
In your day with the muses. Hence, away!
Go, get you forth; you need not longer stay."

*From the poem "An Evening Conversation" by Albert Pike, written at Little Rock in 1845.

He strides on angrily down the echoing hall;
Blazing with wrath; his clenched fists lift, then fall.
'Tis true, this is his place, and never mine;
The watchful walls and chimneys give no sign.

The empty house, the hot wind from the South
Bring never living ecstasy to my mouth:
Only the mournfulness, the moving dust
Of some old dignity far too quickly lost.

The drift of time, the ebbing of dark years,
Bring less to me of laughter than of tears;
While in the market place some newer name
Will always serve to stir the mob's acclaim.

ARKANSAS RED HAW

Scarlet at stream's edge,
Bright against brown of the swamp,
The haw flares up at sunset
By the roadside chill and damp;
It breathes its will
From spikes thick-berried across,
As in the bygone years, to still
Our memories' aching loss:

"Drops of blood you shed for the South,
Dauntless love you gave to the South,
Undying war you waged for the South;
See, here the blood is shed again!
Here am I holding
Stiff savage arms against this ancient winter;
Myriads of other men have marked my cold red clusters;
But they did not escape, nor will you evade their pain."

Silver, slate-blue the cloud,
Cloak caught by spurs of thunder,
Rides upward against the north
In late November; under
Its fold there blaze the haws.
Like tattered flags they flame;
Would you rise from the grave to mock us,
You who have not a name?

"Bone and blood deep-forged by the South,
Life left wasted by the South,
Ruinous ghost that walks the South,
Here is the fruit you have always known;
Scarlet unearthly berries,
Late snow of cotton left rotting in the fields;

Let the plow and the spade go rusty,
The grave will soon take you and all your vain hopes home."

Darkened the thicket now,
Snow drops its first faint wreath far down the western sky;
Twilight is lowered
Over the hill where so many men found the dignity to die;
And the slow, smoldering winter
Turns over its burning heap of leaves and brown, dried
grasses again;
Night runs over the furrow
To the tune of the slow splash of rain;

"Lost, rutted roads that ran to the South,
Clay hills and pines at the edge of the South,
Wilderness washed by the sadness of South,
Trails where the armies once fled;
By the cold breezes
And raindrops that run down my branches,
Here is hard living
Since so many hopes, sprung from the past, lay long forgot-
ten and dead."

THE THREE OAKS

By night I went,
Restless, with spring unfulfilled, under the firmament
Where the crickets' song did sound
Shrilled up from the damp, grass-rooted ground;
There were three great oaks there standing which I had seen
often before,
Having in life lived near them since I was merely a boy;
But I saw them that night with new vision, never known or
imagined before,
As they thrust up gigantic before me, beyond all sorrow or
joy.

Across that sky
Endlessly weaving its cotton-white clouds from the south-
west, very high,
These cast up a screen of exploring branches, new-tasseled,
with delicate leaves
Ranked in thick sheaves.
Around a half circle where their century-old trunks stood as
black
Columns arresting the march of the clouds, aloof, without
future or past,
Their branches they tossed up as outspread fingers seeking
the sky to attack,
To halt the slow movement of clouds, and to rifle the rain
at its task.

Aloof, austere,
Not as other poets have seen them, very friendly or very near,
But with ageless contempt for the generations that had gone
on since new sprung they stood
Here on the earth at my feet, and found their first nourish-
ment good,

Breathing, one wonders, why? Feeling, one wonders, how?
The three oaks stood clustered together, black branch
 stretched to branch and the whole
Skeleton vaulting, nerved ribbing of leaf, washed clean with
 the spring's final flow
Of blossom and twig set sprouting at last, that to them was
 the life of the soul.

And I saw that the tree
Has another life than man's mortal life, lives far more form-
 less, more free,
Its brain reaching down under earth through the night and
 the dark,
Through the strain and the stress of the clay, going deep for
 the spark
Of life-giving sap that will quicken its being, set free from
 decay,
To whose patient upbuilding of bulk a year is but a day;
While aloft to the skylands loosened, its fingers are free for
 their hour
To catch the loose ripples of spring breeze straying, to flaunt
 high their leafage and flower.

It feels the fineness of sky,
But it breathes deeply, determinedly, the dense, dark mois-
 ture of earth;
Not as man breathing impalpable air, the while his feelings
 die
Against the rough husk of the clay that repels them. The
 tree's mortal birth
Is more than mankind's, longer lasting, less harried with
 longing or pain;
And that is why those three great oaks could tell me, there
 watching, again

How my life might go roaming, as wild as it listed, but they
would abide, yet up-ranged;
In indifferent might of proud darkness, against a spring
nightfall, unchanged.

THE FAREWELL *

Plumed hills of Arkansas,
And conelike cedars marking mile on mile
Of fertile lovely valleys
Dotted with paintless cabins,
Scored by dry-rutted roads:
Twelve years have passed away since last I saw you,
Take my farewell — we may not meet again.

You line on line
Of fields marked by worm-fences in the clay,
Purple-brown fields once green, then white with cotton,
Now only filled
By the pale sedge grass in its withered glow:
You trees that sheltered once men of my race
When after plowing, on midsummer days,
They lay and took their leisure, gazing up
At lofty clouds through wondering blue eyes:
I have no sons to give you, to go on
Plowing and dreaming dreams, only this song
Is mine to give at last, and that you know.

You hills and flat-scarped slopes
Lined with green-lichened, crumbling blocks of stone,
Let this pale hour of silence stay between us
When skies are filling with midwinter rain.
Keep yet something for me,
Some acorns lying scattered on the ground,
Some blue and glowing cedar-berry sprays,
Some smooth brown hickory nuts bursting from dark green
sheaths,
Though I come never back to you to claim that hidden gain.

* From "Folk-Say, A Regional Miscellany," edited by B. A. Botkin (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1931), copyright, 1931, by B. A. Botkin.

And you, old house,
White house that stands poised on its rounded knoll
With columned portico,
And wide-arched hallway leading on upstairs;
House that has looked out on a hundred years
Of struggles and regrets,
House that has often sounded
With shots and scrape of fiddles,
And clink of spurs, and sobs for the new dead;
Do not forget
That I a stranger stood awhile before you
And knew that you had sheltered once my head.

Plumed hills of Arkansas,
And you wild birds, spring's baffled messengers,
Swift cardinal, loud jay,
And bluebird flashing past from bough to bough,
And quail in coveys rising from the stalks
Of lank and shriveled corn,
Towards the hills where scarlet haws brood upon purple
silence,
And creeks run shining down brown beds of gravel,
Speaking to me of man and nature, locked in noble strife;
Be this my last farewell in human life.

III

UPPER SOUTH

DOGWOOD

Like a girl holding, spread,
Stiff skirts, a ruffled dancer,
Pale-white, poised in the shadow of the trees:

Like a shy flight of stars
In between gray-brown tree trunks,
Fluttering in loose bands, not yet settled on earth:

Like late snow,
After the winter is ended,
Flakes falling, caught, and held in some unearthly swirl,

Like feathery cloud wisps blown
Over intense blue sky lands —
So to the mountains comes dogwood, a shy slim dancing-girl.

THE FIREFLIES

Between the withered stalks of last year's corn,
Suddenly swarmed the field with seething stars;
Fireflies aflicker under the sickle moon,
That blew through its gold horn great summer in:
Masses of light that moved by the stake fence,
Where the dark cabin, paintless, drowsed against day:
Out of the woods wandering, where the wolves cried loud,
And whippoorwills proclaimed the wane of night.
Firefly and whippoorwill, the things of night,
Along the ribbony road that went so far
Into the mountains; where the screech owl sat
Upon the withered bough with coal-red eyes:
You who invited us to denser night,
Where the great pines sweep downwards from the flank
Of the sharp mountain, trailing winds behind,
Bring to our hearts the memory of trees
Not sparsely gathered nor set here and there,
But densely ranked in woods that do not change,
Washing the warm dusk of the evening star,
With creaking song of breeze, unsleeping dreams.

THUNDERSTORM IN THE OZARKS

I

In the morning his mood failed, for gray buffalo-clouds were
going
Slowly across the sky, from southeast lazily pressing
In ranked and shaggy herds: before them the wind failing
Went piping an eerie, creepy lament to the dark pine-tops
gathered
Below on the bouldered slope; in the morning his mood
wavered;
He saw that the day would have far more to do with hail-
stones than with plowing.
So he left his new-cleared acres, their cornstalks not yet
sprung,
And turned to suck his pipe on the porch and look at a sea
of shadows.

To north, away,
The country seemed as the Indians saw it, ere white men
came to wander;
Mile after mile of plateau'd peaks, rising and rolling and
folding
Range after range, blue-gray, remote, lost in the summer
darkness;
To south, whence the clouds came,
Slowly the thunder growled as if it sought to split
The sky and roll more free:
And under the veil of advancing rain played amber chains
of lightning.

II

Noon and the rain came nearer, the valley was no more.
Pine-tops threshed feathery heads under the assault of rain-
drops;

And around, from side to side of the blurred horizon,
The sky was cracked apart by the beat of advancing thunder:
Darkness swept deep over earth, and made of the day one
twilight,
A cave-roof filled with the cry of winds and the wailing of
endless waters;
Lit by the startling flashes
Of lightning amid the ranked pines.
Branches went hurtling down, and treetops bowed to the
onset.
Noon, as the heart of the storm
Slowly beat deeper on earth.

III

Afternoon and the flattened-out cloud slowly uprolled from
the mountain,
Rising in heavy scrolls, the valley was filled with pale cloud-
banks
Lying loosely, in soft-draped folds about rain-gleaming
shoulders
Sinking deep to the valleys, where torrents raced high and
unfettered.
Slowly they rose, and rejoined
The movement of skies swung by the winds to the zenith.
Slowly the sun emerged, and swept over slope and down
hollow,
Far as the man in the cabin could see, unearthly roamed its
beams:
Then his eye in the cabin unsleeping suddenly saw
Oak after oak flame out, ridge after ridge take daylight,
Tree after tree glitter in new-grown leaf;
Swept out again under the slow movement of shadow,
Darkness still striving and going
Relentlessly over time's face.

S U M M E R D U S K

From tree to tree,
From pine to pine,
The sudden unseen summons went on as by design;
Warble of bird was heard,
Answering cry of bird.
From tree to tree,
From bough to bough,
Where the great pines stood watching, row upon endless row;
Seeing the light ebb slowly
Down in the dim southwest;
When the thunderstorm had died away, and all the woods
 were at rest,
Still did the cry of birds re-echo athwart the sunset sky:
From tree to tree,
From pine to pine,
Questioning the empty woodlands, as clamoring for a sign;
Threading the dim aisles of the forest, as onward going still
Towards a vision lone, remote, not stirred by human will.

HILLBILLY PHILOSOPHY

You will not wish to follow me
Across the twisted hills;
Along the milkwhite streams,
Adown green limestone sills;
Where challenging whippoorwills
Cry through the sky at dawn:
For into empty space
You'll find that I am gone.

For I have watched the snakes
That glide — how swift — away;
Like these, I learned to coil the rock,
Like these, to melt in gray.
You will not quickly find
Nor love, the snake's dark house;
Far less, the place where, vast and blind,
The hills great echoes rouse.

You will not find me out;
No man may easily find
Where, behind laughter of the rocks,
I hide my mind.
Ungainly, gaunt and blind,
It moves away from men,
Threading, through age on age,
The woodland's dark refrain.

For I have seen the hawk
Soar over vale on vale,
Till on a withered stalk
He perched, and, furling sail,
Peered on the purring car

That glistening slid below.
I too, like him, look far.
Like him, I strike my foe.

You will not know how deep
It goes, this flame in bone,
That bids Jehovah creep
Past shelves of crumbling stone,
Hidden from light, alone,
To where unpainted wood
Shuts out the final ray,
And dreams may sing through blood.

For I have given up
All but an ultimate war,
And, for the moonshine in the cup,
Bartered a better star.
Spoken where fiddles keep
Their strings high, and the throng
Of memories that might sweep
The earth, give tongue.

IV

DEEP SOUTH

BIG RIVER

Blue and brown,
Mississippi;
Brown of eternal earth mingled with blue of sky:

So deep, so vast,
So lazily uncoiling;
Tamed by mankind, you hint at worlds untamed.

Bound by the chains
Of tilted green levees,
Sometimes you snap your bonds, and surge on, wild and free;

A loud brown wave,
Overwhelming field and forest;
Seething in eddies, surging in flying streams.

Now lazily poised
Below the yellow bluff, the crumbling lookout,
You weave your sinuous loops from sky to sky.

So vast, so pure
In flight, eternal river,
Words cannot touch you now, for words are useless.
You will endure,

Offering to man
That which he wills, too great a groaning harvest,
Or the vast freedom of deep woods sparse-filled
With fields turned by strong plows, and brought to use
of man.

Grant that we may
Use wisely, ancient river,
The force you gave to us, the mingled fire and water,
Till ended is our day.

Grant us the grace
Of the deep South, the ancient ceremony,
The vision stilled, the face to sky uplifted;
Till all our will

Flowers again
In colonnades, in oaks broad-shaded, silent;
In the deep pastures where the noon goes slowly,
In undulating fields.

While you go on
Flood unreturning, like a fretting¹ racer,
Sea of our upbrimmed hearts, seeking a mighty outlet,
From dusk to dawn:

And the vast South
Comes up before you, with its storm cloud lowered
To spread across deep seas of blossoming cotton
Its burdens of strong rain.

Till in the Gulf,
You cradle steaming jungles,
And Caribbean peaks, and palm-fringed islands,
And drowsy Mayan lands.

Where the swung blade
Hacks at the tangled roots, and in the jungle
Bares carven stones, the débris of great cities
That one time knew your wave —

Yet even there
Under the tropic noon, the vivid alternation
Of blazing sun and dense night, you are going;
You are not ever still:

Till you break free,
And once again retrace your coast to northward,
Through the wide wastes still seeking your old outlet,
The shy and hidden spring you once called home —

Forcing your course athwart
The westward gales, as free scud onward faring,
Through fog-hung shallows, and through unstirred deeps,
Driving the waves apart:

Fringing your banks with seaweed,
Draping your depth with cloud rack,
Immense and fathomless, as the Milky Way:
An endless, endless river.

THE HOUSE TO THE MAN

Here is no easy fate, nor may you find
What you came forth to see —
Not solemn columns only,
Nor the broad splendor of the sun
Dappling the wide white wall
With dancing patterns of shadow;
No, not these things shall reveal me, not the sweep of the
lawn,
Or the peace of the hall:
With its great cupboards flung open, the breadth of the
doors
Forever unclosed,
Nor the croon of the slow dark voices, the patient unhurry-
ing gait
Of those that in me once reposed;
These may forever wait,
Might in proud grace undisclosed;
But not the strength, the dense strength of foundations fixed
to the earth,
Stone rooted to stone,
And the trees that whisper beyond, the solemn trees drearily
swinging
Their aged incredible beards;
Spying upon the graveyard away off there in the corner —
These shall be mine:
These shall do as you feared;
Sapping the lives that live by them, burning them down,
Taking each one in its turn;
No liquor was ever brewed that could subdue them.
They shall go on,
House against man, till the last hand
Has smoothed back the lawn,

Dusted the chairs, made the feast ready
For the guest who never came.
Few men will know of this, few will spy closely, yet love me
Still more deep for the stains,
Because they are clear, few will seek out still the cricket
Chirping on in the autumn rains.
Therefore I say it is better to let me go,
Better to break me down,
Shear the wall off, topple the trees with their burden,
Trek for the North, and be gone;
Than to sit here still listlessly brooding on quiet,
Still aimless and wan,
While over the Southern fields swings the immitigable
Gold hawk of the great Sun.

LIVE OAK AND PARASITE

I think you will not easily free
The noble branches of this tree;

That for its loftiest growth in air
Grows down as fast, into despair.

Because the wind has brought, by night,
Up from the Gulf, a parasite,

That like the buzzard or the owl,
Eats stealthily into its soul;

Draping the branches night and day
With sadness not to pass away;

Fulfilling thus the force of years,
Which take their dignity most from tears;

Till, like a lofty funeral urn,
Or like a king upon a throne,

Who, stricken by sorrow, bids his fate
Still serve and yet command the state,

The tree stands huge, a crape-walled shade,
Making the mightiest man afraid.

Who knows what moss may come to choke
Like a long snake, the loftiest oak?

Only the house has always known
That ghosts may go through brick and stone,

Till life becomes a round of ghosts
Like fireflies moving in pale hosts

Towards the secret sluggish stream
Where bubbling bullfrog bellies gleam,

And the gray moss comes tumbling down
From the wide branches' leafy crown,

Soft-textured stuff, a shroud deep-piled
For hopes as yet unreconciled.

SOUTH WIND

What is the answer to all our longing and seeking,
Who speaks the consolation for life's last weeping?
Only the south wind bringing the boundless rain
Can ever ease our pain;
For the furious dint of the cannon, the fire of the world
Over our heads in crimson streamers hurled,
The south wind answers; for the appalling weight
Of dust that spreads in the house its choking freight
Of knowledge and despair, the south wind bears
Release, being concerned with its own affairs.

Masculine wind of the south, blow on and on!
Whirl up your ragged cloak through the sky at dawn,
Stride through the forest, shatter the rotten bole,
Bring to us back the knowledge that life has a soul!
Sky-angel through the deeps deploying
Cohorts of cloud to quicken unsummoned earth,
Make the cities and their mad works be ready for the
 destroying,
Bid us back to this brown soil that once knew our birth!

THE SONG OF LIVEOAK HILL

Pipe and shuffle, shake your feet,
Ruffle up, tremendous drums;
Over the ridge is a land you lost,
Past the world lies Liveoak Hill.

Cavalcades of priceless ghosts
Riding, top the distant ridge;
Cry halloo to all the earth,
Ere the humpbacked road sinks down:

Slow, the ragged Spanish moss
Waves wild streamers for farewell;
Jeweled cross and broken sword
Buried in the good brown earth,

Rise again, and ghostlike speak;
Whisper from the secret clay,
Bring a message to the hearts
Broken of all things but pride:

“We have seen the white moon rise,
Heard the hound dogs bay all night,
Watched the cardinal’s scarlet breast,
Seen the mockingbird flaunt by.

“Now we come again to life,
From the graves’ unsummoned dark;
For the pride gone up in smoke,
And the family tree blown down.

“We will wreathe about your heads,
Orange blossoms of decay;

Set a hatred in your eyes,
Paint your cheeks with fading tones.

“Put within your hands a fan
Green as a wand of malachite;
Set a footstool at your feet,
Make your rocking-chair a throne:

“Till there swims before your eyes
Broad gray waters leading on
To an island hid in mist
Where a queen’s train sweeps the lawn;

“And the knights press through the trees,
Sword and pennon set at rest,
For the white rose trampled down
And the red rose trailed to dust.

“They will gather close and cry,
Kneeling lowly in the grass:
‘Lady, come and be our queen,
Lo, the Order of the Crown!’ ”

Pipe and shuffle, shake your feet,
Ruffle up, tremendous drums;
Over the ridge is a land well lost,
Past the world lies Liveoak Hill.

THE SONG OF NATCHEZ UNDER
THE HILL

Rifles are rammed full;
Bowie knives are sharpened;
Life loved Natchez Under the Hill.

Columned porticoes rose;
Great gates were opened;
Power stirred Natchez Under the Hill.

Faro tables clinked,
Tall glass was lifted;
Wild went Natchez Under the Hill.

Cotton bales were rolled,
Laden steamboats tooted;
Deep droned Natchez Under the Hill.

Silks flashed and spurs
Clinked; sabers rattled.
Strong grew Natchez Under the Hill.

Cotton bolls burst:
Surged South the chimneys;
Deep dreamed Natchez Under the Hill.

Federal gunboats boomed
Pounding down the river;
Stark stood Natchez Under the Hill.

Locomotives shrieked,
Lordly negroes swaggered.
Cold took Natchez Under the Hill.

Moth, worm and ruin,
Ate through the roof top:
Lone lay Natchez Under the Hill.

Factory hooters blared,
Empires elsewhere flourished,
Quiet filled Natchez Under the Hill.

Feet slipped and staggered
Over creaking stairways.
Ghosts grew in Natchez Under the Hill.

Floods rose and ate
Through the yellow bluff tops;
Water whelmed Natchez Under the Hill.

Roses grew again,
In weed-haunted gardens;
Give a rose to Natchez Under the Hill!

Cities swarmed with men,
Empires rose and vanished;
Death took Natchez Under the Hill.

EPILOGUE

T O W A R D S T H E N O R T H S T A R

On many and many a soft, still summer's night,
Upon the wide verandah, washed in the moon's pale light,
Shifting between the tall white columns patterns of rippling
shade,

As we sat in our armchairs there, my father said:
"Look at the North Star yonder to the right."

The porch all day
Had drowsed in the depth of its shade behind the proud array
Of six great thirty-foot columns, holding the roof to the sky;
For the house had been set to the north, and however hot
the day,
Here there was always coolness, and often a breeze went by.

The house with its many memories watched from behind
the great wall,
The carven and paneled doorway, the green wooden shutters
so tall,
That my mother always kept closed through the night for
she was afraid;
Though she need not have been, for the lawn was so deep
in dense shade
All through the summer that negroes were frightened merely
by passing the place;
And not even a tramp would enter there, for fear that some
ghost he might face.

Between the two central white columns, the front walk ran
straight to the gate;
And my father had shown
How the stars of the Dipper, by circling the Pole, kept over
there to the strait

Passage between the maples, magnolias, the oaks, and the
maidenhair trees;
Drawing a steady bead on the distant Pole;
So he kindled my soul
With something perhaps far more than he meant, alone
there at night with the breeze
Of the Gulf blowing up, and the meteors moving away;
And it woke in me on that day
When at last to the North away from the house I had gone;
Away from the house, and alone with my star of dark fate;
Now knowing if it meant midnight for me, or maybe a far-
off dawn.

For the interlinked white columns had woven themselves in
my life,
And the house with its many memories, deeper by far than
my kind,
Had made me unwitting a part of its substance, so however
deadly the strife
Of the seas and the lands I might suffer, through whatever
struggles I, blind,
Might go on, still the house would remain in my thought
there, its trees all about it and high
Its roof to the North Star pointing, under the southern sky.

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T
T O

Poetry;
The Arkansas Gazette;
The Nation;
Folk-Say;
The Southwest Review;
The Virginia Quarterly;
All's Well;
The Southwest Scene;
The New Republic;
The American Review;
University Review.

J.G.F.

