

## HERNE THE HUNTER.

BY WILLIAM PERRY BROWN.

HERNE THE HUNTER was tall, brown and grizzled. The extreme roundness of his shoulders indicated strength rather than infirmity, while the severing of his great neck at a blow would have made a feudal executioner famous in his craft. An imaginative man might have divined something comely beneath the complex conjunction of lines and ridges that made up his features, but it would have been more by suggestion, however, than by any actual resemblance to beauty traceable thereon. The imprint of strength, severity and endurance was intensified by an open contempt of appearance; only to a subtle second-sight was revealed aught nobler, sweeter and sadder, like faint stars twinkling behind filmy clouds.

Some town-bred Nimrod, with a misty Shakespearean memory, had added to his former patronymic of "Old Herne" that of Windsor's ghostly visitor. The mountaineers saw the fitness of the title, and "Herne the Hunter" became widely current.

His place of abode was as ambiguous as his history, being somewhere beyond the "Dismal," amid the upper caves and gorges of the Nantahalal. The Dismal was a weird, wild region of brake and laurel, walled in by lonely mountains, with a gruesome outlet between two great cliffs, that nearly met in mid-air hundreds of feet over a sepulchral cañon, boulder-strewn, and thrashed by a sullen torrent, that led from a dolorous labyrinth, gloomy at midday, and at night resonant with fierce voices and sad sighings.

Far down in Whippoorwill Cove, the mountaineers told savage tales of adventure about the outskirts of the Dismal, yet, beyond trapping round the edges or driving for deer, it was to a great extent a *terra incognita* to all, unless Herne the Hunter was excepted.

"The devil air in the man, 'nd hopes him out'n places no hones' soul keers to pester hisse'f long of."

This was common opinion, though a few averred that "Old Herne 'nd the devil wern't so master thick atter all." Said one: "Why, the dinged old fool totes his Bible eroun' ez riglar ez he do his huntin'-shirt. Onct when the parson wuz holdin' the big August meetin' down ter

Ebeneezer Meetin'-house, he stepped in. The meetin' was a gittin' ez cold ez hen's feet, 'nd everybody a lookin' at Herne the Hunter, when down he draps onto his knees, 'nd holdin' on by his rifle he 'gun ter pray like a house afire. Wal, he prayed 'nd he prayed, 'twel the people, arter thur skeer wuz over, 'gun ter pray 'nd shout too, 'nd fust they all knowed, the front bench wuz plum full of mou'ners. Wal, they hed a hog-killin' time fur a while, 'nd all sot on by Herne the Hunter, but when they quieted down 'nd begun ter luk fer him—by jing!—he wern't thar. Nobody hed seed him get erway, 'nd that set 'em ter thinkin', 'nd the yupshot wuz they hed the bes' meetin' old Ebeneezer hed seed in many a year."

Once a belated hunter discovered, when the fog came down, that he was lost amid the upper gorges of the Nantahalals. While searching for some cranny wherein to pass the night, he heard a voice seemingly in mid-air before him, far out over an abyss of seething vapor which he feared concealed a portion of the dreaded Dismal. Memories of Herne the Hunter crowded upon him, and he strove to retrace his steps, but fell into a trail that led him to a cave which seemed to bar his further way. The voice came nearer; his blood chilled as he distinguished imprecations, prayers and entreaties chaotically mingled, and all the while approaching him. He fled into the cave, and peering thence, beheld a shadowy form loom through the mist, gesticulating as it came.

A whiff blew aside shreds of the fog, and he saw Herne the Hunter on the verge of a dizzy cliff, shaking his long rifle, his hair disheveled, his eyes dry and fiery, and his huge frame convulsed by the emotions that dominated him. The very fury and pathos of his passion were terrifying, and the watcher shrank back as old Herne, suddenly dropping his rifle, clutched at the empty air, then paused dejectedly.

"Always thus!" he said, in a tone of deep melancholy. "Divine in form—transfigured—beautiful—oh, so beautiful!—yet ever with the same accursed face. I have prayed over these visitations. I have sought in God's word that confirmation of my hope which should yet save me

from despair; but, when rising from my supplications, the blest vision confronts me—the curse is ever there—thwarting its loveliness—reminding me of what was, but will never be again.”

He drew a tattered Bible from his bosom and searched it intently. He was a sight at once forbidding and piteous, as he stood upon the edge of a frightful precipice, his head bent over the book as though devouring with his eyes some sacred antidote against the potency of his sorrow. Then he looked up, and the Bible fell from his hands. His eyes became fixed; he again clutched at the air, then fell back with a despairing gesture, averting his face the while.

“Out of my sight!” he cried. “Your eyes are lightning, and your smile is death. I will have no more of you—no more! And yet—O God! O God!—what dare I—what can I do without you?”

He staggered back and made directly for the cavern. The watcher shrank back, while Herne the Hunter brushed blindly by, leaving Bible and rifle on the rock without. Then the wanderer, slipping out, fled down the narrow trail as though there were less peril from the dizzy cliffs around than in the society of the strange man whose fancies peopled these solitudes with such soul-harrowing phantoms.

Thus for years Herne the Hunter had been a mystery, a fear, and a fascination to the mountaineers; recoiling from men, abhorring women, rebuffing curiosity, yet at times strangely tender, sad, and ever morbidly religious. He clung to his Bible as his last earthly refuge from his darker self, and to the aspirations it engendered as a bane to the fatalistic stirrings within him.

He was a mighty hunter and lived upon the proceeds of his skill. Once or twice a year he would appear at some mountain store, fling down a package of skins, and demand its worth in powder and lead. The jean-clad loungers would regard him askance, few venturing to idly speak with him, and none repeating the experiment. His mien daunted the boldest. If women were there he would stand aloof until they left; on meeting them in the road he would sternly avert his eyes as though from a distasteful presence. One day the wife of a storekeeper, waiting on him in her husband's absence, ventured to say, while wrapping up his purchases:

“I've always wonderred, Mr. Herne, what makes ye wanter git outen the wimmen

folks' way? Mos' men likes ter have 'em eroun'.”

Herne the Hunter frowned heavily, but made no reply.

“I'm shore, if ye had a good wife long with ye way up thar whur ye live, she'd make ye a leetle more like a man 'nd less like a—a—” she hesitated over a term which might censure yet not give offense.

“Like a beast you would say.” He exclaimed then with vehemence: “Were the necks of all women in one, and had I my hands on it, I'd strangle them all, though hell were their portion thereafter.”

He made a gesture as of throttling a giant, snatched his bundle from the woman's hand and took himself off up the road with long strides.

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That night was a stormy one. Herne the Hunter was covering the last ten miles between him and the Dismal in a pelting rain. The incident at the store, trivial as it was, had set his blood aflame. He prayed and fought against himself, oblivious of the elements and the darkness, sheltering his powder beneath his shirt of skins where his Bible lay secure. In his ears was the roar of wind and the groans of the tortured forest. Dark ravines yawned beside him, out of which the wolf howled and the mountain owl laughed; and once came a scream like a child, yet stronger and more prolonged. He knew the panther's voice, yet he heeded nothing.

At last another cry, unmistakably human, rose nearer by. Then he paused, like a hound over a fresher scent, until it was repeated. He made his way around a shoulder of the mountain, and aided by the gray light of a cloud-hidden moon, approached the figures of a woman, a boy and a horse, all three dripping and motionless.

“Thank God! we will not die here, after all,” exclaimed the female, as Herne the Hunter grimly regarded them. “Oh, sir, we have missed the way. This boy was guiding me to the survey camp of Captain Renfro, my husband, on the upper Swana-noa. He has sprained his foot, and we have been lost for hours. Can you take us to a place of shelter? I will pay you well—”

“I hear a voice from the pit,” said Herne, fiercely. “It is the way with your sex. You think, though you sink the world, that with money you can scale Heaven. Stay here—rot—starve—perish—what care I!”

After this amazing outburst he turned away, but her terror of the night overbore her fear of this strange repulse, and she grasped his arm. He shook himself free, though the thrill accompanying her clasp staggered him. For years no woman's hand had touched him; but at this rebuff she sank down, crying brokenly:

"What shall I do? I should not have started. They warned me below, but I thought the boy knew the way. Oh, sir! if you have a heart, do not leave us here."

"A heart!" he cried. "What's that? A piece of flesh that breeds endless woes in bosoms such as yours. All men's should be of stone—as mine is now!" He paused, then said abruptly: "Up with you and follow me. I neither pity nor sympathize; but for the sake of her who bore me, I will give you such shelter as I have."

He picked up the boy, who, knowing him, had sat stupefied with fear, and bade the woman follow him.

"But the horse?" she said, hesitating.

"Leave it," he replied. "The brute is the best among you, but whither we go no horse may follow."

He turned, taking up the boy in his arms, and she dumbly followed him, trembling, faint, yet nerved by her fears to unusual exertion. So rapid was his gait, encumbered though he was, that she kept him in view with difficulty. Through the gloam she could divine the perils that environed their ever upward way. The grinding of stricken trees, the brawl of swollen waters harrowed her nerves not less than the partial gleams of unmeasured heights and depths revealed by the lightning. A sense of helplessness exaggerated these terrors among the unknown possibilities surrounding her.

It seemed as though they would never stop again. Her limbs trembled, her heart thumped suffocatingly, yet their guide gave no heed, but pressed on as though no shivering woman pantingly clogged his steps. They traveled thus for several miles. She felt herself giving way totally when, on looking up once more, she saw that the hunter had vanished.

"Where am I?" she cried, and a voice, issuing seemingly out of the mountain-side, bade her come on. Her hands struck a wall of rock; on her right a precipice yawned; so, groping toward the left, she felt as she advanced that she was leaving the outer air; the wind and rain no longer beat upon her, yet the darkness was intense.

She heard the voice of the boy calling upon her to keep near. Into the bowels of the mountains she felt her way until a gleam of light shone ahead. She hastened forward round a shoulder of rock into a roomy aperture branching from the main cavern. The boy lay upon a pallet of skins, while Herne the Hunter fixed the flaring pine-knot he had lighted into a crevice of the rock. Then he started a fire, drew out of another crevice some cold cooked meat and filled a gourd with water from a spring that trickled out at one end of the cave.

"Eat," he said, waving his hand. "Eat—that ye may not die. The more unfit to live, the less prepared for death. Eat!"

With that he turned away and busied himself in bathing and bandaging the boy's foot, which, though not severely sprained, was for the time quite painful. Mrs. Renfro now threw back the hood of her waterproof and laid the cloak aside. Even old Herne—women hater that he was—could not have found fault with the matronly beauty of her face, unless with its expression of self-satisfied worldliness, as of one who judged others and herself solely by conventional standards, shaped largely by flattery and conceit.

She was hungry—her fears were somewhat allayed, and though rather disgusted at such coarse diet, ate and drank with some relish. Meanwhile, Herne the Hunter turned from the boy for something, and beheld her face for the first time. A water-gourd fell from his hands, his eyes dilated, and he crouched as he gazed like a panther before its unsuspecting prey. Every fibre of his frame quivered, and drops of cold sweat stood out upon his forehead. The boy saw with renewed fear this new phase of old Herne's dreaded idiosyncrasies. Mrs. Renfro at length raised her eyes and beheld him thus. Instantly he placed his hands before his face, and abruptly left the cavern. Alarmed at his appearance, she ran toward the boy, exclaiming:

"What *can* be the matter with him? Do you know him?"

"I knows more of him 'n I wants ter," replied the lad. "Oh, marm, that's old Herne, 'nd we uns air the fust ones ez hev be'n in hyar whar he stays. I ganny! I thort shore he'd hev yeaten ye up."

"Well, but who is he?"

"Well, they do say ez the devil yowns him not but what be air powerful 'ligyus. No one knows much 'bouten him, 'cep'n

he's all'ays a projeckin' round the Dismal whar no one yelse wants ter be."

"Has he been here long?"

"Yurs 'nd yurs, they say." Tommy shook his head as though unable to measure the years during which Herne the Hunter had been acquiring his present unsavory reputation, but solved the riddle by exclaiming: "I reckon he hev all'ays be'n that-a-way."

An hour or more passed. Tommy fell asleep, while the lady sat musing by his side. She did not feel like sleeping, though much fatigued. Finally she heard a deep sigh behind her, and turning saw the object of her fears regarding her sombrelly. The sight of her face appeared to shock him, for he turned half away as he said:

"You have eaten the food that is the curse of life, in that it sustains it. Yet such we are. Sleep, therefore, for you have weary miles to go, ere you can reach the Swananoa."

There was an indescribable sadness in his tone that touched her, and she regarded him curiously.

"Who are you," she asked, "and why do you choose to live in such a place as this?"

"Ask naught of me," he said, with an energy he seemed unable to repress. "Ask rather of yourself who am I and how came I—thus."

He struck himself upon the breast, and without awaiting an answer again abruptly left the cave. She sat there wondering, trying to weave into definite shape certain vague impressions suggested by his presence, until weariness overcame her and she slept.

Hours after, Herne the Hunter reentered the cave, bearing a torch. His garments were wet, the rain-drops clung to his hair, and his face was more haggard than ever. He advanced towards the slumbering woman softly, and stood over her, gazing mournfully upon her, while large tears rolled down his cheeks. Then his expression changed to one that was stern and vindictive. His hand nervously toyed with the knife in his belt. Milder thoughts again seemed to sway him, and his features worked twitchingly.

"I cannot, I cannot," he whispered to himself. "The tears I thought forever banished from these eyes return at this sight. There has never been another who could so move me. Though thou hast been my curse, and art yet my hell — I cannot do, it. Come! protector of my

soul; stand thou between me and all murderous thoughts!"

He drew his Bible from his bosom, kissed it convulsively, then held it as though to guard her from himself, and drawing backward slowly, he again fled into the storm and darkness without.

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The gray light of morning rose over the Dismal, though within the cave the gloom still reigned supreme, when Herne the Hunter again stood at the entrance holding a flaring light. Then he said aloud:

"Wake, you that sleep under the shadow of death! Wake, eat, and—pass on!"

Mrs. Renfro aroused herself. The boy, however, slept on. Herne fixed his torch in the wall, and replenished the fire. Then he withdrew, apparently to give the lady privacy in making her toilet.

She was stiff in limb and depressed in mind. After washing at the spring, she wandered listlessly about the cave, surveying old Herne's scanty store of comforts. Suddenly she paused before a faded picture, framed in long, withered moss, that clung to an abutment of the rock. It was that of a girl, fair, slender and ethereal. There was a wealth of hair, large eyes, and features so faultless that the witching sense of self-satisfaction permeating them, added to rather than marred their loveliness.

The lady—glancing indifferently—suddenly felt a thrill and a pain. A deadly sense of recognition nearly overcame her, as this memento—confronting her like a resurrected chapter of the past—made clear the hitherto inexplicable behavior of their host. She recovered, and looked upon it tenderly, then shook her head gently and sighed.

"You cannot recognize it!" said a deep voice behind her. "You dare not! For the sake of your conscience—your hope in heaven—your fear of hell—you dare not recognize and look upon me!"

She did not look round, though she knew that Herne the Hunter stood frowning behind, but trembled in silence as he went on with increasing energy:

"What does that face remind you of? See you aught beneath that beauty but treachery without pity, duplicity without shame? Lo! the pity and the shame you should have felt have recoiled upon me — me, who alone have suffered." He broke off abruptly, as though choked by emotion. She dared not face him; she felt incapable of a reply. After a pause, he resumed,

passionately: "Oh! Alice, Alice! The dead rest, yet the living dead can only endure. Amid these crags, and throughout the solitude of years, I have fought and refought the same old battle; but with each victory it returns upon me, strengthened by defeat, while with me all grows weaker but the remorselessness of memory and the capacity for pain."

She still stood, with bowed head, shivering as though his words were blows.

"Have you nothing to say?" he asked. "Does that picture of your own youth recall no vanished tenderness for one who—self-outcast of men—fell to that pass through you?"

"I have a husband," she murmured, almost in a whisper.

"Aye, and because of that husband I have no wife—no wife—no wife!" His wailing repetition seemed absolutely heart-broken: but sternly he continued: "You have told me where he is. I say to you—hide him—hide him from me! Even this"—he struck his bosom with his Bible feverishly—"may not save him. I have prayed and wrought, but it is as nothing—nothing—when I think—when I remember. Therefore, hide him from me—lest I slay him—"

"You would not—you dare not harm him!" She faced him now, a splendid picture of an aroused wife and mother. "He is not to blame—he knew you not—he has been good to me—and—and—I love him."

He shrank from the last words as though from a blow, and stood cowering. Then he hissed out:

"Let me not find him. Hide him—hide him!"

Tommy here awoke with a yawn, and announced that his foot was about well. Herne, closing his lips, busied himself about preparing breakfast, which cheerless meal was eaten in silence. When they finally emerged from the cave the sun was peeping into the Dismal below them; bright gleams chased the dark shadows down the cliffs, and the morning mists were melting. The storm was over; there was a twitter of birds, the tinkle of an overflowing burn, and a squirrel's bark emphasizing the freshness of the morn. The pure air entered the lips like wine, and Mrs. Renfro felt her depression roll off as they retraced the devious trail of the night before.

They found the lady's horse standing dejectedly near where he had been left.

The fog, in vast rolls, was climbing out of the Dismal, disclosing dark masses of forest below. The flavor of pine and balsam slept beneath the trees, every grass blade was diamond-strewn, and every sound vivified by the sense of mighty walls and unsounded depths.

After Mrs. Renfro had mounted, Herne the Hunter swept an arm around. The scene was savage and sombre, despite the sunlight. The intensity of the solitude about them dragged upon the mind like a weight.

"Behold," he said sadly, "this is my World. I can tolerate no other."

She inwardly shuddered; then a wave of old associations sweat over her mind. Beneath the austerity of the man, beyond his selfish nurture of affliction, she—for the moment—remembered him as he once was, homely, kindly, enthusiastic and true. Had *she* indeed changed him to this? Or was it not rather the imperativeness of a passion, unable to endure or forget her preference of another? Whatever the cause, her heart now ached for him, though she feared him.

"Come with us" she said, "You were not made to live thus."

"I cannot—I dare not. It will take months to undo the misery of this meeting."

"My husband—"

"Do not name him!" he cried fiercely; then abruptly lowering his tone, he said, with infinite sadness: "Ask me no more, Yonder, by that white cliff, lies the Swananoa trail you missed yesterday. The kindest thing you can do is to forget that you have seen me, Farewell!"

He turned away and swung himself down the mountain-side into the Dismal. She saw the rolling mists close over him, and remained motionless in a reverie so deep that the boy spoke twice to her before she turned her horse's head and followed him.

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Above the surveyor's camp lay the Swananoa Gap, a gloomy, precipitous gorge through which the river lashed itself into milder reaches below. Mrs. Renfro found her husband absent. With a single assistant he had started for the upper defiles, intending to be gone several days. They told her that he would endeavor to secure the services of Herne the Hunter as a guide, as one knowing more of that wilderness than any one else.

Here was fresh food for wifely alarm. Herne had never met her husband, yet the

latter's name would make known his relationship to herself. She shuddered over the possibilities that might result from their sojourn together—far from aid—in those wild mountains, and made herself wretched for a week in consequence.

Meanwhile the transient fine weather passed; the rains once more descended, and the peaks of Nantahalal were invisible for days amid a whirl of vapor. The boom of the river, the grinding of forest limbs, the shriek of the wind, made life unusually dreary at the camp. She lay awake one night when the elements were apparently doing their worst. Her husband was still absent—perhaps alone with a possible maniac, raving over the memory of fancied wrongs.

Finally another sound mingled with and at last overmastered all others—something between a crash and a roar, interblended with sullen jars and grindings. Near and nearer it came. She sprang to the tent-floor and found her feet in the water. The darkness was intense. What could be the matter? Fear overcame her resolution and she shrieked aloud.

A man bearing a lantern burst into the tent with a hoarse cry. Its gleams showed her Herne the Hunter, drenched, draggled, a ghastly cut across his face, with the blood streaming down, his long hair flying, and in his eyes a fierce flame.

"I feared I would not find you," he shouted, for the roar without was now appalling. "It is a cloud-burst above. In five minutes this hollow will be fathoms deep. The tents lower down are already gone. Come!"

He had seized and was bearing her out. "Save—alarm the others!" she cried, "You first—Alice."

In that dread moment she detected the hopelessness with which he called her thus, as though such recognition was wrung from his lips by the pain he hugged, even while it rended him.

"My husband?" she gasped, growing faint over the thought of his possible peril—or death.

"Safe," he hissed through his clenched teeth, for his exertions were tremendous. With a fierce flap the tent was swept away as they left it. About his knees the waters swirled, while limbs and other floating débris swept furiously by.

What seemed to her minutes—though really seconds—passed amid a terrific jumble of sounds, while the rain fell in sheets. It seemed as though the invisible

mountains were dissolving. They were, however, slowly rising above the floods. She heard Herne's hard breathing, and felt his wild heart-throbs as he held her close. Something heavy struck them, or rather him, for he shielded her. One of his arms fell limp, and he groaned heavily. Then she swooned away, with a fleeting sensation of being grasped by some one else.

Later, when she revived, there was a great hush in the air. Below, the river gently brawled; there was a misty darkness around, and the gleam of a lantern held before a dear and familiar form.

"Husband—is it you?" she murmured.

"Yes, yes," said Captain Renfro, "I thought I had lost you. You owe your life to Herne the Hunter. In fact, but for him I would have been overwhelmed myself."

"Where is he?" she asked feebly,

"The men are searching for him. Just as one of them got hold of you, he fell back—something must have struck him, and the flood swept him off. I tell you, Alice, that man—crazy or not—is a hero. We were on our way down and had camped above the Gap, when the cloud-burst came. We knew you all would be overwhelmed before we could get round here by the trail; so what does Herne do but send us on horseback by land, while he scoots down that cañon in a canoe—little better than an eggshell. Risked his life in that awful place to get here in time. I insisted on going with him at first."

"Just like you, George," said the wife fondly, though in her mind's eye came a vision of Herne the Hunter battling with that Niagara to save and unite the two, through whom his own life had been made a burden. She sighed and clasped her husband's hand, while he resumed:

"I was a fool, I expect, for the canoe would have swamped under both of us. He knew this, and ordered me off with a look I did not like; there was madness in it. Well, we hurried round by the trail with one lantern; Herne took the other. When we got here, you were apparently dead, Herne and two of the men swept off—the camp gone from below, and so on."

A cry was now heard. Several men hastened down, and soon lights were seen returning. Four of them bore Herne the Hunter. One arm and a leg were broken, and his skull crushed in; yet the wonderful vitality of the man had kept him alive and sensible.

"We found him clinging to a sapling," said one. "But he's about gone—poor fellow!"

Poor fellow, indeed! Mrs. Renfro felt the lumps rise in her throat as she gazed upon that wreck, and thought. Presently Herne opened his eyes—already filling with the death-mist—and his gaze fell upon her face.

"Alice," he whispered, "my troubles—are over. This"—he tugged at something in his bosom with his uninjured arm, when some one drew forth his Bible, drenched and torn—"this saved me. I could have killed him—" he glanced at Renfro, who amid his pity now wondered. "I could—

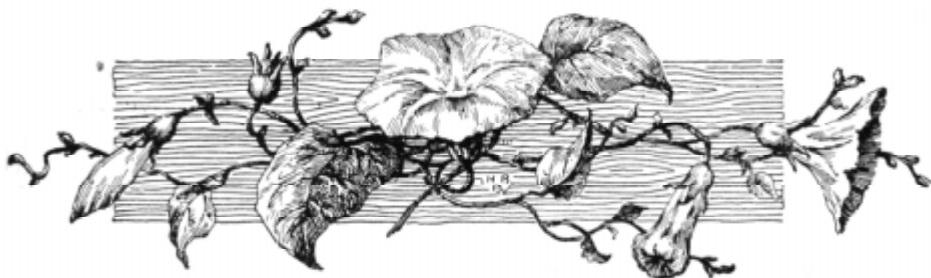
but—I saved you. And—now—Jesus—have mercy—"

These were his last words, for in another minute Herne the Hunter was a thing of the past, and a weeping woman bent over him. After that there was silence for a while. Then the wife said to her husband, while the others removed the dead man:

"It was his misfortune, not my fault, that he loved me. Has he not made amends?"

And the husband, with his hands clasped in hers, could find no other heart than to say:

"Aye—most nobly!"



## AN OUTING.

Down country lanes,  
O'er treeless plains,  
And seas of prairie grasses,  
I wheel along,  
With cheers and song  
To every breeze that passes.

I leave the town,  
Walls bare and brown,  
The bustling, sordid masses—  
The business boom  
Of counting-room,  
The dandies, dudes, and asses.

O, healthful steed!  
My only creed,  
Beyond dissent or doubting,  
Is Nature's way,  
In holiday  
Upon a summer outing.

Awheel, awheel,  
The miles I reel,  
Afar from heated highways,  
And odors greet  
Of verdure sweet,  
Along the country by-ways.

By fields of grain,  
O'er daisy plain,  
Adown the pretty valley;  
By drowsy kine,  
By cot and vine,  
So joyfully I sally.

Jay Gee.