

## THE POET AND THE ARTIST

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Trudging along a dusty prairie road with a worn suitcase containing her only possessions, Minnie, just a petite sixteen year old, thought of how she had been passed around like an unwanted stray. After each new beginning she had been rejected and abused. She had found love, only to be betrayed. She had found warmth and shelter only to be put out in the cold again. As horse drawn carriages and wagons occasionally rattled by on the rutted road, she looked back and could only shudder at the bleak vista of the windy prairie and her bleak life. As she looked ahead down that road she could see no future. Only sixteen years old and she was a woman who had already seen too much of life's disappointments. She had been a survivor—but for this? No home, no family, not a single friend to call her own. Ending her life now, she thought, alone on the prairie where no one would even identify her remains might be the quiet way out. Best of all, no one, no where, would care.

Minnie remembered the pain she had seen on her own dying mother's face as Minnie lay next to her on the bed. Minnie had been only four or five then, but for the rest of her life she remembered the intensity of agony Mother Ida registered as she fought the pain, then sank back in quiet death as her spirit departed. "That's how it will be," Minnie thought of her own escape. "One final moment of pain, then peace." She thought also of her father Isaac, who had to send her, and sisters Effie and Belle, and brother Bert away, all to different places, before his own death only a year or two after Mother Ida. She could remember Father's love, remembered him building a house for them on the North Dakota prairie, remembered him teaching her to recite The Lord's Prayer, remembered him taking her away in a horse-drawn sleigh and leaving her with a strange aunt in a strange home, and then hearing later that her father had died. She thought of her sister Belle who had died of scarlet fever at the age of eight. She thought of her sister Effie who almost died of the same scarlet fever, but survived only to die of diphtheria when she was ten. Minnie had lived in the shadow of death and now, perhaps, it was her own turn to die.

But there had been good times. A bit of warmth means more on the frozen Dakota prairie where she had been born on a cold April day, in 1874. A warm soup, a game, a hug, a song, a prayer. These are precious when you are poor and surrounded by struggle and death. She had felt like her father's sister, Aunt Libby, in her loved her second home. But, too soon she was sent along on her young way. At Aunt Winnie's they were better off and she treasured the presents they gave her. But they sent her on. She spent some time at Aunt Effie's, then was sent along again, now to Iowa. At Aunt May's she earned her young keep by helping in the family hotel. She learned about the ways of the bar in the hotel and she learned to dance the Newport Polka. Best of all, they let her take piano lessons and go to school—a two-mile walk—and she even attended Sunday School. But, Minnie's good times never lasted long and at age fourteen, Aunt May sent her off to live with May's daughter, a school teacher, and her husband, David Bond, a lawyer in booming Pueblo, Colorado.

It was around 1890 and eastern Colorado was in its fourth decade of uncontrolled growth, fueled by the westward land-rush movement and the mining boom in the mountains. This new home in this strange new country awakened her creativity. By now this precocious and mostly self-taught girl was teaching in local schools herself, first at the Bogg's Flat School located next to a railroad station on the fringes of the city, then at the Blake School, in a more wealthy district. Minnie had a flair for language, and acting. She loved to read and quote Shakespeare. Soon she was giving dramatic readings at schools, churches, and even at Pueblo's Grand Opera House. She thrilled audiences with her tales of love, sorrow, inspiration, and humor, with recitations like: "Room for the Leper", "Down by the Rio Grande", and, yes, "Old Mother Hubbard". And she gave her earnings to the Bond family to help pay for her keep.

Again, the joy was short-lived. Minnie's new world of fun, song, and drama came to an end when her guardian, Mr. Bond, decided that this dramatic and interesting young girl should become his lover. Minnie rejected him. So, then there was some real drama, not that of the stage. The Bonds left for the east, and Minnie was left a penniless girl in Pueblo with no home, no family, and no safety net. She decided to put Pueblo behind her and she headed west, walking along that dirt road with only her suitcase and her thoughts of suicide. She was headed up the Arkansas River valley toward the mountains where she would encounter "the Artist".

Buoyed by her hope for a better future and by the fleeting moments of love and joy she experienced between the frequent separations and deaths, she held her suicidal ideas in reserve and accepted a ride to Florence, Colorado, a booming crossroads beautifully situated at the foot of the mountains, where the town served as a staging area for the fast-growing mining towns high above. Hoping for a new start, in Florence, Minnie met a woman who offered her work at the rich and boisterous mining town of Cripple Creek. She agreed to go, but when they arrived at the establishment where she was to work, she discovered it to be a brothel, one of several hundred in the town. Betrayed again, she walked away and started down the mountain back toward Florence. A man offered his help, and to drive her to Florence. She accepted, and when they got to the edge of town, he tried to rape her. She ran away, leaving behind her suitcase containing her only belongings. Many years later she told my mother of her terror and despondency. Somehow, she got back to Florence and eventually found a decent job in a Doctor's home.

Later on, Minnie found a home with a well-known family, the Sheffields, on a large ranch near Cripple Creek. Though Jim Sheffield was a heavy drinker, the family treated her like one of their own. The Sheffield children, Clyde, Kitty, and Ruby treated her like a sister. She attended the rural Baptist Church there and played the piano for services. Reverend Haycroft baptized her out of doors, full Baptist immersion in an icy mountain stream, and perhaps for the first time in her young life, she felt secure. She felt she truly was "saved".

Minnie found her inspiration and peace in the mountains. The beauty and the serenity of the blue skies and starry nights were the work of a great Artist. Despite all she had been

through, she radiated beauty through writing, poetry, and song, and through her recitations and her singing. Hear her optimism and appreciation in one of her early poems, “Springtime”.

### SPRINGTIME

A lazy haze in the heavens,  
A verdant green on the ground;  
A bursting of buds in the purple glade  
Where buttercups abound.

A drifting cloud in the azure sky;  
A bird sings in the clover,  
And we know as the soft breeze wanders by—  
It’s Springtime the wide world over.

A dream of love on the mountainside;  
A maid’s eyes pensive, longing;  
A merry whistle down the lane  
And vagrant fancies thronging.

The clear, bright skies of lilac hue;  
The farmer’s thoughts are straying  
Where fields lie dormant in the haze  
With last year’s weeds decaying.

A song drifts through the peaceful mist;  
Some early birds are mating.  
While all the valley, Springtime-kissed,  
Seems like a bride in waiting.

That “dream of love on the mountainside” came true for Minnie at last. With only an eighth-grade education herself, she obtained a teaching certificate and started teaching at a country school in the mountains, eight grades in one room. In that village, she met a tall, strong, and self-possessed man, William Shepherd. Though he was working as the driver of a twelve-mule team, he also, like Minnie, had a flair for drama. They formed a group to put on plays in local establishments and William played the hero, Sir Arthur Bonnycastle. One night during their performance, the drunken and rowdy audience got out of control, fighting and throwing their boots at the oil lamps. William stepped onto the stage with his pistols drawn and held the crowd at bay while the cast slipped out the back door. Life on the frontier made Minnie a survivor.

Minnie and William Shepherd were married in Florence. In time, Minnie gave premature birth to a tiny three-pound girl she named Rita. Minnie improvised a warm incubator for Rita in the cold mountain cabin and Rita survived to grow into a strong-willed redhead. With the money they saved from their work, the young family moved to Iowa to buy land

for the farm that had been Williams' dream. They found a beautiful fifty acres of rolling farmland and woods, with a pond and a stream. There, William built a fine two-story house, a large barn, a smokehouse, a nut house, and an outhouse. He dug a well and farmed the land. They had fruit trees and a garden, and cows for milk. William and Minnie had four more children, Forest, Wilfred, Dorothy, and Nita Bernice, my mother. Minnie continued to study for teaching, and could be seen with her book propped in the windowsill above the kitchen sink, while she cooked and did the dishes.

But, Minnie's life was destined never to be idyllic for long. The flu of 1918 brought death to fourteen-year-old Forest. After World War I ended, there was a financial crisis and the family lost their farm to a bank foreclosure. They sold most of their possessions and loaded the family onto a truck. Like characters out of John Steinbeck, they drove long days and night back to Colorado, where they obtained a bit of raw land in the mountains under the Homestead Act. They camped out while father and son cut trees for logs to build a sturdy homestead cabin. In a beautiful clearing overlooking a clear cold stream and surrounded by high peaks, they homesteaded. Without electricity or running water, but with Minnie's precious pedal organ, they created a home in the mountain wilderness.

Minnie found a job teaching at a country school about ten miles across the mountain. She would ride her pony, Blue Lightning, sidesaddle to school on Mondays and sleep alone in a room in the back of the school to return to her family on the weekends. The sisters took care of the house and father found work down in the valley. All the while, Minnie, inspired by her Artist and the beauty of the mountains, continued to write her songs and poetry.

Minnie wrote of an abandoned homestead that was a powerful vision of her own homestead as we visited the abandoned dwelling in the wilderness many years later.

#### THE DESERTED HOMESTEAD

Like the fading colors of twilight,  
The silence of lonely peaks,  
The shade of a lofty mountain range  
Where early shadows creep—

So is the deserted homestead  
When the purple shadows fall;  
A cabin long deserted by thee,  
By the towering mountain wall.

A night bird breaks the silence  
With a loud and raucous cry.  
And ever the rippling river  
Seems to answer with a sigh.

The crests of the snow-capped mountains  
Are wrapped in hazy blue  
'Neath a star-gemmed blaze of twinkling lights,  
And a silver moon in view.

That floods the hills and valleys  
With a sea of gorgeous light,  
Enhancing the purple shadows  
And the rugged mountain height.

A weed-grown path is wending  
To the shattered doorstep, where  
The clinging vines are swaying,  
Blown by the vaporous air.

Was this a sheltered haven  
For some dear soul passed on  
From earth's trials and temptation  
To the bliss of the heavenly home?

We know no explanation.  
No eye is there is read  
The story of desolation  
Where the lonely pathway leads.

To the broken, stooping portal  
Where the musty ivy twines,  
Still clinging to soiled and knotted cords  
By loving hands entwined.

A rusty gate is swinging  
On creaking hinges there,  
While trampled bush, neglected blossom  
Sway in the midnight air.

No voices of rollicking children,  
No calls from the verdant heath,  
But a silence of desolation  
Like a spirit of unspent grief.

The stillness of barren wasteland,  
The homestead's decaying walls—  
Far off through the dusky shadows  
A lonely coyote calls.

William Shepherd died in 1932, prematurely aged by his hard life, and his daughters engraved by hand a stone from their homestead to place above his head in the Walsenburg cemetery. Minnie's children grew up and moved out on their own. Minnie never remarried. Minnie was alone again...with the Artist.

Eventually, Minnie Shepherd moved back to Pueblo where she had been betrayed as a teenager. She bought some rental property and managed it well into her eighties. She lived alone, and with her independent streak, she refused to accept Social Security. At age 86, she was asked to give one of her readings for a Mother's Day service and over one thousand people gathered to hear her strong and dramatic voice recite, "The Ship At Sea".

Finally, approaching her ninetieth year, Minnie grew tired. She moved into a Granddaughter's home. Although her health was good, her mobility and ability to care for herself declined. The doctor found nothing organically wrong with her. Independent to the end, keeping control of her own life, she stopped eating. She continued living for about ten days. On her final day, she recited the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, and went to be with her Artist.

Minnie, and her Artist, made her life a work of art. She left poems, and memories of her performances, that inspire us still. She, with her faith in her Artist, captured the beauty and spirit of the earth with the wealth of poetry and song she created.

#### THE ARTIST

I met an artist at his work,  
 Painting, ever painting—  
 Mountain slope and mountain height,  
 Flowering meadow in summer's light;

Faintest flush of glowing morn,  
 When upon the ear is born  
 Softest twitter of singing bird,  
 Far away the stillness stirred.

But never he ceases his endeavor  
 Fashioning, painting on forever.  
 The zigzag rails of a fence outlines,  
 Overgrown by weeds and vines.

And many a flower that upward climbs  
 Over the rail's rough incline,  
 Scarlet blossoms peeping through;  
 Their vivid colors veiled in dew

Tell of the artist's wondrous way,

Who is painting, painting night and day—  
All the world in colors gay,  
Though skies be blue or skies be grey.

This artist's work—how truly grand!  
Where bright sky kisses the sunlit land;  
He paints the river clear and blue  
And mirrors the white clouds floating through.

He's painting ever night and day;  
He paints the world in tints so gay.  
His brush is dipped in the sunset's dye  
And hues from crimson clouds on high.

Then, changing with the season's call,  
He mixes his colors and paints them all.

Oh, may this painter who's painted for me  
From early years of infancy,  
Ever and always my artist be  
Through all my years, eternally.

May He keep the real, the good, the true  
Ever before my wondering view;  
And open to my marveling eyes  
The star-gemmed portals of Paradise.

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Based on interviews and notes written by his mother, Mrs. Marjorie Nita Bernice  
Shepherd Weekley