

The Walker of the Snow

text: Charles Dawson Shanley; music: traditional

This is a composite of the poem found in *Prairie Sod and Goldenrod* and the song recorded by Billie Maxwell in 1929 as "The Haunted Hunter." A few revival singers have taken the song from her record. I've got it on an old RCA reissue of cowboy songs on 78s; in the notes, Fred G. Hoepfner says that it is "... not known to have entered tradition." Probably not, at least in the folkloristic use of the term, but its appearance in this local history suggests that it had some currency in western Canada, at least. I offer it here, not as a likely source for "Old Spookses' Pass," but as an interesting parallel and because she presumably got the motif from folkloric sources.

I've given a very basic version of the tune Maxwell sings here. As Hoepfner points out, it is basically the same melody used for a number of versions of "Windy Bill." It is in fact older than that, undoubtedly having a British source: Ewan MacColl wrote a couple of songs using similar tunes.

Billie Maxwell cleaned out some of the archaisms, and *Sancta Maria* becomes Saint Maria ("Ma-reye-a") in her version. The most striking alteration is her rendering of *capuchon of grey* as *copper suit of grey*! She seems not to have spent much time on the northern ranges!

Speed on, speed on, good Mas-ter! The camp lies far a-way; We must
cross the haunt-ed val-ley Be-fore the close of day. How the
snow-blight came up on me I will tell you as I go, The
blight of the Sha-dow-hunt-er, Who walks the mid-night snow.

Speed on, Speed on, good Master!
The camp lies far away;
We must cross the haunted valley
Before the close of day.

How the snow-blight came upon me
I will tell you as I go,—
The blight of the Shadow-hunter,
Who walks the midnight snow.

To the cold December heaven
Came the pale moon and the stars,
As the yellow sun was sinking
Behind the purple bars.

The snow was deeply drifted
Upon the ridges drear,
That lay for miles around me
And the camps for which we steer.

'Twas silent on the hillside,
And by the solemn wood,
No sound of life or motion
To break the solitude,

Save the wailing of the moose-bird
With a plaintive note and low,

And the skating of the red leaf
Upon the frozen snow.

And said I: "Though dark is falling,
And far the camp must be,
Yet my heart it would be lightsome
If I had but company."

And then I sang and shouted,
Keeping measure, as I sped,
To the harp-twang of the snow-shoe
As it sprang beneath my tread.

Not far into the valley
Had I dipped upon my way,
When a dusky figure joined me,
In a capuchon of grey,

Bending upon the snowshoes,
With a long and limber stride;
And I hailed the dusky stranger
As we travelled side by side.

But no token of community
Gave he by word or look,
And the fear-chill fell upon me
At the crossing of the brook.

For I saw by the sickly moonlight
As I followed, bending low,
That the walking of the stranger
Left no footmarks on the snow.

Then the fear-chill gathered o'er me,
Like a shroud around me cast,
As I sank upon the snow-drift
Where the Shadow-hunter passed.

And the otter-trappers found me,
Before the break of day,
With my dark hair blanched and whitened
As the snow in which I lay.

But they spoke not as they raised me;
For they knew that in the night
I had seen the Shadow-hunter
And had withered in his blight.

Sancta Maria speed us!
The sun is fallen low,—
Before us lies the valley
Of the Walker of the Snow!