

The Ballad of Frankie Silver

As printed in the Lenoir *Topic*, March 24, 1886.

As you read...

A *ballad* is a song whose lyrics tell a narrative story. This ballad was supposedly sung by Frankie Silver from the gallows in July 1833, after she was convicted of murdering her husband. In it, she tells of the crime, her punishment, her fears of hell, and her regret, and she warns her listeners not to follow in her footsteps. It is specifically a “murder ballad,” a kind of ballad that tells the story of a murder and its consequences. Murder ballads go back to England, and several have come from the Appalachian South.

Whatever Frankie Silver sang from the gallows would not have been written down at the time, but would have been orally transmitted — passed along from one person to another by singing. This version, printed in a Morganton newspaper fifty years after the event, is more the product of many people’s imaginations than of Frankie Silver’s jailhouse writings.

Read the article about Frankie Silver, listen to the song via the link below, then think about these questions:

1. What parts of the story of Frankie Silver do you believe or not believe? Why?
2. Why do you think the story was passed down in this way and retold by so many people?
3. How do you imagine this version of Frankie Silver’s “ballad” differs from what she might have said or sung from the gallows?
4. Why do you think that “murder ballads” like this have been so lasting and popular?

THE LENOIR TOPIC.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 24, 1886.

FRANCIS SILVERS' CONFESSION.

Morganton Paper.

We publish, by request, the following confession of Francis Silvers, who was hanged in this place on the 12th of July 1833, for the murder of her husband. Some of our readers will remember the facts in the case.

This dreadful, dark and dismal day
Has swept my glories all away,
My sun goes down, my days are past,
And I must leave this world at last.

Oh! Lord, what will become of me?
I am condemned you all now see,
To heaven or hell my soul must fly
All in a moment when I die.

Judge Daniel has my sentence pass'd,
Those prison walls I leave at last,
Nothing to cheer my drooping head
Until I'm numbered with the dead.

But oh! that Dreadful Judge I fear;
Shall I that awful sentence hear:
"Depart ye cursed down to hell
And forever there to dwell"?

I know that frightful ghosts I'll see
Gnawing their flesh in misery,
And then and there attended be
For murder in the first degree.

There shall I meet that mournful face
Whose blood I spilled upon this place;
With flaming eyes to me he'll say,
"Why did you take my life away?"

His feeble hands fell gently down,
His chattering tongue soon lost its sound,

To see his soul and body part
It strikes with terror to my heart.

I took his blooming days away,
Left him no time to God to pray,
And if his sins fall on his head
Must I not bear them in his stead?

The jealous thought that first gave strife
To make me take my husband's life,
For months and days I spent my time
Thinking how to commit this crime.

And on a dark and doleful night
I put his body out of sight,
With flames I tried him to consume,
But time would not admit it done.

You all see me and on me gaze,
Be careful how you spend your days,
And never commit this awful crime,
But try to serve your God in time.

My mind on solemn subjects roll;
My little child, God bless its soul!
All you that are of Adams race,
Let not my faults this child disgrace.

Farewell good people, you all now see
What my bad conduct's brought on me—
To die of shame and disgrace
Before this world of human race.

This dreadful, dark and dismal day
Has swept my glories all away,
My sun goes down, my days are past,
And I must leave this world at last.

Oh! Lord, what will become of me?
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My little child, God bless its soul!

Figure 1. In 1884, a Morganton newspaper printed this version of Frankie Silver's last words.

All you that are of Adam's race,
Let not my faults this child disgrace.
 Farewell good people you all now see
What my bad conduct's brought on me—
To die of shame and disgrace
Before this world of human race.
 Awful indeed to think on my death,
In perfect health to lose my breath.
Farewell, my friend, I bid adieu.
Vengeance on me must now pursue.
 Great God, how shall I be forgiven?
Not fit for earth, not fit for heaven;
But little time to pray to God,
For now I try that awful road.

On the web

Film: **The Ballad of Frankie Silver**

<http://www.youtube.com/folkstreamer#uploads/i6/qAFT4OwNhSg>

In this 47-minute film, available from Folkstreams.net, folk singer Bobby McMillon tells the story of Frankie Silver. At the beginning of the film, McMillon sings the entire ballad (not quite as it is printed on this page), so if you don't have time to watch the entire film, you can hear the traditional melody.

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Figure 1 (page 2)

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