

The Adventures Perly Monroe

by Marci Seither

prologue

William Gooch was consumed with the prospect of gold. The journey from the flat plains of Missouri over the rugged Sierra Mountains was treacherous. He watched his slaves, Peter and Nancy carefully load the wagon with needed supplies. They would leave for California at dawn's first glow. There was only one more thing William needed to take care of before they joined the wagon train. In the morning, he would inform Peter and Nancy he had sold their three-year-old son to pay the wagon master's fee.

Twenty-two years later, Miss Nancy paced the worn wooden planks outside the depot. She shaded her eyes, searching the horizon. Trains never ran on time, but she hoped this day would be an exception. She reached into her front pocket and fingered the edges of a folded telegraph...

Tears of Joy

Chapter 1

Twenty-one years later, Miss Nancy paced the worn wooden planks outside the freshly painted depot. Her eyes anxiously searched the horizon for any hint of dark smoke smudging the cloudless blue sky. Trains never ran on time. Today, she hoped, would be the exception. Crates of apples were stacked on the platform, ready to be loaded onto the train before making its final descent into Sacramento. A hand cart filled with luggage was moved across the platform by a large man in blue jeans, his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Miss Nancy noticed the small girl clutching the hand of her mother as they purchased train fare. Everyone was waiting, but no one had waited longer than she had. She slid the paper from her pocket. Her dark calloused hands gently unfolded the message that had been sent by telegraph.

ARRIVING 3:00 TRAIN – AUBURN – OCTOBER 12

YOUR SON ANDREW AND FAMILY

If only Peter could have live to see this day, Nancy signed. Without thinking, she rolled the thin band of gold she still wore on her ring finger. Peter had been gone for over 10 years now. After today, miss Nancy wouldn't be alone anymore. She would be with family, her family. Not just Andrew, but his young wife, Sarah Ellen and their two boys,

Pearly, almost four years old and Grant, barely two, Miss Nancy was not only a mama, she was a grandma.

She slipped the telegraph back into her pocket and reached down to smooth out her long blue taffeta skirt. It was the first store bought dress she had purchased in more than ten years. A stark contrast to the cotton dresses she hand stitched for herself. The clerk had been so kind to help her pick out something special for this very important day. Miss Nancy caught her reflection in the depot window and took in a deep breath. *“Will Andrew recognize me? Have I aged beyond my years?”* Miss Nancy looked around and chuckled. She was the only dark skinned woman standing on the platform. *Was he tall? Would he remember the songs I hummed to him every night in the quarters? Would his little boys look like he did?*

A gentle breeze blew an orange tinted leaf across the platform. Fall had come at the usual time but the days were still warm. The apple harvest would be plentiful this year, maybe even better than usual, which was good since her supply of apple butter was almost gone. The depot office door shut with a bang. A tall lanky man in a crisp white shirt and fitted vest stepped to the edge of platform, pulled a small pocket watch from his vest pocket and looked intently at it. He reached up and pulled on one side of his long mustache, then pulled on the other side, as if to make sure one side hadn't gotten longer than the other. With a sigh, he shook his head, put the watch into his pocket and walked back into the depot office.

A far off whistle brought the lanky man back out to the platform, this time his face wasn't so stern. The ground began to shake as the locomotive came into view. Billowing clouds of smoke boiled from the massive chimney. As the train chugged closer to the station, Miss Nancy felt her stomach tighten as the wheels screeched in protest at being made to slow down. As the train cars slowly slid by Miss Nancy frantically searched each window. *What if they weren't on the train?* Then, in the fourth passenger car she saw a small brown face of a young child, eyes wide with curiosity, pressed up against the window. Miss Nancy shuddered as the wheels finally screeched to a complete stop, the hiss of steam sent several leaves dancing across the track.

The porter hopped out of the open door set a small stool on the platform then began helping people as they exited the train. Miss Nancy held her breath. One after another made their way out of the train, then the small dark skinned boy from the window emerged with the help of the porter followed by a slender young woman holding a smaller child in her arms. The tall, strong frame of a full-grown man appeared. Andrew. He paused to catch his breath when his eyes caught hers. A lifetime of pain was slowly fading.

With the long strides of a man, but with the heart of a little boy longing for his mother, he made his way through the crowd and grabbed Miss Nancy up in his arms. Both of them wept. On that terrible, terrible day when they were separated, she had been the one trying to hold onto him until they pulled him from her arms. Now, he was the one holding her, and no one would ever separate them again.

When words were finally able to make their way out of Andrew Monroe's throat, he whispered the word Miss Nancy had waited so long to hear.

"Mama."

Young Pearly asked his mama, Sara Ellen, still holding Grant in her arms. "Why is papa crying?"

"Them is tears of joy, child. Tears of joy," she said.

Pearly didn't fully understand what his mama meant, but, that was ten years ago. Now, while standing, dripping wet at the water's edge of the American River, Pearly Monroe was crying his own tears of joy.

Grant would have been dead for sure, if the old miner hadn't heard Pearly's desperate cries for help. He took a step forward and winced. Looking down he saw a small trail of blood and realized it was his.

Chapter 2 –

Danger in the Water

Grant would have been dead for sure, if the old miner hadn't heard Perly's desperate cries for help. He took a step forward and winced. Looking down he saw a small trail of blood and realized it was his.

Whether it happened while he ran along the river's shore yelling for Grant to hang on, or when he plunged into the river to help pull Grant's limp body from the water, he didn't care. Mr. Stone, the miner that many people talked about in hushed tones, had pulled his brother face down, onto the shore, lifted his limp arms over his head and began to gently push into the middle of Grant's back.

Each time Mr. Stone muttered to himself. "C'mon, boy...don't give up..take a breath." If he hadn't been so desperate for help Perly would have run for safety, but something in the old miner's eyes told a story much different than what he had always heard.

A small audible cough escaped Grant's lips, followed by a gush of water. Pa arrived just as Grant's eyes fluttered open. Pa charged down the soft embankment with several others close behind him then bent his six-foot frame down and scooped up Grant who was still dazed but very much alive. Tears of relief glistened in the bright sunlight as they made their way down Pa's dark chiseled face.

“I feared the Good Lord, had done taken you home,” Pa pressed his cheek against the top of Grant’s wet hair.

Mama pushed her way through the growing crowd and hugged both Pa and Grant. “Land sakes, from the look of that goose egg on your forehead it’s a wonder you made it through the rapids in one piece.”

Grant reached up and gently touched the growing bump on his forehead.

“I sent Cordillia to fetch Doc Harrison and meet us at the house,” Mama said as she looked over at Perly. “We best have the Doc look at that foot of yours as well.” She put her hand on his wet shoulder.

Perly often teased his younger sister, but he had to admit, it was nice to know she was reliable to get the message to Doc Harrison and no doubt she would do it fast as her young legs could carry her.

“Let’s get you boys home and outa those wet clothes. If’n that river didn’t kill you, bein’ chilled to the bones will,” Mama quickly ran to catch up with Pa’s long strides.

The small group started back to town. Perly turned to thank the old miner, however amid all the chaos the bearded man must have quickly and quietly slipped away. Perly had heard a lot of rumors about the hermit who lived in Coloma. Some folks say he had killed an Irishman with his bare hands over a claim dispute, others said he was mad on account of being bit by a rabid coyote. One thing was certain, Charles Stone had saved his brother’s life and for that Perly would always be grateful.

Perly and his classmate, Sam Wimmer, walked back to town in silence. This was an afternoon neither of them would ever forget.

“I can’t believe how fast that happened,” said Sam, shaking his mop of red hair, still damp from swimming. One minute we was laughin’ over you flying off that rope swing and landin’ in the water like some crazy bird and the next...”

“Don’t I know it,” said Perly, careful to not step too hard down on his wounded foot. “I told him he didn’t know how to swim. I shoulda never let him in the water.”

“You ain’t to blame Perly. He told you he could swim all the way to Mormon Island if he had the notion,” reassured Sam.

“Thanks, Sam. You are a good friend,” said Perly.

Sam’s younger sister, Eliza, caught up with the boys as they walked into town. She had also been down at the river, busy making daisy chains when Grant was pulled unto the current after wandering too far from the calm spot where they often swam. She had been the one to run into town for help while Perly and Sam followed Grant.

“Is Grant going to be okay?” she asked.

“Sure looks that way,” replied Sam.

“I do declare, I ain’t never seen any boy run that fast before,” said Eliza.

“Well, you ain’t done too bad yourself.” Perly smiled at the young girl. One of her braids had worked its way out of the ribbon that was tied at the bottom. A soft cascade of brown hair tumbled onto her blue gingham dress.

As they approached the house where Perly’s family lived they saw Cordillia and Clay looking at some newborn kittens, curled up on a small mound of straw next to the silo.

Pa was just ahead of them and already climbed the steps onto the porch, Grant still in his arms. Doc Harrison right behind them.

“Perly, look,” four year old Clay pointed toward the kittens. “Dillia says I can name this one Whispers!”

“I said Whiskers!” corrected Cordillia. She shook her head.

Eliza and Sam turned back home. “See you tomorrow,” they said. “Don’t forget, it is the last day of school, so bring your marbles.”

The white washed house was a welcome sight. Perly climbed the wide wooden stairs of the home his grandparents Peter and Miss Nancy had build when they settled on the 80 acre farm.

The smell of fresh cinnamon rolls lingered in the air, but considering everything that had happened, the last thing on his mind were kittens and cinnamon rolls.

Perly sank into the top step. Exhausted and relieved. He could hear Miss Nancy asking what she could do and Doc Harrison asking Grant about any additional injuries.

In a few minutes Pa joined Perly on the porch step.

“Pa,” Perly spoke without looking over. “I am sorry... I told him... we were all laughing one minute and the next I was thinking he was gone for sure.”

“I know, Perly. Sometimes things happen,” said Pa. “I am jist glad you both are goin’ to be fine.”

Perly felt Pa’s strong arm on his shoulders. Behind them the screen door snapped shut. Doc Harrison held a warm cinnamon roll in one hand and his black leather doctor bag in the other.

“Is my brother goin’ to be alright?” Perly asked.

“I reckon he’ll be a bit sore tomorrow. He sure took a hard hit on the head, plus a few bruises and scrapes, but with plenty of rest for the next day or so, he’ll be as good as new.”

Mama stepped out with a basket of eggs and a few jars of her peach preserves.

“We’ll bring around two dressed out chickens come Tuesday Doc Harrison. We sure do thank you for comin’ right out.”

A lot of towns folks bartered for Doc’s house calls. He told people he was the best fed Doctor in the country.

“That’ll be right fine.” He took another bite of the cinnamon roll and smiled. “Mmmm . . .mmm. That is some of the tastiest food I’ve had in months. Miss Nancy sure does a fine job.”

“Can I see Grant now?” asked Perly.

“Sure can, but let me take a look at that foot of yours first,” Doc Harrison finished the last bite and wiped his mouth on a clean handkerchief pulled from his pocket. The middle age man knelt down next to Perly and gently lifted his blood crusted foot for closer inspection.

“Be sure to give this a good soaking and scrub it with lye soap and have your mama put some of Miss Nancy’s clover salve on it. Just be careful and stay away from rapids.” He winked, then stood, picked up his bag and basket of fresh eggs and strode out of the yard.

“Good-bye,” called Clay. “Come again, real soon.”

“Well,” said Pa standing up. “I best see what I need for fixin’ the chicken coop tomorrow, along with a few other things Miss Nancy needs fixin’.”

Just then Mama walked outside. She had a look of relief on her face, and put her hand on Perly’s shoulder. “Your brother wants to ask you somethin’.”

“What?” asked Perly.

“He want’s to know how close he came to swimming all the way to Mormon Island!”

Pa laughed as he turned to head toward the barn. “Yes sir, I think that boy is gonna be jist fine.”

That night after supper was done and all the chores tended to Perly laid down on his bed. His foot felt much better but he kept playing the scenes of the day over and over in his

head. Seeing the Wimmer kids at the river, the rope swing, Grant screaming. He recalled the way the white foam of turbulent water menacingly pulled his brother into the rapids. The feeling of helplessness as Grant disappeared in the swirling frigid water. Seeing Charles Stone pull Grant toward the shore.

He felt his body relax. His thoughts felt more like feathers, slowly drifting on a small current of air. Charles Stone...so many rumors had been spoken about him, but now Perly wondered which ones, if any, were true. *If Charles Stone was really hiding something or perhaps avoiding the law, would he have been willing to risk his own life to save Grant?* Perly was determined to find out the truth.

A half moon shone its bluish beam through his small attic window where he and Grant shared a room. "That almost looks like water..." He closed his eyes and started to breathe deep and slow when he heard something that reminded him of someone in distress. Perly sat up, fully awake, as the sound of rustling leaves grew louder.

More cries pierced the night, punctuated by the exploding sound of a gunshot.

Spellin' Bees and Strangers ~ Chapter 3

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Perly sat up in bed. "What was that?" asked Grant from his bed.

Another gunshot rang out into the moonlit night followed by the sound of Pa's angry voice. "You scat, you hear critter!" The hens kept squawking a few minutes longer.

"Don't be worryin' "Perly said. "Just something thinking it would be all sneaky and get a free chicken dinner."

Perly could hear the door shut and the sound of Pa moving through the kitchen beneath where he and Grant slept.

"Time to git some shuteye, Grant," Perly settled back against his pillow.

"Tomorrow is goin' to be a big day at school. "

But the only sound Perly heard were the soft sounds of Grant's breathing. It had already been a big day. Perly was thankful that everything turned out fine.

It seemed like Perly had barely closed his eyes when he heard someone calling his name.

"Perly! Grant!" called Mama from downstairs. "You boys best be getting' up and hurrying along with your chores 'fore you find yourselves late for the school bell."

Perly hurried down the attic ladder while Grant, still groggy from sleeping so soundly and sore from being bounced down the river in a fight for his life, dawdled behind him. Today was the spelling bee. The entire school had been studying for weeks, so Perly wanted to make sure he was there when the school bell rang. The best part was that this was the last day of school.

Perly walked through the back door, milk pail in hand, and headed toward the barn where Molly, the milk cow, would be waiting.

It took about 30 minutes to do morning chores. This morning, Perly worked extra fast. The smell of sizzling sausage let him know that breakfast was almost ready.

He carried the pail of milk to the back porch where Miss Nancy would let it sit long enough for the rich cream to rise to the top and scoop it into a wooden bucket. There was something about the rich cream that made the best butter. While he was usually the one in charge of milking Molly, Cordillia had been the one to churn it. The large slabs of pressed butter from the wood molds were a popular request of the local hotels.

Perly washed his hands in the basin next to the door, walked into the kitchen, and sat down at the long wood table. Grant, having finished his morning chores, followed closely behind him.

“Grant,” Mama spoke up as she put the sausages onto a large plate. “Have those hens taken the day off, or did you forget to bring in the eggs?”

Grant quickly turned back around and headed out the back door to retrieve the forgotten basket.

“Land sakes, if that child’s head ain’t about to plumb fall off,” she continued as she pulled a tin of piping hot biscuits from the wood stove.

“Maybe he took a harder hit on the head than Ol’ Doc Harrison thought,” added Miss Nancy.

“Mama, he’s jist nervous about the spillin’ bee I reckon.” Cordillia was almost two years younger than Grant, but she was always trying to sound grown-up.

Four year old Clay spoke up. “What is the bee spillin’? Is the spillin’ bee have a stinger like a honey bee?”

“No, Clay.” replied Cordillia. “It is a spellin’ bee! Not a spillin’ bee, silly. It is where everyone at school tries to outsmart each other by spellin’ words. The winner gets a peppermint stick!”

“Ohh,” Clay nodded his head.

“I don’t see no need for all that worry,” replied Perly, taking a hot biscuit and putting it onto his plate. “I aim to be a hard workin’ man, not a hard thinkin’ one.”

Andrew walked in and set a few pieces of wood he was carrying next to the stove.

“Perly Monroe, I don’t want to hear such talk. I aim to see that you get a good learnin’. Mr. Markham is a fine teacher. You should be thankful.”

“Yes, Pa.” Perly felt his face get hot and looked at his plate. He knew that his pa’s first goal after they arrived in Coloma was to learn to read and write. Perly remembered seeing Pa study by lamplight after a hard day’s work.

“Getting’ educated is the best thing a man can do for himself. Don’t you forget that now.” Pa gave Perly a warm smile. “Besides, there ain’t nothin’ wrong with bein’ a hard workin’ man and a hard thinkin’ one.”

“Well, if these children don’t leave soon there won’t be any educatin’, “ Miss Nancy spoke up from the porch where she was snapping beans. Grant came in and handed Mama the half empty egg basket.

“That was all there was today,” Grant said, seeing the questioning look on Mama’s face.

“What ever was getting’ those hens all worked up last night must have helped themselves to a few eggs before bein’ startled last night,” Pa said.

“Did you see what it was?” asked Clay. “Hope it don’t try stealin’ into our house.”

“I’m sure it was just some critter thinking ‘bout an easy meal. Just glad they didn’t grab hold of the hens,” said Pa.

“I told you I was thinkin’ the hen house needed tendin’ to,” came Miss Nancy’s voice.

“I know, Miss Nancy. It is the first thing on my list this morning.” Pa smiled.

“We bet be gettin’,” said Cordillia, who was making sure her new hair ribbon was tied just right.

Mama handed Grant his lunch tin and a biscuit to eat on the way to school. “You’ll do jist fine,” she whispered reassuringly.

“Thanks Mama,” Grant replied as he walked out the door behind Perly and Cordillia. He ran to catch up. Sam and his little sister were waiting at the end of the lane.

The school bell rang just as they all took their seats. Perly and Rufus Burgess sat in the fifth row. Grant and Sam Wimmer sat in the desk in front of them.

The Burgess family lived just down the lane from the Monroe-Gooch Farm. Monty Burgess was a blacksmith. Perly loved going over to the Burgess' shop. Mr. Burgess often let Perly pump the large bellows to fan the glowing orange embers needed to heat up the metal. Once in a while, Perly even got to use the hammer and strike the pliable hot iron against the anvil until it flattened out.

"Someday, I'm going to be a blacksmith," Perly told Miss Nancy when she scolded him after a hot spark burned a hole in the bib of his overalls.

Perly looked over at Rufus. It was going to be another adventure filled summer full of fishin' and hopefully they could start tomorrow, first thing in the morning.



Perly was thinking about his favorite fishing spot when Mr. Markham called the class to attention to say the Pledge of Allegiance, which they did every day before class started.

"I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the republic for which it stands, one nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

Soon, the spelling bee was under way. Students went several rounds before anyone was eliminated. Finally, it was down to six students.

When the contest was over Susan Burgess had won first place. Perly ended up in fifth place, but he didn't care. He was just glad it was over.

"Perly, you did good, even if you was beaten' by my sister!" laughed Rufus.

Perly shrugged his shoulders. "I'd like to hear you spell the word *acquaintance*, or *adventuresome*. Anyway, the program is over and Susan won fair and square. The only word I want to spell right now is L-I-C-O-R-I-C-E!"

"Mm..mmm, now that is my kind of spellin'," said Rufus.

As a reward, Mr. Markham announced that lunch and recess would be extended as promised. The sound of students cheering exploded from the clapboard schoolhouse. Everyone picked up their lunch tins and headed outside. Soon, the schoolyard filled with the sound of kids playing tag, catch ball, and jumping rope.

Perly and several other boys were playing tag when a movement from across the street caught his attention. A blur of motion disappeared behind a pillar of the Alhambra Saloon. Perly stopped to make sure he wasn't just seeing things. Then he saw someone quickly disappear through the swinging door.

Whoever it was had been watching them from across the street.