

# The Cremation of Sam McGee

poem by Robert W. Service

*There are strange things done in the midnight sun  
By the men who toil for gold.  
The arctic trails have their secret tales  
That would make your blood run cold.  
The northern lights have seen queer sights  
But the queerest they ever did see,  
Was that night on the marge of Lake LeBarge  
I cremated Sam McGee.*

Now Sam McGee was from Tennessee  
Where the cotton blooms and blows.  
Why he left his home in the south to roam  
'round the Pole, God only knows.  
He was always cold, but the land of gold  
Seemed to hold him like a spell,  
Though he'd often say in his homely way  
That "he'd sooner live in Hell."

On a Christmas day we were mushing our way  
Over the Dawson trail.  
Talk of your cold! through the parka's fold  
It stabbed like a driven nail.  
If our eyes we'd close, then the lashes froze  
till sometimes we couldn't see.  
It wasn't much fun, but the only one  
To whimper was Sam McGee.

And that very night, as we lay packed tight  
In our robes beneath the snow,  
And the dogs were fed, and the stars o'er head  
Were dancing heel and toe,  
He turns to me, and "Cap" says he  
"I'll cash in this trip, I guess.  
And if I do, I'm asking that you  
Won't refuse my last request."

Well, he seemed so low that I couldn't say no,  
Then he says with a sort of a moan,  
"It's the cursed cold, it's got right hold  
'til I'm chilled clean through to the bone.  
Yet tain't being dead – it's my awful dread  
Of the icy grave that pains.  
So I want you to swear that, foul or fair,  
You'll cremate my last remains."

A pal's last need is a thing to heed,  
So I swore I would not fail.  
And we started on at the streak of dawn,  
But, God! he looked ghastly pale.  
He crouched on the sleigh, and he raved all day  
Of his home in Tennessee,  
And before nightfall, a corpse was all  
That was left of Sam McGee.

There wasn't a breath in that land of death,  
And I hurried, horror-driven.  
With a corpse half hid, that I couldn't get rid,  
Because of a promise given.  
It was lashed to the sleigh, and it seemed to say,  
"You may tax your brawn and your brains,  
But you promised true, and it's up to you  
To cremate those last remains."  
Now, a promise made is a debt unpaid,  
And the trail has its own stern code.  
In the days to come, though my lips were dumb,  
In my heart, how I cursed that load.  
In the long, long night by the lone firelight  
While the huskies 'round in a ring  
Howled out their woes to the homeless snows  
Oh, God, how I loathed the thing.

And every day that quiet clay  
Seemed to heavy and heavier grow.  
But on I went, though the dogs were spent  
And the grub was getting low.  
The trail was bad, and I felt half mad,  
But I swore I would not give in.  
And I'd often sing to the hateful thing  
And it harkened with a grin.

Till I came to the marge of Lake LeBarge  
And a derelict there lay.  
It was jammed in the ice, but I saw in a trice  
It was called the "Alice May".  
And I looked at it, and I thought a bit,  
And I looked at my frozen chum,  
Then "Here," said I with a sudden cry  
"Is my cre-ma-tor-eum."

Some planks I tore from the cabin floor  
And lit the boiler fire.  
Some coal I found that was lying around  
And heaped the fuel higher.  
The flames just soared, and the furnace roared -

Such a blaze you seldom see.  
And I burrowed a hole in the glowing coal  
And I stuffed in Sam McGee.

Then I made a hike, for I didn't like  
to hear him sizzle so.  
And the heavens scowled and the huskies howled  
and the wind began to blow.  
It was icy cold, but the hot sweat rolled  
down my cheeks, I don't know why.  
And the greasy smoke in an inky cloak  
went streaking down the sky.

I do not know how long in the snow  
I wrestled with grisly fear.  
But the stars were out and they danced about  
'ere again I ventured near.  
I was sick with dread, but I bravely said  
"I'll just take a peep inside.  
I guess he's cooked, and it's time I looked"  
...Then the door I opened wide.

And there sat Sam, looking cold and calm  
In the heart of the furnace roar.  
And he wore a smile you could see a mile,  
And said "Please close that door.  
It's fine in here, but I greatly fear  
You'll let in the cold and storm.  
Since I left Plumtree, down in Tennessee,  
It's the first time I've been warm."

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