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**Ballads of A Chechako  
&  
Songs of a Sourdough**



**Robert W. Service**

Modernized edition by Arthur Strutzenberg, 2025  
Originally Published by William Briggs, Toronto  
1907 and 1909

## Foreword

I was just a teenager when Robert Service first came into my life. My mom was sitting in her chair one quiet evening, the lamplight falling across a worn book in her hands. I asked what she was reading, and she told me it was a poet—Robert Service. Before I knew it, she was reading *The Cremation of Sam McGee* aloud, her voice carrying that rhythm like a campfire tale in the Yukon night.

Not long after, I found Grin, and it struck with me in a different way. There was grit in it, and humor too—a reminder to face the hard days with a crooked smile and a stubborn heart.

Years rolled on. Life took its turns. And then, while setting the type for this very book, I came across Grin again. This time, it wasn't just familiar—it felt lived in. The words seemed to fit the lines of my own story better than ever before.

So this collection is more than just a gathering of poems. It's a thread that runs from my mom's chair on that quiet evening, through the years in between, and into my hands today. In setting these pages, I honor her as much as I honor the poet she introduced me to. And I hope, as you read, you feel a little of the same warmth, wonder, and resilience that she gave me when she first turned those pages.



## Ballads of A Chechako

### To the Man of the High North

My rhymes are rough, and often in my rhyming  
I've drifted, silver-sailed, on seas of dream,  
Hearing afar the bells of Elfland chiming,  
Seeing the groves of Arcadie agleam.

I was the thrall of Beauty that rejoices  
From peak snow-diademed to regal star;  
Yet to mine aerie ever pierced the voices,  
The pregnant voices of the Things That Are.

The Here, the Now, the vast Forlorn around us;  
The gold-delirium, the feline strife;  
The lusts that lure us on, the hates that hound us;  
Our red rags in the patch-work quilt of Life.

The nameless men who nameless rivers travel,  
And in strange valleys greet strange deaths alone;  
The grim, intrepid ones who would unravel  
The mysteries that shroud the Polar Zone.

These will I sing, and if one of you linger  
Over my pages in the Long, Long Night,  
And on some lone line lay a calloused finger,  
Saying: "It's human-true—it hits me right";  
Then will I count this loving toil well spent;  
Then will I dream awhile—content, content.

## Men of the High North

Men of the High North, the wild sky is blazing;

Islands of opal float on silver seas;

Swift splendors kindle, barbaric, amazing;

Pale ports of amber, golden argosies.

Ringed all around us the proud peaks are glowing;

Fierce chiefs in council, their wigwam the sky;

Far, far below us the big Yukon flowing,

Like threaded quicksilver, gleams to the eye.

Men of the High North, you who have known it;

You in whose hearts its splendors have abode;

Can you renounce it, can you disown it?

Can you forget it, its glory and its goad?

Where is the hardship, where is the pain of it?

Lost in the limbo of things you've forgot;

Only remain the guerdon and gain of it;

Zest of the foray, and God, how you fought!

You who have made good, you foreign faring;

You money magic to far lands has whirled;

Can you forget those days of vast daring,

There with your soul on the Top o' the World?

Nights when no peril could keep you awake on

Spruce boughs you spread for your couch in the snow;

Taste all your feasts like the beans and the bacon

Fried at the camp-fire at forty below?

Can you remember your huskies all going,

Barking with joy and their brushes in air;

You in your parka, glad-eyed and glowing,

Monarch, your subjects the wolf and the bear?

Monarch, your kingdom unravish't and gleaming;

Mountains your throne, and a river your car;

Crash of a bull moose to rouse you from dreaming;

Forest your couch, and your candle a star.

You who this faint day the High North is luring

Unto her vastness, taintlessly sweet;

You who are steel-braced, straight-lipped, enduring,

Dreadless in danger and dire in defeat:

Honor the High North ever and ever,

Whether she crown you, or whether she slay;  
Suffer her fury, cherish and love her—  
He who would rule he must learn to obey.

Men of the High North, fierce mountains love you;  
Proud rivers leap when you ride on their breast.  
See, the austere sky, pensive above you,  
Dons all her jewels to smile on your rest.  
Children of Freedom, scornful of frontiers,  
We who are weaklings honor your worth.  
Lords of the wilderness, Princes of Pioneers,  
Let's have a rouse that will ring round the earth.

## The Ballad of the Northern Lights

One of the Down and Out—that's me. Stare at me well, ay, stare!  
Stare and shrink—say! you wouldn't think that I was a millionaire.  
Look at my face, it's crimped and gouged—one of them death-mask things;  
Don't seem the sort of man, do I, as might be the pal of kings?  
Slouching along in smelly rags, a bleary-eyed, no-good bum;  
A knight of the hollow needle, pard, spewed from the sodden slum.  
Look me all over from head to foot; how much would you think I was worth?  
A dollar? a dime? a nickel? Why, **I'm the wealthiest man on earth.**

No, don't you think that I'm off my base. You'll sing a different tune  
If only you'll let me spin my yarn. Come over to this saloon;  
Wet my throat—it's as dry as chalk, and seeing as how it's you,  
I'll tell the tale of a Northern trail, and so help me God, it's true.  
I'll tell of the howling wilderness and the haggard Arctic heights,  
Of a reckless vow that I made, and how I **STAKED THE NORTHERN LIGHTS.**

Remember the year of the Big Stampede and the trail of Ninety-eight,  
When the eyes of the world were turned to the North,  
and the hearts of men elate;  
Hearts of the old dare-devil breed thrilled at the wondrous strike,  
And to every man who could hold a pan came the message, "Up and hike".  
Well, I was there with the best of them, and I knew I would not fail.  
You wouldn't believe it to see me now; but wait till you've heard my tale.

You've read of the trail of Ninety-eight, but its woe no man may tell;  
It was all of a piece and a whole yard wide,  
and the name of the brand was "Hell".  
We heard the call and we staked our all; we were plungers playing blind,  
And no man cared how his neighbor fared, and no man looked behind;  
For a ruthless greed was born of need, and the weakling went to the wall,  
And a curse might avail where a prayer would fail,  
and the gold lust crazed us all.

Bold were we, and they called us three the "Unholy Trinity";  
There was Ole Olson, the sailor Swede, and the Dago Kid and me.  
We were the discards of the pack, the foreloppers of Unrest,  
Reckless spirits of fierce revolt in the ferment of the West.  
We were bound to win and we revelled in the hardships of the way.  
We staked our ground and our hopes were crowned,  
and we hoisted out the pay.  
We were rich in a day beyond our dreams,