

Songs of a Sourdough

The Law of the Yukon

This is the law of the Yukon, and ever she makes it plain:
 "Send not your foolish and feeble; send me your strong and your sane.
 Strong for the red rage of battle; sane, for I harry them sore;
 Send me men girt for the combat, men who are grit to the core;
 Swift as the panther in triumph, fierce as the bear in defeat,
 Sired of a bulldog parent, steeled in the furnace heat.
 Send me the best of your breeding, lend me your chosen ones;
 Them will I take to my bosom, them will I call my sons;
 Them will I gild with my treasure, them will I glut with my meat;
 But the others—the misfits, the failures—I trample under my feet.
 Dissolute, damned, and despairful, crippled and palsied and slain,
 Ye would send me the spawn of your gutters—Go! take back your spawn again.

"Wild and wide are my borders, stern as death is my sway;
 From my ruthless throne I have ruled alone for a million years and a day;
 Hugging my mighty treasure, waiting for man to come:
 Till he swept like a turbid torrent, and after him swept—the scum.
 The pallid pimp of the dead-line, the enervate of the pen,
 One by one I weeded them out, for all that I sought was—Men.
 One by one I dismayed them, fighting them sore with my glooms;
 One by one I betrayed them unto my manifold dooms.
 Drowned them like rats in my rivers, starved them like curs on my plains,
 Rotted the flesh that was left them, poisoned the blood in their veins;
 Burst with my winter upon them, searing forever their sight,
 Lashed them with fungus-white faces, whimpering wild in the night;
 Staggering blind through the storm-whirl, stumbling mad through the snow,
 Frozen stiff in the ice pack, brittle and bent like a bow;
 Featureless, formless, forsaken, scented by wolves in their flight,

Left for the wind to make music through ribs that are glittering white;
 Gnawing the black crust of failure, searching the pit of despair,
 Croaking the toe in the trigger, trying to patter a prayer;
 Going outside with an escort, raving with lips all afoam;
 Writing a cheque for a million, drivelling feebly of home;
 Lost like a louse in the burning ... or else in tented town
 Seeking a drunkard's solace, sinking and sinking down;
 Steeped in the slime at the bottom, dead to a decent world,
 Lost 'mid the human flotsam, far on the frontier hurled;
 In the camp at the bend of the river, with its dozen saloons aglare,
 Its gambling dens a-riot, its gramophones all a-blare;
 Crimped with the crimes of a city, sin-ridden and bridled with lies,
 In the hush of my mountained vastness, in the flush of my midnight skies.
 Plague-spots, yet tools of my purpose, so nathless I suffer them thrive,
 Crushing my Weak in their clutches, that only my Strong may survive.

"But the others, the men of my mettle, the men who would 'stabish my fame,
 Unto its ultimate issue, winning me honour, not shame;
 Searching my uttermost valleys, fighting each step as they go,
 Shooting the wrath of my rapids, scaling my ramparts of snow;
 Ripping the guts of my mountains, looting the beds of my creeks,
 Them will I take to my bosom, and speak as a mother speaks.
 I am the land that listens, I am the land that broods;
 Steeped in eternal beauty, crystalline waters and woods.
 Long have I waited lonely, shunned as a thing accurs,
 Monstrous, moody, pathetic, the last of the lands and the first;
 Visioning camp-fires at twilight, sad with a longing forlorn,
 Feeling my womb o'er-pregnant with the seed of cities unborn.
 Wild and wide are my borders, stern as death is my sway,
 And I wait for the men who will win me—and I will not be won in a day;
 And I will not be won by weaklings, subtle, suave, and mild,
 But by men with the hearts of vikings, and the simple faith of a child;
 Desperate, strong, and resistless, unthrottled by fear or defeat,
 Them will I gild with my treasure, them will I glut with my meat.

"Lofty I stand from each sister land, patient and wearily wise,
 With the weight of a world of sadness in my quiet, passionless eyes;
 Dreaming alone of a people, dreaming alone of a day,
 When men shall not rape my riches, and curse me and go away;
 Making a bawd of my bounty, fouling the hand that gave—
 Till I rise in my wrath and I sweep on their path and I stamp them into a grave.
 Dreaming of men who will bless me, of women esteeming me good,
 Of children born in my borders, of radiant motherhood;

L'Envoi

We talked of yesteryears, of trails and treasure,
 Of men who played the game and lost or won;
 Of mad stampedes, of toil beyond all measure,
 Of camp-fire comfort when the day was done.
 We talked of sullen nights by moon-dogs haunted,
 Of bird and beast and tree, of rod and gun;
 Of boat and tent, of hunting-trip enchanted
 Beneath the wonder of the midnight sun;
 Of bloody-footed dogs that gnawed the traces,
 Of prisoned seas, wind-lashed and winter-locked;
 The ice-gray dawn was pale upon our faces,
 Yet still we filled the cup and still we talked.
 The city street was dimmed. We saw the glitter
 Of moon-picked brilliants on the virgin snow,
 And down the drifted canyon heard the bitter,
 Relentless slogan of the winds of woe.
 The city was forgot, and, parka-skirted,
 We trod that leagueless land that once we knew;
 We saw stream past, down valleys glacier-girted,
 The wolf-worn legions of the caribou.
 We smoked our pipes, o'er scenes of triumph dwelling;
 Of deeds of daring, dire defeats, we talked;
 And other tales that lost not in the telling,
 Ere to our beds uncertainly we walked.
 And so, dear friends, in gentler valleys roaming,
 Perhaps, when on my printed page you look,
 Your fancies by the firelight may go homing
 To that lone land that haply you forsook.
 And if perchance you hear the silence calling,
 The frozen music of star-yearning heights,
 Or, dreaming, see the seines of silver trawling
 Across the sky's abyss on vasty nights,
 You may recall that sweep of savage splendor,
 That land that measures each man at his worth,
 And feel in memory, half fierce, half tender,
 The brotherhood of men that know the North.

Seems that I must be dreaming! Here is the old home trail;
 Yonder a light is gleaming; oh, I know it so well!
 The air is scented with clover; the cattle wait by the rail;
 Father is through with the milking; there goes the supper-bell.

Mother, your boy is crying, out in the night and cold;
 Let me in and forgive me, I'll never be bad any more:
 I'm, oh, so sick and so sorry: please, dear mother, don't scold—
 It's just your boy, and he wants you. . . . Mother, open the door. . . .

*"Father, father, I saw a face
 Pressed just now to the window-pane!
 Oh, it gazed for a moment's space,
 Wild and wan, and was gone again!"*

*"Mother, mother, you saw the snow
 Drifted down from the maple tree
 (Oh, the wind that is sobbing so!
 Weary and worn and old are we)—
 Only the snow and a wounded loon—
 Rest and sleep, 'twill be morning soon."*

Of cities leaping to stature, of fame like a flag unfurled,
 As I pour the tide of my riches in the eager lap of the world."
 This is the Law of the Yukon, that only the Strong shall thrive;
 That surely the Weak shall perish, and only the Fit survive.
 Dissolute, damned, and despairful, crippled and palsied and slain,
 This is the Will of the Yukon,—Lo! how she makes it plain!

The Parson's Son

*This is the song of the parson's son, as he squats in his shack alone,
On the wild, weird nights when the Northern Lights shoot up from the frozen zone,
And it's sixty below, and couched in the snow the hungry hustlers moan.*

"I'm one of the Arctic brotherhood, I'm an old-time pioneer.

I came with the first—O God! how I've cursed this Yukon—but still I'm here.

I've sweated a-hirst in its summer heat, I've frozen and starved in its cold;

I've followed my dreams by its thousand streams, I've toiled and miled for its gold.

"Look at my eyes—been snow-blind twice; look where my foot's half gone;

And that gruesome scar on my left cheek where the frost-fiend bit to the bone.

Each one a brand of this devil's land, where I've played and I've lost the game,

A broken wreck with a craze for 'hooch,' and never a cent to my name.

"This mining is only a gamble, the worst is as good as the best;

I was in with the bunch and I might have come out right on top with the rest;

With Cornack, Ladue and Macdonald—O God! but it's hell to think

Of the thousands and thousands I've squandered on cards and women and drink.

"In the early days we were just a few, and we hunted and fished around,

Nor dreamt by our lonely camp-fires of the wealth that lay under the ground.

We traded in skins and whiskey, and I've often slept under the shade

Of that lone birch-tree on Bonanza, where the first big find was made.

"We were just like a great big family, and every man had his squaw,

And we lived such a wild, free, fearless life beyond the pale of the law;

Till sudden there came a whisper, and it maddened us every man,

And I got in on Bonanza before the big rush began.

"Oh, those Dawson days, and the sin and the blaze, and the town all open wide!

(If God made me in His likeness, sure He let the devil inside.)

But we all were mad, both the good and the bad, and as for the women, well—

No spot on the map in so short a space has hustled more souls to hell.

"Money was just like dirt there, easy to get and to spend.

I was all caked in on a dance-hall jade, but she shook me in the end.

It put me queer, and for near a year I never drew sober breath,

Till I found myself in the bughouse ward with a claim staked out on death.

"Twenty years in the Yukon, struggling along its creeks;

Roaming its giant valleys, scaling its god-like peaks;

Bathed in its fiery sunsets, fighting its fiendish cold,

Twenty years in the Yukon ... twenty years—and I'm old.

On hands and knees will I buck it; with every breath will I fight;
It's life, it's life that I fight for—never it seemed so sweet.

I know that my face is frozen; my hands are numblike and dead;

But oh, my feet keep a-moving, heavy and hard and slow;

They're trying to kill me, kill me, the night that's black overhead,

The wind that cuts like a razor, the whiplash of the snow.

Keep a-moving, a-moving; don't, don't stumble, you fool!

Curse this snow that's a-piling-a-purpose to block my way,

It's heavy as gold in the rocker, it's white and fleecy as wool;

It's soft as a bed of feathers, it's warm as a stack of hay.

Curse on my feet that slip so, my poor tired, stumbling feet—

I guess they're a job for the surgeon, they feel so queerlike to lift—

I'll rest them just for a moment—oh, but to rest is sweet!

The awful wind cannot get me, deep, deep down in the drift."

"Father, a bitter cry I heard,

Out of the night so dark and wild.

Why is my heart so strangely stirred?

"Twas like the voice of our erring child."

"Mother, mother, you only heard

A waterfowl in the locked lagoon—

Out of the night a wounded bird—

Rest and sleep, it will be morning soon."

Who is it talks of sleeping? I'll swear that somebody shook

Me hard by the arm for a moment, but how on earth could it be?

See how my feet are moving—awfully funny they look—

Moving as if they belonged to a someone that wasn't me.

The wind down the night's long alley bows me down like a pin;

I stagger and fall and stagger, crawl arm-deep in the snow.

Beaten back to my corner, how can I hope to win?

And there is the blizzard waiting to give me the knockout blow.

Oh, I'm so warm and sleepy! No more hunger and pain.

Just to rest for a moment; was ever rest such a joy?

Ha! what was that? I'll swear it, somebody shook me again;

Somebody seemed to whisper: "Fight to the last, my boy."

Fight! That's right, I must struggle. I know that to rest means death;

Death, but then what does death mean?—ease from a world of strife.

Life has been none too pleasant; yet with my failing breath

Still and still must I struggle, fight for the gift of life.

Lost

*"Black is the sky, but the land is white—
(O the wind, the snow and the storm!)"*

Father, where is our boy to-night?

Pray to God he is safe and warm. "Mother, mother, why should you fear?"

Safe is he, and the Arctic moon

Over his cabin shines so clear—

Rest and sleep, 'twill be morning soon."

"It's getting dark awful sudden. Say, this is mighty queer!

Where in the world have I got to? It's still and black as a tomb.

I reckoned the camp was yonder, I figured the trail was here—

Nothing! Just draw and valley packed with quiet and gloom;

Snow that comes down like feathers, thick and gobby and gray;

Night that looks spiteful ugly—seems that I've lost my way.

"The cold's got an edge like a jackknife—it must be forty below;

Leastways that's what it seems like—it cuts so fierce to the bone.

The wind's getting real ferocious; it's heaving and whirling the snow;

It shrieks with a howl of fury, it dies away to a moan;

Its arms sweep round like a banshee's, swift and icily white,

And buffet and blind and beat me. Lord! it's a hell of a night.

"I'm all tangled up in a blizzard. There's only one thing to do—

Keep on moving and moving; it's death, it's death if I rest.

Oh, God! if I see the morning, if only I struggle through,

I'll say the prayers I've forgotten since I lay on my mother's breast.

I seem going round in a circle; maybe the camp is near.

Say! did somebody holler? Was it a light I saw?

Or was it only a notion? I'll shout, and maybe they'll hear—

No! the wind only drowns me—shout till my throat is raw.

"The boys are all round the camp-fire wondering when I'll be back.

They'll soon be starting to seek me; they'll scarcely wait for the light.

What will they find, I wonder, when they come to the end of my track—

A hand stuck out of a snowdrift, frozen and stiff and white.

That's what they'll strike, I reckon; that's how they'll find their pard,

A pie-faced corpse in a snowbank—curse you, don't be a fool!

Play the game to the finish; bet on your very last card;

Nerve yourself for the struggle. Oh, you coward, keep cool!

"I'm going to lick this blizzard; I'm going to live the night.

It can't down me with its bluster—I'm not the kind to be beat.

"Old and weak, but no matter, there's 'hooch' in the bottle still.

I'll hitch up the dogs to-morrow, and mush down the trail to Bill.

It's so long dark, and I'm lonesome—I'll just lay down on the bed,

To-morrow I'll go ... to-morrow ... I guess I'll play on the red.

"... Come, Kit, your pony is saddled. I'm waiting, dear, in the court ...

... Minnie, you devil, I'll kill you if you skip with that flossy sport ...

... How much does it go to the pan, Bill?... play up, School, and play the game ...

... Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name ..."

*This was the song of the parson's son, as he lay in his bunk alone, Ere the fire went out
and the cold crept in, and his blue lips ceased to moan, And the hunger-maddened
madamutes had torn him flesh from bone.*

The Spell of the Yukon

I wanted the gold, and I sought it;

I scrabbled and mucked like a slave.
Was it famine or scurvy—I fought it,

I hurled my youth into the grave.

I wanted the gold and I got it—

Came out with a fortune last fall,—
Yet somehow life's not what I thought it,
And somehow the gold isn't all.

No! There's the land. (Have you seen it?)

It's the cussedest land that I know,

From the big, dizzy mountains that screen it,
To the deep, deathlike valleys below.

Some say God was tired when He made it;

Some say it's a fine land to shun;

Maybe: but there's some as would trade it
For no land on earth—and I'm one.

You come to get rich (damned good reason),

You feel like an exile at first;

You hate it like hell for a season,
And then you are worse than the worst.

It grips you like some kinds of sinning;

It twists you from foe to a friend;

It seems it's been since the beginning;

It seems it will be to the end.

I've stood in some mighty-mouthed hollow

That's plumb-full of hush to the brim;

I've watched the big, husky sun wallow

In crimson and gold, and grow dim,

Till the moon set the pearly peaks gleaming,

And the stars tumbled out, neck and crop;

And I've thought that I surely was dreaming,

With the peace o' the world piled on top.

The summer—no sweeter was ever;

The sunshiny woods all athrill;

The grayling aleap in the river,

The bighorn asleep on the hill.

The strong life that never knows harness,

The wilds where the caribou call;

Till the dogs lay down in their traces, and rose and staggered and fell;

Till the eyes of him dimmed with shadows,

and the trail was so hard to see;

Till the Wild howled out triumphant, and the world was a frozen hell—

Then said Constable Clancy: "I guess that it's up to me."

Far down the trail they saw him,

and his hands they were blanched like bone;

His face was a blackened horror, from his eyelids the salt rheum ran;

His feet he was lifting strangely, as if they were made of stone,

But safe in his arms and sleeping he carried the crazy man.

So Clancy got into Barracks, and the boys made rather a scene;

And the O. C. called him a hero, and was nice as a man could be;

But Clancy gazed down his trousers at the place where his toes had been,

And then he howled like a husky, and sang in a shaky key:

"When I go back to the old love that's true to the finger-tips,

I'll say: 'Here's bushels of gold, love,'

and I'll kiss my girl on the lips;

'It's yours to have and to hold, love.'

It's the proud, proud boy I'll be,

When I go back to the old love that's waited so long for me."

*A grave deep, deep, with the moon a-peep,
A grave in the frozen mould.
Sing hey, sing ho, for the winds that blow,
And a grave deep down in the ice and snow,
A grave in the land of gold."*

Day after day of darkness, the whirl of the seething snows;
Day after day of blindness, the swoop of the stinging blast;
On through a blur of fury the swing of staggering blows;
On through a world of turmoil, empty, inane and vast.

Night with its writhing storm-whirl, night despairingly black;
Night with its hours of terror, numb and endlessly long;
Night with its weary waiting, fighting the shadows back,
And ever the crouching madman singing his crazy song.

Cold with its creeping terror, cold with its sudden clench;
Cold so utter you wonder if 'twill ever again be warm;
Clancy grinned as he shuddered, "Surely it isn't a cinch
Being wet-nurse to a looney in the teeth of an arctic storm."

The blizzard passed and the dawn broke, knife-edged and crystal clear;
The sky was a blue-domed iceberg, sunshine outlawed away;
Ever by snowslide and ice-rip haunted and hovered the Fear;
Ever the Wild malignant poised and panted to slay.

The lead-dog freezes in harness—cut him out of the team!
The lung of the wheel-dog's bleeding—shoot him and let him lie!
On and on with the others—lash them until they scream!
"Pull for your lives, you devils! On! To halt is to die."

There in the frozen vastness Clancy fought with his foes;
The ache of the stiffened fingers, the cut of the snowshoe thong;
Cheeks black-traw through the hood-flap, eyes that tingled and closed,
And ever to urge and cheer him quavered the madman's song.

Colder it grew and colder, till the last heat left the earth,
And there in the great stark stillness the pale fires glinted and gleamed,
And the Wild all around exulted and shook with a devilish mirth,
And life was far and forgotten, the ghost of a joy once dreamed.

Death! And one who defied it, a man of the Mounted Police;
Fought it there to a standstill long after hope was gone;
Grinned through his bitter anguish, fought without let or cease,
Suffering, straining, striving, stumbling, struggling on.

The freshness, the freedom, the farmness—
O God! how I'm stuck on it all.

The winter! the brightness that blinds you,
The white land locked tight as a drum,
The cold fear that follows and finds you,
The silence that bludgeons you dumb.
The snows that are older than history,
The woods where the weird shadows slant;
The stillness, the moonlight, the mystery,
I've bade 'em good-bye—but I can't.

There's a land where the mountains are nameless,
And the rivers all run God knows where;
There are lives that are erring and aimless,
And deaths that just hang by a hair;
There are hardships that nobody reckons;
There are valleys's unpeopled and still;
There's a land—oh, it beckons and beckons,
And I want to go back—and I will.

They're making my money diminish;
I'm sick of the taste of champagne.
Thank God! when I'm skinned to a finish
I'll pike to the Yukon again.
I'll fight—and you bet it's no sham-fight;
It's hell!—but I've been there before;
And it's better than this by a damsite—
So me for the Yukon once more.

There's gold, and it's haunting and haunting;
It's luring me on as of old;
Yet it isn't the gold that I'm wanting,
So much as just finding the gold.
It's the great, big, broad land 'way up yonder,
It's the forests where silence has lease;
It's the beauty that thrills me with wonder,
It's the stillness that fills me with peace.

The Call of the Wild

Have you gazed on naked grandeur where there's nothing else to gaze on,
Set pieces and drop-curtain scenes galore,

Big mountains heaved to heaven, which the blinding sunsets blazon,
Black canyons where the rapids rip and roar?

Have you swept the visioned valley with the green stream streaking through it,
Searched the Vastness for a something you have lost?

Have you strung your soul to silence? Then for God's sake go and do it;
Hear the challenge, learn the lesson, pay the cost.

Have you wandered in the wilderness, the sage-brush desolation,
The bunch-grass levels where the cattle graze?

Have you whistled bits of rag-time at the end of all creation,
And learned to know the desert's little ways?

Have you camped upon the foothills, have you galloped o'er the ranges,
Have you roamed the arid sun-lands through and through?

Have you chummed up with the mesa? Do you know its moods and changes?
Then listen to the wild—it's calling you.

Have you known the Great White Silence, not a snow-gemmed twig a-quiver?
(Eternal truths that shame our soothing lies.)

Have you broken trail on snowshoes? mused your huskies up the river,
Dared the unknown, led the way, and clutched the prize?

Have you marked the map's void spaces, mingled with the mongrel races,
Felt the savage strength of brute in every throw?

And though grim as hell the worst is, can you round it off with curses?
Then hearken to the wild—it's wanting you.

Have you suffered, starved, and triumphed grovelled, down, yet grasped at glory,
Grown bigger in the bigness of the whole?

"Done things" just for the doing, letting babblers tell the story,
Seeing through the nice veneer the naked soul?

Have you seen God in His splendours, heard the text that nature renders?
(You'll never hear it in the family pew.)

The simple things, the true things, the silent men who do things—
Then listen to the wild—it's calling you.

They have cradled you in custom, they have primed you with their preaching,
They have soaked you in convention through and through;

They have put you in a showcase; you're a credit to their teaching—
But can't you hear the wild?—it's calling you.

Let us probe the silent places, let us seek what luck betide us;
Let us journey to a lonely land I know.

Through the ice-rifts the river smoked and bubbled and hissed;
Behind was a trail fresh broken, in front the untrodden snow.

Ahead of the dogs ploughed Clancy, haloed by streaming breath;
Through peril of open water, through ache of insensate cold;

Up rivers wantonly winding in a land affianced to death,
Till he came to a cowering cabin on the banks of the Nordenscold.

Then Clancy loosed his revolver, and he strode through the open door;

And there was the man he sought for, crouching beside the fire;
The hair of his beard was singing, the frost on his back was hoar,

And ever he crooned and chanted as if he never would tire:— *"I panned and
I panned in the shiny sand,
and I sniped on the river bar";*

*But I know, I know, that it's down below
that the golden treasures are;*

*So I'll wait and wait till the floods abate,
and I'll sink a shaft once more,*

*And I'd like to bet that I'll go home yet
with a brass band playing before."*

He was nigh as thin as a siver, and he whined like a Moose-hide cur;
So Clancy clothed him and nursed him as a mother nurses a child;

Lifted him on the toboggan, wrapped him in robes of fur,
Then with the dogs sore straining started to face the Wild.

Said the Wild, "I will crush this Clancy, so fearless and insolent;

For him will I loose my fury, and blind and buffed and beate;
Pile up my snows to stay him; then when his strength is spent,

Leap on him from my ambush and crush him under my feet.

"Him will I ring with my silence, compass him with my cold;

Closer and closer clutch him unto mine icy breast;
Buffer him with my blizzards, deep in my snows enfold,

Claiming his life as my tribute, giving my wolves the rest."

Clancy crawled through the vastness; o'er him the hate of the Wild;

Full on his face fell the blizzard; cheering his huskies he ran;
Fighting, fierce-hearted and tireless, snows that drifted and piled,

With ever and ever behind him singing the crazy man.

"Sing hey, sing ho, for the ice and snow,

And a heart that's ever merry;

Let us trim and square with a lover's care

(For why should a man be sorry?)