

The Song of the Mouth-Organ

(With apologies to the singer of the "Song of the Banjo")

I'm a homely little bit of tin and bone;

I'm beloved by the Legion of the Lost;

I haven't got a "vox humana" tone,

And a dime or two will satisfy my cost.

I don't attempt your high-falutin' flights;

I am more or less uncertain on the key;

But I tell you, boys, there's lots and lots of nights

When you've taken mighty comfort out of me.

I weigh an ounce or two, and I'm so small

You can pack me in the pocket of your vest;

And when at night so wearily you crawl

Into your bunk and stretch your limbs to rest,

You take me out and play me soft and low,

The simple songs that trouble your heartstrings;

The tunes you used to fancy long ago,

Before you made a rotten mess of things.

Then a dreamy look will come into your eyes,

And you break off in the middle of a note;

And then, with just the dreariest of sighs,

You drop me in the pocket of your coat.

But somehow I have bucked you up a bit;

And, as you turn around and face the wall,

You don't feel quite so spineless and unfit—

You're not so bad a fellow after all.

Do you recollect the bitter Arctic night;

Your camp beside the canyon on the trail;

Your tent a tiny square of orange light;

The moon above consumptive-like and pale;

Your supper cooked, your little stove aglow;

You tired, but snug and happy as a child?

Then 'twas "Turkey in the Straw" till your lips were nearly raw,

And you hurled your bold defiance at the Wild.

Do you recollect the flashing, lashing pain;

The gulf of humid blackness overhead;

The lightning making rapiers of the rain;

The cattle-horns like candles of the dead

You sitting on your bronco there alone,

In your slicker, saddle-sore and sick with cold?

Do you think the silent herd did not hear "The Mocking Bird",

Or relish "Silver Threads among the Gold"?

Do you recollect the wild Magellan coast;

The head-winds and the icy, roaring seas;

The nights you thought that everything was lost;

The days you toiled in water to your knees;

The frozen ratlines shrieking in the gale;

The hissing steeples and gulfs of livid foam:

When you cheered your messmates nine with "Ben Bolt" and "Clementine",

And "Dixie Land" and "Seeing Nellie Home"?

Let the jammy banjo voice the Younger Son,

Who waits for his remittance to arrive;

I represent the grimy, gritty one,

Who sweats his bones to keep himself alive;

Who's up against the real thing from his birth;

Whose heritage is hard and bitter toil;

I voice the weary, smeary ones of earth,

The helots of the sea and of the soil.

I'm the Steinway of strange mischief and mischance;

I'm the Stradivarius of blank defeat;

In the down-world, when the devil leads the dance,

I am simply and symbolically meet;

I'm the irrepressive spirit of mankind;

I'm the small boy playing knuckle down with Death;

At the end of all things known, where God's rubbish-heap is thrown,

I shrill impudent triumph at a breath.

I'm a humble little bit of tin and horn;

I'm a byword, I'm a plaything, I'm a jest;

The virtuoso looks on me with scorn;

But there's times when I am better than the best.

Ask the stoker and the sailor of the sea;

Ask the mucker and the hewer of the pine;

Ask the herder of the plain, ask the gleaner of the grain—

There's a lowly, loving kingdom—and it's mine.

The Trail of Ninety-Eight

I.

Gold! We leapt from our benches. Gold! We sprang from our stools.

Gold! We wheeled in the furrow, fired with the faith of fools.

Fearless, unfound, unfitted, far from the night and the cold,

Heard we the clarion summons, followed the master-lure—Gold!

Men from the sands of the Sunland; men from the woods of the West;

Men from the farms and the cities, into the Northland we pressed.

Graybeards and striplings and women, good men and bad men and bold,

Leaving our homes and our loved ones, crying exultantly—"Gold!"

Never was seen such an army, pitiful, futile, unfit;

Never was seen such a spirit, manifold courage and grit.

Never has been such a cohort under one banner unrolled

As surged to the ragged-edged Arctic, urged by the arch-tempter—Gold.

"Farewell!" we cried to our dearests; little we cared for their tears.

"Farewell!" we cried to the humdrum and the yoke of the hiring years;

Just like a pack of school-boys, and the big crowd cheered us good-bye.

Never were hearts so uplifted, never were hopes so high.

The spectral shores flitted past us, and every whirl of the screw

Hurled us nearer to fortune, and ever we planned what we'd do—

Do with the gold when we got it—big, shiny nuggets like plums,

There in the sand of the river, gouging it out with our thumbs.

And one man wanted a castle, another a racing stud;

A third would cruise in a palace yacht like a red-necked prince of blood.

And so we dreamed and we vaunted, millionaires to a man,

Leaping to wealth in our visions long ere the trail began.

II.

We landed in wind-swept Skagway. We joined the weltering mass,

Clamoring over their outfits, waiting to climb the Pass.

We tightened our girths and our pack-straps; we linked on the Human Chain,

Struggling up to the summit, where every step was a pain.

Gone was the joy of our faces, grim and haggard and pale;

The heedless mirth of the shipboard was changed to the care of the trail.

We flung ourselves in the struggle, packing our grub in relays,

Step by step to the summit in the bale of the winter days.

A proud, white, alien presence, a glittering galley of light,
Confident-poised, triumphant, freighted with hopes and fears.

I look as one looks on a vision; I see it pulsating by;

I glimpse joy-radiant faces; I hear the thresh of the wheel.

Hoof-like my heart beats a moment; then silence swoops from the sky.

Darkness is piled upon darkness. God only knows how I feel.

Maybe you've seen me sometimes; maybe you've pitied me then—

The lonely waif of the wood-camp, here by my cabin door.

Some day you'll look and see not; futile and outcast of men,

I shall be far from your pity, resting forevermore.

My life was a problem in ciphers, a weary and profitless sum.

Slipsfoot and stupid I worked it, dazed by negation and doubt.

Ciphers the total confronts me. Oh, Death, with thy moistened thumb,

Scoop like a petulant schoolboy, wipe me forever out!

The Wood-Cutter

*The sky is like an envelope,
One of those blue official things;
And, scaling it, to mock our hope,
The moon, a silver wafer, clings.
What shall we find when death gives leave
To read—our sentence or reprieve?*

I'm holding it down on God's scrap-pile, up on the fag-end of earth;
O'er me a menace of mountains, a river that grits at my feet;
Face to face with my soul-self, weighing my life at its worth;
Wondering what I was made for, here in my last retreat.

Last! Ah, yes, it's the finish. Have ever you heard a man cry?
(Sobs that rake him and rend him, right from the base of the chest.)
That's how I've cried, oh, so often; and now that my tears are dry,
I sit in the desolate quiet and wait for the infinite Rest.

Rest! Well, it's restful around me; it's quiet clean to the core.
The mountains pose in their ermine, in golden the hills are clad;
The big, blue, silt-freighted Yukon seethes by my cabin door,
And I think it's only the river that keeps me from going mad.
By day it's a ruthless monster, a callous, insatiate thing,
With oily bubble and eddy, with sudden swirling of breast;
By night it's a writhing Titan, sullenly murmuring,
Ever and ever goaded, and ever crying for rest.

It cries for its human tribute, but me it will never drown.
I've learned the lore of my river; my river obeys me well.
I hew and I launch my cordwood, and raft it to Dawson town,
Where wood means wine and women, and, incidentally, hell.
Hell and the anguish thereafter. Here as I sit alone
I'd give the life I have left me to lighten some load of care:
(The bitterest part of the bitter is being denied to atone;
Lips that have mocked at Heaven lend themselves ill to prayer.)

*Impotent as a beetle pierced on the needle of Fate;
A wretch in a cosmic death-cell, peaks for my prison bars;
Whelmed by a world stupendous, lonely and listless I wait,
Drowned in a sea of silence, strewn with confetti of stars.*

See! from far up the valley a rapier pierces the night,
The white search-ray of a steamer. Swiftly, serenely it nears,

Floundering deep in the sump-holes, stumbling out again;
Crying with cold and weakness, crazy with fear and pain.
Then from the depths of our travail, ere our spirits were broke,
Grim, tenacious and savage, the lust of the trail awoke.

"Klondike or bust!" rang the slogan; every man for his own.
Oh, how we flogged the horses, staggering skin and bone!
Oh, how we cursed their weakness, anguish they could not tell,
Breaking their hearts in our passion, lashing them on till they fell!
For grub meant gold to our thinking, and all that could walk must pack;
The sheep for the shambles stumbled, each with a load on its back;
And even the swine were burdened, and grunted and squealed and rolled,
And men went mad in the moment, huskily clamoring "Gold!"

Oh, we were brutes and devils, goaded by lust and fear!
Our eyes were strained to the summit; the weaklings dropped to the rear,
Falling in heaps by the trail-side, heart-broken, limp and wan;
But the gaps closed up in an instant, and heedless the chain went on.

Never will I forget it, there on the mountain face,
Antlike, men with their burdens, clinging in icy space;
Dogged, determined and dauntless, cruel and callous and cold,
Cursing, blaspheming, reviling, and ever that battle-cry—"Gold!"

Thus rolled we, the army of fortune, in hunger and hope and despair,
Till glacier, mountain and forest vanished, and, radiantly fair,
There at our feet lay Lake Bennett, and down to its welcome we ran:
The trail of the land was over, the trail of the water began.

III.

We built our boats and we launched them. Never has been such a fleet;
A packing-case for a bottom, a mackinaw for a sheet.
Shapeless, grotesque, lopsided, flimsy, makeshift and crude,
Each man after his fashion builded as best he could.

Each man worked like a demon, as prow to rudder we raced;
The winds of the Wild cried "Hurry!" the voice of the waters, "Haste!"
We hated those driving before us; we dreaded those pressing behind;
We cursed the slow current that bore us; we prayed to the God of the wind.
Spring! and the hillsides flourished, vivid in jewelled green;
Spring! and our hearts' blood nourished envy and hatred and spleen.
Little cared we for the Spring-birth; much cared we to get on—
Snake in the Great White Channel, stake ere the best be gone.

The greed of the gold possessed us; pity and love were forgot;
 Covetous visions obsessed us; brother with brother fought.
 Partner with partner wrangled, each one claiming his due;
 Wrangled and halved their outfits, sawing their boats in two.

Thuswise we voyaged Lake Bennett, Tagish, then Windy Arm,
 Sinister, savage and baleful, boding us hate and harm.
 Many a scow was shattered there on that iron shore;
 Many a heart was broken straining at sweep and oar.

We roused Lake Marsh with a chorus, we drifted many a mile;
 There was the canyon before us—cave-like its dark defile;
 The shores swept faster and faster; the river narrowed to wrath;
 Waters that hissed disaster reared upright in our path.

Beneath us the green tumult churning, above us the cavernous gloom;
 Around us, swift twisting and turning, the black, sullen walls of a tomb.
 We spun like a chip in a mill-race; our hearts hammered under the test;
 Then—oh, the relief on each chill face!—we soared into sunlight and rest.

Hand sought for hand on the instant. Cried we, "Our troubles are o'er!"
 Then, like a rumble of thunder, heard we a canorous roar.
 Leaping and boiling and seething, saw we a cauldron afume;
 There was the rage of the rapids, there was the menace of doom.

The river springs like a racer, sweeps through a gash in the rock;
 Burs at the boulder-ribbed bottom, staggers and rears at the shock;
 Leaps like a terrified monster, writhes in its fury and pain;
 Then with the crash of a demon springs to the onset again.

Dared we that ravening terror, heard we its din in our ears;
 Called on the Gods of our fathers, juggled forlorn with our fears;
 Sank to our waists in its fury, tossed to the sky like a fleecy;
 Then, when our dread was the greatest, crashed into safety and peace.

But what of the others that followed, losing their boats by the score?
 Well could we see them and hear them, strung down that desolate shore.
 What of the poor souls that perished? Little of them shall be said—
 On to the Golden Valley, pause not to bury the dead.

Then there were days of drifting, breezes soft as a sigh;
 Night trailed her robe of jewels over the floor of the sky.
 The moonlit stream was a python, silver, sinuous, vast,
 That writhed on a shroud of velvet—well, it was done at last.

There were the tents of Dawson, there the scar of the slide;

Eager the thrill of hope,
 Awful the chill of fear.

I'm thinking out aloud;
 I reckon that is bad;
 (The snow is like a shroud)—
 Maybe I'm going mad.
 Say! wouldn't that be tough?
 This awful hush that hugs
 And chokes one is enough
 To make a man go "bugs".

There's not a thing to do;
 I cannot sleep at night;
 No wonder I'm so blue;
 Oh, for a friendly fight!
 The din and rush of strife;
 A music-hall aglow;
 A crowd, a city, life—

Dear God, I miss it so!

Here, you have moped enough!
 Brace up and play the game!
 But say, it's awful tough—

Day after day the same
 (I've said that twice, I bet).
 Well, there's not much to say.
 I wish I had a pet,
 Or something I could play.

Cheer up! don't get so glum
 And sick of everything;
 The worst is yet to come;
 God help you till the Spring.
 God shield you from the Fear;
 Teach you to laugh, not moan.
 Hal' hal' it sounds so queer—
 Alone, alone, alone!

The Telegraph Operator

I will not wash my face;

I will not brush my hair;

I "pig" around the place—

There's nobody to care.

Nothing but rock and tree;

Nothing but wood and stone,

Oh, God, it's hell to be

Alone, alone, alone!

Snow-peaks and deep-gashed draws

Corral me in a ring.

I feel as if I was

The only living thing

On all this blighted earth;

And so I frowst and shrink,

And crouching by my hearth

I hear the thoughts I think.

I think of all I miss—

The boys I used to know;

The girls I used to kiss;

The coin I used to blow;

The bars I used to haunt;

The racket and the row;

The beers I didn't want

(I wish I had 'em now).

Day after day the same,

Only a little worse;

No one to grouch or blame—

Oh, for a loving curse!

Oh, in the night I fear,

Haunted by nameless things,

Just for a voice to cheer,

Just for a hand that clings!

Fainly as from a star

Voices come o'er the line;

Voices of ghosts afar,

Not in this world of mine;

Lives in whose loom I grope;

Words in whose web I hear

Swiftly we poled o'er the shallows, swiftly leapt o'er the side.

Fires fringed the mouth of Bonanza; sunset gilded the dome;

The rest of the trail was over—thank God, thank God, we were Home!

The Ballad of Gum-Boot Ben

*He was an old prospector with a vision bleared and dim.
He asked me for a grubstake, and the same I gave to him.
He hinted of a hidden trove, and when I made so bold
To question his veracity, this is the tale he told.*

"I do not seek the copper streak, nor yet the yellow dust;
I am not fain for sake of gain to irk the frozen crust;
Let fellows gross find gilded dross, far other is my mark;
Oh, gentle youth, this is the truth—I go to seek the Ark.

"I prospected the Pelly bed, I prospected the White;
The Nordenscöld for love of gold I piked from morn till night;
Afär and near for many a year I led the wild stampede,
Until I guessed that all my quest was vanity and greed.

"Then came I to a land I knew no man had ever seen,
A haggard land, forlornly spanned by mountains lank and lean;
The nitchies said 'twas full of dread, of smoke and fiery breath,
And no man dare put foot in there for fear of pain and death.

"But I was made all unafraid, so, careless and alone,
Day after day I made my way into that land unknown;
Night after night by camp-fire light I crouched in lonely thought;
Oh, gentle youth, this is the truth—I knew not what I sought.

"I rose at dawn; I wandered on. 'Tis somewhat fine and grand
To be alone and hold your own in God's vast awesome land;
Come woe or weal, 'tis fine to feel a hundred miles between
The trails you dare and pathways where the feet of men have been.

"And so it fell on me a spell of wander-lust was cast.
The land was still and strange and chill, and cavernous and vast;
And sad and dead, and dull as lead, the valleys sought the snows;
And far and wide on every side the ashen peaks arose.

"The moon was like a silent spike that pierced the sky right through;
The small stars popped and winked and hopped in vastitudes of blue;
And unto me for company came creatures of the shade,
And formed in rings and whispered things that made me half afraid.

"And strange though be, 'twas borne on me that land had lived of old,
And men had crept and slain and slept where now they toiled for gold;
Through jungles dim the mammoth grim had sought the oozy fen,
And on his track, all bent of back, had crawled the hairy men.

I'll soar to their ken like a comet. They'll see me with never a stain;
But will they reform me?—far from it. We pay for our pleasure with pain;
But the dog will return to his vomit, the hog to his wallow again.

I've chewed on the rind of creation, and bitter I've tasted the same;
Stacked up against hell and damnation, I've managed to stay in the game;
I've had my moments of sorrow; I've had my seasons of shame.

That's past; when one's nature's a cracked one,
it's too jolly hard to mend.

So long as the road is level, so long as I've cash to spend.
I'm bound to go to the devil, and it's all the same in the end.

The bugle is sounding for stables; the men troop off through the gloom;
An orderly laying the tables sings in the bright mess-room.
(I'll wash in the prison bucket, and brush with the prison broom.)

I'll lie in my cell and listen; I'll wish that I couldn't hear
The laugh and the chaff of the fellows swigging the canteen beer;
The nasal tone of the gramophone playing "The Bandolier".

And it seems to me, though it's misty, that night of the flowing bowl,
That the man who potlatched the whiskey and landed me into the hole
Was Grubbe, that Unmerciful Bounder, Grubbe, of the City Patrol.

The Black Sheep

"The aristocratic ne'er-do-well in Canada frequently finds his way into the ranks of the Royal North-West Mounted Police." –Extract.

Hark to the ewe that bore him:

"What has muddled the strain?

Never his brothers before him

Showed the hint of a stain."

Hark to the tups and wethers;

Hark to the old gray ram:

"We're all of us white, but he's black as night,

And he'll never be worth a damn."

I'm up on the bally wood-pile at the back of the barracks yard;

"A damned disgrace to the force, sir", with a comrade standing guard;

Making the bluff I'm busy, doing my six months hard.

"Six months hard and dismissed, sir." Isn't that rather hell?

And all because of the liquor laws and the wiles of a native belle—

Some "hooch" I gave to a siwash brave who swore that he wouldn't tell.

At least they SAY that I did it. It's so in the town report.

All that I can recall is a night of revel and sport,

When I woke with a "head" in the guard-room,

and they dragged me sick into court.

And the O. C. said: "You are guilty", and I said never a word;

For, hang it, you see I couldn't—I didn't know WHAT had occurred,

And, under the circumstances, denial would be absurd.

But the one that cooked my bacon was Grubbe, of the City Patrol.

He fagged for my room at Etom, and didn't I devil his soul!

And now he is getting even, landing me down in the hole.

Plugging away on the wood-pile; doing chores round the square.

There goes an officer's lady—gives me a haughty stare—

Me that's an earl's own nephew—that is the hardest to bear.

To think of the poor old mater awaiting her prodigal son.

Tho' I broke her heart with my folly, I was always the white-haired one.

(That fatted calf that they're cooking will surely be overdone.)

I'll go back and yarn to the Bishop; I'll dance with the village belle;

I'll hand round tea to the ladies, and everything will be well.

Where I have been won't matter; what I have seen I won't tell.

"And furthermore, strange deeds of yore in this dead place were done.

They haunted me, as wild and free I roamed from sun to sun;

Until I came where sudden flame uplit a terraced height,

A regnant peak that seemed to seek the coronal of night.

"I scaled the peak; my heart was weak, yet on and on I pressed.

Skyward I strained until I gained its dazzling silver crest;

And there I found, with all around a world supine and stark,

Swept clean of snow, a flat plateau, and on it lay—the Ark.

"Yes, there, I knew, by two and two the beasts did disembark,

And so in haste I ran and traced in letters on the Ark

My human name—Ben Smith's the same. And now I want to float

A syndicate to haul and freight to town that noble boat."

I met him later in a bar and made a gay remark

Arent an ancient miner and an option on the Ark.

He gazed at me reproachfully, as only toppers can;

But what he said I can't repeat—he was a bad old man.

Clancy of the Mounted Police

In the little Crimson Manual it's written plain and clear

That who would wear the scarlet coat shall say good-bye to fear;

Shall be a guardian of the right, a sleuth-hound of the trail—

In the little Crimson Manual there's no such word as "fail"—

Shall follow on though heavens fall, or hell's top-turrets freeze,

Half round the world, if need there be, on bleeding hands and knees.

It's duty, duty, first and last, the Crimson Manual saith;

The Scarlet Rider makes reply: "It's duty—to the death."

And so they sweep the solitudes, free men from all the earth;

And so they sentinel the woods, the wilds that know their worth;

And so they scour the startled plains and mock at hurt and pain,

And read their Crimson Manual, and find their duty plain.

Knights of the lists of unrenown, born of the frontier's need,

Discainful of the spoken word, exultant in the deed;

Unconscious heroes of the waste, proud players of the game,

Props of the power behind the throne, upholders of the name:

For thus the Great White Chief hath said, "In all my lands be peace",

And to maintain his word he gave his West the Scarlet Police.

Livid-lipped was the valley, still as the grave of God;

Misty shadows of mountain thinned into mists of cloud;

Copselike and stark was the land, with a quiet that crushed and awed,

And the stars of the weird sub-arctic glimmered over its shroud.

Deep in the trench of the valley two men stationed the Post,

Seymour and Clancy the reckless, fresh from the long patrol;

Seymour, the sergeant, and Clancy—Clancy who made his boast

He could cinch like a bronco the Northland,

and cling to the prongs of the Pole.

Two lone men on detachment, standing for law on the trail;

Undismayed in the vastness, wise with the wisdom of old—

Out of the night hailed a half-breed telling a pitiful tale,

"White man starving and crazy on the banks of the Nordenscold."

Up sprang the red-haired Clancy, lean and eager of eye;

Loaded the long toboggan, strapped each dog at its post;

Whirled his lash at the leader; then, with a whoop and a cry,

Into the Great White Silence faded away like a ghost.

The clouds were a misty shadow, the hills were a shadowy mist;

Sunless, voiceless and pulseless, the day was a dream of woe;

And when in lands of dreariness and dread

You seek the last lone frontier, far beyond your frontiers now,

You will find the old prospector, silent, dead.

You will find a tattered tent-pole with a ragged robe below it;

You will find a rusted gold-pan on the sod;

You will find the claim I'm seeking,

with my bones as stakes to show it;

But I've sought the last Recorder, and He's—God.