

The Cremation of Sam McGee

Robert Service (1874-1958)

*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'erhead were dancing heel and toe,
He turned 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 moan:
"It's the cursèd cold, and it's got right hold, till 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 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;
And 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 hearkened 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 I lit the boiler fire;
Some coal I found that was lying around, and I 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, and 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 came 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 cool 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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THE DYING COWBOY

As I rode out by Tom Sherman's bar-room,
As I rode out so early one day,
'Twas there I espied a handsome young cowboy,
All dressed in white linen, all clothed for the grave.

'I see by your outfit that you are a cowboy,'
These words he did say as I boldly stepped by,
'Come sit down beside me and hear my sad story,
For I'm shot in the breast and I know I must die.

'Then beat your drum slowly and play your fife lowly,
And play the dead march as you carry me along,
And take me to the graveyard and throw the sod o'er me,
For I'm a young cowboy and I know I've done wrong.

"Twas once in the saddle I used to go dashing,
'Twas once in the saddle I used to go gay,
But I first took to drinking and then to card-playing,
Got shot in the body and I'm dying today.

'Let sixteen gamblers come handle my coffin,
Let sixteen young cowboys come sing me a song,
Take me to the green valley and lay a sod o'er me,
For I'm a poor cowboy and I know I've done wrong.

'Go bring me back a cup of cool water
To cool my parched lips,' this cowboy then said.
Before I returned, his soul had departed
And gone to his Maker - the cowboy lay dead.

We swung our ropes slowly and rattled our spurs lowly,
And gave a wild whoop as we carried him on,
For we all loved our comrade, so brave, young and
handsome,
We all loved our comrade, although he'd done wrong.

Maiden-Savin' Sam

In the wild ol' West there lived a man,
A man by the title of Maiden-Savin' Sam.
Saving maidens was his hobby and he did it very well,
Bragged about his victories—great stories did he tell.

Sam, Sam, Maiden-Savin' Sam,

Greatest maiden saver in all of the land.

Saved all the short ones, all the tall ones, too,

With his hat on his head and spurs on his shoes.

“One day a herd of buffalo crossed the land,

Biggest gaw-darned herd in all the land!

I was a-watchin' them, watchin' was I,”

Sam began the story, with a twinkle in his eye.

Sam, Sam, Maiden-Savin' Sam...

“Now as I was watchin'—‘Uh-oh,’ says I,

‘In the herd’s way a pretty maiden does lie.

She’s gonna get trampled,’ I thought to myself.

‘No longer will she be in such radiatin’ health.’”

Sam, Sam, Maiden-Savin' Sam...

“I looked all around, and what did I see?

A big, shiny pitchfork just a-waitin’ for me.

I picked it up, threw it far and wide,

And now them buffalo are buffalo hide.”

Sam, Sam, Maiden-Savin' Sam...

Sam now lies deep in his grave,

Chased one too many bears into a cave.

But never we’ll forget him—he was the very best

Of all the maiden savers in all of the West!

—Jenny Ellison
Webb School of Knoxville
Knoxville, Tennessee

