

Literary Notes

FROM a Yukon poet we have reason to expect strong food. Mr. Robert Service in "Songs of a Sourdough," gives us such fare as this conventional age seldom receives. Mr. Jack London for a time revelled in Alaska and the Yukon, serving the world with fiction that was ice-bound and decalogue-less. But Mr. London mistakes brutality for strength and raw meat for properly-prepared nourishment. Mr. Service makes no such blunder, although his work is not adapted for recitation at a pink tea. The first lines of "The Law of the Yukon" will recall to most readers certain verses which an Anglo-Indian author has written of the Jungle, yet the Canadian song is no imitation.

"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."

These, it will be admitted, are lines almost savage in their intensity but they bring us face to face with a land of stern necessity, where only the superlatively fit survive. The description of the failures in that searching land is given with a painful realism that spares few of the hideous features in a picture of ruin.

"Gnawing the black crust of failure,
searching the pit of despair,
Crooking the toe in the trigger, trying
to patter a prayer;
... Steeped in the slime at the bottom,
dead to a decent world,
Lost, 'mid the human flotsam, far on
the frontier hurled."

No exhortation, no sermon could go deeper than the last defiance of "The Parson's Son," and again the reader links this lyric of the lost with the despairing "Gentlemen Rankers." A barracks in India or a shack where it's sixty below—the theme is the same.

"The Spell of the Yukon" is a poem full of the freshness that is close to earth, whether that earth be frost-bound or the yielding mould of a kindlier country.

"The summer—no sweeter was ever;
The sunshiny woods all a-thrill
The greyling a-leap in the river,
The bighorn asleep on the hill.
The strong life that never knows harshness;
The wilds where the caribou call;
The freshness, the freedom, the farness—
O God! how I'm stuck on it all."

"Unforgotten" is a dainty snatch of melody that shows our Yukon writer in a gentler mood. In fact, these "Songs of a Sourdough" reveal an original and versatile writer who has seen and interpreted a life that, whatever it may be, is neither dull nor uninspiring. Toronto: William Briggs.

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