

S E L E C T E D
P O E M S B Y
ROBERT W. SERVICE
WITH SOME ACCOUNT OF
HIS LIFE AND EXPERIENCES

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ADELPHI TERRACE, LONDON

1917

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ROBERT W. SERVICE :
THE CANADIAN KIPLING
AUTHOR, BANKER AND SOLDIER

SOME time ago there appeared at a local picture-house a remarkably fine picture entitled "The Shooting of Dan M'Grew." The picture was a source of great pleasure to all who knew the life and work of Robert W. Service, but the writer was considerably surprised at the number of people who had not read the wonderful "Songs of a Sourdough," from which the story of Dan M'Grew was taken.

The story of Robert W. Service is as strange and romantic as that of any

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wandering Briton who has ever sought his fortunes in our colonies. Born in Preston, Lancashire, nearly forty years ago, he spent his childhood and youth in Glasgow. His parents early apprenticed him to a bank, and there he stayed till, in his own words, he reached the years of indiscretion and the routine of office began to pall. "I seemed to see," he writes, "an endless vista of drab days and myself growing bald and paunchy in a halo of respectability. I rebelled. I wanted colour, action, change, excitement, the thrill of not knowing what's round the corner. So it came about that at twenty-one, to the horror of my parents, I kicked over the traces and precipitated myself violently into the Wild West."

GOLD!

The future Kipling of Canada, as was most meet, travelled steerage, and landed

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at Vancouver with exactly five dollars in his pocket. His first job was to pick stones off a field designed for turnips. With bewildering rapidity a series of other jobs followed. He chopped down trees, he drove reaping machines through fields of golden grain, he shovelled earth in the dripping blackness of a tunnel, he tramped Mexico with a blanket on his back and not a sou in his pocket. Then he sought a situation in a bank, and from that moment his whole fortunes were changed. When gold was discovered at Yukon he was sent there by the bank.

Life at Yukon, by its extraordinary virility and colour, made a great impression on young Service. There was excitement enough even for him in the summer time. But in the winter things began to go drab again, and he began to take long solitary walks, and here our poet was born. He had read tales

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without number of the North, he had read Kipling every line, and he was in the midst of a wonderful wilderness of snow and mountain. It was little wonder, therefore, that with poetry in his soul, he began spontaneously to versify Kipling fashion. But the poet did not think much of his verse, for as each piece was finished he pitched it aside, and when he got tired of amusing himself in this way the product of his spate of verse-writing lay neglected in an old trunk for over a year. Then he happened to land upon them and to read some of them over to a friend, who—candid friend!—said they were “not so bad,” and that he might have some of them printed to hand round as a Christmas card to his friends.

SOLDIER.

The idea struck Mr. Service as rather foolish. However, on the strength of a bonus of a hundred dollars he got from

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the bank, he sent the stuff to a publisher, and told him to go ahead and have it printed at his own expense. Very soon a reply came from the publisher saying he liked "the stuff," and would be glad to publish it on a royalty basis. To the young banker this looked like a bit of a story book, and what followed was still more like romance than reality. "Songs of a Sourdough" reached its seventh edition before the day of publication, and so it came about that a grubbing bank clerk rubbed his eyes and wondered at the absurd turn of events, and stared unbelievably at cheques of four figures, where before he had stared equally unbelievably at bills representing his debts.

Since then he has wandered about Europe. At the time of the Balkan war he was in Turkey, then he drifted to Paris, where he settled and started writing fiction with as much success as he had written verse. Then came the

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big event that has changed the face of the world and the hearts of the people in it. Mr. Service immediately joined the Anglo-American Ambulance Corps as a chauffeur. He is now with the second French Army Corps at the front. It is his duty to take the wounded right from the trenches, dodging the shells as best he can. He has to sleep in his boots to the lullaby of the Jack Johnson, to live on army rations despite dyspepsia, and to receive as wages one halfpenny per day.

FAME.

But between the days of the bank clerk at Yukon and the days of the motor man in France lies the span of Mr. Service's rise to fame. "Songs of a Sourdough" have gone round the world. Mr. T. Fisher Unwin, the London publisher, is selling the 33rd impression, and little wonder when we recall that wonderful poem, "The Spell

AUTHOR, BANKER & SOLDIER

of the Yukon," and many others like "The Heart of the Sourdough," "The Call of the Wild," "The Law of the Yukon," "Men That Don't Fit in," and "The Shooting of Dan M'Grew." So with his second book, "Ballads of a Cheechako," and his third, "Rhymes of a Rolling Stone." They are all full of the same spirit—the craving of the pioneer as truly as ever it was told by Whitman.

He sings the song of the trail. He is the spokesman of all who are true to the trail. Ever on and ever upwards. Not disheartened, but spurred to greater effort by seeking and not finding. Robert W. Service is essentially a poet of to-day—one of the best and most manly of our poets. There is strength and beauty and idealism in his verse, just as there is strength and beauty and idealism in life. He is never morbid, never pathological. He sees the sordid and

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sinister side of life as Kipling sees it—squarely and honestly as a man. There is no hectic flush, no craving for shaded lights. The great glory of the snow-clad, unattainable peaks, with the glittering sun lighting them up with the magnificence of day, sinking then till the hills are shrouded in the cloak of night—the matchless grandeur of nature in her pristine beauty is upon him. This he has set into verse, and this has made his poetry memorable. The lesson the wilds taught him he has taught to all who read his works—it is better to strive than to attain.—*From THE DUNDEE ADVERTISER, 29.3.16.*

THE SPELL OF THE YUKON

*I wanted the gold, and I sought it ;
I scabbled 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 ;*

THE SPELL OF THE YUKON

*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 waltow
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 ;*

THE SPELL OF THE YUKON

*The freshness, the freedom, the farness—
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
 siant;
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 unpeopled and still;
There's a land—oh, it beckons and beckons,
And I want to go back—and I will.*

THE SPELL OF THE YUKON

*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 its 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.*

FROM SONGS OF A SOURDOUGH.

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POEMS OF THE FROZEN NORTH.

THE FOOL

*"But it isn't playing the game," he said,
And he slammed his books away;
"The Latin and Greek I've got in my head
Will do for a duller day."
"Rubbish!" I cried; "the bugle's call
Isn't for lads from school."
D'ye think he'd listen! Oh, not at all:
So I called him a fool, a fool.*

*Now there's his dog by his empty bed,
And the flute he used to play,
And his favourite bat . . . but Dick he's
dead,
Somewhere in France, they say:
Dick with his rapture of song and sun,
Dick of the yellow hair,
Dicky whose life had but begun,
Carrion-cold out there.*

*Look at his prizes all in a row
Surely a hint of fame.*

THE FOOL

*Now he's finished with, nothing to show:
Doesn't it seem a shame!*

*Look from the window! All you see
Was to be his one day:*

*Forest and furrow, lawn and lea,
And he goes and chucks it away.*

*Chucks it away to die in the dark.
Somebody saw him fall,*

*Part of him mud, part of him blood,
The rest of him—not at all.*

*And yet I'll bet he was never afraid,
And he went as the best of 'em go,
For his hand was clenched on his broken
blade,
And his face was turned to the foe.*

*And I called him a fool . . . Oh, blind
was I!*

And the cup of my grief's abrim.

Will glory o' England ever die

So long as we've lads like him?

So long as we've fond and fearless fools,

Who, spurning fortune and fame,

THE FOOL

*Turn out with the rallying cry of their schools,
Just bent on playing the game.*

*A fool! Ah no! He was more than wise.
His was the proudest part.
He died with the glory of faith in his eyes,
And the glory of love in his heart.
And though there's never a grave to tell,
Nor a cross to mark his fall,
Thank God! we know that he "batted well"
In the last great Game of all.*

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"Robert Service has
become by undisputed
right the laureate of
the B.E.F."

—*Daily Chronicle.*

THE LURE OF LITTLE VOICES

*There's a cry from out the Loneliness—Oh,
listen, Honey, listen!*

*Do you hear it, do you fear it, you're
a-holding of me so?*

*You're a-sobbing in your sleep, dear, and your
lashes, how they glisten—*

*Do you hear the Little Voices all a-begging
me to go?*

*All a-begging me to leave you. Day and
night they're pleading, praying,*

*On the North-wind, on the West-wind,
from the peak and from the plain;*

*Night and day they never leave me—do you
know what they are saying?*

*“He was ours before you got him, and we
want him once again.”*

THE LURE OF LITTLE VOICES

*Yes, they're wanting me, they're haunting me,
the awful lonely places;*

*They're whining and they're whimpering
as if each had a soul;*

*They're calling from the wilderness, the vast
and god-like spaces,*

*The stark and sullen solitudes that sentinel
the Pole.*

*They miss my little camp-fires, ever brightly,
bravely gleaming*

*In the womb of desolation where was never
man before;*

*And comradeless I sought them, lion-hearted,
loving, dreaming;*

*And they hailed me as a comrade, and they
loved me evermore.*

*And now they're all a-crying, and it's no use
me denying:*

*The spell of them is on me and I'm helpless
as a child;*

*My heart is aching, aching, but I hear them
sleeping, waking;*

*It's the Lure of Little Voices, it's the
mandate of the Wild.*

THE LURE OF LITTLE VOICES

*I'm afraid to tell you, Honey, I can take no
bitter leaving;*

*But softly in the sleep-time from your love
I'll steal away.*

*Oh, it's cruel, dearie, cruel, and it's God
knows how I'm grieving;*

*But His Loneliness is calling and He knows
I must obey.*

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“Mr. Service certainly sees the Northern wilderness through the eyes of the man into whose soul it has entered.”—*Morning Post*.

MY FRIENDS

*The man above was a murderer, the man
below was a thief;
And I lay there in the bunk between, ailing
beyond belief;
A weary armful of skin and bone, wasted
with pain and grief.*

*My feet were froze, and the lifeless toes were
purple and green and gray;
The little flesh that clung to my bones, you
could punch it in holes like clay;
The skin on my gums was a sullen black, and
slowly peeling away.*

*I was sure enough in a direful fix, and often
I wondered why
They did not take the chance that was left
and leave me alone to die,
Or finish me off with a dose of dope—so
utterly lost was I.*

MY FRIENDS

*But no; they brewed me the green-spruce
tea, and nursed me there like a child;
And the homicide he was good to me, and
bathed my sores and smiled;
And the thief he starved that I might be fed,
and his eyes were kind and mild.*

*Yet they were woeefully wicked men, and often
at night in pain
I heard the murderer speak of his deed and
dream it over again;
I heard the poor thief sorrowing for the dead
self he had slain.*

*I'll never forget that bitter dawn, so evil,
askew and gray,
When they wrapped me round in the skins of
beasts and they bore me to a sleigh,
And we started out with the nearest post an
hundred miles away.*

*I'll never forget the trail they broke, with its
tense, unuttered woe;
And the crunch, crunch, crunch, as their snow-
shoes sank through the crust of the hollow
snow;*

MY FRIENDS

*And my breath would fail, and every beat of
my heart was like a blow.*

*And oftentimes I would die the death, yet
wake up to life anew;*

*The sun would be all ablaze on the waste, and
the sky a blighting blue,*

*And the tears would rise in my snow-blind
eyes and furrow my cheeks with dew.*

*And the camps we made when their strength
outplayed and the day was pinched and
wan;*

*And oh, the joy of that blessed halt, and how
I did dread the dawn;*

*And how I hated the weary men who rose and
dragged me on.*

*And oh, how I begged to rest, to rest—the
snow was so sweet a shroud;*

*And oh, how I cried when they urged me on,
cried and cursed them aloud;*

*Yet on they strained, all racked and pained,
and sorely their backs were bowed.*

MY FRIENDS

*And then it was all like a lurid dream, and
I prayed for a swift release
From the ruthless ones who would not leave me
to die alone in peace;
Till I wakened up and I found myself at the
post of the Mounted Police.*

*And there was my friend the murderer, and
there was my friend the thief,
With bracelets of steel around their wrists, and
wicked beyond belief:
But when they come to God's judgment seat—
may I be allowed the brief.*

FROM BALLADS OF A CHEECHAKO.

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“Mr. Service has a fine gift of writing good, swinging verse which takes you along at a gallop.”—*The Observer*.

THE QUITTER

*When you're lost in the Wild, and you're
scared as a child,*

*And Death looks you bang in the eye,
And you're sore as a boil, it's according to
Hoyle*

To cock your revolver and . . . die.

*'But the Code of a Man says: "Fight all
you can,"*

And self-dissolution is barred.

In hunger and woe, oh, it's easy to blow . . .

*It's the hell-served-for-breakfast that's
hard.*

*"You're sick of the game!" Well, now,
that's a shame.*

*You're young and you're brave and you're
bright.*

*"You've had a raw deal!" I know—but
don't squeal,*

Buck up, do your damndest, and fight.

THE QUITTER

*It's the plugging away that will win you the day,
So don't be a piker, old pard!*

*Just draw on your grit; it's so easy to quit:
It's the keeping-your-chin-up that's hard.*

*It's easy to cry that you're beaten—and die;
It's easy to crawfish and crawl;*

*But to fight and to fight when hope's out of
sight—*

*Why, that's the best game of them all!
And though you come out of each gruelling bout
All broken and beaten and scarred,
Just have one more try—it's dead easy to die,
It's the keeping-on-living that's hard.*

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“To read the poems of Robert Service is to conceive a secret shame of one's carpet slippers and easy chair by the fire.”—*Scots Pictorial*.

GRAND-PÈRE

*And so when he reached my bed
The General made a stand:
"My brave young fellow," he said,
 "I would shake your hand."*

*So I lifted my arm, the right,
With never a hand at all;
Only a stump, a sight
 Fit to appal.*

*"Well, well. Now that's too bad!
That's sorrowful luck," he said;
"But there! You give me, my lad,
 The left instead."*

*So from under the blanket's rim
I raised and showed him the other,
A snag as ugly and grim
 As its ugly brother.*

GRAND-PÈRE

*He looked at each jagged wrist;
He looked but he did not speak;
And then he bent down and kissed
Me on either cheek.*

*You wonder now I don't mind
I had'nt a hand to offer. . . .
They tell me (you know I'm blind)
"Twas Grand-père Joffre.*

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