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# North West ROMANCES



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## A SNOWLAND CLASSIC

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# The Ballad of the Northern Lights

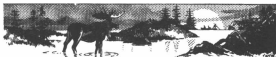
*By Robert Service*

*One of the Down and Out—that's me. Stare at me well, ay, stare!  
Stare and shrink—say! you wouldn't think that I was a millionaire.  
Look at my face, it's crimped and gonged—one of them death-mask things;  
Don't seem the sort of man, do I, as might be the pal of kings!  
Slouching along in smelly rags, a bleary-eyed, no-good bum;  
A knight of the hollow needle, pard, sprung from the sodden slum.  
Look ~~me~~ all over from head to foot; how much would you think I was worth?  
A dollar? a dime? a nickel? Why, I'M THE WEALTHIEST MAN ON EARTH.*

*No, don't you think that I'm off my base. You'll sing a different tune  
If only you'll let me spin my yarn. Come over to this saloon;  
Wet my throat—it's dry as chalk, and seeing as how it's true  
I'll tell of the howling wilderness and the haggard Arctic heights,  
Of a reckless vow that I made, and how I STAKED THE NORTHERN LIGHTS.*

*Remember the year of the Big Stampede and the trail of Ninety-eight,  
When the eyes of the world were turned to the North, and the hearts of men slate;  
Hearts of the old dare-devil breed thrilled at the wondrous strike,*

From *BALLADS OF A COPPERHEAD* BY ROBERT SERVICE  
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*And to every man who could hold a pan came the message, "Up and hike!"  
Well, I was there with the best of them, and I knew I would not fail.  
You wouldn't believe it to see me now; but wait till you've heard my tale.*

*You've read of the trail of Ninety-eight, but its woe no man may tell;  
It was all of a piece and a whole yard wide, and the name of the brand was "Hell."  
We heard the call and we staked our all; we were plungers playing blind,  
And no man cared how his neighbor fared, and no man looked behind;  
For a ruthless greed was born of need, and the weakling went to the wall,  
And a curse might avail where a prayer would fail, and the gold lust crazed us all.*

*Bold were we, and they called us three the "Unholy Trinity";  
There was Ole Olson—the Sailor Swede, and the Dago Kid and me.  
We were the discards of the pack, the forelopers of Unrest,  
Reckless spirits of fierce revolt in the ferment of the West.  
We were bound to win and we revelled in the hardships of the way.  
We staked our ground and our hopes were crowned, and we hoisted out the pay.  
We were rich in a day beyond our dreams, it was gold from the grass-roots down;  
But we weren't used to such sudden wealth, and there was the siren town.  
We were crude and careless frontiersmen, with much in us of the beast,  
We could bear the famine worthily, but we lost our heads at the feast  
The town looked mighty bright to us, with a bunch of dirt to spend,  
And nothing was half too good them days, and everyone was our friend.  
Wining meant more than mining then, and life was a dizzy whirl,  
Gambling and dropping chunks of gold down the neck of a dance-hall girl;  
Till we went clean mad, it seems to me, and we squandered our last poke,  
And we sold our claim, and we found ourselves one bitter morning—broke.*

*The Dago Kid he dreamed a dream of his mother's aunt who died—  
In the dawn-light dim she came to him, and she stood by his bedside,  
And she said: "Go forth to the highest North till a lonely trail ye find;  
Follow it far and trust your star, and fortune will be kind."  
But I jered at him, and then there came the Sailor Swede to me,  
And he said: "I dreamed of my sister's son who croaked at the age of three.*



*From the herded dead he sneaked and said: "Seek you an Arctic trail;  
 'Tis pale and grim by the Polar rim, but seek and ye shall not fail."  
 And lo! that night I too did dream of my mother's sister's son,  
 And he said to me: "By the Arctic Sea there's a treasure to be won.  
 Follow and follow a lone moose trail, till you come to a valley grim,  
 On the slope of the lonely watershed that borders the Polar trim."  
 Then I woke my pals, and soft we swore by the mystic Silver Flail,  
 'Twas the hand of Fate, and to-morrow straight we would seek the lone moose trail.*

*We watched the groaning ice wrench free, crash on with a hollow din;  
 Men of the wilderness were we, freed from the taint of sin.  
 The mighty river snatched us up and it bore us swift along;  
 The days were bright, and the morning light was sweet with jewelled song.  
 We poled and lined up nameless streams, portaged o'er hill and plain;  
 We burnt our boat to save the nails, and built our boat again;  
 We guessed and groped, North, ever North, with many a twist and turn;  
 We saw ablaze in the deathless days the splendid sunsets burn.  
 O'er roundless lakes where the grayling makes a rush at the clumsy fly;  
 By bluffs so steep that the hard-hit sheep falls sheer from out the sky;  
 By filled pools where the bull moose cools and wallows in huge content;  
 By rocky lairs where the pig-eyed bears peered at our tiny tent.  
 Through the black canyon's angry foam we hurried to dreamy bars,  
 And round in a ring the dog-muzzed peaks bayed to the mocking stars.  
 Spring and summer and autumn went: the sky had a fallow gleam,  
 Yet North and ever North we pressed to the land of our Golden Dream.*

*So we came at last to a tundra vast and dark and grim and lone;  
 And there was the little lone moose trail, and we knew it for our own.  
 By muskeg hollow and nigger-head it wandered endlessly;  
 Sorry of heart and sore of foot, weary men were we.  
 The short-lived sun had a leaden glare and the darkness came too soon,  
 And stationed there with a solemn stare was the pinched, anæmic moon.  
 Silence and silvers solitude till it made you dumbly shrink,  
 And you thought to hear with an outward ear the things you ought to think.*

*Oh, it was wild and weird and woe, and ever in camp o' nights  
We would watch and watch the silver dance of the mystic Northern Lights,  
And soft they danced from the Polar sky and swept in primrose haze;  
And swift they pranced with their silver feet, and pierced with a binding blaze.  
They danced a cotillon in the sky; they were rose and silver shod;  
It was not good for the eyes of man—'twas a sight for the eyes of God.  
It made us mad and strange and sad, and the gold wherof we dreamed  
Was all forgot, and our only thought was of the lights that gleamed.*

*Oh, the tundra spongy it was golden brown, and some was a bright blood-red,  
And the reindeer moss gleamed here and there like the tombstones of the dead,  
And in and out and around about the little trail ran clear,  
And we hated it with a deadly hate and we feared with a deadly fear,  
And the skies of night were alive with light, with a throbbing thrilling flame;  
Amber and rose and violet, opal and gold it came.  
It swept the sky like a giant scythe, it quivered back to a wedge;  
Argently bright, it cleft the night with a wavy golden edge.  
Pennants of silver waved and streamed, lary banners unfurled;  
Sudden splendors of sabres gleamed, lightning javelins were hurled.  
There in our awe we crouched and saw with our wild, uplifted eyes  
Charge and retire the hosts of fire in the battlefield of the skies.*

*But all things come to an end at last, and the muskety melted away,  
And frowning down to bar our path a muddle of mountains lay,  
And a gorge sheered up in granite walls, and the moose trail crept betwixt;  
'Twas as if the earth had gaped too far and her stony jaws were fat.  
Then the winter fell with a sudden swoop, and the heavy clouds sagged low,  
And earth and sky were blotted out in a whirl of driving snow.  
We were climbing up a glacier in the neck of a mountain pass,  
When the Dago Kid slipped down and fell into a deep crevasse.  
When we got him out one leg hung limp, and his brow was wreathed with pain,  
And he says: " 'Tis badly broken, boys, and I'll never walk again.  
It's death for all if ye linger here, and that's no cursed lie;  
Go on, go on while the trail is good, and leave me down to die."*

*He raved and swore, but we tended him with our uncooth, clumsy care.  
The camp-fire gleamed and he gazed and dreamed with a fixed and curious stare,  
Then all at once he grabbed my gun and he put it to his head,  
And he says: "I'll fix it for you, boys"—them are the words he said.*

*So we seized him up in a canvas sack and we slung him to a tree;  
And the stars like needles stabbed our eyes, and woeeful men were we.  
And on we went on our woeeful way, wrapped in a daze of dream,  
And the Northern Lights in the crystal nights came forth with a mystic gleam.  
They danced and they danced the devil-dance over the naked snow;  
And soft they rolled like a tide upshoaled with a ceaseless ebb and flow.  
They rippled green with a wondrous sheen, they fluttered out like a fan;  
They spread with a blaze of rose-pink rays never yet seen of man.  
They writhed like a brood of angry snakes, hissing and sulphur pale;  
Then swift they changed to a dragon vast, lashing a cloven tail.  
It seemed to us, as we gazed aloft with an everlasting stare,  
The sky was a pit of bale and dread, and a monster revelled there.*

*We climbed the rise of a hog-back range that was desolate and drear,  
When the Sailor Swede had a crazy fit, and he got to talking queer.  
He talked of his home in Oregon and the peach trees all in bloom,  
And the fern head-high, and the topaz sky, and the forest's scented gloom.  
He talked of the sins of his misspent life, and then he seemed to brood,  
And I watched him there like a fox a hare, for I knew it was not good.  
And rare enough in the dim down-light I missed him from the tent,  
And a fresh trail broke through the crusted snow, and I knew not where it went.  
But I followed it o'er the seamless waste, and I found him at shut of day,  
Naked there as a new-born babe—so I left him where he lay.*

*Day after day was sinister, and I fought fierce-eyed despair,  
And I clung to life, and I struggled on, I knew not why nor where.  
I packed my grub in short relays, and I covered down in my tent,  
And the world around was purged of sound like a frozen continent.  
Day after day was dark as death, but ever and ever at nights,  
With a brilliancy that grew and grew, blazed up the Northern Lights.*

*They rolled around with a soundless sound like softly braided silk;  
They poured into the bowl of the sky with the gentle flow of milk,  
In eager, pulsing violet their wheeling chariots came,  
Or they poised above the Polar rim like a coronal of flame.  
From depths of darkness fathomless their lancing rays were hurled,  
Like the all-combining search-lights of the navies of the world.*

*There on the roof-pole of the world as one bewitched I gazed,  
And howled and growled like a beast as the awful splendors blazed.  
My eyes were scared, yet thrilled I peered through the parka hood nigh blind;  
But I staggered on to the lights that shone, and never I looked behind.*

*There is a mountain round and low that lies by the Polar rim,  
And I climbed its height in a whirl of light, and I peered o'er its jagged brim;  
And there in a crater deep and vast, unguined, unguessed of man,  
The mystery of the Arctic world was flashed into my ken.  
For there those poor dim eyes of mine beheld the sight of sights—  
The hollow ring was the source and spring of the mystic Northern Lights.*

*Then I staked that place from crown to base, and I hit the homeward trail.  
Ah, God! it was good, though my eyes were blurred, and I crawled like a sickly mail.  
In the vast white world where the silent sky communes with the silent snow,  
In hunger and cold and misery I wandered to and fro.  
But the Lord took pity on my pain, and He led me to the sea,  
And some ice-bound whalers heard my moan, and they fed and sheltered me,  
They fed the feeble scarecrow thing that stumbled out of the wild  
With the ravaged face of a mask of death and the wandering wits of a child—  
A craven, cowering bag of bones that once had been a man.  
They tended me and they brought me back to the world, and here I am.*

*Some say that the Northern Lights are the glare of the Arctic ice and snow;  
And some that it's electricity, and nobody seems to know.  
But I'll tell you now—and if I lie, may my lips be stricken dumb—  
It's a MINE, a mine of the precious stuff that men call radium.  
It's a million dollars a pound, they say, and there's tons and tons in sight.  
You can see it gleam in a golden stream in the latitudes of night.  
And it's mine, all mine—and say! if you have a hundred planks to spare,  
I'll let you have the chance of your life, I'll sell you a quarter share.  
You turn it down? Well, I'll make it ten seeing as you are my friend.  
Nothing doing? Say! don't be hard—have you got a dollar to lend?  
Just a dollar to help me out, I know you'll treat me white;  
I'll do as much for you some day . . . God bless you, sir; goodnight.*