Chapter 11
The Cremation of Sam McGee
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by Robert W. Service
Synopsis

Sam McGee, from Tennessee, finds himself in the far reaches of the frozen north in the Yukon Territory. He is traveling with his good friend Cap, and together they are mushing their way along the Dawson Trail. On Christmas Day, the brutal cold seemed beyond the endurance of Sam who knew he would not survive the rigors of this trip. With thoughts of his balmy Southern home and a fantasy about a final warm resting place, Sam asks Cap to swear that he will cremate Sam's last remains. Through fear and grave physical hardship, Cap tries to fulfill this final obligation to his friend. But no one could believe what finally happens to the corpse of Sam McGee.

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Courage Rises in the Face of Adversity

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 you 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 a moan:
"It's the cursed 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 curse 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—O 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 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 he 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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   By the men who toil for gold;
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Point of View—Discussion Questions:
1. Define a hero. Establish criteria for any person, man or woman, whom you would consider to be a heroic character.

   Possible Answer:
   In an extraordinary article entitled “Do Teens Hunger for Heroes?” in Seventeen magazine, July 1981, the author, Ron Powers, establishes the following standards for a true hero: • “A hero must take risks • A hero must take the risk voluntarily • His or her actions must benefit the world at large • Heroes redeem us”

   (Redemption is changing one’s behavior in response to a positive ideal.)

2. Cap was the name of Sam McGee’s friend who, despite his desperate fear, kept his word to Sam. He cremated Sam on the Alice May, a derelict barge which was tied up on Lake Lebarge. According to the standards for a hero (which you have established), do you believe that Cap was courageous or heroic? Was he simply driven by fear, a motivation which is less noble? Does he fit the criteria for a hero? Why or why not?

3. We have called many people in popular culture heroes. But now, having defined a hero in more limited terms than in ordinary usage, our standards may have changed. Why does a sports figure, a person in entertainment, a politician, or a prisoner of war not qualify as a hero? Keep referring back to Ron Powers’ definition as the acid test.

4. Does an act of courage or heroism always imply a physical act? Explain intellectual acts of courage. (Standing up publicly for an ideal or something you believe in, expressing an unpopular opinion, telling the truth—though you may be punished for it—or acts of civil disobedience may all be intellectual acts of courage.)
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Improvisation—Role-Play Variations:

1. Weary and exhausted after his strange trip home, Cap shares the details of his adventures on the Dawson Trail with his comrades. They ask some very specific questions because they don’t believe he was capable of such perseverance in the face of such odds. They especially don’t believe the fantasy that Sam McGee expressed his gratitude to Cap from the heart of the fiery crematorium on the barge. Cap responds to the direct questions of his friends and tries vigorously to defend his reputation. Re-create this scene.

2. Cap returns to camp under a cloud. By his own admission he left the body of Sam McGee in the deep snow where there was not even the need to dig a grave. He is criticized harshly by his comrades for not bringing the body back. His defense is that it was senseless to risk his own life just to bring back a dead body. He thinks that such an attitude is illogical. He believes that dragging the body back would have been a meaningless ritual. Some of his friends agree with his logic, others disagree. Assume a point of view for the role play. Generalize two other situations. For example, should a soldier on a field of battle risk his life to rescue the body of a dead comrade in arms? A boy or a girl can assume the role of Cap.

3. Assume the role of a real male or female hero in history. Be prepared to answer questions from the audience about your selfless act. Since self-preservation is the ultimate law of existence, how can it be that you were prepared to sacrifice yourself for the betterment of humankind?

(Prometheus in Greek mythology would be such a hero. He stole fire from the gods to give to humans. He wanted to elevate them from the level of animals and in doing so improve the quality of their lives. The name Prometheus means “forethought,” which indicates that he knew fully that he would be punished eternally by the great god Zeus for having committed this act, but this did not deter him.)*

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Writing Suggestions:
1. In the poem, Cap expresses his reactions throughout his ordeal as follows: "It was icy cold but the hot sweat rolled down my cheeks," "I wrestled with grisly fear," "I was sick with dread." From your own experience or what you have heard, what do you think happens to a person physically in an emergency situation which makes it possible for that person to perform with power and speed? Write a description of your own personal reactions in a stressful situation which you have experienced. How does fright sometimes have a reverse reaction which does not produce courage or galvanize action?

2. Recall a heroic act which you have heard or read about currently or in history. Describe the circumstances. From the accounts of the situation, were there any clues about the reasons the hero would risk life and limb to help someone in trouble who may even have been a stranger? Do you believe such courage can be explained logically? Consider intellectual acts of courage as well.

3. Since "The Cremation of Sam McGee" was set in the frozen north, it would be intriguing to research the adventurous Susan H. Butcher, dog kennel owner and famous "musher" who was, by 1990, a three-time winner of the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race in Alaska. The route of the race is from Anchorage to Nome—a formidable, tough 1600 miles of bitter, bone-chilling cold. If you could interview Ms. Butcher, what questions would you be anxious to ask this powerful woman who has met this Herculean challenge? For starters, you may want to know that she was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on December 26, 1954.
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Student Comment

Characters: Sam McGee from Tennessee
Cap, his friend
The men at camp

In a paragraph express your feelings about any aspect of this story which you liked or disliked. How would you have changed it?

Alternative: Now that the story has been discussed, explain the proverb above from your point of view.