

Hank Snow, Ballad Of Basmphemous Bill

I took a contract to bury the body of blasphemous Bill MacKie
Whenever wherever or whatsoever the manner of death he die
Whether he die in the light o' day or under the peak-faced moon
In cabin or dance-hall camp or dive mucklucks or patent shoon

On velvet tundra or virgin peak by glacier drift or draw
In muskeg hollow or canyon gloom by avalanche fang or claw
By battle murder or sudden wealth by pestilence hooch or lead
I swore on the Book I would follow and look till I found my tombless dead

For Bill was a dainty kind of cuss and his mind was mighty sot
On a dinky patch with flowers and grass in a civilized boneyard lot
And where he died or how he died it didn't matter a damn
So long as he had a grave with frills and a tombstone epigram

So I promised him and he paid the price in good cheechako coin
Which the same I blew in that very night down in the Tenderloin
Then I painted a three-foot slab of pine here lies poor Bill MacKie
And I hung it up on my cabin wall and waited for Bill to die

Years passed away and at last one day came a squaw with a story strange
Of a long-deserted line of traps way back of the Bighorn range
Of a little hut by the great divide and a white man stiff and still
Lying there by his lonesome self and I figured it must be Bill

So I thought of the contract I'd made with him and I took down from the shelf
The swell black box with the silver plate he'd picked out for hisself
And I packed it full of grub and hooch and I slung it on the sleigh
Then I harnessed up my team of dogs and was off at dawn of day

You know what it's like in the Yukon wild when it's sixty-nine below
When the ice-worms wriggle their purple heads through the crust of the pale blue snow
When the pine trees crack like little guns in the silence of the wood
And the icicles hang down like tusks under the parka hood

When the stove-pipe smoke breaks sudden off and the sky is weirdly lit
And the careless feel of a bit of steel burns like a red-hot spit
When the mercury is a frozen ball and the frost-fiend stalks to kill
Well it was just like that that day when I set out to look for Bill

Oh the awful hush that seemed to crush me down on every hand
As I blundered blind with a trail to find through that blank and bitter land
Half dazed half crazed in the winter wild with its grim heartbraking woes
And the ruthless strife for a grip on life that only the sourdough knows

North by the compass North I pressed river and peak and plain
Passed like a dream I slept to lose and I waked to dream again
River and plain and mighty peak and who could stand unawed
As their summits blazed he could stand undazed at the foot of the throne of God

North aye North through a land accurst shunned by the scouring brutes
And all I heard was my own harsh word and the whine of the malamutes
Till at last I came to a cabin squat built in the side of a hill
And I burst in the door and there on the floor frozen to death lay Bill

Ice white ice like a winding-sheet sheathing each smoke-grimed wall
Ice on the stove-pipe ice on the bed ice gleaming over all
Sparkling ice on the dead man's chest glittering ice in his hair
Ice on his fingers ice in his heart ice in his glassy stare

Hard as a log and trussed like a frog with his arms and legs outspread
I gazed at the coffin I'd brought for him and I gazed at the gruesome dead
And at last I spoke Bill liked his joke but still goldarn his eyes
A man had ought to consider his mates in the way he goes and dies

Have you ever stood in an Arctic hut in the shadow of the Pole
With a little coffin six by three and a grief you can't control
Have you ever sat by a frozen corpse that looks at you with a grin
And that seems to say you may try all day but you'll never jam me in

I'm not a man of the quitting kind but I never felt so blue
As I sat there gazing at that stiff and studying what I'd do
Then I rose and I kicked off the husky dogs that were nosing round about
And I lit a roaring fire in the stove and I started to thaw Bill out

Well I thawed and I thawed for thirteen days but it didn't seem no good
His arms and his legs stuck out like pegs as if they were made of wood
Till at last I said it ain't no use he's froze too hard to thaw
He's obstinate and he won't lie straight so I guess I got to saw

So I sawed off poor Bill's arms and legs and I laid him snug and straight
In the little coffin he picked hisself with the dinky silver plate
And I came nigh near to shedding a tear as I nailed him safely down
Then I stowed him away in my Yukon sleigh and I started back to town

So I buried him as the contract was in a narrow grave and deep
And there he's waiting the Great Clean-up when the the Judgment sluice-heads sweep
And I smoke my pipe and I meditate in the light of the Midnight Sun
And sometimes I wonder if they was the awful things I done

And as I sit and the parson talks expounding of the Law
I often think of poor old Bill and how hard he was to saw