

The Ballad of the Ice-Worm Cocktail

by Robert W. Service

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To Dawson Town came Percy Brown from London on the Thames.
A pane of glass was in his eye, and stockings on his sterns.
Upon the shoulder of his coat a leather pad he wore,
To rest his deadly rifle when it wasn't seeking gore;
The which it must have often been, for Major Percy Brown,
According to his story was a hunter of renown,
Who in the Murrumbidgee wilds had stalked the kangaroo
And killed the cassowary on the plains of Timbuctoo.
And now the Arctic fox he meant to follow to its lair,
And it was also his intent to beard the Artic hare...
Which facts concerning Major Brown I merely tell because
I fain would have you know him for the Nimrod that he was.

Now Skipper Grey and Deacon White were sitting in the shack,
And sampling of the whisky that pertained to Sheriff Black.
Said Skipper Grey: "I want to say a word about this Brown:
The piker's sticking out his chest as if he owned the town."
Said Sheriff Black: "he has no lack of frigorated cheek;
He called himself a Sourdough when he'd just been here a week."
Said Deacon White: "Methinks you're right, and so I have a plan
By which I hope to prove to-night the mettle of the man.
Just meet me where the hooch-bird sings, and though our ways be rude
We'll make a proper Sourdough of this Piccadilly dude."

Within the Malamute Saloon were gathered all the gang;
The fun was fast and furious, and the loud hooch-bird sang.
In fact the night's hilarity had almost reached its crown,
When into its storm-centre breezed the gallant Major Brown.
And at the apparition, with its glass eye and plus-fours,
From fifty alcoholic throats responded fifty roars.
With shouts of stark amazement and with whoops of sheer delight,
They surged around the stranger, but the first was Deacon White.
"We welcome you," he cried aloud, "to this the Great White Land.
The Artic Brotherhood is proud to grip you by the hand.
Yea, sportsman of the bull-dog breed, from trails of far away,
To Yukoners this is indeed a memorable day.

Our jubilation to express, vocabularies fail...
Boys, hail the Great Cheechako!" And the boys responded: "Hail!"
"And now," continued Deacon White to blushing Major Brown,
"Behold assembled the delight and cream of Dawson Town,
And one ambition fills their hearts and makes their bosoms glow --
They want to make you, honoured sir, a bony feed Sourdough.
The same, some say, is one who's seen the Yukon ice go out,
But most profound authorities the definition doubt,
And to the genial notion of this meeting, Major Brown,
A Sourdough is a guy who drinks ... an ice-worm cocktail down."

"By Gad!" responded Major Brown, "that's ripping, don't you know.
I've always felt I'd like to be a certified Sourdough.
And though I haven't any doubt your Winter's awf'ly nice,
Mayfair, I fear, may miss me ere the break-up of your ice.
Yet (pray excuse my ignorance of matters such as these)
A cocktail I can understand -- but what's an ice-worm, please?"
Said Deacon White: "It is not strange that you should fail to know,
Since ice-worms are peculiar to the Mountain of Blue Snow.
Within the Polar rim it rears, a solitary peak,
And in the smoke of early Spring (a spectacle unique)
Like flame it leaps upon the sight and thrills you through and through,
For though its cone is piercing white, its base is blazing blue.
Yet all is clear as you draw near -- for coyly peering out
Are hosts and hosts of tiny worms, each indigo of snout.
And as no nourishment they find, to keep themselves alive
They masticate each other's tails, till just the Tough survive.
Yet on this stern and Spartan fare so-rapidly they grow,
That some attain six inches by the melting of the snow.
Then when the tundra glows to green and nigger heads appear,
They burrow down and are not seen until another year."

"A toughish yarn," laughed Major Brown, "as well you may admit.
I'd like to see this little beast before I swallow it."
"'Tis easy done," said Deacon White, "Ho! Barman, haste and bring
Us forth some pickled ice-worms of the vintage of last Spring."
But sadly still was Barman Bill, then sighed as one bereft:
"There's been a run on cocktails, Boss; there ain't an ice-worm left.
Yet wait . . . By gosh! it seems to me that some of extra size
Were picked and put away to show the scientific guys."

Then deeply in a drawer he sought, and there he found a jar,
The which with due and proper pride he put upon the bar;
And in it, wreathed in queasy rings, or rolled into a ball,
A score of grey and greasy things, were drowned in alcohol.
Their bellies were a bilious blue, their eyes a bulbous red;
Their back were grey, and gross were they, and hideous of head.
And when with gusto and a fork the barman speared one out,
It must have gone four inches from its tail-tip to its snout.
Cried Deacon White with deep delight: "Say, isn't that a beaut?"
"I think it is," sniffed Major Brown, "a most disgustin' brute.
Its very sight gives me the pip. I'll bet my bally hat,
You're only spoofin' me, old chap. You'll never swallow that."
"The hell I won't!" said Deacon White. "Hey! Bill, that fellows fine.
Fix up four ice-worm cocktails, and just put that wop in mine."

So Barman Bill got busy, and with sacerdotal air
His art's supreme achievement he proceeded to prepare.
His silver cups, like sickle moon, went waving to and fro,
And four celestial cocktails soon were shining in a row.
And in the starry depths of each, artistically piled,
A fat and juicy ice-worm raised its mottled mug and smiled.
Then closer pressed the peering crown, suspended was the fun,
As Skipper Grey in courteous way said: "Stranger, please take one."
But with a gesture of disgust the Major shook his head.
"You can't bluff me. You'll never drink that gastly thing," he said.
"You'll see all right," said Deacon White, and held his cocktail high,
Till its ice-worm seemed to wiggle, and to wink a wicked eye.
Then Skipper Grey and Sheriff Black each lifted up a glass,
While through the tense and quiet crown a tremor seemed to pass.
"Drink, Stranger, drink," boomed Deacon White. "proclaim you're of the best,
A doughty Sourdough who has passed the Ice-worm Cocktail Test."
And at these words, with all eyes fixed on gaping Major Brown,
Like a libation to the gods, each dashed his cocktail down.
The Major gasped with horror as the trio smacked their lips.
He twiddled at his eye-glass with unsteady finger-tips.
Into his starry cocktail with a look of woe he peered,
And its ice-worm, to his thinking, most incontinently leered.
Yet on him were a hundred eyes, though no one spoke aloud,
For hushed with expectation was the waiting, watching crowd.
The Major's fumbling hand went forth -- the gang prepared to cheer;

The Major's falt'ring hand went back, the mob prepared to jeer,
The Major gripped his gleaming glass and laid it to his lips,
And as despairfully he took some nauseated sips,
From out its coil of crapulence the ice-worm raised its head,
Its muzzle was a murky blue, its eyes a ruby red.
And then a roughneck bellowed forth: "This stiff comes here and struts,
As if he bought the blasted North -- jest let him show his guts."
And with a roar the mob proclaimed: "Cheechako, Major Brown,
Reveal that you're of Sourdough stuff, and drink your cocktail down."

The Major took another look, then quickly closed his eyes,
For even as he raised his glass he felt his gorge arise.
Aye, even though his sight was sealed, in fancy he could see
That grey and greasy thing that reared and sneered in mockery.
Yet round him ringed the callous crowd -- and how they seemed to gloat!
It must be done . . . He swallowed hard . . . The brute was at his throat.
He choked. . . he gulped . . . Thank God! at last he'd got the horror down.
Then from the crowd went up a roar: "Hooray for Sourdough Brown!"
With shouts they raised him shoulder high, and gave a rousing cheer,
But though they praised him to the sky the Major did not hear.
Amid their demonstrative glee delight he seemed to lack;
Indeed it almost seemed that he -- was "keeping something back."
A clammy sweat was on his brow, and pallid as a sheet:
"I feel I must be going now," he'd plaintively repeat.
Aye, though with drinks and smokes galore, they tempted him to stay,
With sudden bolt he gained the door, and made his get-away.

And ere next night his story was the talk of Dawson Town,
But gone and 'reft of glory was the wrathful Major Brown;
For that ice-worm (so they told him) of such formidable size
Was -- a stick of stained spaghetti with two red ink spots for eyes.