

The Phantom of the Trail

*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...*
Robert Service in THE CREMATION OF SAM MCGEE

I was in no special hurry for I'd found no cause to worry,
Though I had another hundred miles to go;
For my sled was loaded lightly and the northern lights shone brightly
As I mushed along the trails of ice and snow.
But the polar lights stopped shining and the sled dogs started whining,
And refused to do another lick of work;
So I built a fire for cooking and I used its light for looking,
But could find no reason why the dogs would shirk.

I began to lose my temper when the beasts began to whimper,
And appeared to lose all gumption and desire;
Till my lead dog gave a shiver when the rest began to quiver
As they crept a little closer to the fire.
Then above their anxious growling I could hear a baleful howling,
And my heart was filled with terror at the wails;
For I'd heard of phantoms lurking where the icy winds were working
On the drifts that form along the arctic trails.

Every second stretched out longer as the doleful sound grew stronger,
While I racked my tortured mind for some escape;
And my courage cracked a trifle as I realized that my rifle
Would be worthless on a target without shape.
Still, I held the weapon ready though it seemed a bit unsteady,
Pointed where I thought the creature might have been;
While I hunkered on my bedding and resolved to give up sledding,
If I ever made it back to town again.

Then, although the snow was blowing, I perceived some vague eyes glowing
Just beyond the fire-lit circle of my camp;
And all evil seemed to haunt me as the creature crouched to taunt me,
While the furrows in my brow grew cold and damp.
When it sprang I pulled the trigger but its leering face grew bigger
As the bullets passed right through its vapid zone;
But somehow it did not hit me and it never scratched or bit me,
For it had no useful body of its own.

Now I fought it for a minute but there was no substance in it-
Nothing I could grapple with to get control;
And because it had no boundary it was able to surround me,
As it struggled to displace my human soul.
Then in hopeless desperation born of utter consternation,
I was blurting out a rather stifled prayer;
When a Finger seemed to poke me and its kindly touch awoke me
From my nightmare from the regions of despair.