

MAPLE-LEAF SONGS

Frederick Niven
1917

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MAPLE-LEAF SONGS

BY

FREDERICK NIVEN

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DEDICATED TO

MY FRIENDS IN THE CANADIAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCES

PREFATORY NOTE

One of the greatest pleasures that has ever come to me is that occasioned by hearing of how certain verses I wrote about "B.C." are treasured by many members of the Canadian Expeditionary Force in France. Copies of *The Daily News* (in which they originally appeared) were evidently sent, in no small numbers, to the boys at the Front by friends who had seen them. But the copies of the *News*, thus sent, were not sufficient for the demand that arose. It has made me tremendously grateful to the Muse for inspiring, and to *The Daily News* for publishing these verses, to hear of how they were copied by hand and by aid of typewriters; to hear of a slightly whimsical episode too: of how a man who had made, on demand, several copies for comrades (he having a typewriter and an office) was one day handed a folded sheet by an old acquaintance (last seen in the Yellow Head Pass, and not again till that meeting in France), and told to read. On unfolding the proffered paper, which had clearly seen much service, and by its hue had been "up the line," he found it was one of the typescripts he had made weeks before, in an attempt to supply the demand of the boys who, caring for the Dominion, and for verse, cared for these. Such enquiries as could be answered in the midst of the main business that occupies everybody in Europe to-day brought

evidence to the delighted transcriber that his tattered copy had passed through many hands. And I would care little for Canada, or for the verses I write, if, on hearing of this incident, I was not at least equally pleased.

Repeated requests from members of the Canadian Contingent for copies of "B.C." (crowned with that jolly episode) have caused me to gather these verses together into a little book. The day of the broadsheet is not our day, and "B.C." must go out with others, instead of alone. I trust that some of the others—two of which, I have to state, with acknowledgments to the Editors in question, have already been in print: "Inventory" in *The New Statesman* (London), and "River Saint Lawrence" in *The University Magazine* (Montreal)—may also find friends.

F.N.

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MAPLE-LEAF SONGS

"B.C."

The yellow bench-lands gleam and glow
Under an azure sky;
Above the benches trees arow
March upward, very high;
And higher than the trees again
The scarpéd summit stands:
My heart is desolate because
I cannot see these lands.

The winding trails go up and down,
The tributary trails
That lead to roads that lead to town,
A town beside the rails.
But happy he who quits the train
And or the wagon-road
Rides watching for the old blazed tree;
He needs not any goad.

Dear God, if prayers of men avail
For special things with Thee,
This would I pray—To hit the trail,
And smell the balsam tree;

To see the eagles coasting heaven:
The sun-shafts striking deep
In lonely lakes and laughing streams;
To hear the chipmunks cheep;

To give the high-ball to old friends
And throw the reins abroad,
As men there do when travel ends;
This would I ask, O God;
To see the pack-train glide and lope
A-patter through the woods,
All silent in the old cone-dust
Of these old solitudes.

Some call the Indians dirty folk,
But I again would see,
And smell, Great Spirit, wood-fire smoke
Of some red man's tpee.
One sign that I was back again
In these tremendous lands,
Would be the sight of silver rings
On brown and lissome hands.

The bench's yellow pales and fades,
The sun ebbs up the hill,
'Tis dark in the deep forest glades,
'Tis dark and very still;
The sunlight on the summit dies,
—Was that a drop of rain?—
I knew it once from dawn to dusk
And would go home again.

BOW RIVER

(Alberta)

I lay upon a mighty bluff
Beside the River Bow,
Betwixt the sunlight and the breeze
I let all worries go,
Amid the bunch-grass at my ease
Beside the River Bow.

No boss was nigh me to rebuff
A kid for lying low;
The fluff from out a cottonwood
Went drifting by like snow,
As there I lay in restful mood
Beside the River Bow.

Beside the River Bow I lay
And heard the water flow,
And marked the Sarcee's white tipis
With smoky tops just show
Amid a grove of poplar trees
That fringed the River Bow.

I lay there half a summer's day;
The sand-hills were aglow;
A hundred miles away to west

The Rocky peaks, arow,
Rose up like peaks of amethyst
Seen from the River Bow.

Just yesterday it sometimes seems,
And sometimes long ago,
That on that mighty bluff I lay
And let all worries go,
Watching the gophers at their play
Beside the River Bow.

I journey back again in dreams,
Back to the River Bow;
I hear my pinto tear the grass,
I feel the thin winds blow,
And see the dreams of God that pass
Beside the River Bow.

SO-LONG

As far as Barnet, Billy came
To set me forth upon my way;
And if you know a kind of shame
At showing just how much you feel
At certain times, you'll understand
Why Billy briefly took my hand,
Then whisked around upon his heel,

My buddy Billy, when he came
To set me on my way.

But Barnet Camp I still can see
And hear: the saws were buzzing shrill
The Inlet rippled pleasantly.
Back to Vancouver Billy went,
But with my bundle I hiked on
And hit the ties to Harrison—
Pondering on life and what it meant—
When Billy said so-long to me
Beside Camp Barnet mill.

THE SON OF A GUN CAME BACK

I went back East for to observe,
 And took with me a wad of bills
To last a month. A week would serve
 The meanest cuss in all them hills.
To put you wise why I came West,
Some prompt, one word will tell the rest—
'Nuff said.

The men there look you up and down
 The way the gals each other do,
After the bargain-sale in town
 When they are fixed in something noo.
And all they get who look like that

Is the price-ticket in your hat,
That's straight!

It's good to hit the high plateau
And see the fellers long and lean
Projectin' up and down, and know
You're home again. There's nothing mean
About them fellers ridin' by
With stirrups long and saddles high—
That's what!

BUFFALO BONES

Why in thunder must men die?
Say, it surely puzzles me
When I see the boys ride by,
Ridin' easy, ridin' free.

Singin' down the wagon-road
Once, I sudden quits my song,
For I met a wagon-load
Made my singin' seem all wrong.

"What's them bones?" The plug explains
This that stops my dulcet tones—
Buff'lo bones from off the plains;
Say! They was some buff'lo bones.

All is gathered; there's no more;
Suffices gone, and bones as well.
Sold to some back-east bone-store;
Partners! Wouldn't that freeze Hell?

Bones! It sometimes hits me fair:
As with buffloes, so with me,
Me, that rides through open air,
Ridin' easy, singin' free.

THE IMPERIAL LIMITED

There's something happens in my heart
When in that depôt once again
I see the boards—"Arrive"—"Depart"
And verify the west-bound train.

Then to that café where I sit
Each time, the farewell meal to eat;
I think my ghost shall visit it,
Its window table, window seat.

The barrier next—and there I show
The long good ticket to the west.
"Go right ahead!" Ahead I go
Right gladly at that terse behest.

The train beside the platform stands,
Inert and mute; and one by one
The travellers come, some shaking hands
With many friends, and some alone.

My train of trains begins to fill;
One asketh what the time may be
When she pulls out; enough if still
Again she will pull out with me.

That mild impingement on the car
Proclaims, without a voice that said
What it proclaimed—the time's not far,
The locomotive's on ahead.

And at that chanted utterance
Of "All aboard!" I have to grip
My seat: Were I to rise and dance
They'd call me crazy, stop my trip!

Ah, though expressionless I be,
As one who neither heeds nor feels,
My heart is full, plumb full of glee

THE WAY TO WINDERMERE, B.C.

The lodge poles stand beside the trail
Upon the way to Windermere:

The land is a well-wooded land,
Trees fit for lodge poles grow at hand
And so the red men leave these here
And only pack the tent along,
Rolled featly up with buckskin thong,
When they come riding down the trail,
The pleasant trail to Windermere.

Epochs o'erlap upon this way,
This ancient way to Windermere:
Here goes the pack-train with its load
A-loping down the twining road;
Here does the auto-stage-man steer,
Once weekly; with a sound like hail
He hits the high parts of the trail.
The trail? The road! The furrowed way,
The winding way to Windermere.

And as the auto rips along
And bobs and leaps to Windermere,
It often meets upon the way
That relic of a former day,
The "prairie-schooner," with some queer
And gnarled old-timer holding in
Scared horses, scared at all the din
That devil-wagon makes along
The tranquil road to Windermere.

Still may the smoky lodge poles stand
Though rails should run to Windermere,
As frail memorials remain,
And round and up them once again

The squirrels dart, the chipmunks peer.
Of how men came, and live, and die
(Like poplar cotton drifting by)
The lodge poles for a symbol stand
Beside the road to Windermere.

SUN WORSHIP AT KANANASKIS

To see the morning come again
At Kananaskis is a thing
So perfect it is almost pain,
So deep it is too deep to sing.

Yet would I fain essay some song
Of waking woods, and waking rills,
And morning magic on the long
Grey rolls of the Alberta hills.

There is a wavering of plumes
To east, white plumes, tremendous high;
A hint of what's to come illumines
The scarves of cloud that westward lie.

And subtly through the greyness creeps
A primrose hue, suspected more
Than sure as yet. The camp still sleeps,
Though Dawn is fumbling at the door.

All's still and strange, all's strangely still
And awed before this miracle
Of gold outlining each grey hill:
You watch it, silent, in a spell.

Till something flashing high to west
Draws round your head and craves your eyes,
And out of your warm blanket-nest
In awe, in reverence, you rise—

To see the Rockies mirroring
The Dawn from their eternal peaks,
The Day, that to the grass doth bring
New green, new purple to the creeks.

And then the white man understands
Why all the red men here-away
Revere the sun, and raise their hands
In adoration to the Day.

AT DUNMORE JUNCTION

At Dunmore Junction you must change,
Bound eastward from the Crow's Nest Pass,
And there await the Eastbound Main:
To do so needs a heart of brass.

Whether it be the morning train
Or night train brings you to Dunmore,
That change you never shall forget;
'Tis like a slowly closing door.

A-sudden comes the ancient fret,
For, stepping from the stuffy cars,
You are held spell-bound by the air
And thrall'd by sunlight, or the stars.

Then, breathing deep, you do not care
If eastbound trains have ceased to run:
This vasty west for you seems made,
Your eastbound journey here seems done.

Vain warning! No man may evade
That poignant hour that doth derange
His schemes, when, from the Crow's Nest Pass,
At Dunmore Junction he must change.

MATTAGAMI

A thousand miles from south to north,
Five hundred, say, from west to east.
The farmers, settling up the earth,
Have left this land to bird and beast—
The wolf, the bear, the antlered deer,
That through the thickets pad and peer.

Most white men, visiting that land
On snow-shoes, or in birch canoe,
With these dense woods on either hand,
Go quiet as the Indians do
That down its water path-ways steer,
To trap the wolf, the bear, the deer.

No townsman born can ever feel
Wholly at ease when travelling there;
The silence of that land doth seal
His lips; a boat-song seems to dare
Some Spirit—though there's none to hear
Save wolf, and bear and antlered deer.

Oh, wander east, and wander west,
And in far cities make your home—
But oft, at memory's behest,
Your spirit through this land shall roam,
And you, a ghost, through silence steer,
And taste the ancient love and fear.

NORTHLAND RIVERS

The haunting Northland rivers
Disturb me here in town,
In Montreal I hear them call
As I go up and down;
Behind the buzz and clang of cars,

The rattle and the hum,
In street and square, and everywhere,
Because the spring has come.

One river of the Northland
Is called by a name
To suit them all, by ford and fall—
In one way all the same:
The name of it is with me
In dreams, asleep, awake,
A dear refrain just touched with pain:
God's River—and God's Lake.

Most things that I have toiled for
Have come, the toil not vain;
But if it be I may not see
My Northland streams again,
I think, so well I love them,
That in the After-days
In ghost-canoe I'll paddle through
These quiet water-ways.

FRIEND CHIPMUNK

As I was hiking down the grade
From Greenwood, hiking to Midway.
A little chipmunk with me made
The cutest kind of chipmunk-play.

He'd sit and wait ahead of me,
A-chirping, till I came as near
As five or, say, six feet maybe,
Then frisk his tail, and off he'd clear.

That waving tail was full of fun
(Sure his whole shape was full of it!)
He'd bounce ahead, and frisk and run,
Then on his haunches up he'd sit.

As I advanced he chirped to me
And (him and me alone like that)
I chirped to him: his eyes danced glee
As there upon the grade he sat;

Then oft again when I drew near
As five feet, or six feet, or so,
'Way down the track, with fun, not fear,
The little varmint thing would go.

The miles I disremember now;
Say nine. From Greenwood to Midway
He was my partner anyhow,
Kept friskin' that ways all the way.

Until we hit the scattered shacks
That then was Midway; not till there
From off the grade the beast made tracks—
Say eight miles easy; that I'll swear.

Just fellows that have never seen
A chipmunk play and frisk at all

(The knowing kind, that's also green)

Would call this anecdote too tall.

Them that have studied chipmunks well

Will take on trust that half my tale;

But, in the rest I have to tell,

If they misdoubt, I must not rail.

This is the rest: When I came back,

Eastbound to Greenwood from Midway.

My feet had scarcely hit the track

When up he bounced again to play.

Out of the bush corvetting came,

A-chirping and a-frisking good;

As he went west with me, the same

Came east, from Midway to Greenwood,

Till where the woods thin out, and you

Can see to south, beyond the track,

That little burg; 'twas there he drew

Aside. And looking o'er my back

I see him settin' on his rump,

His little forepaws hangin' down,

Settin' right doleful on a stump—

And I went smilin' back to town.

THE SONG OF A SHOVEL-STIFF

Up in the Dry-belt, Ashcroft way,
From seven till noon, from one till six,
To play that tune that wanderers play
With rasping shovels, clinking picks,
Seemed, most days, a fair lengthy day.

It was so hot we had to stand
The pinch-bars upright. If one threw
A pinch-bar down in that hot sand
The next to lift the pinch-bar knew
How hot it was: 'twould burn the hand.

Upward, as well, the heat would pour
Out of the Pit we shovelled in.
Each round his neck a loose scarf wore
To keep from blistering 'neath the chin—
And shovelling seemed the damndest bore.

That's why we smiled in sheer delight
If some one came on solid rock;
For then we gave her dynamite
And stood off waiting for the shock—
And had a little rest all right.

But most days there was nary rock,
And if a man played 'possum then
The boss's voice supplied the shock,
That voice that sounded sweetly when
He said: "Knock off, boys, six o'clock!"

Then straightway all the toil, and heat,
And anguish of the bended back,
Were nothing. We trooped down to eat—
In that old car beside the track—
A square no swell hotel could beat.

And slacked our belts, and heaved the sigh
Of mighty ease; and took our wage
Of toil up there—in starry sky,
And upland dusk, and scent of sage,
And Thompson River singing by.

THINKING OF CANADA

Thrush, within this English lane,
Trying o'er your flageolet,
Singing season here again,
Hint of June in mid-March rain,
What is this that you recall,
Tuning o'er your flageolet,
To make England's beauty pall
And to fill me with regret?

As your reedy notes begin,
Tuning up your flageolet,
Thoughts of your Canadian kin
Tuning thus, now rich, now thin,
Set an exile's heart a-fret.

Thrush, your brother thrush out there,
 Later tries his flageolet—
So there still is time to spare;
Sailing now I'll hear him where
 Life has not grown petty yet.

Thrush, you sound me my recall,
 Trying o'er your flageolet;
England's beautiful, but small—
Fields, and woods, and skies, and all.
 Thrush, within this English lane,
Tuning o'er your flageolet,
 How you fill my heart with pain
And the home-sick fret?

HENRY HOUSE

Though "Henry House" is on the maps,
There's nothing there but creeks and woods;
No fort, no traders, no trade goods.
'Tis weird when some woodpecker taps;
Or when some old tree falls, perhaps,
With muffled thud in the deep woods.

There was a House there years ago
Owned by the Nor'West Company,
A fur-shop built in rivalry
To Jasper—twenty miles below,

Or thirty, as the waters flow—
Built by the other Company.

But still upon this clearer space,
On Athabasca's western shore,
By scouting round you can restore
A picture of that one-time place,
The ground-plan mark, the door-way trace—
And see the ghosts along the shore.

The ruins of two chimneys stand
At either end. They saw to that—
That they were cosy when they sat
Snow-bound—this little distant band
Of traders in that lonely land;
'Tis queer to think they sat by that.

For all is ruin. Logs and stone
Are crumbled, grown upon by grass;
The hungry winter wolves that pass
Smell not so much there as a bone:
The Ancient Mother claims her own,
Wraps Henry House in snow, and grass.

THE CRY OF THE LOON

I never hear the loon's lone cry
But this deep sorrow stirs in me:

That one who loves the world must die;
This joy: that I'm alive and free.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN MUSINGS

The camp is lonely. It has been so since
Upon that crest my partner showed, hull-down,
Then vanished. All the forest's reticence
Closed round the camp when Billy went to town.

There are too many things beyond my ken,
Without, within, in what I see and feel:
O brooding mountains, do ye hold for men
A secret that some magic might reveal?

Billy's been gone to Barkerville a week,
And all that while the woods have looked at me
Under their branches. Why do ye not speak,
Ye woods, and tell me of Eternity?

'Tis lonesome here. It may be that no man
Has ever broken trail into this place
And made a smoke here since the world began;
No other sign except a bear's I trace.

The camp is high. Night whelmeth up, not down,
Upon me here. It glooms the woods below,

Then riseth hither; the red trees go brown,
Then black, although the peaks are still a-glow.

Dawn floodeth down—sending the wolves to bed,
To cry no more—illumineth each peak,
Tips tree-tops golden, turns brown forests red:
I wait in Silence for a Voice to speak.

If I should stay here a long while, alone,
With tree-tops and the mountain-tops for friends,
Would the Voice come some day, and all be known
That I have wondered—how Life comes, and ends?

It is not Fear I feel, it is not Dread—
Because I love this camp-place lone and high;
But it was thus long syne, and when I'm dead
It shall be thus: and I am hushed thereby.

I wish my partner would come back again,
He's gone too long. The Unknown grips my soul,
But will not speak. I lend my ear in vain;
The soundless days one after one unroll.

Here comes my partner breaking through the brush!
He's back too soon, too soon! I may not know
What I had almost fathomed in the hush—
Whence I have come, and whither I must go.

A SONG OF MOWING

We went to mow the meadow;
The sun was shining bright;
The mountain's mighty shadow
Wheeled slowly left to right.

All day we mowed the meadow,
Our arms went forth and back,
The mountain's mighty shadow
Kept wheeling round, alack.

Years since we mowed that meadow;
The scythes were shining bright,
Till the sundial mountain shadow
Went drifting into night.

O you, who mowed the meadow
With me, long years ago,
Are you in sun or shadow,
In darkness, or in dawn?

RIVER SAINT LAWRENCE

Saint Lawrence is a noble stream:
All tasteful mariners declare
That unto them its waters seem
Unmatched by any anywhere.

Along the shore, like bits of France,
Bright villages and poplars stand
'Mid emerald meadows that entrance
All strangers entering the land.

On ocean steamers, surging down
That thousand miles of opal stream,
The noisy bells of some small town,
Far-heard, sound sweet as in a dream.

But what a man remembers best
Is how, before the land appears,
There comes a scent from out the west
That toucheth to the fount of tears.

It is the balsam scent of woods,
Blown out to sea, to meet and tell
The stranger of these solitudes—
Of Canada, and of her spell.

From Lachine Rapids to Gaspé
Old circumnavigators go,
And leaning o'er the taffrail say:
"There is no lordlier stream doth flow."

INVENTORY

Was ever man so drawn before
By diverse loves? One clings to shore;
The other takes the foam-flecked sea
In quest of far adversity.

The one desireth opal rings,
And silks as frail as are the wings
Of humming-birds; carved ivories;
Quaint bronzes made by Japanese;
Old jars, unearthed in Babylon,
The Pharaohs must have looked upon;
Tear-bottles hid two thousand years,
Once moist with Cleopatra's tears,
But now so old they seem to be
Brimful of calm eternity;
Venetian mirrors; scimitars
With jewelled hilts, once used in wars,
But gem-wrought with so much of love
They now like healing unctions prove.

The other calls to sun-scorched toil
By lava-bed and sandy soil,
To travelling the tremendous trail
Where it is splendid even to fail.
It calls unto the sound and sight
Of seas that swirl through purple night,
Whose stars are magical as when
Jason beheld them, and his men.

Ah me! Whichever life I choose
I can but sip of it, must lose
Far more than ever I shall quaff—
Life is so brief, the hours thereof
Too speedy for a man to do
The things of one. I ask for two!

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[The end of *Maple Leaf Songs* by Frederick Niven]