

Laddie Jr., in the Sugar Maple Bush

Written for The Western Home Monthly by Bonnycastle Dale

It's not one thing it's another!" as the old saying goes. Here I was intent on noting and picturing the migration as it sped north over Migration Point, and the lad had a hundred muskrat traps scattered all over the face of the drowned land to attend to, and then I caught him whittling a suspicious looking stick.

"What's that?" I demanded. "Only a spile," he said.

"For what?" "Maple syru-u-up—yum, yum," and he laughed his boyish peal.

Thirty-five of these spiles he split and whittled out of one short pine log, spiles twelve inches long, an inch through and a tiny gutter running down one side; tapered off at the tree end. Now came the swift outpouring of all the camp supplies from their nice dry tins into paper bags, until not a tin was left in all the camphouse—every time I dived my hand into one of those bally bags for tea I came up with cornmeal, and if I wanted coffee my only safe way was to scent along the whole lot like a setter nosing along for a bird. Soon he had me and the sleigh and the tins and the augur all loaded up and away off down the island. I was evidently cast for a horse in this play, as while he bored I toted the load all around the trees. I had a spasm and kicked off a single tin at each tree; and went back and put myself in the hut. A couple of hours later he appeared with a demand for supper—and the news that all the trees were bored.

What a careful way in contrast to the Indians' wasteful methods, they take a small axe and make cruel gashes in the trees, fell a basswood and cut it up into troughs, sapholders and sugar forms—never let one in your bush without an augur—so our mouths were all set for a nice drink of sap—and it rained next day. "A good cold night—warm sun to-morrow—sap will run well," muttered Laddie as he snuggled into his bunk. Yes! but it forgot and kept cold, and very cold too, for a full week; and never a drop of sap ran—well; maybe a drop; for the boy got an icicle off a spout that he swore was "as sweet as anything."

I must tell you of a young chap I met on the Pacific Coast. He, each spring in Old Ontario had made good sap into gallons of syrup and pounds of maple sugar—so off he trotted along the banks of this western stream that emptied into the ocean, laden with pails and spiles and augur, then he toted a great iron pot, that he had packed into the freight car that took them west; off over that rude trail, chopped his firewood, tapped his broadleaved maples and gathered the sap. He tasted the first, insipid; believe me! "It'll get stronger later on he urged." Back over the trail he went for a barrel to hold the big run—then he started to boil—he might have been boiling yet if I had not happened along with a camera just then, for broadleaves are not sugar maples. You'll get about one quart of syrup to forty quarts of sap and about half that may be sugar if you boil the syrup thick enough, Laddie, but this poor lad might have boiled down the whole soft maple forest without result. And blame me if he had not done it all on the sly to fool and surprise his good mother who was very fond of sugar—so we laid a deep plan—and that night a letter went over the mountains to Old Ontario, and lo and behold! a few weeks later the good old lady was deep into a cake of sugar, and praising the new country; when we both laughingly told her the true tale.

I have seen whole towns almost deserted each morning in Quebec when the early train for the sugar bush drew out, hundreds of people off on a daily business that we consider a bit of fun once a year, the huge pots and the thousands of trees tapped explain where the tons of sugar come from out of that pastoral old province. Yes! and the law is so well written and enforced now that Mr. Sugarmaker cannot make a thousand pounds down in the bush and add three or four hundred pounds of common brown sugar to it as they used to in my boyhood days. And you can't even call it "mapyleine" on the label and get away with it, but there are great quantities of maple flavor used now-a-days, my advice to the housekeeper is buy this yourself, it's an excellent flavoring.

"Say—it's melting!" said Laddie. He had each day worn a deep path in the snow to where the thermometer hung. Honestly his first waking thought was "How cold is it, please?" A hundred traps deeply buried and dozens of spiles keeps a boy busily thinking.

"It's runnin'" he burst out one day, "taste!" I did—some very mawkish rainwater with a shadow of a maple tree in it. Again, "Say! do taste this; it's the real stuff." This was better, one could almost trace a faint taste of sugar in it. But the pride of him when he marched into camp and laid down two full buckets of sparkling sap. Now everything in camp was full of sap—in fact, for two weeks we patiently and calmly drank sap. You see the trees seemed to know the stove was small and the pots too; so they said "we'll just give this old fellow his fill of sap"—and they did—I boiled that slowly lessening fluid indoors and outdoors; in pots and washdishes in heat and cold, on calm days and windy days, in snow and rain and sunshine and never could I get more than a quart for a day's work. A day do you call it? I worked far into the night and dreamed of sap then until daylight—and no sooner would I get a bottle nicely filled with syrup than it was "Pass me some more, please." Goodbye, syrup!

My only day's leisure was Sunday. In the bright sun I would walk around under the score of maple trees on our little ten-acre island and wonder if they knew just how much work they could give a fellow.

Yes! I got even a bit too, photographing the boy while he was on his back drinking; and begging him to lie still until I got another good picture—all the while a good healthy stream of sap was running down his neck, or into his open mouth, or into one blinking eye. I sent some of the syrup to dear old Laddie Sr. in the hospital, and he wrote and told me it made him "think of the island so much; he could taste the leaves and the smoke in it."

So if you want a real nice hard job make a couple of gallons of syrup on a tin camp stove or an outside fireplace—and no sooner get a taste out of the bottle than "Please pass the syrup, I like it so much."

THE MEN WHO FELL OUT

Two Christian men "fell out." One heard that the other was talking against him, and he went to him and said, "Will you be kind enough to tell me my faults to my face, that I may profit by your Christian candor and try to get rid of them."

"Yes, sir," replied the other, "I will do it."

They went aside, and the former said: "Before you commence telling what you think wrong in me, will you please bow down with me and let us pray over it, that my eyes may be opened to see my faults as you tell them? You lead in prayer."

It was done, and when the prayer was over, the man who had sought the interview said:

"Now proceed with what you have to complain of in me."

But the other replied: "After praying over it, it looks so little that it is not worth talking about. The truth is, I feel now that in going round talking against you I have been serving the devil myself, and have need that you pray for me, and forgive me the wrong I have done you."

The quarrel was settled from that hour; and there are several other difficulties that might be settled in the same way. Try it.

There is no real rest until we reach God; there is no noble and inspiring courage until we trust in Him.

When we build on a faith, floods may break on the foundations, but cannot move, clouds may obscure the sun but cannot destroy it. "You may kill us but you cannot hurt us," said one of the noblest martyrs to his persecutors. "If God be for us who can be against us?"

—Hamilton Wright Mabie.

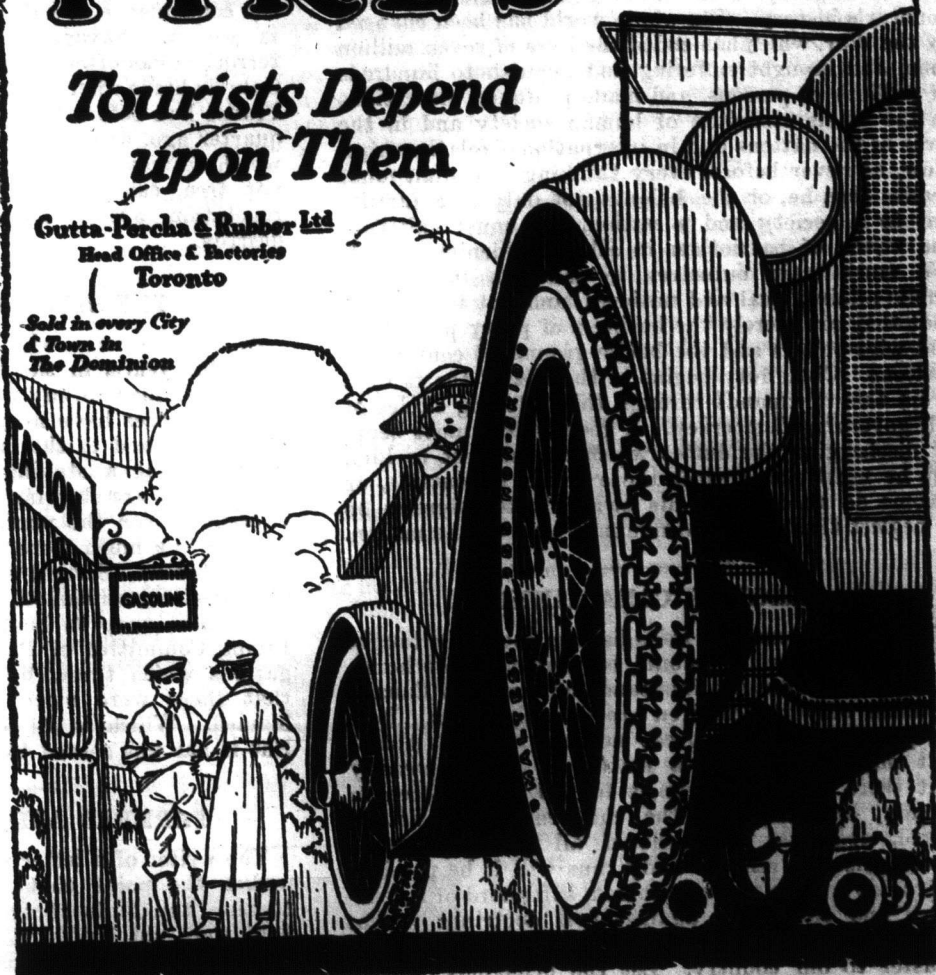
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