

VERENDRYE



A POEM OF
THE NEW WORLD

by

Alexander Maitland Stephen

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the ebook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the ebook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: Verendrye

Date of first publication: 1935

Author: Alexander Maitland Stephen (1882-1942)

Date first posted: Feb. 16, 2016

Date last updated: Feb. 16, 2016

Faded Page eBook #20160222

This ebook was produced by: Mardi Desjardins, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

VERENDRYE

Other Works by A. M. Stephen

Poems

THE ROSARY OF PAN

THE LAND OF SINGING WATERS

BROWN EARTH AND BUNCH GRASS

Novels

THE KINGDOM OF THE SUN

THE GLEAMING ARCHWAY

Anthologies

THE VOICE OF CANADA

THE GOLDEN TREASURY OF CANADIAN VERSE

CANADIAN VOICES AND OTHERS

Plays

CANADIAN DRAMAS FOR LITTLE FOLK

VERENDRYE

A POEM OF
THE NEW WORLD

by

A. M. STEPHEN

Toronto and Vancouver

J. M. DENT AND SONS LIMITED

All rights reserved
Made in Great Britain
at The Temple Press Letchworth
for
J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd.
Aldine House Toronto & Vancouver
London (Eng.) . Melbourne . Wellington
First Published in this Edition 1935

To IRIS

BELOVED FRIEND AND COMRADE

WHO

IS THE SPIRIT OF CANADA

EMBODIED IN FORM

FOREWORD

WHEN my poem, *Verendrye*, was completed, I did not think it necessary or advisable to preface it with a critical introduction. However, the work has called forth from one of my critics certain strictures which have a vital bearing upon poetry in general as well as upon the form of my own effort in particular. This criticism was so completely expressive of some of the tendencies in the contemporary attitude towards the poetic art that I feel it incumbent upon me to take this opportunity to defend my own artistic creed and to justify the method of presentation used in *Verendrye*.

The chief faults which my critic found in the poem, he was pleased specifically to term its 'romance and sentiment.' In his finding he revealed himself as an academic exponent of the literary fashion which favours the naturalistic and realistic elements in the poetry of to-day. The extremists, in these twentieth-century schools, would have us believe that romance and sentiment in poetry are hopelessly antique, or, at least, Victorian. They would substitute factual representation and the bare bones of a scientific attitude towards life for the idealistic and imaginative tendencies which have entered into the great poetry of the past. Carried to its logical conclusion, their method would result in a complete severance from the body and tradition of literature and a leap into a vacuum. Granting the value of experiments in art, there remain, nevertheless, certain fundamentals which cannot be lightly set aside by the writer who wishes to do work of a permanent nature. If a poet desires only to exploit his personality and to revel in the blind alleys of self-expression, if he aspires only to please himself without regard to the needs of his fellow-men, if poetry is no longer to be considered a kind of 'communication' which anticipates the possible delight of those who read or listen—then it matters little in what form an author shuffles off the burden of his complexes. However, a cursory glance over the field will reveal the fact that the best poets of to-day are adhering to tradition—not in a slavishly imitative manner, but in a way which recognizes that culture has advanced in time and has, upon this continent, been transferred to a new environment. The best modern poetry, in common with that of all ages, is romantic in its approach to the problems of life and of art.

If, to gain the approval of this critic, I had aped the mannerisms of a Sandburg or of a Stephen St. Vincent Benet, he and his confrères would doubtless have hailed my work as vital, realistic, and modern. But my theme is essentially romantic and, since I am actuated by a strong sentiment of affection for Canada, my poem naturally expresses itself in a form suited to its content and to its spirit.

Nor am I unable, because I have written the story of *Verendrye* in another

manner, to see the merits and uses of the realistic mode of presentation. For objective description, either of nature or human character, I am willing to admit the value of free verse which conveys vivid ideas or clear mental images. I also believe that the rhythm of life peculiar to many phases of the twentieth century and to the elemental vastness and beauty of our wide open spaces in Canada and the United States will often find its most fitting expression in forms differing greatly from the old familiar patterns. Organic rhythms and the freedom of irregular verse can be found in much of my own work.

Verendrye, however, has a subject which is closely associated with the days when poets vied with each other in the use of the accepted and traditional conventions of their art. It has an historical theme which, I think, demands a form suggestive of the period in which the events took place.

May I also submit my belief that the time has arrived in Canadian history when there is need for romantic poets to enshrine the story of our heroes in memorable verse? Young as we are, we have a record teeming with deeds unsurpassed in the annals of older nations. In the rush of this materialistic age, we may overlook the epic character of our achievements if there be not those whose love can express itself through the medium of literature.

In passing, it may be interesting to note that my critic made further complaint because I had not, in his opinion, 'reproduced the authentic atmosphere of the Canadian *bush*.' I am quite willing to let Canadians pass judgment upon my descriptions of the scenery of our native land. Is it reasonable to think that I know less about Canada than one to whom it is an interesting appendage of an older country? I have 'rustled' beechnuts in Ontario woods, punched cattle in the Alberta foothills, homesteaded in British Columbia, swung an axe in logging camps, helped to build railroads through the Western wilderness. I was born upon this soil, and I have known and loved it through long and direct contact with its strength and its beauty. If I have seen it in 'an ethereal light of romanticism, it is because I am a poet to whom his native land is a religion and an inspiration.

May I say, in conclusion, that I do not apologize for the form of my poem *Verendrye*? For its deficiencies as a complete work of art I may have to crave the indulgence of my readers. However, my purpose will be partly fulfilled if I convey some idea of the romance of exploration in the period when men searched for the Western Sea. It will be more fully realized if a few are persuaded that the inner drama of the soul is what constitutes the material for all significant poetry. *Verendrye*—and, indeed, every great spirit who has struggled forward upon the quest of something beyond himself—presents but another symbol of the Great Adventure

which has always called forth the hero and the poet in man.

A. M. S.

VANCOUVER, B.C.,
23rd April 1932.

CONTENTS

EPISODE I

[THE SUMMONS](#)

EPISODE II

[IN THE WILDERNESS](#)

EPISODE III

[EN VOYAGE](#)

EPISODE IV

[THE SHINING PEAKS](#)

EPISODE V

[THE TIDELESS SEA](#)

I THE SUMMONS

EPISODE I

PIERRE GAULTIER DE VARENNES, Sieur de la Verendrye, was born 17th November 1685, in the town of Three Rivers, Quebec. At that time Three Rivers was the home of romance and adventure. Champlain, Maisonneuve, La Salle, the Fathers Brebœuf, Lalement, Le Jeune, Daniel, and others had gone forth from this hamlet to their conquests of the wilderness. The minds of its inhabitants and of the voyageurs, who sojourned there for a space, were deeply stirred by the dream of a North-West Passage and the tale of a Western Sea.

While still a boy, Verendrye saw service with an expedition of the French against the English settlements on the Atlantic seaboard. Returning from this frontier war, he became betrothed to Marie-Anne Dandonneau, but, before the marriage was consummated, war broke out in Europe and the young adventurer crossed to France to fight for his king. He received eight sabre gashes and a bullet wound at the Battle of Malplaquet. After three years in European camps, he returned to Canada, imagining that his king would grant him position and wealth so that he might fulfil his desire to find and explore the Western Sea. Twelve years passed before he was given any encouragement tending towards the realization of his plans. Then the Governor of Canada appointed him manager of the trading-posts near Lake Nipigon. When, in 1727, he moved westward to take this position, he made his first step towards the accomplishment of his self-appointed mission.

I THE SUMMONS

Prelude

Westward the sun god leads the advancing day.
Shall we not follow? Stars and seasons sway
To rhythmic law. The tide of nations drawn
By white moons of desire, from dawn to dawn,
Moves onward dreaming to an end divine
Up slopes precipitant of endless time.
And here, within our shining triune seas,
Sound the last trumpets of the prophecies.
The last great West—and no more west to be
Till Earth's span merges with eternity!
No more, until the planet's march is done,
Shall a Columbus search beneath our sun;
No more the bearded captains rake the main
For treasure hoarded in the ships of Spain.
No oceans now may fire a Cortez' eyes;
No new scene flash its thrill of swift surprise
Through daring heart. The homing soul must fend
The gold it gathered at the Rainbow's End.

Fling far, O winds, your bannered clouds that fly
Beneath proud arches of an epic sky,
Wide-canopied above the broad expanse of plain
Swept by grey hunters of the summer rain
And wolf-packs of the hurtling, sharp-fanged snow.
Like onset of the airs which ebb and flow
Through coulee's full brown lips, from flowering earth,
Let Song spring radiant with an Age's birth!
New songs and strong young dreams, as when
The Argonauts beyond man's utmost ken
Drove through the mirrored stars their glitt'ring way,
Rise where, in virgin sleep, the prairie lay,
Time's youngest lure to tempt the questing soul.
Like distant drums that throb and fading roll,
Some secret of eternal youth and spring—

Some memory—some beat of sun-swept wing
Remains a burning hope to lift and sting
Adventuring hearts that build and reap and sow,
Forget the past and trust the days that glow
On ripened harvests, peaks of ancient snow,
And fir-clad steeps which fold the mystery
And verberant magic of the Western Sea.

The Summons

France! Ah, the veiled wonder in a name!

Bright pennons flutter and, a golden star,
The oriflamme goes dancing like a flame
Above plumed hosts. Dim legends of Navarre—
Of Breton, Gascon, Paris—gleam and wane
Like torchlights on the water of the Seine.

All this is mirrored in Canadian themes,
A flash of crimson caught and lingering still
Like sunset's colour in our lakes and streams,
A moonbeam tangled in the songs that thrill
Through winds that whisper when the twilight fades
And silence holds the green Laurentian glades.

Verendrye! Music on the eager tongue
That would bring back the years, the old romance,
The lure of wild adventure, lives outflung
Along the careless roads of time and chance,
Foam on the crest of living waves that streamed
Westward to where alluring sunsets dreamed!

A boy's heart is a pool wherein the light
And promise of the future is a star.
Now wrapt in mist, now splendent in the night,
Is seen the glory on the heights afar.
On battlements of cloud, new wonders lean—
The sky a palace for his hidden queen.

And she who binds a manchild's heart with love
Is but Romance, though priests have called her God.
She was the patron saint they felt above
Three Rivers. Voyageur and soldier trod—
Old World and New upon its thoroughfare—
The path of danger here with lightsome air.

The painted curtain of the autumn woods,
Green foam of buds in spring, and drifting snows
Hid dusky terror in their solitudes

And warpaths of a thousand creeping foes.
No young Greek, nourished in Arcadian vales,
Heard more of valour or heroic tales.

Here Champlain rested, here bold Maisonneuve
Drew breath which fanned a spark of dauntless will
To plant an outpost where the lilies wave
With rose and maple on Mount Royal's hill.
Here Lalement and Brebœuf knelt to pray
Before the cross which marked the Saviour's way.

Had D'Iberville not magic in his name?
Was not La Salle a word to stir the heart
Of dreaming youth? A haunting golden flame
Flashed through his visions—was the nobler part
Of that young soul which wandered half aware
Of all the meaning that the days might bear.

For in the air of that far time there hung
Some radiance of the Golden Fleece to lure
New Jasons to adventure, and there clung
To all men's lips a hint of things to cure
The fever in the blood—the endless quest
That flung souls onward to the gleaming West.

Pierre was tinder for this drifting fire—
The North-West Passage, India, old Cathay.
Had others failed of their most high desire?
Was he not born to find this hidden way?
By day his silence nursed the mystery;
By night he sailed upon his Western Sea.

*Oh, the light that softly gleams
On the misted trail of dreams!
In the ardent mind of youth
Shines the soul's transcendent truth.
When the vagrant stars are led
In the cold white radiance shed
By the wintry moon, it glows
Golden through the veil of snows.*

*When the trillium's lambent fire
Breaks the green, and spring's desire
Flames along the maple boughs,
'Tis the spirit which endows
Earth with beauty, life with love,
Shadow of the gods above.*

*In the summer's splendid calm,
In the passion and the balm,
Through the burdened nights of June,
This it is that weaves the tune,
Stirs the languor till its spark
Lightens all the fragrant dark.
When the silver winds outbear
Drifting galleons of the air,
Strewing all the autumn ways
With the wreckage of bright days,
It is colour wrought with sound
In a moving haze profound.*

*Ever on the sunward way
Light of dreams will gently play,
And the star that finds its rest
Near the portals of the West
Is a beacon for the soul.
Somewhere golden seas outroll,
Somewhere earth will melt away,
Spirit rend the prisoning clay.
Heights more fair than those we won
Dream beyond the setting sun.*

The child sees visions, but how near to truth!
Somewhere his fairy queen, in shining air,
Rides down a highway, gold and green, of youth,
A starry splendour in her unbound hair.
Boy merged in man whose heart still held the Gleam.
A maiden of New France fulfilled his dream.
With Marie-Anne he wandered, hand in hand,

Down to the sunlit stream St. Lawrence rolls
Through the blue autumn haze by light winds fanned,
Till summer's face is seen by weary souls
And winter seems a myriad hours away
In the illusive cloud which hides the day.

Although scarce twenty springs, with April mood,
Had stirred the red blood rising in his veins,
Tried was Verendrye, supple as the wood
That breasts the storm upon a windy plain.
War had he seen and shades of the long trail
Dimmed youth's bright joy as with a sombre veil.

'Pierre!' Her sorrow brushed him like the wing
Of Death, and then he said: 'My pledge will stand.
Marie, I love you, but—I serve the king!'
How grief came down and shadowed that fair land!
Trembling upon the brink of an abyss,
Two lovers dared the darkness with a kiss.

For France had called across the sundering sea.
The ancient foe in England raised its head
To strike, and all the wandering chivalry
Remembered glories of the days which sped
Suborned by knightly deeds, by high emprise,
And martial music under sunny skies.

'Pierre!' Again her dark eyes searched his face.
'Oh, must you go?' The maple leaves seemed dyed
With thoughts of blood, and through the fern's soft lace
The wind wove whispers dark, while, at their side,
The river murmured with an ancient pain
Of life that sows and death that reaps the grain.

'But I shall come again, dear heart,' he said,
'With wealth and honour!' The eyes he loved grew dim.
'Ah, then the Golden Sea—the dream has fled?' . . .
God's voice: 'Where art thou, Adam?' . . . Over him
There fell the mantle of the Hidden Gleam,
The visioned wonder in the sunset's stream.

*'What gift shall I bring thee, Love,
Ere the day has fled,
And the strength of my youth is past
And hope lies dead?'*
Then Love bent low and whispered:
'Dear, bring me your dream!' she said.

*'What way, in the darkness, Love,
When the night wind wails,
And the cry of the sea whines through
My tattered sails?'*
Then Love bent low and whispered:
'Dear, follow my star!' she said.

*'And how shall I know thee, Love,
If thy word be true?
In the shadows a man may grope
For the light he knew.'*
Then Love bent low and smiled:
'Dear, I am thy soul!' she said.

Long is the way and steep the trail which leads
To where the sunset flings the light of dreams
In one last dying splendour which precedes
Night and the silence where cold starlight dreams.
Few have the courage, few the faith to see
Life's meaning written in its mystery.

Verendrye kept the glow of secret fires
Warm through those weary hours in distant France.
The bronzed young hunter, born of martial sires,
Lent to the Old World camps a strange romance.
Three years of war and then, at Malplaquet,
Death came so near he touched its pinions grey.

Honour was his and fame. He would return
Proudly to that fair land which gave him birth,
For always, night and day, he could discern
The light of that far Sea. The song of Earth,
At dawn and sunset, rose within his heart.

For this he lived and played his lonely part.

Oh, there was Love that waited, but its gleam
Was blent with sunshine on a distant sea—
The Western Sea that called, with waves adream
In trembling colours where wild winds go free.
A grateful king would grant him office, wealth—
His own iron frame soon bring returning health.

Fond dreamer! France, his king, his friends knew naught
Of visions or an ocean in the West,
Which banished sleep with sheen of glory caught
From some bright future or from islands blest.
Marie alone could see and understand—
Marie, whom Love had taken by the hand.

So to the toil of common days he turned.
For twelve long years he bound his soul to wait
While in the nights a pulsing wonder burned
And waves all golden thundered at his gate.
Sons came, and these, about their father's knee,
Were nurtured by his vision of the Sea.

Desire, the sun, will draw all seed to birth
And is lieutenant to that sovran will
Which conquers fate. So, from the stubborn earth
Of circumstance, Verendrye saw the still,
White flower of dream unfolding to the air.
Then, after promise, came the fruit it bare.

France had an outpost in the wilderness
At Nipigon. Now, would Verendrye go
And face a lonely life of toil and stress
To hold this fortress in the northern snow?
And one step nearer to his goal he drew,
Hiding his gladness. Only Marie knew!

*On the lone outpost stands the soul,
The pilgrim soul, companionless.
From earth and sky, from pole to pole,*

*Remains no voice to ban or bless.
Friendless, within the chilling void,
It fronts the wilderness.*

*The lips which spake of love are dumb.
The eyes which shone with light of home
Are steeled and bright as swords, and, numb,
The hand of Life, as frosted foam,
Touches the heart that for a dream
Has dared afar to roam.*

*Friends, lovers, like the autumn leaves,
Will cling awhile, then fall away
Before the lonely wind that grieves
About the path where dreams must stray.
Their eyes are blind. They cannot see,
Or fear the truth they slay.*

*Oh, spring will steal with tender green
And flash of blossom on the boughs,
And memory bring back the scene—
The long brown road, the little house,
The hours which brought respite from pain,
And Love's low-whispered vows.*

*And nights will come when, on the lake,
The loon's loud mocking laughter fills
The sombre shadows in the brake,
And the soft flute of whip-poor-wills
Will waver with despairing cry
Through all the darkened hills.*

*Back will the yearning body lean,
And 'Forward!' will the soul reply.
The Golden Sea with dazzling sheen
Will paint the grey and wintry sky,
For in the Pilgrim Soul there lives
The dream that will not die.*

II IN THE WILDERNESS

EPISODE II

VERENDRYE, while engaged in superintending fur-trading operations at one of the Nipigon forts, was visited by Auchaga, an Indian chief. The dusky stranger had come from Kaministiquia, where Fort William now stands. Always upon the alert for news of the western country, Verendrye questioned his visitor. He was informed by Auchaga that there were tribes in the direction of the sunset who knew of a river that emptied into a limitless expanse of bitter water. The chieftain had also heard rumours, so he said, of men on horseback who wore clothing of iron. On a piece of birch-bark, Auchaga sketched an outline of the trails leading to the distant country which he described. Then the messenger from the sunset lands departed. Verendrye was much perturbed in mind by the story to which he had listened. On three successive nights, we are told, he dreamed of the Western Sea.

II IN THE WILDERNESS

Walled in by silence and the wilderness,
Verendrye moved as men in paths of dream
Grove through thick clouds of gloom that inward press
Upon the soul. No longer shone the gleam.
His thoughts becalmed were like grey, drooping sails
Beneath a sky o'ercast by threatening veils.

Yet down the green trails there were passing feet
Whose light touch he could sense but failed to see,
And there were drifting whispers, voices sweet,
In every wind a hint of mystery
That lay to westward where the sunset's fire
Made each dark spruce and pine a glitt'ring spire.

Days came and swept on noiseless wings to rest
But left him restless, and the stars were eyes
Which stirred old memories of an endless quest.
His mind, a bird caged in by curving skies,
Found naught of comfort in his narrow round,
But strained to catch a hidden thread of sound.

Low as the echo of a distant drum
Through mountain passes or the dying swell
Of thunder on the air, a Wave would come,
Then faint—a ghostly surge which rose and fell,
A phantom moving on the golden shore
Of some far sea that called for evermore.

As from a rocky beach the tide withdraws
And leaves the salt pools trembling on the land,
So did the siren Wave, without a pause,
Recede from out his heart which, like the strand,
Lay naked, shrinking from the feeble glare
And cold embraces of the common air.

Then came a day of wonder. From the woods,
On beaded moccasins, his answer came.
Auchaga, from the western solitudes,

A chieftain bronzed and grim, of mighty fame,
Stood by Verendrye and, dark eyes agleam,
Spoke of the Sea that murmured in his dream.

The firelight on the rude log walls laid hands
Of shadow, but, with magic of the sun,
They limned the chieftain of the wandering bands—
Verendrye's tense, white features. 'Is there one—
One man alive who knows my dream no lie—
One who has seen?' The Red Man made reply:

'I have not seen but I have travelled far.

A river flows to where the sun leans down
To touch the forehead of the western star.

Plains, endless as their covering sky, but brown
With dry grass waving in the autumn breeze,
The stream divides before it meets the seas.

'Bitter and fierce the waters which you seek.

At times the long waves rush upon the land,
Drive back the river, turn again, and wind
Down where long since the mighty Spirit planned
A frame for them within His boundless space.
There, with the winds, they rest before His face.'

Auchaga swiftly passed, as visions gleam.

His shadowy figure merged with trees that drew
Apart, then closed behind. Verendrye's dream
Was clothed in flesh, warm, firm, and true.
He felt it his, for in his trembling hand
He held a birch-bark map the chief had planned.

*When, after storm, deep silence folds the earth,
And, from relucent heights, the shadows fall,
Lo, from the watch-tower of the soul, a call
Breathes gently of some secret death and birth!*

*The star that clings to yonder hill, o'erpast,
Seems far removed and cold. Its rays, inturned,
Light other flames less bright than that which burned,*

A shining challenge from my ship's lone mast.

*Come, Love, with me! Beyond the space that binds,
Beyond this slumbering day where memories bide,
Stretch the wide seas, the sky's triumphal arch,
The sounding trumpets of white-bannered winds,
The tumult of great hosts, the onward march
Of wave on wave of Life's exhaustless tide!*

So rang the summons in Verendrye's heart.

Like bells that toll within a swathing mist
Or beating of his own blood heard apart,
So did the rising surge of fate persist
Beyond the dawn and through the hours of day
Which brought the common duties to his way.

His sons and those who shared his exile saw
The tragic gloom that held him in a cloud.
His heedless glance betokened mind entranced
By dreams which rapt him from the stolid crowd.
He moved attuned to hidden melodies,
The light and golden thunder of far seas.

So did the minutes blend with hours that time
Was merged in some eternal moment where
Past, present, future seemed but words that chime
Recurrent movements of the self-same air,
And he was one with that stern, ageless Will
Which moves the world beyond our good or ill.

So passed his day till sleep resumed its reign
And freed his soul from bondage of dull clay.
Thought fled and, in that unexplored domain
Beyond our fivefold world, held lighter sway.
No longer did his spirit wander lone,
But felt a guiding hand upon its own.

From out the churning chaos of black storms,
Where starlight fainted in the cold embrace
Of spaces infinite, there rose dim forms

And cloudy phantoms. Then there gleamed a face
Majestic, scarred as thunder-smitten peaks
Whereon the hunted eagle refuge seeks.

So might some red god loom with pensive face
Among the ruined temples of his race.
The sleeper trembled with a chill surprise.

Auchaga's features he could faintly trace,
Yet there was youth and age commingled there,
A radiant promise with a dark despair.

He heard a Voice from out some deep profound—
A rush of wings that lifted him to sheer
And wind-swept heights. His soul, a dancing star,
Leaped out into the night as o'er the bar
A ship is launched into wide waters curled
In gleaming splendour round our sleeping world.

Dark lay the forest spread below, save where
Some river threaded through the dusky veil
Of trees and glittered in the quiet air,
The murky silence, and the vapours pale
That lay beneath the troubled zone of stars
And the white moon behind its drifting bars.

To southward, billowing fogs told where the lake,
A sleeping monster, coiled its gleaming scales.
But westward swept his soul some thirst to slake
At fountains where the shining sunset trails
And eager hearts that ever on them wend
Meet at the last beside the Rainbow's End.

The silver-patterned maze of hill and vale,
The whisper'ring leagues of shadowy spruce and pine
Flowed back, a wavering banner on a gale,
Till in the light he saw the levels shine—
Water, then land, and, from his airy lanes,
He glimpsed the wide expanse of boundless plains.

As some dead planet's rugged breast laid bare

Beneath the chill and searching winds of God,
The prairie's silent waste stretched stern and fair
The unfilled promise of its procreant sod.
Gashed by the coulees, scarred by trail of streams,
It lay gargantuan—mystic land of dreams.

Within a thousand lakes, the moon's pale wheel
Rolled through the velvet deep of waters tranced
And silent, save where the quavering peal
Of dreaming birds stirred in the reeds and glanced
Across the silver of a lonely slough
To shake the grasses gemmed by fragrant dew.

From solitary buttes beneath the stars,
The long-drawn howl of coyotes fouled the air
With fiendish laughter, shattering down the bars
Of silence. Then, as still and crystal-fair
As a great ocean in the moonlight's gleam,
The prairie winds resumed their peaceful dream.

At times a moving thunder shook the gloom
Below him and, in dusky clouds, a herd
Of bison stumbled through the night like doom
Or the blind tread of marching fate that stirred
The echoes, then was lost in space so vast
He only knew some mystery had passed.

The dim plain, like a mighty scroll unfurled,
Streamed eastward to the fading line of stars
Where dawn's grey portent rimmed the sleeping world.

But, in the west, like cold bright walls that bar
The heavenly glories from our mortal sight,
The Shining Mountains lay empearled by light.

A clouded splendour, then a dazzling sheen,
They swept towards him as he rose to heights
Of limpid air that shimmered chill and keen
With broken moonbeams, dusted gleams and lights,
Then, like the sparkling suns within the Milky Way,
The peaks shone regnant in their stern array.

Across the great white range, strong pinions bore
Him over that weird, many-coloured land
Of snow-clad hills and valleys, where the roar
And vibrant music of bright waters fanned
The froned cypress, and dark Earth, in dreams,
Echoed the chorus of the falling streams.

Bound by the symphony of sound and hue,
Verendrye's soul, beyond the shades of time,
Moved to the cosmic rhythm Creation knew
In those first morning hours when Song sublime
Rippled the void and foamed upon the bars
Of space to wake a myriad slumbering stars.

Nor could he hear above the cadence vast
A rising wave—a tide whose level tone
Smoothed all the curving crests which broke and passed,
Till once again a hand upon his own
Bade sight resume its wonted use. His heart
Leaped. A loud cry drove his lips apart.

The dawn behind him reached with golden hand
And filled with magic of a trembling fire
The far-flung majesty beyond the land
Where lay the symbol of his heart's desire—
Dreams' end—the answer and the mystery,
The gleaming wonder of the Western Sea.

And with that dawn there rose a wind which flowed
And caught the choral music of the Earth,
To blend it with the thunders which abode
In that tempestuous ocean from its birth.
His spirit heard it as a mighty voice
Wherein the sounds and lights of day rejoice.

*Its roots in the earth, will the Rose of Life blow.
Its joy and its pain are but wings for its flight,
And, tossed by wild winds of desire, it must grow
Till the heavens bow down to enfold it in light.*

*Oh, come where the air is aglow with the love
That blossoms in light from the heart of the sun!
Know, soft as the twilight or breast of a dove,
The kiss of the breeze on the heights you have won!*

*Oh, come where the deep is a trumpet whose tones
Swell the chorus of winds in the surge of the foam!
Hear now, in the breath of the wave as it moans,
The soul that is longing—the passions that roam!*

*The love of the wind is the voice of the free
That sings through the music of breakers at play.
Oh, come where the sun is a flower of the sea,
A rapture that flames at the close of the day!*

Verendrye woke. He gazed with 'wilder eye,
And saw the dust-motes in a sunbeam glide,
Like whirling comets in a strip of sky
That touched his pallet's edge, and naught beside
Was there of that mysterious dream withdrawn,
Nor aught of red man's magic in his dawn.

And all that day his spirit, raptured, sped,
An atom in immensities of mind,
So lost that time, a lynx on cushioned tread,
Slipped by into the verdant dusk behind
The pine-clad hills along the Nipigon,
And on his world once more the starlight shone.

Again Auchaga piloted his soul
Across the reefs into eternity.
The vision gleamed. He heard loud breakers roll
Upon the cliffs that bound the Western Sea.
The chieftain's voice was in its wistful moan,
That rose and fell in rhythmic monotone.

'I am a fragment of that ancient race
Whose serpent mounds are scattered on the plains
Which you have seen lie bare beneath the moon.
And here, beside the sea when daylight wanes,

We hear the echoes of the past, and bitter winds
Bear in the long-lost story to our minds.

‘Lo, where the long wave whispers to the land
Of buried things beneath her cool, green gloom!
“Ten thousand years ago”—she croons her tale—
“I locked a memory within my tomb.
The splendours of an age were swept like sand
Before the cleansing vengeance of my hand.”

‘Atlantis—legend on a wise man’s tongue!
Her glitt’ring towers against the blue were tossed
In high abandon, built on blood and pain.
The sun of time dissolved them like the frost
Of ghost-like forests on a window cast,
Which, for a night, were lovely and then passed.

‘Self was the watchword of that ancient world.
Its winged ships belched destroying flame and death.
Its Juggernaut of armoured hate was made
To crush resistance by its fiery breath.
O’er the bright seas which round its borders curled,
Its proud defiance was a challenge hurled.

‘Now, in these caves, the mermaids sit upon
Bleached bones of empire, rusted cross and crown.
The Church and State, “that would not pass away,”
Are ocean slime, and soft lights, amber-brown,
Play where the lustful eyes of kings once shone,
And shackled millions bowed beneath a throne.’

Auchaga paused. Verendrye heard the cry
Of strong men broken on a golden wheel.
He saw the stricken hosts of Beauty fly
Before blind greed and ruthless sweep of steel.
He felt the horror of the dread Machine,
And saw bold Mammon pass with bloodstained mien.

He heard priests raise their soporific hymn
While men were mangled in that ancient Age,

And breathed the wind which hurtled from the rim
Of its revolving din and senseless rage,
Then marked Time's finger blot the passing scene,
And leave the canvas white again and clean.

Again the Red Man spoke: 'The Past am I.

To you the future of these hills and plains
Belongs, as on the high road of the sky

Our star grows dim and all its glory wanes.
Atlantis rose and fell. Her children stray
Like ghostly shadows of a vanished day.

'Where stood our temples, you will raise new shrines.

Our phantom walls will touch your builder's hand
And bring the old forms back—the towering lines,

The zoned steps rising from the self-same land.
Your songs will rise from this surf-beaten shore
To praise the White God whom we both adore.'

The vision passed. Verendrye stood alone

A moment on the height above his Sea.
Then, drawn to slumber's deep by its full tone,
He knew no more till dawn's bright witchery
With resurrection's transient beauty shone
And silvered all the shores of Nipigon.

.

Oh, happy they who do not dream, but walk
Content upon their solid pavements, arched
By skies that hold no lure of wandering stars!
For them Love's crimson flame may never burn,
Yet there will always shine the cheerful hearth
And friendly solace of all common things.
But, to the rebel host, the Lucifers, who fell
Long since from heights supernal, comes no peace.
Till they regain the glory of remembered heights,
The world is dust and ashes to their fire
That spirals up its long, lone path to God,
And lights new ways, new worlds for timid souls

Who walk unmindful of the task divine.
Of this wild fire, Verendrye was a spark.
Alone he stood, enchanted by his Dream—
Alone upon the frontier of the dread Unknown,
The continent which loomed as infinite
As life eternal or the vast abyss of space.
Behind his night's dark veil, dim Powers conferred,
And there was whispering of stars, and Fates
Stirred in the silence of his wilderness,
Till came the hour when his lone will was blent
With that One Will which guides the farthest suns.
All lesser loves grew shadowy, faint
As the white stars before that regnant dawn
Within his heart, and self was laid upon
The altar. Life—Death—what mattered these?
He lived to serve. France and his king must have
This far-flung realm, this wondrous Golden Sea!
So might a greater King be born in him,
And crowns bow down, and, in eternal ways,
His soul be one with all Earth's conquerors.

III EN VOYAGE

EPISODE III

FOR three years after the coming of Auchaga to the fort at Nipigon, Verendrye unceasingly importuned the French governor and the king for men and supplies with which to prosecute the search for his Western Sea. At last, in May 1731, Verendrye himself raised the necessary money in Montreal by taking into partnership a number of merchants who hoped to profit by the fur-trade. On 8th June, Verendrye, his three eldest sons, Jean-Baptiste, Pierre, and François, his nephew, Sieur de la Jemmeraye, and fifty men made the start from Montreal upon their voyage of sixteen hundred miles by canoe.

III EN VOYAGE

June and St. Anne's—names fragrant as a rose,
And filled with magic of the evening hour
When the dim censer of the sunset glows,
And soft-winged mem'ries throng with subtle power
To weave enchantments, voices blent with chimes,
That break the silence where the white moon climbs.

Verendrye, voyageur on seas of fate,
Looked proudly on his fleet of long canoes,
Which, through the twilight, moved in joyous state
Up the Great River, while his hardy crews
Dipped noiseless paddles to the sound of bells—
Bells of St. Anne's intoning silv'ry spells.

And with the vibrant notes that called to prayer
Were echoes of the mystic trumpet blown
Upon the battlements when all the air
Was golden with the dreams of youth, which shone
In those far days before his strength had won
The right to journey westward with the sun.

Now, in the summer of his heart's content,
There were no shadows. Spirit warred no more
With flesh. Misfortune's arrows all were spent.
Gold, arms, and men were his, and goodly store
Of all things needful for his cherished quest—
The Sea that laved the portals of the West.

Free was he now to answer Beauty's call,
Which fled before him on the waves that curled
Before his light canoe, and free for all
The myriad wonders of the future furled
In leagues of wilderness, where Nature smiled,
Of Canada, her last and loveliest child.

*All day long there was light that shivered
Its golden arrows through trembling leaves.
All day long, a breath that quivered*

Through sun-drenched trees.

*Song was hushed while the noon-tide, dreaming,
Lay spent and silent upon the hills.
Song was hushed—a memory gleaming
In waters stilled.*

*Languid fire was the air that, swooning,
Wrapt height and hollow in shimmering haze.
Languid fire, the brown bees crooning
In amber shades.*

*Still green ghosts were the maples straining
The drowsy sunbeams through listless boughs.
Still green ghosts, the willows raining
Their silver tears.*

*Now the night and cool shadows winging
Bring song-bright echoes while evening falls.
Now the night, with voices singing,
And sound of bells!*

Peace fell at eve upon the hearts that drew
Close to the shadow of the wayside shrine,
And, in the starlit night, each voyageur knew
His quest was sanctioned by a power divine.
With morning came a wakening thrill which ran—
A crimson thread that bound him to St. Anne.
A light wind rustled like a wild bird's wing
Through misted leaves. The river seemed a way—
A silver road on which the angels sing
Their rapturous music to a new-born day.
As on still waters clouds enshadowed glide,
The fleet moved out upon the glimmering tide.
The solitude closed round them. Daylight ran
Its glistening way with webs of beauty spun.
Then came a vagrant wind that rose to fan
The surf of leaves to gold and green and dun
Waves breaking on the silence of the shore

That caught the echo of the labouring oar.

The blue-jay's scream, the trill of darting squirrels,
Rang through the spaces where the sunlight filled
The woodland aisles and stirred the clustered whorls
Of verdure. Then the careless din was stilled,
And only through the shadows flashed a wing,
The flicker's gleam or dragon-flies a-ring.

Thus, through the drowsy summer afternoon,
They stemmed Utawa's stream till failing light
Dimmed wooded banks beneath a wraith-like moon.

Now to their ears, like voices of the night,
Came sound of waters where athwart the way
The Long Sault thundered in its treacherous play,
And blent with mutterings of the prisoned flood,
That moaned within the grip of iron-bound shores,
Were trembling sounds that chilled the reckless blood—
The sudden sweep of shadowy hands and oars—
Cries stifled by cold winds from off the spray
That hurtled through the dusk of fading day.

Verendrye's eyes were turned upon his sons.

White-lipped, Pierre and François faced the gloom.
Jean whispered: 'Daulac!' heard the crackling guns,
The crash of timbers, saw red flames illumine
The clearing round a shattered palisade,
Where youthful hearts were on the altar laid.

'Here we shall sleep to-night,' they heard his voice.

'Here we shall sleep and dream of those who died
That France might live. And happy in their choice
Were they. His spirit we may have as guide
Who held life lightly, fought, and bravely smiled
At death which threatened in this lonely wild.'

Then, as the knights of old, on holy ground
They lay full-armed beneath the arching boughs.
As through a cloister's silence, moved the sound

Of wind and waters. Morning came to rouse
Each sleeper from a dream of battles won,
Each soul made strong to greet the rising sun.

‘Gai lon la, gai la rosier,’ sang the men,
Whose rippling muscles strained with merry will
Along the portage. Hill and dew-drenched glen
Rang to the echoes, then once more were still,
Deep pools of silence when their feet had passed,
Stirring the shadows which the morning cast.

François, by sixteen summers lightly crowned,
Fired by a boyish zest, led all the crew.
All day they heard his joyous whistle sound,
As in the sweltering sun their packs they drew
Slowly along the trails till set of sun
Saw all the stores piled high and labours done.

And with the twilight rose the pale blue wreath
Of camp-fires’ smoke against the wavering green.
No nightingales were there to sing beneath
The rising moon beyond the darkening scene,
But, through the trembling light, a whip-poor-will
Flung silvery arrows at a distant hill.

And Love bent down to cheer each lonely heart—
Love of the land where Beauty, in her arms,
Held them as children chosen and apart
To share her heritage, her virgin charms.
The year’s processional of seasons sprang
To mind. The fires died down and François sang.

*I heard them sing of roses
And violets pale and sweet,
Where, in a dim and ancient land,
The spring and summer meet.
They sang of bluebells in a glen,
Of lilies’ white desire—
But only crimson maples
Can set my heart afire.*

*Hidden in a ruddy fame, merry voices ring,
'Canada! O Canada!' Hear the robins sing!*

*'Soon the yellow leaf will lie, sodden in the rain.
When Earth's little children wake, we shall come again—*

*'Come again to Canada, piping through the hills,
Swinging all the silver bells frozen in the rills!'*

*Wings upon the maple bough glimmer in the sun,
Silken webs of gossamer, sails of beauty spun.*

*Hear the wand'ring echoes call, hear the rivers shout,
'Canada! O Canada! Fling your banners out!*

*'Bind a tress of golden hair with a sprig of green.
Down the gleaming roads of Time, ride, our forest queen.*

*'Brave the storm when autumn winds tint your cheek with rose.
Charging up the wintry steep, your scarlet challenge glows.*

*'Love will meet you on the way, touch your wondering hand,
Crown you with eternal youth, where your maples stand.'*

*I heard them sing of roses
And violets pale and sweet,
Where, in a dim and ancient land,
The spring and summer meet.
They sang of bluebells in a glen,
Of lilies' white desire—
But only crimson maples
Can set my heart afire.*

Portage, and then once more the moving glades,
The panorama of the flowing shores
Interminable, flash of paddle-blades—
All hints of heaven to the voyageurs,
Whose rich, red blood was tuned by life to stress
And luring silence of the wilderness.

Verendrye felt the glow of hope fulfilled.
Sieur de la Jemmeraye sat on the thwart
Before him, and his arm, by practice skilled,

Steered the deep-laden craft with graceful art.
His lithe young form, his dark eyes' shadowed fire,
Spoke the high heart and will that sways desire.

Him had the leader chosen for command,
Lieutenant of his chosen enterprise.
And, in the long canoes on either hand,
Were merry François, of the wondering eyes,
And Pierre, the dauntless, with the eldest son,
Jean, and Verendrye knew their hearts were one.

Not Jason, ploughing through the sounding seas,
Had braver souls among his Argonauts.
So, like the kings of old, he sailed with these
Young hearts he loved, but still his restless thoughts
Winged through the quiet air which was in tune
With light-robed dreams wrought in the fire of June.

If, in the lambent flame which wrapt him round,
Or on a soft air borne from cloudless skies,
The Future's face had gleamed, or wordless sound
Had built a vision of the towers that rise
Beside Utawa's stream to-day, he might have known
The meaning of the quest he deemed his own.

But from no height of mind could he foresee
The regal glory of our northern queen—
Our Canada, far-flung from sea to sea.
But there was present beauty in the scene—
Beauty which moved, a spirit, at their side,
To bear them gently up the sunlit tide.

Evening, a shepherd from the fields of sleep,
Moved down to meet them through a sky-blue lane,
Hedged by white stars, when from a distant steep
They heard the wind-blown sound of drumming rain,
A sobbing thunder, where enchantment thralls
The glittering curtain of the Rideau Falls.

A summer shower had passed and left enskied

A rainbow bridge above the shining flood,
And, where the bow's end rested on the tide,
They passed thro' radiant mists which seemed like blood
Diluted in a sea of light. Once more
The fleet drew out along the darkening shore.

Portage! La Chaudière, des Chats, and then
The long, white channels of the Calumet!
Verendrye knew the trail would try strong men
Till bodies writhed beneath the toil, with set,
Grim lines of pain upon each sullen face,
So, in his wisdom, rested for a space.

The gift of song refreshed these sons of France,
And, in the leaping shadows of their fires,
Their voices rose and brought the old romance,
The courtly grace and vigour of their sires,
To mingle with the buoyant life that gleams
In the bright laughter of Canadian streams.

Across an ancient bridge at Avignon
A dark-eyed maiden fled, and, in the gloom,
Knights carolled loud an old Provençal song,
And troubadours, where wine-red roses bloom,
Tuned harp and lute to measures grave or gay,
In canzonet, ballade, and roundelay.

Then silence, and a velvet curtain fell,
Flecked with a myriad stars. No sound
Was there but when a swooping nightjar's knell
Pealed, or some lonely muskrat on its round
Dived and moved slowly from the river's edge,
Rippling the water with its silver wedge.

The strenuous days bore fruit. Their labours won
A toilsome passage through the Calumet.
Canoes cruised freely in the strength of sun
And balmy winds, and all their hours were set
To music that was caught from skies in tune
To life's adventure and the zest of noon.

So fared Verendrye's voyage that time was naught
To him, and, with brave wings, his fleet swept on.
Utawa's stream they left. Their black prows sought
The long, swift reaches of the Matawan.
The boats were carried o'er a short divide,
Then with the stream they saw their cargoes glide.

A summer day of blinding glare and heat
Relaxed the sturdy arms. The shining oars
Dipped lazily until the little fleet
Beheld the line of Nipissing's green shores
Spread out on either hand, and islets gleam
Like emeralds set in golden mists of dream.

The humid air seemed 'tranced by some weird spell.
The fallen leaf lay still upon the lake,
And, through the hush, a lonely bird's cry fell,
Then suddenly grew still, as if to make
The silence tangible and strong to form
The shadowy portents of the coming storm.

*Now crumbling bastions from the deep
Uproll their ghostly towers,
Crowning the hill with Asgard's glory—
Their pearly hollows flushed dark rose,
And, on their billowing crests, the flame
Caught from the beacon of some Titan host,
Whose footfalls move unheard
Through the dread silence where the thunder sleeps,
And unleashed lightnings coil and dream
Like hidden fire within an opal's heart.*

*What love can mount these glowing steeps
To touch the warm, white breast of Beauty
Pillowed there in godlike ease?
Desire so bold might compass time
Within a moment's transient glance,
And see
Illusion's wall grow thin and fade*

Into eternity.

Swiftly the gathering darkness cast its pall.

The prisoned air grew faint, and phantom green
The rocks swam in a light ethereal

And sinister, as in some elfin scene.
An echoing crash, and then, from shore to shore,
The rain descended with a deafening roar.

Through storm and sunshine, stress and fleeting joy,

The great adventure fared. Verendrye learned
Life's lesson well. Illusion served to buoy
His fondest hope, and ever starward turned
The eyes that sought the passing gleam which sped
Up vistas endless to a goal that fled.

French River tried his men. The tortuous way,

White with the fume of rapids, and with spears
Set thickly in the boiling pits which lay

Across his path, was rife with lurking fears.
A sense of freedom came when Huron's wide
Blue reaches bore them on a restless tide.

In days swept clean by wind and sun,

They passed the island of the Manitou.
And, in the nights, there moved the Mighty One—

The silent Voice that starry systems drew
From out the void to blossom in the space
That is a mirror for His sovran face.

Dreams, like familiar airs, flowed in once more

To veil their leader's eye throughout the day,
So that he drew apart. His comrades bore
His mood with patience, for they felt the sway
Of unseen forces cast a potent spell,
And on each face a wandering shadow fell.

The meaning of the quest, the path that leads

Man's soul to greatly dare upon new trails,
The hand that yearns, the wistful heart that bleeds,

Knights-errant searching for the visioned Grails—
These they knew not, but blithely faced each day
With dauntless faith. Verendrye knew the way!

The stout canoes were rowed by willing hands
Till, with the rolling surf of Mackinac,
Their dark prows shouldered up the sands.
Against a crimson sky, the fort stood black,
A guardian grim of that vast solitude
Where Père Marquette had raised the Saviour's rood.

Now, with his savage converts at his side,
They saw the careworn form of Messaiger,
A worthy priest, but made to be the guide
Of other souls upon a milder way.
Verendrye took him, at the king's command,
To be his chaplain in the Western land.

Rest and confession soothed the tired crews.
Some, at the close of mass, heard other bells
And memories falling with the evening dews.
Then, like a hidden doom that faintly knells,
Fear's shadow stood by men who knelt to pray.
Home seemed a thousand weary miles away.

Sieur de la Jemmeraye was quick to note
The small, black cloud which boded future ill.
Jean he could trust and, in a spot remote,
Under the stars that lit a neighbouring hill,
Wandered that night with him and bared his soul,
Pledged to the venture and Verendrye's goal.

'Wrapt in his dream, your father will not see
The coiling serpent till it strikes at him.
Pierre and François are but lads, and we—
Cousin, we two must guard him!' In the dim
Light softly filtered thro' a pine's dark lace,
Jean saw his flashing eye and set, pale face.

'To-night our men have thoughts of home, of wives,

And church bells tolling over flocks secure
In peaceful folds. Their goods, but not their lives,
They lay upon the altar, and the lure
Of that far Western Sea, the priceless gem
Of honour and renown, are not for them.’

Then Jean: ‘Pray that no evil wind may blow
To fan this discontent to open flame.
’Twould break my father’s heart. Come, let us go!
No word of this to him! We bear his name,
And proudly, but there is a thing more fair—
To bear his burden. This must be our care.’

With laughter and with song as weapons, fought
The two that sensed disaster, and their eyes,
Keen to each chance, a passing glory brought—
A visionary gleam to their emprise.
Days swiftly merged into each starlit night,
And bore them westward in triumphant flight.

Nor did Verendrye know, immersed in dream,
And moving in his own eternal mood,
Of aught but visions and the golden gleam.
The waves below or earth whereon he stood
Were dimly felt, for, now the goal drew near,
The world was lost within a larger sphere.

And so they passed from Huron’s wide domain.
Sault Ste Marie flung high her foaming wrath,
Touching them lightly as a gentle rain
Of sudden mist across their strenuous path;
And then, upon a day of mystery,
They dared the perils of the Inland Sea.

Air, fire, and water, in a whirling blaze
Of elemental fury, volleyed down
The shouting winds, and, rapt beyond their gaze,
Earth passed, and heaven, a threatening frown,
Alone remained. They sought the nearest shore
And hid them from the tempest’s thundering roar.

Peace after storm! The siren waters smiled,
Where sunbeams, flashing like a mermaid's hair,
Flowed on the curving crest of waves beguiled
To languid motion, and they felt the air
Blow chill across the wide blue wilderness,
Which late had heaved beneath the wind's dark stress.

Then from stark hills did Fear, the grisly hound,
Slink quietly down to shamble at their heels,
A shadow ever near that, in a bound,
Might seize on fainting heart or mind which reels
Confused when spirit aids not in the strife.
Now each man thought again of home and wife.

Jean saw the coward veiled in shrinking eyes,
And with his cousin prayed, but silently.
No word betrayed them. Pointing to clear skies,
They laughed and launched their vessels merrily.
And, as they watched the fast-receding shores,
They sang in tune to dip of shining oars.

And still Verendrye dreamed through hours when life
And instant death stood by him, hand in hand.
The Demon of the Lake, whose frequent strife
With heaven cast him bellowing on the strand,
Tossed the frail fleet like clots of flying spray,
Or gulfed them in the hollows where he lay.

Fear stalked them, hissing in the stinging foam,
In wail of wind or cry of storm-swept bird,
In echoes whispered by the waves that roam,
Or phantom voices in the night wind heard,
Until that evening when the first stars shone
Above the hills which bound the Nipigon.

In the dim twilight on a naked beach,
Where polished driftwood gleamed like frozen bones,
They drew to shore and heard their long keels screech
And then lie still upon the cold, grey stones
Between them and a cliff that touched the sky,

Wondering, they saw Auchaga's form draw nigh.

Silent the chieftain stood. Verendrye's hand

Sought his, and then, two shadows in the gloom,
They moved towards the hill. Meanwhile, the band

Of voyageurs, upon the edge of doom,
Trembled like men who feel their little world
An atom through blank withering spaces hurled.

Night fell upon their wav'ring camp-fires' gleam,

And on pale faces, furtive eyes and souls.

No song of joy defied the deeps that teem

With ghostly terrors when the black wave tolls,
And, on the stones and up the chill wet sands,
They heard hushed footsteps from the spirit lands.

Each crossed himself and sighed before he crept

Close to his comrade and lay down to rest.

Then Jean knelt by his cousin where he slept.

'Christophe?' 'Dear lad, trust God. He knoweth best.'

Their eyes were turned towards the shadowing hill.

Somewhere a lone wolf howled and all was still.

The morning mist lay curled upon the lake,

When, outward bound, Verendrye led the way.

Nor did he know that, trailing in his wake,

Hate and black treason followed him that day.

Auchaga, bronzed and grim, sat by his side,

And steered the fleet across the threat'ning tide.

How tense with unleashed lightning is the air

That moves serene before the lances of the storm
Are levelled and the curving sky-lanes bear

The blasting presence of Death's awful form!

Days passed as moments while each silent crew

Quailed in the darkness of the fear they knew.

Kaministiquia, the stern and proud!

This was the outpost brave De Lhut had planned,
Crowning the lakes and by kind fates endowed

With powers strategic. Here Verendrye's band
Breathed for a space, muttered, and stumbled on,
Skulking like phantoms in a misty dawn.

Up the Grosseilliers, there were flagging blades,
And whisperings, and councils in the long canoes,
Till through the hills and from the echoing glades,
A rapid's thunder floated and the crews
Drew in to land. As if beneath a spell,
They halted while the evening stillness fell.

A red moon flamed. Its disk of sullen fire
Gleamed in the forest's dark and gnarled hand.
Verendrye, driven by his soul's desire,
Paced at a distance from his toiling band.
He heard a step, and gazed with quick surprise
On François's white, drawn face and stricken eyes.

'The men refuse—they say that they will die
But will not move a hairbreadth farther west!'
From some black depth there came a night-bird's cry—
Then silence. The wide meaning of his quest
Flashed through the leader's soul, and then he turned
To where, upon the beach, his camp-fires burned.

And there was council held, while through the trees
A wind arose, and that red moon above
Flared like the eye of Fate, and treacheries,
Winged fears, despairs, dark hates which strangle love,
Moved in upon the man who strove with men
And demons and grim powers beyond his ken.

He parried while his heart's fire wavered, fell,
And sought to rise upon some wave of chance.
Then all seemed lost. Jean's voice broke through the spell
That bound him helpless. 'I would die for France
And for my father! Cowards, rest you here—
Return—do what you will! I know not fear.

'Alone I go into this wilderness

To build and wait beneath the western star,
For I have seen beyond the day's long stress,
The gleam of golden waters from afar.
My father has not lied. Is truth a thing
To lightly cast aside? I serve the king!

His drawn sword flashed, and then another blade
Touched his in air, and Jemmeraye stood by.
Beneath the shining cross their weapons made,
Verendrye faced his men with moistened eye.
His lips moved. Some thought he murmured: 'Quest'—
And still the red moon sailed into the west.

.

Ye powers that battle in the midmost air
Be merciful to him who dares the lonely way,
For he has seen your dangerous Truth, a blazing star,
Trail its red lightnings through unfathomed deeps!
He has seen aery towers, vast archetypal forms,
Plunge down the quivering darkness of the void,
Leaving the shining pillars, Beauty, Truth,
Alone in all that emptiness of space.
And he has heard, upon the trampling winds,
Great armies storming at the gates of heaven;
Soul reaching through the blinding clouds of earth
To majesties and thrones, its ancient heritage;
And pinioned thoughts that, on storm-beaten air,
Clove to the heart of God like homing birds.
Not gently does this lightning yield its bolt
Nor skies bend down before man's sovran will,
But like funereal wings that blot the sun,
Does Night descend upon the pilgrim soul.
Spirit of Beauty, eternal, awful, real,
Breathe thou into his darkness like a star,
A rose of light, a flowering dawn of love
That will not die! Give him to hear, beyond
The sound of tempest and Earth's warring drums,
The choral thunders of his Golden Sea.

IV THE SHINING PEAKS

EPISODE IV

FOR a dozen years, on the Western frontier, Verendrye and his sons carried on their explorations and search for the sea of their dreams. The first white men who forced a way into the West, they left behind them a chain of forts and trading-posts reaching from the Great Lakes to the Rocky Mountains. One historian has made the claim that the new lands which they added to the possessions of the French king were as extensive as all the country explored in the 240 years between the time of Columbus and their own adventure. The journey of Verendrye's sons, which took them to the foot of the Rockies, is one of the most remarkable exploits of history.

IV THE SHINING PEAKS

Caught in illusion's web, the captive soul
Floats in the sunshine or is whipped by storms
Upon a fragile thread that holds it bound.
The searching winds of Fate alone may break
The golden snare, and, in the stream of life,
Plunge dreams and dreamer. Then, no longer blind,
But led by the eternal will, he moves
One with the flood, twice-born, young Wisdom's child.

Beyond the flux of thought, Verendrye's self
Looked calmly on the fruitless years that passed.
He saw hopes perish, marked approaching age
Assail the flesh and dim the eyes wherethrough
His spirit watched the sun set on far seas,
Which called him still and would not be denied,
But, on Life's wave, one with the changeless Will,
He marched to wars ordained by mightier stars
Than those which shone above his lonely plains.

Dreams? Aye, so might they call his clear-eyed truth
Who still were tangled in the webs of time.
Their solid earth to him was tenuous mist,
Their good a dancing fire above a swamp.
He kept his outpost on the mind's frontier
Between reality and that false show
Which men deem living, and his tower was set
Above the clouded depths of pain and strife
On the stark headlands of the infinite.
Thus did he serve the Future patiently,
Waited, and held his dream inviolate.

.

This is the tale Pierre Verendrye brought
From the dim places where the sun's last gleam
Falls on the West. Of all wild stories fraught
With marvel, this remains to fire the dream
Of those who follow, when the blood beats high,

Adventure's star beneath an ardent sky.

'Father, if we have failed, forgive your sons!'

Then flashed the leader's eye, his lifted hand

Was eloquent. 'Forgive? The long tide runs

Its course serene, but ever on the land

A thousand ripples break. Man can but try,

Strive, question—and then wait for God's reply.'

Pierre was silent, but his thought still burned

On lips that would have cried: 'Oh, spare me this!

The Sea—his Golden Sea—and we who turned

And left it within reach! Oh, traitor kiss—

The word which flickers like a phantom hope

Among the ashes where his hands will grope!'

His father smiled. Pierre, once more a boy,

Glowed, stammered—then loosed all the flood

Of speech that bears the treasure of youth's joy.

'We have, at least, not shamed the ancient blood.

Time will befriend us. Only truth can last.

Others will follow where our feet have passed.

'It seems but days, brief days ago! The Spring

With flowers and sunlight decked her prairie land

For carnival, adventure, thoughts which sing.

We went with her, rejoicing, hand in hand,

Along the trail the Mandan people take.

Regrets were none, your blessing in our wake.

'We found that endless leagues the western plain

Sweeps onward, comrade to the wandering sun.

It is an ocean, boundless, chartless as the main—

Its waves, green billowing hollows, crests that run

To touch horizons moving like a phantom line

That glimmers faintly where the last stars shine.

'From tribe to wondering tribe we made our way

Till a great chief his serried horsemen brought,

Two thousand strong, and then, in fierce array,

The Bows moved westward, bearing us who sought
But peace. With them, our hearts, though sore distressed,
Surmised there lay the secret of our quest.

‘Quest? Aye, never could our souls forget!

Spring’s green fire quenched, the parching earth lay bare
And torpid. Then, with steadfast joy, we met

The onslaught of the steel-bright winter air,
But, through all Nature’s lure and mystery,
We saw the gleaming waters of our Sea.

‘Now, with the dusky tribesmen of the plains,

We crept like ants through the immensities
Of shining snow, grey sky, and light that wanes

But to make clear the starry drops that freeze
And twinkle in the purple cloth of night,
Stretched like a scroll whereon the angels write.

‘All silent, as a black cloud shadow, passed

Our cavalcade across that soundless waste.
At times we staggered helpless, saw aghast

The blizzard’s whirling wraith, and, shivering, faced
Pale Death, with streaming hair and cold blue eyes,
That flashed beneath the arch of cruel skies.

‘Then would the sun prevail, and crystal seas

Of light curtained the sparkling white expanse,
All lifeless save where deer ran with the breeze,

Or the grey coyote prowled, or birds perchance,
Like weary thoughts that idly come and go,
Threw transient shadows on the untrodden snow.

‘There came one wondrous day. Oh, memory still

Leaps like a sudden fire in brown, dry grass,
And sparkles, blown upon the winds at will,

When words are sought to catch the scenes that pass
Before my mind—the splendour and the gleam
Of distant hills which hid our cherished dream!

‘The barrier range before our Western Sea

Lay like a floating mirage of bright towers
Beside an aery ocean wide and free.

A shimmering line glowed where angelic powers
Tipped with pure gold the helmets of a host
Of Titan peaks that guard the magic coast.

‘With evening came the rivers of the light.

A thousand glittering fountains on the hills
Flared with the sun upon the rim of night.

Then darkness gathered up the shining rills,
And then, where twilight’s rising shadow grew,
The great range loomed, a phantom cold and blue.

‘The solemn stars above these mountains lone

Moved forth to sentinel forgotten dreams
And majesties and secrets frozen into stone

When Earth was young and dawning light’s first beams
Struck through the primal void to wake the Word
In spherical music that no man has heard.

‘Our chieftain halted, for he knew the hour

Of battle near. Each scarred and dark ravine
Might hold a brood of Snakes, the tribe whose power

Was like their name, cold, sinister, and keen.
The stores and women housed, his braves would go,
Light, but full-armed, against the ancient foe.

‘And, in the lodges, François stayed to guard

Our scant supplies. La Londette and Miotte
Marched on with me. God knows ’twas passing hard

To leave my brother, but the voyageur’s lot
Holds life and danger one, and, mile by mile,
Makes the eternal portage with a smile.

‘Four days our horsemen moved towards the hills.

The plain’s edge, curled and broken like a wave,
Curved up to meet the dark green shade that fills

The canyons with a sombre twilight, save
Where captive streams flash in their glist’ning chains
That bind the lyric gladness of their strains.

‘Oh, wary as a serpent did we glide
Among the terrors of that wilderness.
A stalking Fear moved ever at our side,
And eye told eye what lips dare not confess,
While through the froned screen of fir and pine,
We saw, at times, Death’s ghostly tapers shine.

‘One evening when the purple shadows crept
Towards the plain, we rested on a slope.
A black cliff towered above. The foothills, cleft
And rugged, like vast icy hands that grope,
Spread down to valleys where the storm wind fanned
The level reaches of the prairie land.

‘Our leader stood apart. His keen eyes sought
To pierce the darkness on the mountain trail
The scouts had followed. His trained ear soon caught
The beat of flying footsteps. Now the pale,
Taut faces held him while his young men said:
‘We are undone! Our foe—the Snake has fled!

“Our children’s wail, the shriek of women sounds
Within our lodges where these devils rage.
While we march blindly through their hunting-grounds
To war on air, the eagle’s empty cage
Our only prize, lo, he destroys our young!
We stand with vacant eye and bow unstrung!”

‘A cry of hate and anguish from our band
Startled the evening, and the cliff’s wall caught
And tossed the echo through the silent land.
From valleys dim the night wind brought
An answering yell. The wolf-packs filled the air
With quavering horrors of a black despair.

‘As well might some weak human hand have tried
To stem the leaping avalanche. Our chief
Was helpless while his desperate braves defied
The tribal rules. All, frenzied by their grief—
A shouting torrent in the twilight grey—

Plunged down that mountain-side in disarray.

‘That hour, beneath the Shining Peaks, there fled
Our promised hope of guidance to the Sea—
Our Golden Sea. Like withered leaves that sped
Before the winter’s breath, my thoughts to me
Fell down and trembled—little ghosts that beat
And shivered in the snow about my feet.

‘Oh, grimly then as hooded acolytes,
Who slowly move in sad processional
Towards the tomb, we left the lonely heights.

In black ravines we heard the waterfall,
A muffled drum that sounded our retreat,
With dull, bleak music of the soul’s defeat.

‘Father—no more to-night! The journey home—
What matters it? Our empty hands disclose
No treasure that you sought. Our feet have roamed
A thousand weary miles. He only knows,
Who holds the future in His mighty hand,
What there is still to find in that strange land!’

.

’Tis only those who love that know its pain.
How futile voices cry: ‘Live on! Each day
Holds promise still. The future hides a rose
Within a dark bud sleeping. Oh, live on!’
Body is but of time. The hope too long deferred,
And anguish, in night’s sleepless watches, burn
This mortal flesh till but a ghost remains
That smiles and lies and smiles once more, and then
Goes out upon dark seas with shattered faith
To question God and search the infinite,
And wrest from fates beyond our earthly star
The inner meaning of the lonely quest.

Verendrye had laid all—his breed do this—
Upon the altar of a dream that fled.
Youth’s ardour, man’s stern, virile will, were gifts

He placed most gladly at his true love's feet—
His only love—the Vision of far seas
That he might find and conquer for his king.
In his lone outpost, unremitting toil
And longing worked their ruthless will. Now soul
Shone through a fleshly veil so worn
That there came moments when he moved with those
Sad earth-bound spirits who were of his kin.
Then, through his sons' eyes, he was given to see
The barrier range across his pathway flung—
Vast and impenetrable walls of fate
That closed for ever on his heart's desire.

Mountains and sea, and sea and mountains, rose
Through visionary mazes in his mind,
Weary with waiting, weary of toil and pain,
And all his soul cried out to Death:

*'A drifting storm of dreamlike golden wings,
Sunlight beats home across this restless sea,
Fulfilled of sound and flecked by grey gulls blown
Like sombre thoughts athwart my wavering mind.*

*'Is there in all the flux of time no space
Where soul may rest content in body's clasp?
Is there not light beyond the dream that fades?
Now, where the mountains virgin breast is bared
Shyly to meet the sunset's vermeil lip,
The stars are shining through a jewelled veil.
Love's eyes are they behind these silent skies,
Dewed by sweet promise, dimmed by mist of tears.*

*'It is enough to know the law of Beauty writ
In script of sea, spent sun, and rising star.
All life moves on to rhythmic measures felt
In waves of anguish, winds that thrill to power,
Triumphant ardours of our vibrant flesh.*

*'It is enough to know that Love may touch
The pain-racked strings of this our earthly frame,*

*Till Melody be born and Death expire
Upon the altar of an ageless Quest.'*

V THE TIDELESS SEA

EPISODE V

WITH the death of Verendrye my poem ends. Defeated by his enemies, he retired from the Western frontier. Friends who knew the value of his discoveries and the unselfishness of his purpose, brought influence to bear at the Court of the French king. Notable among those who championed our hero were the Marquis de Beauharnois and the Count de la Galissionière. In the summer of 1749 the latter appeared in Paris to voice the claims of the valiant explorer. French statesmen recognized the injustice which had left Verendrye alone and unaided in his enterprise. Honours were showered upon him, and he was commissioned to take charge of a new expedition to the North-West. Human justice had been too long delayed. Debt, disappointment, hardships, the uncertainties of life had accomplished their deadly tasks, and, at Montreal, on 6th December 1749, Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de la Verendrye, passed to his rest.

V THE TIDELESS SEA

‘The sea—again I hear the sea—the wind
Is calling and the waves are whispering now.’

An errant sunbeam from a wintry sky
Touched the worn cheek and left a fading light
That darkened in Verendrye’s wistful eyes.
In that great curtained bed, he strangely lay
Whose flesh so long had known the hard caress
Of earth. Now kindly hands smoothed out the folds
Of snow-white linen, eased his pillowed head,
And raised him so that failing sight perceived
The crystal beauty of the day, the roofs,
The pointed gables capped by feath’ry drifts,
The long blue shadows and the quietude of skies
Brushed clean by sparkling winds.

Then there was silence in that sun-filled room.
The friends, beside him, saw the tired eyes gleam,
Speak, fade, and then a veil slipped down. He lay
As one the mothering tide bears out to sea
Upon its breast.

And one who loved him thought: ‘It cannot be
That God repays with pain and bitter loss
The service of long years. He will give back
The strength and dauntless will. Verendrye knows
The king has spoken, crowned his toil with praise
And honour. He is promised men and gold.
All France—its wealth, its arms, its chivalry—
Will help him now to find his Western Sea.
Life will deal justly and it will repay.’

Their leader’s voice broke through the reverie.
Startled, they heard the tones of vibrant youth,
Exultant as the spring. They saw his face
Glow with the light which drew men on to die
In far, dim trails, and marked the ageless soul

Look through the windows of the falling tower—
The body crumbling on the brink of time.

‘God will repay? What is this merchandise
In which Life traffics? Have I asked for gold?
Three Rivers! Ah—but this is Montreal!
Your city holds an hundred who would say:
“The old thief dies to cancel debts unpaid!”
Aye, they will come—will search this house for coin—
Silver and gold—the treasures they hold dear.
“Verendrye”—hear them now—“Verendrye was a fox
Too sly for us. He used his tale of seas,
The North-West Passage, as a herring-skin to hide
His trail, while he grew rich from trade. His forts—
Built with our money? What were these? His blinds!
Built for the king? Nay, reared to store his wealth
Who robbed the king and us!”

‘So clatter fools who deem the greatest crime
To be a lack of this world’s musty goods.
An if God spared me, I would go once more,
And, from my West, bring loads of stinking pelts
To glut their hunger—pay my debt. But now—
It shall not be.

‘So they shall deal with me in brighter coin,
In futures, and in dreams, and hopes that bide
Like golden seed below the heart of Earth.

‘As for these baubles which my king has sent—
St. Louis’s gilded cross, preferment, gauds
Of courtiers—what are these things to me?
Lo, in return, about the fair white brow
Of France I bind a chaplet much more rare—
Fort St. Pierre, St. Charles, and Maurepas,
Fort Rouge, Rouscaux, La Reine, Dauphin, Bourbon,
Le Pas, and Fort La Corne. These are the gems
To mark an empire great as Caesar knew—
To guard the frontiers of a world more vast

Than that which called for Alexander's tears.

'I, one lone man, who dared the wilderness,
Death, darkness, and the powers thereof, saw realms
That fold the future in titanic wastes
Now barren but, in God's good time, to be
The home of races yet unborn. I failed,
But those to come shall see the wave of life
Move with the westering sun across my plains—
Shall mount the Shining Peaks by that far sea,
Whose golden voices sing of liberty.

'Too late these honours—wealth so long delayed—
This joy—fulfilment of my heart's desire!
It might have been—ah, yes, I know—I know—
But I am very weary. I must sleep, and then . . .

'Too late? Nay—it is early yet! The dawn
Will bring my dream again. The pain and loss—
These are the symbols of a secret growth
Into some larger life. If I have failed
In this one momentary breath, eternal ways
Stretch on and on. He will repay.'

So passed Verendrye when the sunset flamed
And cast a crimson glory on the land
He loved. Then did the few, who watched him go,
Tremble as eye caught eye in nameless fear.
From somewhere—through the veils of time—they heard
The distant thunder of a tideless sea.

MADE AT THE
TEMPLE PRESS
LETCWORTH
GREAT BRITAIN



TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover was created for this ebook.

[The end of *Verendrye* by Alexander Maitland Stephen]