

STEPHAN STEPHANSSON
THE SPRUCE FOREST

Stephan G. Stephansson (1853-1927) was born in Skagafjörður, Iceland, and came to North America with the first group of Icelandic settlers in 1873. He briefly lived in the United States before moving to Markerville, Alberta, where he remained for the rest of his life. He made his living as a farmer and wrote at night due to insomnia. He only wrote in Icelandic, and his poems were eventually published in a six-volume collection titled *Andvökur* (Sleepless Nights, 1909-1938). The first English translations of his work appeared in Richard Beck's *Icelandic Lyrics: Originals and Translations* (1930) and Watson Kirkconnell's *The North American Book of Iceland Verse* (1930). The following poem, translated by Kirkconnell, was published in the October 1934 issue. In the accompanying essay, Kirkconnell described Stephansson as "the equal of any poet that Canada has yet produced" and claimed that he "may ultimately be recognized as superior to all." A revised translation by Kristjana Gunnars was also included in the collection *Stephan G. Stephansson: Selected Prose and Poetry* (1989).

Other trees, with taunts and brags,
Try in vain, like thee, to grow
Under sheer and shadowy crags,
Shut in by black bogs below—
There thy gallant groves aspire,
Greenest woods that earth can show.

Surely winter oft has waged
Wars of frost about thy feet:
Stark as steel, blue ice has raged,
Stamping on thy roots' retreat,
Lashing all thy limbs with cold,
Laming every joint with sleet.

Is thy view not vast and dire,
Void of joy?—Beneath the hill
Gapes a maw of fetid mire,
Muck-devouring, hungry still;
While a jaundiced jaw of stone
Juts above thee, gaunt and chill.

Yet thou mountest, undismayed,
Meetly dressed in patient green—
Born to burdens, dolours laid
Brutally, with anguish keen,
On thy shoulders; still unshamed
Shake thy crests in peace serene.

When, with cruel blizzards, come
Cramping frosts all earth to hold,
Naked oaks, distorted, numb,—
Null, grey ghosts of forests old,—
Stretch their limbs like helpless hands,
Haggard with the ashen cold.

All alone thou lingerest
Lustrous green, O spruce, and sure
As if summer still possessed
Sovereign peace, in thee secure—
A mark of life on marred earth's corpse,
Making winter fair and pure.

Green thou art, yea altogether,
Growing from thy earliest birth,
Green against all winter weather,
Waxing ever out of earth
Young from root to needles, knowing
Naught of naked age or dearth.

Many a man in kindred fashion,
Moved on by the winter's blast,
Looks on livid bogs of passion
Lying rotten, black and vast;
Sees the yellow rock-jaw yonder
Yawning from the face of Caste.

Yet from shadowed, slimy slopes
Slips of life grow green and free;
Winter earth, unwarmed of hopes,
Watches still the sturdy tree;
Nor can blizzards' crescent crash
Crush that living liberty.