LEVEL B1

The Thieves Who Stole $18 Million of Maple Syrup

How Quebec's Syrup Slowly Turned into Water

In 2012, thieves took thousands of barrels of maple syrup from a warehouse in Quebec and put water in their place. Olivia tells Sean how they did it and how they got caught.

Key words

- heist
- barrel
- notice
- warehouse
- temporary
- patient
- lazy
- border
- arrest
- ringleader
- trial
- sympathy
- profit
- guilty

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How to use it

1

Listen to the episode on YouTube.

2

Read the transcript and learn the key words.

3

Do the activities, then check the answer key.

Includes the full transcript, key words, activities and answers

Listen to the episode on the Aprendos YouTube channel

Key words

These words appear in the episode.

Key words	Meaning	Example
heist *noun*	A big, planned robbery of something very valuable.	*The film is about a group of old friends who plan a heist at a casino.*
barrel *noun*	A big round container for liquids like oil, wine or syrup.	*The farmer collects rainwater in a blue barrel behind the house.*
notice *verb*	To see or hear something and become aware of it.	*Did you notice that the café has new chairs?*
warehouse *noun*	A very large building where companies keep goods before they sell them.	*My brother works nights in a warehouse, packing boxes for an online shop.*
temporary *adjective*	Only for a short time, not forever.	*While they fix the bridge, there's a temporary bus stop on the other side.*
patient *adjective*	Able to wait calmly for a long time without getting angry.	*Be patient with the new waiter. It's only his second day.*
lazy *adjective*	Not wanting to work or make an effort.	*I felt lazy on Sunday, so I stayed on the sofa all afternoon.*
border *noun*	The line between two countries.	*We showed our passports at the border and drove into France.*
arrest *verb*	When the police take someone away because they think the person broke the law.	*The police arrested two men for selling fake concert tickets.*
ringleader *noun*	The person who leads a group that does something wrong.	*The teacher knew who the ringleader was the moment the class started laughing.*
trial *noun*	The time when a court listens to the facts and decides if someone broke the law.	*The trial lasted three weeks, and the newspapers wrote about it every day.*
sympathy *noun*	The feeling that you understand someone's problems and feel sorry for them.	*I have a lot of sympathy for people who work on Christmas Day.*
profit *noun*	The money you keep after you pay all your costs.	*The lemonade stand made a profit of ten dollars on Saturday.*
guilty *adjective*	When a court decides that someone did a crime.	*The jury found the driver guilty of driving too fast.*

Full transcript

The Thieves Who Stole $18 Million of Maple Syrup: How Quebec's Syrup Slowly Turned into Water

OLIVIA So the accountant climbs up onto the **barrels** to count them. They're stacked six high, and each one weighs about six hundred pounds.

SEAN Fun day at the office.

OLIVIA He steps onto one barrel, and it moves under his foot. It nearly tips over...

SEAN ...hold on. Six hundred pounds of anything doesn't just move.

OLIVIA Unless it's empty. And that was the first clue in the great Canadian maple syrup **heist**.

SEAN Wait. Somebody robbed Canada of its syrup?

OLIVIA Thousands of barrels of it. And for months, nobody **noticed** a thing.

SEAN This is Aprendos English, level B1. I'm Sean.

OLIVIA And I'm Olivia.

SEAN Before you go on, I need to confess something. I'm not sure I've ever had real maple syrup.

OLIVIA Excuse me?

SEAN At home we put golden syrup on pancakes. It comes in a green and gold tin. Lovely stuff.

OLIVIA Sean, that's just sugar in a tin.

SEAN It's a British tradition, thank you.

OLIVIA Well, by the end of this story, you'll understand why people steal the real thing.

SEAN We'll see. And if you're new here, subscribe. There's a strange true story in every episode.

OLIVIA Okay. Quebec, in the summer of 2012. We're in a small town called Saint-Louis-de-Blandford.

SEAN You said that very nicely.

OLIVIA I practised all morning. There's a big **warehouse** there, close to the highway.

SEAN A warehouse, so a huge building where you store things.

OLIVIA Yes. And inside, there are about sixteen thousand metal barrels of maple syrup.

SEAN Whose syrup?

OLIVIA It belongs to the Federation of Quebec Maple Syrup Producers.

SEAN So all the syrup farmers together, in one big group.

OLIVIA Thousands of farmers, yes. And the warehouse is part of something called the strategic reserve.

SEAN Why would farmers need a warehouse full of syrup? For pancake emergencies?

OLIVIA You're closer than you think.

SEAN Really?

OLIVIA Some years the weather is bad, and the trees give very little. In 2008 the reserve was completely empty after a few bad years.

SEAN So now they keep some syrup back in the good years...

OLIVIA ...and they sell it in the bad years. That's the reserve.

SEAN Okay, I actually know a bit about this federation. Some newspapers call it the OPEC of maple syrup.

OLIVIA Like the oil countries?

SEAN The same idea. Since 2002 it has worked like a legal cartel.

OLIVIA A cartel, so a group that controls the price together? Sounds a bit dramatic for pancakes.

SEAN It decides how much each farm can sell, and it sets the price.

OLIVIA Can they do that?

SEAN In Quebec, yes, it's the law. And Quebec makes around three quarters of the world's maple syrup.

OLIVIA So whoever controls Quebec...

SEAN ...controls the breakfast of the whole planet. Pretty much.

OLIVIA Remember that, because some farmers really hated this system.

SEAN And do you know what one barrel was worth back then?

OLIVIA No idea. A few hundred dollars?

SEAN About eighteen hundred dollars. One business magazine said that was around thirteen times the price of crude oil.

OLIVIA Thirteen times? Okay, now I want to be a thief.

SEAN Please don't. Who was guarding all this liquid gold?

OLIVIA That's the funny part. In 2011 the farmers made so much syrup that the main buildings were full. So the federation rented an extra warehouse.

SEAN The one in Saint-Louis-de-Blandford.

OLIVIA That one. It was only **temporary**, so there were no cameras and no alarms.

SEAN Oh no.

OLIVIA And somebody counted the barrels only once a year.

SEAN I check my milk more often.

OLIVIA Now, the building had a private owner. And the owner was the wife of...

SEAN ...let me guess. Somebody on the inside.

OLIVIA The wife of Avik Caron. According to the court, he was the man on the inside. And another company rented part of the same building.

SEAN So the thieves had keys.

OLIVIA Keys and a good excuse.

SEAN Right then. One dark night, a big truck arrives, and they take everything at once...

OLIVIA ...no. That's how a movie does it. These guys were much more **patient**.

SEAN Go on.

OLIVIA They took a few barrels at a time. They drove them to a sugar shack far away from town.

SEAN A sugar shack, the little wooden cabin in the woods where they boil the sap?

OLIVIA Right, the place where syrup is usually made. There they siphoned the syrup out of the barrels.

SEAN Siphoned, so they sucked it out with a tube.

OLIVIA Into their own barrels, yes. And then they filled the old barrels with water and drove them back.

SEAN Water! That's brilliant. And a bit evil.

OLIVIA The barrels looked the same, and they weighed almost the same. Nobody opened them.

SEAN But your accountant's barrel was empty. No water at all?

OLIVIA Good question. After a while, the thieves stopped bringing barrels out. They emptied them right there in the warehouse...

SEAN ...and stopped filling them with water.

OLIVIA They got **lazy**, yes.

SEAN Criminals always get lazy.

OLIVIA I know about counting syrup, by the way. In college I had a summer job at a pancake place in Seattle. Every night we counted the syrup bottles, and one night we were short by twelve.

SEAN Twelve bottles. Who took them?

OLIVIA The cook. He was making syrup cocktails.

SEAN So you've solved a syrup crime.

OLIVIA A much smaller one. Okay, question for everyone listening. If you were the accountant, would you climb those barrels or just count them from the floor? Tell us in the comments.

SEAN From the floor. Definitely from the floor.

OLIVIA Lucky for the farmers, Michel Gauvreau climbed. That was the accountant's name. In July 2012 he came to do the yearly count.

SEAN And the barrel moved.

OLIVIA And then the next one moved too. Some barrels were completely empty. Others were full of water.

SEAN How much was missing? A few hundred...

OLIVIA ...more than nine and a half thousand.

SEAN Nine and a half thousand?

OLIVIA About six million pounds of syrup. It was worth around eighteen point seven million Canadian dollars.

SEAN That's a lot of pancakes. Hang on, why didn't someone notice the trucks?

OLIVIA Trucks with barrels are normal there. Every syrup farm in Quebec has trucks with barrels.

SEAN So the thieves were hiding in plain sight.

OLIVIA Exactly. Then the Quebec police got involved, and they started to follow the syrup.

SEAN Follow it where? You can't exactly put a name on syrup.

OLIVIA The thieves sold it in small amounts to normal companies. A lot of it went by truck to New Brunswick, the next province. Some went across the **border** to Vermont.

SEAN Clever. Small sales don't look strange.

OLIVIA And in October 2012 the police found more than six hundred barrels at a buyer in New Brunswick. In a town called Kedgwick.

SEAN So they found it. Great, case closed...

OLIVIA ...not even close. That was only a small part of the syrup.

SEAN How much came back?

OLIVIA Honestly, nobody gives a clear number. One magazine said about two thirds. Other reports only talk about those few hundred barrels.

SEAN Hmm... So some of it is probably on someone's breakfast table.

OLIVIA Or it was eaten years ago. Then in December 2012, the police **arrested** more than fifteen people.

SEAN Fifteen! For syrup.

OLIVIA For a lot of syrup. And there was a boss. His name was Richard Vallières, and he was in his early thirties.

SEAN Was he a syrup farmer?

OLIVIA Not really. He bought and sold syrup outside the federation's rules. They call him the **ringleader**.

SEAN The ringleader, so the boss of the whole group.

OLIVIA Yes. And his father, Raymond, was arrested too.

SEAN A family business, then.

OLIVIA Sadly, yes. Now, I have to be fair to you, Sean. You were right about something earlier.

SEAN I'm always right. Which part?

OLIVIA The cartel part. At the **trial**, a truck driver remembered something one of the Vallières men said.

SEAN Let me guess. He called them thieves.

OLIVIA He said stealing from thieves is not stealing. The reports don't agree if it was the father or the son.

SEAN You know, I have a tiny bit of **sympathy** there. When I worked in Brussels, farmers drove their tractors into the city. They were protesting about milk quotas. Farmers really hate being told how much they can sell.

OLIVIA I'm going to stop you there. This was not a protest.

SEAN I'm not saying it was a protest...

OLIVIA ...because who do you think owned that syrup? Thousands of normal farmers. And they only get paid when their syrup is sold.

SEAN Okay, fair point.

OLIVIA The federation said the syrup was insured. Still, it was the farmers' syrup.

SEAN Fine. My sympathy just got smaller.

OLIVIA Good. And the money was huge. Vallières told the court he sold the syrup for about ten million dollars.

SEAN Ten million. He must be rich, then...

OLIVIA ...he said he only kept about one million as **profit**. The rest went to other people in the chain.

SEAN And how do you even pay for stolen syrup? You can't use a bank.

OLIVIA You'll like this. The truck driver said that once he picked up a shoebox full of cash.

SEAN A shoebox.

OLIVIA He thought it had to be about two hundred thousand dollars.

SEAN Very expensive shoes.

OLIVIA And Vallières had a story for the court too. He said a dangerous man forced him to take the syrup. He said the man had a gun.

SEAN Did the court believe him?

OLIVIA No. Not for a second.

SEAN And what about the buyer in New Brunswick? He must have known something.

OLIVIA He argued that you can't prove which tree syrup comes from.

SEAN That's actually a good line.

OLIVIA It didn't work. In November 2016, a court found Richard Vallières **guilty**, together with his father and that buyer.

SEAN So what did he get? A few months?

OLIVIA Eight years in prison.

SEAN Eight years! I thought maybe a big fine.

OLIVIA Oh, he got a fine as well. In 2017 the judge fined him more than nine million dollars.

SEAN A fine, so money he has to pay the court.

OLIVIA Yes, on top of the prison time. And if he didn't pay, he could spend more years in prison.

SEAN What about Mister Caron, the man on the inside?

OLIVIA Five years in prison, and a fine of one point two million.

SEAN So everyone got punished.

OLIVIA Most of them did. And the federation's main warehouse, in Laurierville, has security like a bank.

SEAN Cameras, alarms, the lot?

OLIVIA Cameras everywhere, and the alarm goes off if anyone comes in after work hours. Even the staff.

SEAN Didn't they make a TV show about all this? I'm sure I saw an advert.

OLIVIA The Sticky. It came out on Prime Video in 2024, with Margo Martindale.

SEAN Is it the true story?

OLIVIA No. The trailer even says it's absolutely not the true story.

SEAN I respect that.

OLIVIA So, Sean. Do you understand now why people steal real maple syrup?

SEAN I understand that it's worth more than oil. But I'm still loyal to my tin.

OLIVIA You're going to try real syrup, and you're going to say sorry.

SEAN We'll see. So, everyone, what would you do with thousands of barrels of stolen syrup and nowhere to sell it? Tell us in the comments.

OLIVIA Wait, I saved one last thing. In 2020 an appeal court cut his fine. From nine million to about one million.

SEAN So he won in the end.

OLIVIA Not quite. In 2022 the Supreme Court of Canada put the nine million back. He has ten years to pay, or he goes back to prison for six more years.

SEAN Ten years after the theft, and the syrup still followed him. Sticky.

OLIVIA The free PDF with the whole conversation and the key words is linked in the description.

SEAN And subscribe, because next time at this level it's the box that helped save Apollo 13.

OLIVIA Bye, everyone. Sean, I'm sending you a bottle of real syrup.

SEAN Leave it on the shelf next to my green and gold tin. Cheers.

Did you understand?

Choose the correct answer.

1. What was the first clue that something was wrong?

- ◯ A truck driver saw people with tubes in the warehouse.
- ◯ A barrel moved under the accountant's foot because it was empty.
- ◯ The farmers had no syrup to sell in 2012.

2. Why did the federation rent the extra warehouse?

- ◯ In 2011 the farmers made so much syrup that the main buildings were full.
- ◯ The main warehouse needed new cameras and alarms.
- ◯ It was cheaper than the warehouse in Laurierville.

3. At first, what did the thieves put in the old barrels?

- ◯ Golden syrup.
- ◯ Sand.
- ◯ Water.

4. Where did the police find more than six hundred barrels in October 2012?

- ◯ In a sugar shack near the warehouse.
- ◯ At a buyer in New Brunswick.
- ◯ On a farm in Vermont.

5. What did the Supreme Court of Canada decide in 2022?

- ◯ Vallières could leave prison early.
- ◯ The farmers had to pay back the insurance money.
- ◯ Vallières had to pay the fine of nine million dollars.

Exercise 1. Who said it?

Complete the quote with a key word. Then guess who said it.

1. “There's a big _____ there, close to the highway.”

Who said it? Sean / Olivia

2. “That's how a movie does it. These guys were much more _____ .”

Who said it? Sean / Olivia

3. “Criminals always get _____ .”

Who said it? Sean / Olivia

4. “The _____ , so the boss of the whole group.”

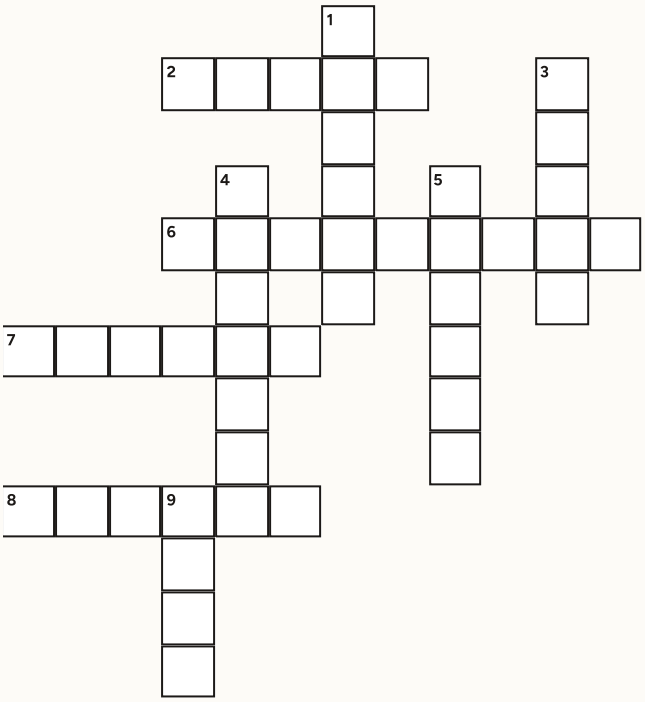
Who said it? Sean / Olivia

5. “You know, I have a tiny bit of _____ there.”

Who said it? Sean / Olivia

Exercise 2. Crossword

All the answers are key words from the episode.



ACROSS

2 At this event in court, a truck driver talked about a shoebox of cash. (5)

6 The syrup waited here, with no cameras and no alarms. (9)

7 Vallières said he kept about one million dollars of this. (6)

8 In 2016, the court said Vallières was this. (6)

DOWN

1 One of these weighs about six hundred pounds when it's full of syrup. (6)

3 A robbery so big that people make films about it. (5)

4 The thieves were this: they took only a few barrels at a time. (7)

5 Some syrup crossed this line into Vermont. (6)

9 After a while, the thieves stopped filling the barrels with water. They got... (4)

Exercise 3. Your turn

You are in charge of the syrup warehouse in 2012. How do you protect the barrels? Write three or four sentences. Use at least two words from the list.

Answer key

Check your answers after you finish the activities.

Did you understand?

1. A barrel moved under the accountant's foot because it was empty.
2. In 2011 the farmers made so much syrup that the main buildings were full.
3. Water.
4. At a buyer in New Brunswick.
5. Vallières had to pay the fine of nine million dollars.

Exercise 1. Who said it?

1. warehouse (Olivia)
2. patient (Olivia)
3. lazy (Sean)
4. ringleader (Sean)
5. sympathy (Sean)

Exercise 2. Crossword

2 across: trial
6 across: warehouse
7 across: profit
8 across: guilty
1 down: barrel
3 down: heist
4 down: patient
5 down: border
9 down: lazy

Exercise 3. Example answer

First, I would never use a temporary warehouse without cameras. I would count the barrels every month, and I would open a few of them, too. That way I would notice an empty barrel quickly. Thieves get lazy, but good guards don't.