

Personalities and Problems

10---Aime Geoffrion, K.C., Eminent Avocat

Apt at Cross-Examining Other Men, He is as Apt to Flabbergast an Interviewer

By AUGUSTUS BRIDLE

MONTREAL has something less than a thousand lawyers, many of them gathered in from the tin-spire villages down the St. Lawrence. For law is a passion in Quebec. Doubtful if there are ten of the lot at all like the eminent avocat who lately represented Quebec in the argument on the Lancaster Bill before the Supreme Court: Professor of civil law at McGill; occasional advocate before the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council; and nine years ago, then a keen-cut, lean man of thirty-one, junior counsel for the Dominion Government in the Alaska Boundary arbitration.

I think Aime Geoffrion was born to law as the sparks fly upward. He wears his court gown with the severe distinction of an ascetic to whom law is a cold, critical passion. When a youth at Laval and later at McGill, where he was a gold medalist, it's doubtful if he ever got the least bit daft over English poetry or went out bobsledding with the boys to the dingdong of French *chansons*. He would have made an almost terrible student of surgical anatomy. Or in the priesthood he would have spotted a heresy the size of a flea.

Aime Geoffrion is the bloodless impersonation of argument. This may sound like abuse; but it's really a compliment. At the same time I am sure it will not magnificently please "M'sieu Aime." He does not live to be pleased; neither to please—others. So far as he can be judged from half an hour's talk in his office, he has made a practice of vivisectioning other people in the courts. And I can think of no man able to do it with finer nicety of technique.

The office in which the eminent avocat and quite distinguished maker of briefs pays rent is on lower St. James St., below Place d'Armes. It is one of those queer office buildings where the offices rise deck by deck seven decks high round a square that lets in the light. Floor after floor the doors are gilded with French names, among which legal signs are not at all uncommon; but there is no sign towards which men hasten with more expectation than to the sign Geoffrion, Geoffrion & Cusson, Avocats. It is somewhere near the top; a dingy sort of place; at the entrance a long waiting room, telephone booth, clerk's desk and a bench for those who may prefer to wait a good while for M'sieu Aime rather than see anybody else in the firm.

Mr. Geoffrion was not in his office whose windows overlook St. James. He was still at court. He is much at court; perhaps more than any other lawyer in Montreal except Mr. Eugene Lafleur, with whom he sometimes has the last word in expert argument. I had heard considerable about the legal mind of this luminary; with what deadly analysis he is able to rip up the fabric of other counsel's arguments and to cross-examine witnesses into a state of befuddlement. Naturally I had likened him to a tremendously expert spider, quite without animosity or the least ill will towards "M'sieu Aime." I found myself examining all the evidence for and against him while I waited on the bench. Another man came, gabbled some French at the clerk and sat down beside me. He was waiting to see the avocat. Being able to talk French besides being a *bona fide* client, no doubt he would get ahead of the interviewer.

EVERY now and then the clerk talked French at the telephone. French with all its fascination is sometimes singularly irritating. Over the telephone with its quick, impatient "Oui-oui's," it gives the listener a feeling of uneasiness. I knew that Aime Geoffrion, with his academic education, was a master of French—and of English. The big, gloomy courts of the bi-lingual city, greystone almost black with age and weather-wet from the mists of the St. Lawrence, are to him something what St. James Cathedral is to the Archbishop. Without the least unkindness to either of these eminent men, I wished as I waited, that for one day they might be compelled to swap places; mainly that Mr. Geoffrion might find himself involved in a ceremony and a ritual that would tangle him up so that no court finesse could extricate him.

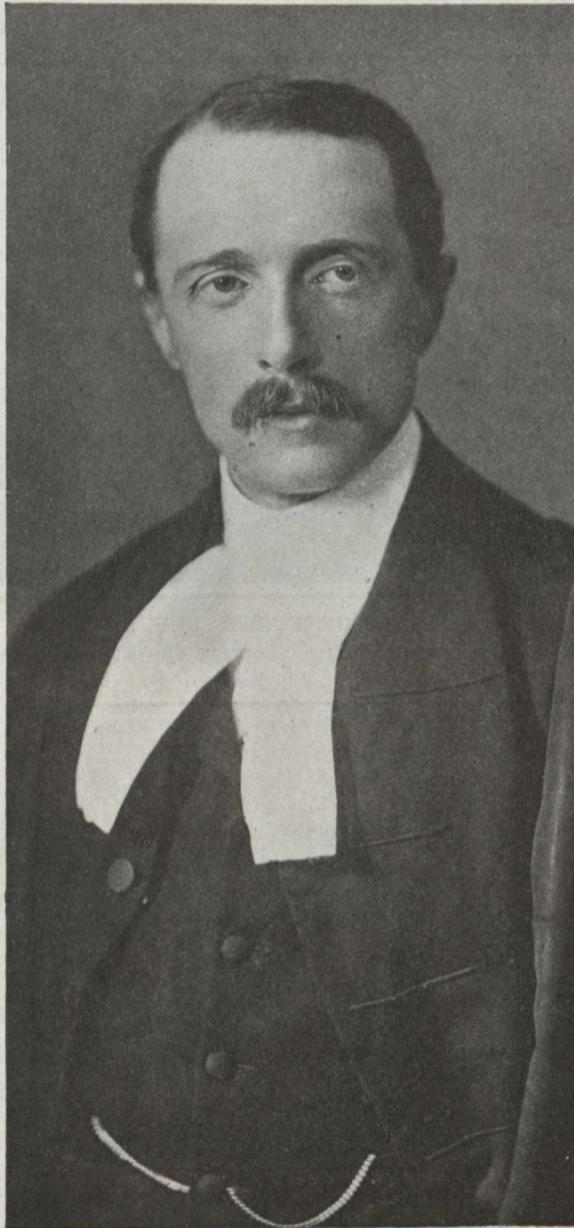
In fact I was a shade nervous about Mr. Geoffrion. Two days I had been thinking up things to ask him that might interest the public in his evidence. The syllabus of briefs I had concocted would have

made the material for a book much more compendious than a French law-book, on the cause and cure of civilization. And the more the man next to me fidgeted and fumbled, and the oftener the clerk jargoned at the telephone, the more I hypnotized myself into the belief that if I could get Mr. Geoffrion to answer lucidly half the questions I had prepared for him I should have evidence enough almost to reconstruct the State.

Soon the client shot out.

I felt certain he would meet Mr. Geoffrion.

In five minutes he came back, at the heels of a



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very swift, somewhat lean personage carrying a brief-bag. They hustled into a front office, where they were soon engaged in a loud parley in English.

So if this was Aime Geoffrion, he obviously had English-speaking clients; though there are in Montreal plenty of English lawyers. Also it was clear that Mr. Geoffrion could use the English language much more fluently and discriminately than his client. He spoke like a trip-hammer. Out of every ten words at least seven were his. There was evidently no time to lose. The clients' doubts must be cleared up more swiftly than a nor-wester cleans up a cloud.

The clerk interrupted at the door—

"Long-distawnce, M'sieu Aime?"

For a minute and thirteen and three-quarter seconds the avocat held a conversation in English. Back to the office again. Soon the client had all his fog removed. He went out. The clerk signified that M'sieu Aime was now at liberty. I went in; intimating, without explicitly saying so, that I would like to cross-examine him upon a few subjects of interest to other people.

"Why?"

There is one kind of silence that follows the lightning; and a silence that succeeds to the racket of an automobile at two a.m. And there is the singular, uncomfortable, almost creepy stillness that comes after a query by Aime Geoffrion. I knew at once that I was a sheer intrusion, if not a rank impertinence. There was no reason why any newspaper should seek to know anything from the avocat of St. James. Yet here he was consuming valuable time trying to find out why he was to be interviewed.

However, he sat down. So did I.

THE court was opened. Aime Geoffrion was supposedly in the witness box; when he had no earthly idea what was the case upon which he was expected to give evidence. He leaned his thin, intellectual face upon his tapering white fingers and looked through the crannies of my soul. He did not need to say how foolish I looked to him. I cannot describe how bloodlessly uncanny he felt to me.

To make himself still more disquieting he smiled. It was a freezing, Arctic smile.

"Well—I am ready. What do you wish to ask me?"

Candidly there wasn't anything I wanted to ask Aime Geoffrion, K.C. I should have preferred to escort my hat to the kindly street.

"Your own profession—uh, there should be—in fact I'm quite sure there are—some (frog in the throat)—some points of interest—"

He executed a scientific squirm in his low, big chair, crossed his legs, and the left foot bobbed in scornful impatience.

"I don't see why the public have the remotest interest in what a lawyer thinks about law," he said, cuttingly.

Another of those creepy silences.

"Well—you still continue to prefer law to—that is you have never been tempted to go into—business?"

"But what has that to do with the public?"

He was perfectly right. I was maligning the poor public to suppose that any prying into Mr. Geoffrion's affairs could be interesting to any but the writer of an obituary; and Mr. Geoffrion is just forty years of age, with every obvious intention of cross-examining other people for a good many years to come.

"Except that many lawyers make law a sort of stepping-stone or side issue to business that they think they can make more out of than at law."

It seemed at least a trifle ironical that the French advocate should use very much better English than his interviewer. However, I fancy he enjoyed the spectacle; and perhaps in some pity for my blundering efforts to draw him out he condescended to say.

"Well, I studied for the bar. I went into law. I am still in law, and I make my living by it. I suppose I like it or I should be doing something else. But what of that?"

"Oh, nothing. No—but the practice of law is perhaps different now from what it was?"

"In what way do you mean?"

THE only other sort of person that could come back with such cutting polite rejoinders is a perfectly aristocratic lady who finds herself suddenly compelled to converse with a stenographer. However,

"For instance, Mr. Geoffrion, big corporations have had some influence on legal practice, have they not?"

"Yes, corporations are intricate affairs. But what does it matter?"

"Have they not considerably modified the actual business of the country; so that—?"

He gave a shrug.

"I do not know that. I am not an economist."

"But I suppose that a great lawyer is always a student of economy."

He seemed to be much more fascinating now than the poster picture of the black boy that points his finger at you for a block and a half along the street.

"Oh, a lawyer is to some extent jack of all trades and master of none. To-day he may be posted upon one subject. To-morrow something else may obliterate it from his mind. There is nothing strange about that."

"Then you have some remote resemblance to a journalist?"