

DIS-FRENCHISING CANADIANS

WHEN the press depicted Sam Genest as fanning the flames of racial prejudice, the arch-agitator of a movement designed to disturb the peace, if not the security, of the country, I began to suspect that there was more in the bilingual question than had appeared in the newspapers. I had known Genest fifteen or twenty years, and if he had turned demagogue since last we met it was clearly in defiance of the intention of nature.

Sam Genest is not built for conspiracy. His stature is short, his shoulders broad, and his figure well-knit, save for a slight and not unbecoming, but quite unconspirator-like embonpoint. His voice is soft and sympathetic, and his "eyes were made for laughing, and do their part." Sam Genest has humour—broad, wholesome humour—wit untinged with bitterness; and many a time in the old days I have sought him as one seeks a cure for the blues, or searches for a breath of fresh air on a sultry day. And Genest is generous. He draws a modest stipend from a sometimes close-fisted government, and belongs to that non-commercial school of civil servants, which is continuously turning inside-out, seldom-filled pockets to relieve the needs of others. We had discussed Canada's race question long before Dr. Merchant's report had been printed, or Rule No. 17 devised, and I can bear witness to his tolerance. He would be the last to impose an intolerant measure upon the men of another race, and counts his English-speaking friends as if born to the tongue.

Sam Genest may not be a towering genius, like another Sam of whom we know; but, like the other Sam, he has ability, culture and education. When Genest's character is fully analyzed and its qualities set forth for inspection, it is his wholesomeness and sincerity which stand in boldest relief.

"One of those happy souls who are the salt of the earth, And without whom this world would smell like what it is—a tomb; Who is what others SEEM."

In recent years my work had taken me to Ottawa only once in a while, and I had not met my old friend since he had come into fame as leader of the Ottawa Bilingual Movement. As from the steps of the "Chateau Laurier" I watched the striking school children march by, my mind turned to Genest, even before I saw him a short distance away approaching from Wellington Street.

"The old gentleman with the scythe and the hour-glass" had been kind to Genest, and usually is to people of his sort. There were evident, the old-time confident, resolute bearing; the same quick step and jaunty air; not the same fat cigar, it is true, but one that looked familiar, between his teeth. If it were not for a generous sprinkling of grey hairs, I would have thought it only yesterday we met and swapped stories of the bright side of life.

Together we walked to the spacious rotunda of the hotel and sank back into one of the comfortable benches in a quiet corner.

"Sam," I said, "you are being talked about."

My comment opened the flood gates of bilingualism. His questions were terse, his answers decisive, and the language! I wish I could repeat, word for word, the things that Sam Genest said to me that day many months ago in the "Chateau Laurier." When he pressed for the information that I had read Rule No. 17, I was compelled to acknowledge that I had not done so.

"It's always the same story with you English-speaking people," said Sam. "You are so busy with your own affairs there is neither time nor inclination to enquire into matters that do not directly affect your self-interest. Or, perhaps, it is the oppression in Belgium that fills your mind to the exclusion of the oppression at home," he added, with what I thought to be a touch of sarcasm.

"But I am willing to read it," I urged, "or to have you explain it." I added, on second thought. The numerical name of the thing gave me an unpleasant foretaste of something technical, complicated, and difficult to understand.

"Very well! Here is a copy," said Sam, extracting a paper from his inside pocket. "I always carry a copy. It is the best justification of our cause."

I read slowly the circular of Instruction No. 17, issued by the Department of Education for the Province. When I had finished, Genest took the paper from my hand.

"Do you understand it?" he asked.

"Not entirely."

"It isn't a masterpiece of the English language. Let

Sam Genest Reads Rule No. 17 to Me

By W. H. MOORE

me state in plain words its meaning. The rule entirely prohibits French-Canadian children from being taught arithmetic, geography, history, or general school subjects in the French language. May I read to you the section that says so," His voice steadied into seriousness as he read:

"In the case of French-speaking pupils, French may be used as the language of instruction and communication; but such use of French shall not be continued beyond Form 1, excepting that on the approval of the Chief Inspector it may also be used as the language of instruction and communication in the case of pupils beyond Form 1 who are unable to speak and understand the English language."

"The design of the Rule," commented Sam, "is to Anglicize the French-Canadians; and that would be the effect, too, if we were to submit to it. But we don't want to be Anglicized."

"You believe that an attempt is being made to dis-frenchise you," I suggested.

Genest looked at me suspiciously. "We want to remain just what we are," he said, "Canadians speaking French, and Britishers. The British Empire is broad enough to include scores of races, each speaking its own language, and surely it has room for us."

"How about the English language?" I asked.

"We learn it!" he exclaimed, "the better educated because they want access to its culture, and appreciate the friendships of English-speaking Canadians; and all of us in Ontario because of self-interest; the business man for more business, the labourer for better wages."

"BUT we are wandering from Rule No. 17, Sam," I ventured. "Our press at home says that it does not take away or interfere with the right of an education in the French language."

"Under Rule No. 17, provision is made for the French language to be taught, it is true, but only to pupils during their first two years at school. Afterwards, when they are six or seven years old, the subjects of the school curriculum may not be taught in French; the language of instruction and communication is to be exclusively English, except under special circumstances. In other words, while French may be taught, the children may not be educated in French."

"Rather an anomaly?" I questioned.

"Not at all. Let me give you an illustration. The child is concerned the first two years at school with the alphabet and in learning to read and write. This must be done before it is ready to take up its general education or to become acquainted with arithmetic, geography, and history; the period is past in which the language of communication may be French, and so these subjects are taught exclusively in the English language, except under the special circumstances to which I have referred, and which the inspector, not the teacher, must determine: very special circumstances, you must know."

Genest again picked up the circular of instruction.

"Let me read this clause to you," he asked, "and you will see the general provision that has been made for the teaching of French:

"The provision for such instruction in French in the time-table of the school, shall be subject to the approval and direction of the chief inspector, and shall not on any day exceed one hour in each class-room, except where the time is increased upon the order of the chief inspector."

The study of French after the first two years becomes simply one of the subjects in the course, as is history."

"Or Latin, when you and I went to high school."

"Exactly," he agreed.

I asked myself: "How much Latin do you remember?" and for a moment lost the thread of his remarks in an attempt to run over some of the easier declensions of Latin nouns, and when I hesitated, stumbled, and stopped, it came forcibly home to me that the pupils of the bilingual schools would know little French under this arrangement, if they were not apter pupils at French than I had been at Latin; and then I picked up Sam again.

"It is charged against French-Canadians that we are not good traders, are not quick at figures, are poor financiers, and possibly there is something in the charge. Are we to become more skilful by being compelled to learn all of our arithmetic in a tongue with which we cannot possibly be as familiar as that

of our mothers? Is that in the interests of the State?"

I did not answer, and Genest continued. "And this is not the worst. Provision is made that even these scant privileges are denied to communities in which French-Canadians are a majority and desire education in French. Clause No. 4 of the Department's Regulations commences: 'In schools where French has hitherto been a subject of study, the public or the separate school board, as the case may be, may provide,' and then sets forth the conditions for instruction in French grammar, reading, and composition. This clause is designed to confine the teaching of French in schools established before 1912, the year in which Rule No. 17 was promulgated, and consequently to proscribe the French language in all other schools."

"BUT that has been denied," I objected.

"None the less, I can cite you applications for leave to teach French from school districts composed wholly or very largely of French-Canadian children, which the Department has refused under this clause of the regulation."

"And what is to be done?" I asked.

"Obtain our rights," he replied, confidently.

"How?"

"I can't tell you how, and can't tell you when, but I have a firm belief in the ultimate success of our cause. In the end, truth must prevail. We have carried our case to the Government, and it has listened patiently, but unsympathetically; we have appealed to the courts and are confident they will grant some relief; but it is to our English-speaking compatriots' sense of fair play that we would appeal, if we could; but the public ear is reached only through the press, and the press is against us."

"Why should it be against you?" I enquired.

"Because the press is political," he replied. "How many daily papers can you name that are neither Grit nor Tory? Their business is with majorities, not minorities."

"It looks to me as if you were crusading for an already lost cause."

Sam's voice trembled with emotion when he replied: "We simply can't lose. Our language is as dear, dearer than, life itself. We are proud of the achievements accomplished in its name in this land of our forefathers; we are proud of our church, our homes, our clubs, and our friendships, and the various activities that go to make up life, and they are all inextricably bound up with our language. It may mean a long, hard struggle. We may have to undergo persecution, imprisonment, loss of life—who knows? But we are men. We will leave to our children and our children's children the beautiful language we inherited from our forefathers."

There was no mistaking the fact: my old friend Genest had become a man with a cause. Years had brought maturity and leadership, responsibility. There was a touch of bitterness, but no bombast, a great yearning to be of service in the preservation of his mother tongue, "the amber in which a thousand precious and subtle thoughts have been safely embedded and preserved." Self-interest, party politics, the great war itself, were thrust back into the subconscious mind of Sam Genest by the all-powerful conviction that he and his people were facing racial annihilation.

"You will help us, won't you?" he pleaded. "You have years of friendship with Canadians, the men of our race. You know the beauty of our home-life; you know our failings and our good points alike."

"It is not help from me you require. Turn to the men of influence, the men behind the big daily papers, the Ontario Government, the leader of the Opposition and his Inner Circle, the members of the Legislature," I replied.

"We have tried them, the politicians and the press, and failed," answered Genest, wearily. "The Conservatives may conserve and the Liberals may be liberal, but we fail to recognize the principles of the parties by the treatment of the French language in the Province of Ontario. We are only a people one to ten in the population of the province, mainly farmers, scattered along the banks of the Ottawa up into the great hinterland of Ontario, scarcely two hundred and fifty thousand people all told. We are in need of help, desperately in need, and you can at least raise your voice in our behalf."

"Why should I take part in the heated bilingual controversy?" I asked myself that night after Genest had left, and I have repeated the question many times since. I am neither politician nor journalist; and, by the custom of the country, great national