

The Canadianising of Sam MacPhail

SKETCH NO. I.—SOME CANADIAN LANDLADIES.

By Robert Watson

Author of "My Brave and Gallant Gentleman," "The Girl of O. K. Valley," etc.

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We welcome, as we are confident readers of the British Columbia Monthly will, this first of a series of sketches to be contributed to this magazine by Mr. Robert Watson, the British Columbia novelist, at present at Vernon, B. C.

Mr. Watson's first book, "My Brave and Gallant Gentleman," which had a large sale, has just been followed by a second, "The Girl of O. K. Valley," a review of which we hope to publish in our next issue.—(Ed. B.C.M.)

Looking for lodgings for the first time in my life and in a city seven thousand miles from the land that gave me birth was to me like going out to a cemetery to choose my grave. But, after I had inspected sixty or seventy bedrooms and over half that number of landladies, I got as calloused to the job as if I had been at it from birth.

I can remember calling at one place named Lodge Something-or-other. The lady of the house much regretted that all the first and second floor bedrooms were already occupied; but, as I was looking for a room at a moderate charge, maybe I would not object to a cubby-hole in the garret which I could have for the very modest sum of fifty-five dollars a month, breakfast, supper and view of the Bay included;—and that, mark you, was quite a few years before we knew anything of the H. C. of L.

At that time I was earning—well, not much more than fifty-five per month, consequently I was unable to avail myself of such generous hospitality.

That landlady was quite nice about it, though. From the full distance of the hallway she instructed me on how to open the front door as I was going out.

Following this, a lady acquaintance recommended me to try a Mrs. Sorrell, who had been married only recently. Mrs. Sorrell's husband ran a lumber mill up the coast somewhere and he was away from home most of his time. Mrs. Sorrell did not really require to take in boarders, but, in exchange for my services as watchdog, she was willing to have me on trial, as a guest; with room, breakfast and supper for twenty-five dollars a month.

I knew instinctively that this was too good to be true, but, in a moment of rashness, I accepted the offer.

My first morning there, she entertained me at breakfast, expressing the hopes that I did not drink, that I kept good hours; that I would not mind if she happened to be out some evenings at supper-time so long as she left 'something cold' for me; that I would chop a little wood for her occasionally and start the fire in the mornings before she came down, as she had such a horror of cold.

She gave me her history. She had been the friend and confidante of duchesses and other titled ladies in the Old Land. She had come out here on a tour; had met her husband in the north and had married him simply because he had 'gone off his head' about her and had threatened to do away with himself if she refused him.

In the circumstances, what was there left for her to do?

At meal times, Mrs. Sorrell had a habit of yawning and rising to clear away the dishes before I had properly started.

The lady friend who was instrumental in my settling there called one day and was informed by Mrs. Sorrell that it looked as if I did not take any mid-day meal down town, as I ate more at one sitting that she and her husband did combined.

I did, too—but I contend that my appetite is very ordinary for a young man who is fond of exercise.

About this time, I was fortunate in falling in with one, Jim McDougall. He had just taken a room in a house in the suburbs. If I cared to join him and share with him, it would prove to our financial as well as to our mutual benefit.

I jumped at the offer, and Jim and I lodged with Mrs. Sands for the three years that immediately followed.

Mrs. Sands was small and round, voluble, tremendously energetic and, of course, a Scot. Despite her thirty years' residence in Canada, she still retained a firm grip of the Doric.

George—that was her husband—was a gaunt, easy-going, round-shouldered individual, who seemed to be forever striking matches in an endeavour to relight a pipe that was always going out on him. He coughed and wheezed all the time he was awake and half the time he was asleep.

It would have been hazardous to guess whether the cough would carry him off or he the cough. According to George, they had been 'bosom friends for twenty-eight years, so he hoped 'they would slip awa' thegither.'

As he had a nest-egg in the bank, George did not trouble himself about any outside occupation. He was slow, as Mrs. Sands was quick. His stock answer to all her questions was 'Ay,—ay.'

All day long she could be heard at him, rousing him and urging him to the completion of his duties.

"George—ha'e ye got the beds made?" she would shout up the stairs.

"Ay, ay," would come the laconic answer, as he sat on the edge of a bed behind a newspaper he had found in the room.

"Hae ye got the rooms sweepit oot?"

"Ay,—ay," he would answer again, without having the slightest notion what his wife was saying.

In a few moments more her head would pop round the corner of the doorway and George would scramble up, drop the paper and resume his chores.

"I kent it," she would nag. "Here ye are, eleven o'clock and no' a hand's turn done yet." She would put her knuckles against her haunches and look at him in scorn. "My! I'm richt glad I'm no' a man."

As soon as George showed face in the kitchen, she would be at him again from sheer habit.

"George,—ha'e ye cleaned oot the chicken hoose?"

"Ay, ay!" (George is evidently thinking of the time he did it the week previously).

"George,—bring up some coal and firewood."

"Ay,—ay!"

"George!—ha'e ye fixed the furnace?"

"Ay,—ay!" (George is now referring to his pipe).

But George simply kept along with an undisturbed, unhurried, calm.

"Och!—I don't mind her, ye ken," he confided to me, with a cough, one day when she was out of earshot. "I'm weel used to her by this time. (Interval for pipe lighting and sucking). "She canna help hersel', poor body." (cough). "She's worse i' the bark than she is i' the bite." (Strong pulling at pipe and prolonged coughing). "She's a smart yin though. That I'm tellin' you."

Mrs. Sands was tantalisingly clean. A speck of dirt on the bed-sheets and they were whipped off and new ones on in their place before you could think. She even went the length of furnishing Jim and me with a waste-paper basket and instructed us carefully on how to use it.

'The boys,' as she lovingly called us, occupied the star chamber. Our furnishings were simple, but useful; consist-