

PROMINENT CANADIANS.—XVIII.

THE HONOURABLE WILFRID LAURIER, M.P.

FROM the banks of the Loire, in the ancient Province of Anjou, came a French family bearing the name of Laurier, to settle on the shores of the blue St. Lawrence, in 1650. The spot they selected for their new home was the seigniory of Lachenaie, in the county of L'Assomption, and it was at St. Lin, in the same seigniory, that the present leader of the Canadian Liberal party in the House of Commons was born, on 20th November, 1841. In a Chamber where the average age of the members is above fifty, and where the First Minister is a patriarch in years, the Hon. Wilfrid Laurier may still be classed as a young man. In appearance he does not show the weight of the cares of state; for his dark hair is full and wavy, his tall and rather slender figure is straight as an arrow, and with his clean-shaven face, he might easily be taken for one of the youngest members of the House.

Although both his father and grandfather were land surveyors, he did not adopt the same profession, but after leaving L'Assomption College he pursued a course of legal studies in Montreal, in the office of Hon. R. Lafamme. During this period he took the law course at McGill University, and received the degree of B.C.L. in 1864. He was called to the Quebec Bar in 1865, and began the practice of the law in Montreal; but his health was impaired by his application to study, and he soon after abandoned the law and entered upon the career of journalism, as editor of *Le Dériveur*, a Liberal newspaper published in Arthabaskaville. It was not long, however, before he was able to begin the practice of the law in his new home, and he speedily built up a large business, which his law firm still enjoys. It was not likely that abilities of so high an order as his would be long overlooked by the leaders of the Liberal party, and Mr. Laurier was accordingly selected in 1871, as a candidate for the county of Drummond and Arthabaska in the Quebec Legislature, and was triumphantly elected. He remained in the Provincial House for three years, and the system of Dual Representation, which at that time permitted members of the Commons to hold seats in the Local Legislatures, gave him colleagues of brilliancy and experience. He fleshed his maiden sword in contests with Messrs. Cartier, Cauchon, and Langevin, and among his minor antagonists stood the young Conservative member for Terrebonne, who is his senior by only a year, and who again faces him as Secretary of State in the House of Commons. It cannot be doubted that the presence of such remarkable men amongst the Liberal Opposition in Quebec as Mr. Holton, Mr. Fournier, and Mr. Joly did much to mould the opinions of their young follower from Drummond and Arthabaska, who was destined soon to occupy a higher political position than any of them ever reached.

When Mr. Mackenzie made his successful appeal to the country in 1874, he sought out the young deputy whose reputation had been so firmly established by his success in the Quebec Legislature, and persuaded him to contest his own county for the Ottawa seat. Mr. Laurier responded to the call, and entered the House of Commons, after a keen contest, as member for Drummond and Arthabaska.

Those who were present on 30th March, 1874, when the Address was moved in reply to the Speech from the Throne, witnessed a remarkable display of oratory. The mover was Thomas Moss, the seconder was Wilfrid Laurier. The reputation of each was great. Mr. Moss had achieved the most distinguished successes at the University of Toronto, and had reached a high position at the Bar. He was marked out by all who knew him for still higher things, and although afterwards cut off in the prime of life, he lived to adorn the highest judicial position in Ontario. The expectations of the audience were not disappointed. If the English speech of Mr. Moss was a splendid effort, no less did the charm of Mr. Laurier's eloquence in his native tongue captivate the listeners. The praises accorded to these two maiden speeches were not the mere conventional compliments, always considered appropriate on such occasions.

The functions of a private member of the House of Commons who is one of a large majority supporting a Ministry are not of colossal importance. It is not safe for him to criticise in public the measures of the Administration, for which, as a party man, he may have to give a vote. His private remonstrances are often unavailing, and the spectacle is frequently witnessed of members voting for Government measures, which they may consider inexpedient and unnecessary, and to the details of which they may strongly object. It is to be hoped that the party whip does not often discipline members to desert a principle they value.

If a Government supporter is not free to attack Ministerial measures, neither is he at liberty to put himself forward, unasked, as their champion. The gentlemen of the Treasury benches are apt to resent a gratuitous defence of their policy, because it may commit them to untenable positions. On the whole, where a measure is matured after full consideration in the secret conclave of Ministers, it is seldom a safe policy for an uninitiated supporter to rush forward to defend it in debate.

For such reasons Mr. Laurier had but a moderate opportunity to display his ability in the House of Commons between 1874 and 1877. In July of the latter year, he responded to the invitation of the Liberals of Quebec City, to deliver an address on "Political Liberalism." The whole ground was covered by Mr. Laurier in this remarkable pronouncement. His party had for years been traduced as revolutionists of the most extreme Parisian school, as teaching doctrines subversive alike of public order, and of all religion. Many simple souls believed this slander, and among others the parish priests were very generally filled with genuine horror and alarm at any prospect of political success for the Quebec Liberals, either in Dominion or Provincial affairs. No man in Canada was better qualified to correct this error than Mr. Laurier. He had, from his earliest years,

been a profound student of English constitutional history and an ardent admirer of the heroic struggles for liberty by the English people. It was upon that model he desired to mould Canadian liberties, and to win by purely constitutional means every advance in freedom and progressive development for his country. In his own words spoken to the Quebec Liberals:—"We are a happy and free people; we owe this freedom to the Liberal institutions which govern us, which we owe to our forefathers and to the wisdom of the Mother Country. The policy of the Liberal party is to guard these institutions, to defend and propagate them, and under the rule of these institutions to develop the latent resources of our country. Such is the policy of the Liberal party, and it has no other."

Mr. Laurier entered Mr. Mackenzie's Cabinet, as Minister of Inland Revenue, in September, 1877, and was defeated when he went back for re-election. He was at once offered East Quebec, and has ever since sat for that important constituency, holding it by immense majorities. At a caucus of the Dominion Opposition, held towards the end of the Session of 1887, Mr. Laurier was unanimously chosen as leader of the Party in the place of Hon. E. Blake, who resigned on account of ill-health.

The position of the French-Canadian people is entirely unique. Separated from their ancestral home by the lapse of nearly ten generations of men, and living under a foreign flag, they have preserved with pious pride the language, the creed, and many of the customs of old Normandy and Bretagne, with more fidelity than their fellow-countrymen who remained behind. The France of to-day is not the France of old, nor does it specially attract the Franco-Canadians. Yet they cannot feel for England the sympathy of race. Cut off then, as they are, from any other country but Canada, they feel an intense love for their native land. They fought for their dear firesides under Montcalm against the Union Jack; and they fought for them again beneath the folds of the English flag under DeSalaberry. There are no truer Canadians to-day, and none more loyal to the free institutions which we possess, than our French-speaking fellow-citizens. This idea has often been eloquently expressed by Mr. Laurier. When, in 1887, he seconded the Jubilee address to the Queen, the whole House rang with plaudits elicited by his eloquent and manly expressions of loyalty to the Queen, and speaking for his own race he said:—"It is a great pleasure to me to say that if her Canadian subjects ought to be grateful to her Majesty, there are none of them who ought to be so grateful to her as her subjects of French origin, because there is no class of her subjects who have so profited by the era of liberty which was ushered in by her ascension to the throne." This loyalty, founded on reason and gratitude, is more likely to be enduring than the hysterical and jingo loyalty, which occasionally develops itself among some of her Majesty's subjects in Canada.

As a Parliamentary orator, it is conceded by friend and opponent alike, that Mr. Laurier is unequalled in Canada to-day. When, in 1886, he was pleading the cause of the Half-breeds of the North-West, he held the House spell-bound from the beginning to the end of his speech. It was of that effort Mr. Blake spoke when he said:—"My honourable friend, not content with having, for this long time, in his own tongue, borne away the palm of Parliamentary eloquence, has invaded ours; and in that field has pronounced a speech which, in my humble judgment, merits this compliment, because it is the truth, that it was the finest Parliamentary speech ever pronounced in the Parliament of Canada since Confederation."

Besides his fine presence, pleasing voice, and admirable manner, Mr. Laurier never fails to elevate his subject to a high plane, to brighten it by illustrations drawn from a varied knowledge of men and books, and often to give, in a few condensed phrases, the cream of many arguments. The announcement that he is likely to speak is always the signal for a crowded house and a well-filled gallery. It is certainly a marvel that any man should be able to acquire such remarkable command over the niceties of a foreign tongue.

Mere eloquence alone does not fit a public man for the leadership of a party. An alert and intelligent interest in public business is indispensable, and during the first session of Mr. Laurier's leadership he has already shown himself entirely qualified in this respect. But, after all, to be a true leader of men, qualities of the heart are at least as requisite as intellectual pre-eminence. Kindly instincts, also, often lead to a treatment of political opponents, which disarms them more effectually than the keenest weapons of logic, or the fiercest onslaughts of invective. Truly there are necessary and sharp differences of opinion to be expressed on public questions, and it is not in human nature that blow should not be returned for blow. But we are taught by the example of all the greatest among the statesmen of England, that it is possible in the midst of the political strife, in the very din and shock of the conflict, so to deal with public questions as to denounce measures rather than men, and that no good cause requires that personal wounds should be inflicted upon an adversary. An unerring and kindly natural instinct has prevented Mr. Laurier from making an enemy of a political opponent during his public career, and perhaps this gives him more power in the House of Commons than all his eloquence. On his own side, he is the sympathetic friend, as well as the trusted leader, of every individual member; on the other side, he is, by all, honoured, respected, and admired.

J. D. EDGAR.

It has generally been believed that the reduction in average height of French soldiers which followed Napoleon's wars, due, of course, to the immense slaughter in those campaigns, made all of those soldiers the shortest in Europe. But, according to a high medical and military authority in Russia, the minimum height of the Russian and the French conscript is about equal—five feet; while in most other European countries the minimum ranges from five feet one inch to five feet three inches.