

Personalities and Problems

No. 23—Sir William Macdonald

Shrewd Manufacturer, Educational Philanthropist, and the Most Independent Character in America

By AUGUSTUS BRIDLE

ONCE, upon a time a large Methodist church in Canada was in sore need of immediate funds. The matter had been taken up at a General Conference. It was decided that something must be done by the entire Methodist connection, if the big, beautiful church were to be saved to the honour of John Wesley.

In cases of this kind it is the influential and sometimes wealthy laymen that save the day. One of these, a delegate to the Conference, being constituted one of a committee for the raising of funds, bethought him of sundry efficiently rich men, not only Methodists, who might be willing to lend a hand and a few dollars. Chief among these was a little, oldish and very active man who had made millions from tobacco manufacturing and was beginning to get rid of millions in the cause of education.

That man intended for a prop to Methodism was Sir William Macdonald, who, though born a Roman Catholic, takes no particular interest in any church.

So the committee-man paid a call at the then somewhat antiquated offices occupied by the tobacco emperor. He sent in his card and was admitted to see the philanthropist.

"Yes—what would you have me do for you?" was the quick question. No time to beat about the bush or ask questions about health or business or gossip about the weather or politics. Right to the point and hard as a hammer.

"Well, Sir William, the General Conference of the Methodist Church in Canada—"

Thereafter followed an outline of the case, which should have been fundamental enough to appeal to any one with such an ease of money-giving as this opulent citizen of Montreal. But all the while the brief recital went on the delegate observed that the thin, shrewd lines in the millionaire's face were tightening, and queer Scotch crinkles were coming into his brows. Then of a sudden a cold lightning shot from his eyes.

"I believe, sir, that Mr. —" (mentioning a prominent merchant in a western Ontario city) "is a very heavy buyer of your tobaccos."

"Yes. He is."

"Well, he is particularly interested in this matter and of course did not feel like broaching the matter to you himself. So he has asked me to—"

"Yes!" snapped the magnate. "I understand you. Wait a moment."

He called his chief clerk.

"Find out at once—what our year's shipments of tobacco to Mr. — amount to, and in what shape the account stands."

"Yes, sir."

The clerk went at the books. This seemed encouraging to the delegate, who sat and said no more, casting up in his mind that in all probability at least a thousand dollars would be the outcome of this interview. Sir William Macdonald was known to be a very dour, unemotional man. Deeds, not words, with him. Besides—his generosity was not limited to one denomination—

But here was the clerk.

"I find, sir, that—"

THE amount of tobacco shipped annually in large lots to this customer of Mr. Macdonald's was quoted in quite staggeringly big figures. The delegate smiled; saying to himself, "Well, this surely ought to fetch him. When a prominent Methodist merchant handles one firm's tobaccos exclusively in such large lots—"

When suddenly the tobacco king's voice snapped in.

"Yes, tell Mr. — that his account with this firm is closed."

"I beg pardon, sir?"

"Write Mr. — that this firm desires to have no further dealings with him."

"Y—yes, sir."

"I am sorry," was the final reply to the delegate, "but there is no account carried by this house big enough to warrant making it the pretext for an appeal to our philanthropy. I hope I have not taken up too much of your valuable time. Good-day!"

The donation was not forthcoming. Not as in the charmed story books did the magnate's check for a thousand reach the merchant accompanied by regrets that the account had been so peremptorily closed. And the account was speedily opened again at the request of the merchant, who, in spite of the rebuff, could not afford to do business without the Macdonald tobacco—which was a sheer matter of business with him as it was with the manufacturer.

For there was no sentiment then in Sir William Macdonald. Neither was there any when he was a youth. Nor is there any now in Sir William Macdonald, aged eighty-two and the most remarkable personality in all Canadian manufacturing. With this astonishing Scotch-Canadian, born in Prince Edward Island, business is business. Grandson of a U. E. Loyalist military officer though he is, he is obsessed by no vague emotions during business hours; neither afterwards, nor before. A citizen of Montreal since he was the age of 23, he never has been known to merge his peculiar identity in

any cause, or impair his tremendous efficiency by any indiscreet enthusiasms.

Sir William Macdonald has somewhat the charmed mystery of the Count of Monte Cristo. If he were ever to be made honorary chief of an Indian tribe he would be soubriqueted as "Man-who-makes-Tobacco" or "Man-who-gives-money-away." Nobody in Montreal knows explicitly and intimately very much about the tobacco king and premier money-giver of this country; the man who made millions out of tobacco and gave millions to the cause of education; who is looked up to at McGill University as a patron saint of learning, at Macdonald Agricultural College and Normal school up at St. Anne de Bellevue as an educational creator, at Macdonald College and the O. A. C. in Guelph, Ont., as the inventor of domestic science and the practical apostle of consolidated rural schools in four sections of Canada.

Tobacco and education; never have nicotine and human improvement in the name of science and modern invention been so connoted together. When Sir Walter Raleigh discovered on the island of Tobago the fragrant, smokable weed that was to revolutionize the male half of humanity, he never dreamed that in the chief colony of the empire in whose name he discovered tobacco, there should arise a Scotchman that would make tobacco the key to the open door of truth.

Of course Sir William mortally hates newspaper publicity. If he sees or hears about this article he will be displeased. He has been written about a good deal at random. He has never encouraged it. Not because he despises newspapers, but because he is the most independent man that ever lived in this country. He is *sui generis*, William Macdonald—however he came to permit Queen Victoria to prefix that with a "Sir" is beyond those who know him best. Yet he is the one rich man not in public or semi-public life in Montreal about whom the tongues of men are most diligent. It is many years now since any accredited or authorized photograph of Sir William appeared in print. The one used in the *Courier* week before last was many years old. The picture on this page was a snapshot taken when the tobacco philanthropist was so busy looking up at an airship that he couldn't see the camera; or he would have either paid for suppression of the negative or smashed the machine and paid damages.

AND that is a good picture of Sir William, as he was a couple of years ago; and as he is now. A very old, much shrunken-up man who dodges hastily about Montreal from the Guardian Building, where his offices are, to McGill University, where his millions are invested; to his house, not regarded as a famous resort, for he has not the polite hobbies of some millionaires and was never even domesticated enough to get married.

How they do talk about him in Montreal. Always respectfully. Nobody ever heard of Sir William in any discreditable transaction. He has been in commercial scimmages. He always came out top of the heap. He has a vast concern engaged in the manufacture of tobacco in which branch of commerce he is the king in this country and has few rivals anywhere. He has his own odd ideas as to how the business should be conducted, and there isn't a man or woman on the staff, nor a wheel in the works, nor scarce a brick in the walls that doesn't feel prepared to quake at the personality of Sir William.

And he avoids interviewers. I didn't expect to get the opportunity for a long conversation. When I went to the office on the seventh floor of the Guardian Building, on St. James St., I found it a very quiet place; so peaceful that it might have been taken for the office of a cemetery trust or the sanctum of a Peace Conference. Three light and airy large rooms, not in the least different in design from the average modern office; disappointingly modern even to being commonplace; when one had been led to expect that the tobacco philanthropist would have the queerest, ricketiest, most unconformable offices in town. I expected to find him in a remote cranny of a dark building, sternly holding the



Snapshot of Sir William Macdonald (Left) When He Was so Busy Watching the Flight of an Airship That He Couldn't See the Camera.