

## THE LIFE OF SIR WILFRID LAURIER--2

As a young man of 25 Sir Wilfrid Laurier showed his courage and the strength of his convictions in undertaking the editorship of the Rouge organ "Le Defricheur" (The Pioneer). This task he carried on at Arthabaska-ville for six months in the teeth of the religious authorities of the district who did not perceive, as Professor Skelton says, that the editor's "quarrel was with ecclesiastical pretensions, not with religion." Laurier's paper flickered out under persecution, and thus was lost, and yet not altogether lost, his first bout with bigotry. The grand struggle was to come in the following decade.

In 1871 the ultramontane party dominating the Quebec Church issued "The Catholic Programme." "It sought," says Mr. Skelton, "to lay down a policy to govern all good Catholics in the coming elections. The doctrine of the separation of Church and State, the document declared, was impious and absurd. On the contrary, the authorities of the state, and the electors who chose them, must act in perfect accord with the teachings of the Church, and endeavor to safeguard its interests by making such changes in the laws as the bishops might demand. To secure this end the Conservative party must be supported . . . The right of the clergy to intervene in politics was upheld."

So Laurier, then a candidate for the Quebec Legislature, was branded for his Liberalism, for his championship of individual liberty, as "impious and absurd." And the ultramontanes found in 1871, as in 1911 and since, their natural allies in the Conservative party. History repeats itself.

The Liberals in Quebec had a hard fight against clerical intolerance and interference. In 1873 and 1875 the bishops issued pastorals, and priests interfered improperly in elections both provincial and federal, in support of "The Catholic Programme," and against Liberals or Liberalism. Priests threatened voters with eternal punishment if they went Liberal. If Liberal candidates announced themselves as not anti-clerical but merely opposed to such undue clerical pressure, if they called themselves "moderate Liberals" in order to mollify the wrath ecclesiastic, a Chambly priest was ready to say that "moderate is only another term for liar." Another priest, referring to the colors of the two parties, blue (Conservative) and rouge (Liberal), declared with French or fanatic vivacity that "The sky of heaven is blue, the fire of hell is rouge." Elections of Conservatives in Quebec being contested as brought about by these illegal tactics, one witness testified in court that he "was afraid if he voted for Tremblay he should be damned." The voiding of some of these elections by the Supreme Court put a damper on the fires of bigotry. "The sturdy fight of the Liberals of Quebec for the most elementary rights of a free people had its effect." But bitterness had reached such a pitch in 1877 that all "the vigor and moderation, the grace and flair" (Skelton, p. 34) of Laurier, from 1874 the leader of Quebec Liberalism, was still needed to calm a dangerous ferment and complete the victory won for his cause in the courts by a masterpiece of statesmanly and epoch-making oratory.

It was in June, 1877, that Laurier in a speech to "Le Club Canadien" of Quebec City:

"Came forward to do for his province and his country a service which could be accomplished only by a man of rarely balanced judgment, of firm grasp of essential principles, of wide reading and familiarity with the political ideals of other lands, and, above all, of matchless courage. Rarely, if ever, has there been delivered in Canada a speech of such momentous importance, or one so firmly based on the first principles with which Canadian statesmen too rarely concern themselves."

It is noticeable that here (p. 48) and elsewhere in his history, Professor Skelton emphasizes the principle and consistency of Laurier. Again and again this is brought out. Finally, summing up (p. 325-330), the historian says:

"With rare consistency and steadfast courage these ends were held in view. Ever an opportunist as to means, Wilfrid Laurier has never been an