

The Habitant

IDEALISED, misunderstood, abused and scorned, sometimes taken too seriously and sometimes too trivially, the habitant remains on the lower St. Lawrence as yet unchanged in manner and thought and as yet disaffected in political and social matters touching his future destiny. A survival of the feudal age, he maintains a curious and unique position among the nations of the earth, for, fused though he may be with the other elements that make for Canadian Federation, he mixes but poorly and stands best by himself with a background of Laurentian hills and brown sparkling waters; for the most part silent and solitary, finding his work where he is born and sticking to it till he dies. In fiction the habitant appeared about thirty years ago, and critics and exploiters of the short story vogue recognised a new vein of local colour; the tourist blossomed into the journalist on tour, the cottagers in the vicinity of Murray Bay wrote letters to suburban dailies descriptive of the strange characters they had encountered and in a short while dialect sketches sprang up, chiefly in American magazines, in which certain vices and virtues supposed to be always characteristic of the habitant were insisted upon at great length and with much elaboration. The school of which Mr. Cable was head no doubt helped to introduce the French Canadian school and since that day many writers have tried their hand upon this descendant of an old regime with more or less success.

But it seems at times as if all efforts to give him a local habitation and a name and to create strong local colour were unsatisfactory, for, as the writer has experienced, the conventional aspect too often interferes. If without previous conceptions of what his life is, one were set down to live with him and study him, the results would be more convincing even if not so picturesque. In fact it is doubtful if the habitant is really ever picturesque and this is where the conventional portrayal too often errs. For example, I have seen on the Upper Ottawa one shantymen in earrings, red scarf round his hat, with high boots and a splendid physique to a hundred poorly clothed, undersized, dull and ignorant-looking folk sallying forth from the churches or out on a Saint's day to view the procession. Humour—which he is supposed to possess in abundance—is rather rare in the country districts and in the family life; it is to be feared that by "French Canadians" some authors really mean the solitary guide they fished with on the Matane or the Matapedia last year! The humorous guide becomes, by a sort of enlargement process peculiar to the "correspondent" tribe, the type of French Canada; a little more and he is to them all French Canada.

It is necessary here to distinguish between the habitant, living on and off the ground, and the educated French Canadian, always successful in politics, art, and letters, often conspicuous in business and always able to infuse charm, dignity and culture into his surroundings, whether in the cities where he builds fine houses and lives according to progressive standards, or in the smaller centres where he dispenses bounty with the true seigneurial air to those less fortunate. Between these two extremes—on the one hand, the elegant the elegant rooms Terres de la Couronne, the comfortable manor at Longueuil, the venerable and lofty terraces of St. Denis St.—and on the other—the gabled cottages of the St. Charles Road there is to be found a large, varied, and most interesting class.

There are the patient thousands who toil on the narrow farms of Port Neuf, or Joliette, or Charlevoix, or Montmorency. And those who live many months of the year in lumbercamps, or on rafts, eating off the "food bench" and deprived of social intercourse with their fellows; the bourgeois shopkeeper of the tiny villages, the notary public, the editor of a fiery country periodical, the hotelkeeper who plays the cornet in a local orchestra, the priest, born, bred and educated in the narrow old-world province, the women who run the farms and keep their money in cupboards and armoires rather than entrust it to the Bank of the People, the sagacious and polite nuns who live in cheerful self-denying communities, content with the duties of the present hour. All these are not, it is true, precisely habitant types, but all these possess many of the same mental traits; they are conservative to the point of self-immolation and would not change if they could from existing primordial but comfortable conditions to those they do not understand. The habitant has intermarried more often with Scotch than with any other race; witness the red-haired, freckled little Narcisse, Aristide or

Napoleon of old Andre Lachlan, a Scot whose father was enamored of a dark French Lassie.

In a certain village on the Ottawa, not far from the Capital's gleaming towers and the golden cross of her Great Basilica, dwells a family in whom are blended four strikingly diverse races: the French, the Scotch, the Red Indian and the Jew! Fifty years ago a Jewish peddler, travelling through the country with images and pictures, became snowbound in the region of Calumet and was forced to stay over for several weeks at the house of one Narcisse Deschapelle, wood cutter and ranger throughout a large but desolate and gloomy tract of wild land. The peddler was attractive, knowing much of old parts of the world, and Narcisse had a daughter by a Scotch mother, young, also attractive. Voila tout! A marriage was celebrated by the priest of that locality and the Jew and his wife left the banks of the Ottawa for a small town in Vermont, but after a couple of years the former died and the young woman, now a mother, returned to Canada. In due time her son grew up and, against all the wishes of his family, took a handsome halfbreed girl to wife, whose father had been a well known and intrepid lumberman of Scotch extraction, her mother a Chief's daughter, with straight black locks and olive skin.

Here we have, right in the heart of a remote and obscure Laurentian colony, a mixture of races, alien and white, and of passions, motives, habits and creeds which cannot fail to create episodes and form characters of much force, some pathos and no little originality. It is but a small world, this we live in. We see the Jew, born we will say, near Warsaw, taking to the frugal fare of his Canadian father-in-law as together they sit in the warm house and wait for the storms to abate, and we also see his descendants, thrifty or stolid, lazy or active as the case might be, many-sided, lonely, half-civilized beings in some of whom, surely, the love of roaming will sooner or later manifest itself.

S. F. Harrison, "Seranus."

Author of "The Forest of Bourg-Marie."

Hamlet's Tombs

M. Oscar Comettant and a friend went forth one day in search of Hamlet's grave. They traversed the whole town of Elsinore—which was only a fishing village, a contemporary tells us, until King Erik of Pommern raised it to the rank of a city in 1425—and they reached a hill, on which formerly stood an abbey, at the extremity of the terraced gardens of Marienlyst, where, we are told, they would behold the sublime metaphysician's tomb. Finding nothing, they inquired of a passer-by, "Hamlet's tomb, if you please?" "Which tomb is the one you want?" "Which tomb! Are there two Hamlet's tombs? He cannot have been buried in two places at once." "Possibly. Nevertheless there have been three Hamlet's tombs, though only half of one is still remaining. I must inform you, if you don't know it already, that a single tomb was quite insufficient to satisfy the curiosity of English visitors. At one time there was no Hamlet's tomb at all at Elsinore; for, as you are aware, the Danish Prince never set foot in Zealand, either alive or dead. But the English, who came in crowds to Elsinore, insisted on having one, and somebody made them tomb the first. But the crowds of tourists increased to such an extent, and so annoyed the owner of the land where the monument stood, that, in order to divide, if he could not suppress, the flocks of pilgrims, he set up another tomb at the farther end of his property. But that did no good, because the English—you know how curious they are—would visit both the tombs. He therefore, driven to despair, erected a third tomb. The first two have disappeared, and only a portion of the third remains. I suppose the English have carried away the rest of it piecemeal in their pockets to enrich the Shakespearean museums." At the indicated spot M. Comettant found something like a milestone much the worse for wear, without any inscription, around which an English family—father, mother, and five children—were standing apparently in earnest prayer; but, on approaching, he found they were piously reciting the famous monologue, "To be, or not to be."

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