

Personalities and Problems

12---Sir William Van Horne

Whom no Sub-Head to an Article Could Ever Adequately Describe

By AUGUSTUS BRIDLE

NEWSPAPERS may scold till they're black in the face about the "melon-cutting" on the C. P. R. That doesn't faze on the individual whose almost Titanic physique and tremendous *caput* keep the printed matter on this page from having it too much its own way. Sir William Van Horne has nothing to do with the C. P. R. any more—publicly. Up at his stone palace on upper Sherbrooke St. West; there at the individualistic art gallery and museum under the mountain, what cares he how the heathen rage and the people imagine a vain thing? Sir William graduated from the ranks of those interviewed by the newspapers some years ago when he quit the C. P. R. and began to build railroads in Cuba.

It has always seemed a pity that Cuba couldn't have been some new Atlantean island never trod by a white man. It should have been a vast heterogeneous community of naked men with assegais and mud huts and jungles reeking with wild beasts of Ind—that it might be said of him, "He found it a wilderness and he left it on a train of palace cars after making a grand circuit of the island over his own railways, because the natives would have made him king and he remembered Cæsar."

However, Sir William is reconquering Cuba his own way. The United States had that little brush with Spain just about the time when he decided to quit rediscovering Canada and wept for other worlds to conquer. Of any other man this would be satire. Of Van Horne—it's a compliment. He cannot be written in calm language. He will not talk as other men do; do as they do; think as they do. He is an individualist. He is Van Horne; not the smug, smooth person whose alleged likeness appears on cigar boxes so profusely in Montreal; but the immense, cyclopaedic and psychic personality who at the age of seventy has the energy of a young Indian chief, and is able to take time from his multifarious preoccupations to convince any casual visitor that he is one of the most profoundly intellectual men in America.

Sir William did me the kindness to spend three hours in conversation. At the end of that time he had only begun to sketch the outlines of his eclectic philosophy. At the first hour he intimated that none of it was for publication; at least not by newspapers. Some day he would publish it himself. He had notes. He preferred to elucidate his views in his own way (*ipse dixit*). Which he may do. And when done it will be a good supplementary library to the Eliot five-foot shelf.

The day I went to his house things were topsyturvy from spring cleaning. I think it's the biggest house in Montreal, but there was grave difficulty finding a room where we could talk without hindrance. The vast hallways walled up with huge pictures were cluttered with canvases coming down. A gang of picture men were furbishing up. It felt like hanging week at the Canadian National Exhibition.

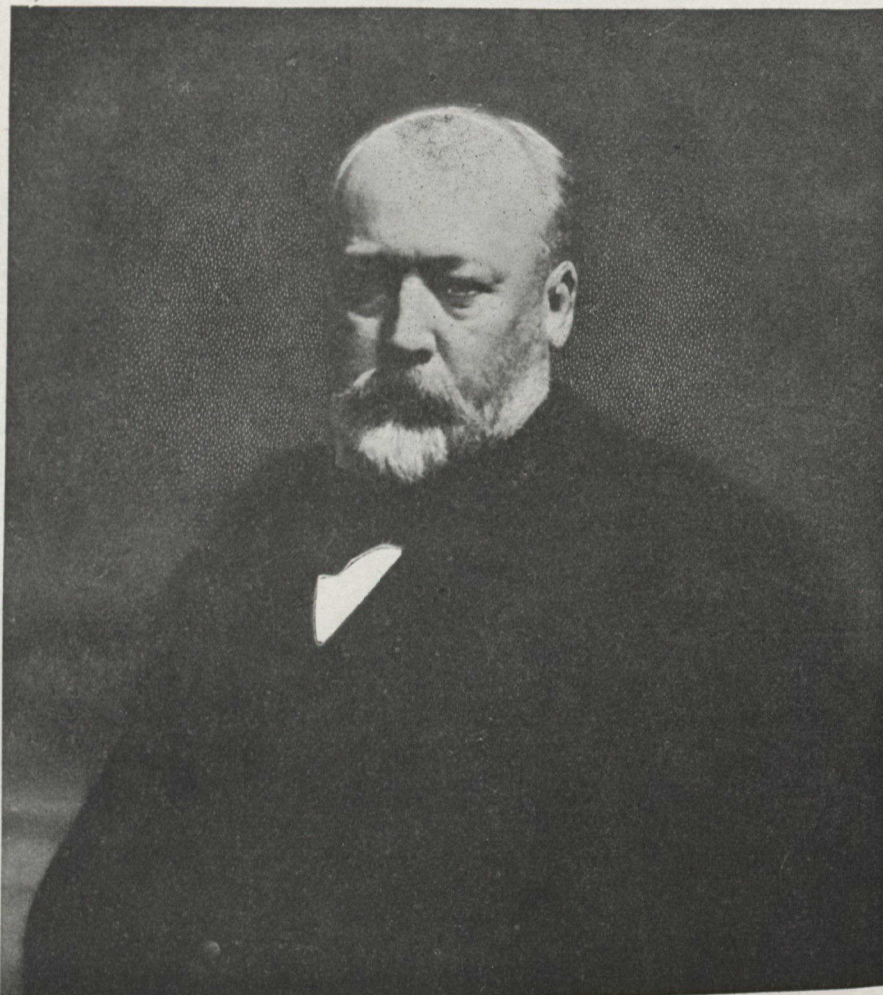
Which is perhaps the reason Sir William did not show me his pictures. I did not see even a sketch signed Van Horne. He has a large number of these, dashed off in the open at sundry and divers places, many of them down at St. Andrew's by the Sea, in New Brunswick, where he has a summer plantation.

It really didn't matter. With two or three days and nothing else to do a man might enjoy the Van Horne collection of pictures, which is one of the very best, in some respects the most remarkable, in a city that ranks third in America for private collections. He is the only owner of a private art gallery who himself makes pictures. Some say that he might have become an artist. But on that score he has no regrets. He knows what it feels like to have nature clamouring for a pic-

ture; though he has been denied the great joy of knowing what it feels like to put a price on the canvas that he has to get or not pay the butcher.

It was a small cathedral in the east end of the palace where Sir William sat at a broad plateau of a desk amid walls of Japanese bric-a-brac and ceramics and fantastically carved emblems of wood gathered from the Orient when he first projected C. P. R. ships. I fancy the late Mikado gave him some of these.

He was inditing a letter. Silently he motioned me to a large chair while he finished the epistle to Cuba. And as the pen scratched and the rain beat upon the tall windows, I wondered if the lord of the manor could tell me off-hand the name, origin and history of every piece of art in that room. Perhaps Pierpont Morgan has such an office. Surely nobody else in America. Plaques



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and gargoyles and shields and pots and pans and heavy oaken and teaken and Oriental woods glum as a black forest—with that prodigious, herculean personality at the desk, it was a picture for a Constable landscape crossed with a Rembrandt portrait. The day was dark. The room was dim. The pen scratched with ferocious energy. I began to have a dim notion of what it felt like to be Daniel in a den of lions.

And as yet, never a cigar; when I knew the nicotine paradises of Cuba had been ravaged to furnish Havanas for Sir William. Presently—perhaps?

All of a sudden the pen ceased. Sir William protruded himself from the involutions of his personalia and looked at the door. In a loud tone he called. The secretary came. Instructions; brief, explicit and luminous. Never a word to repeat or to explain. But if there was a point missed by Sir William, the secretary had no hesitation stopping him for an insert. Sir William never objects to being amplified. He thrives on opposition. This is a virtue with C. P. R. men.

Having finished instructing his secretary for the present he chuckled the cares of Cuba and turned to the interviewer. He extricated a box of dusky cigars which he held out to me, profoundly striking

a match, which I took. This is mentioned because it is not considered good form to permit a millionaire to hold a match to your cigar.

NOW that he was up I noticed how he was dressed; all in black—morning coat, black-striped trousers, somewhat negligent and prodigious waistcoat and a nonchalant black bow. A man whom no tailor could ever tabulate in a book. He defies tailors. Indeed, from some remarks of his I believe he would be willing to dispense with clothes. In which he resembles Cecil Rhodes. Yet he is not a fat man. He is merely big. Hammering at the open places has kept him hard. He is not an esthete; neither an ascetic. He lives to the brim; gouging out the sensations of life to almost Gargantuan dimensions.

I began by inadvertently trying to insult him.

At your age, Sir William—?"

I could see that he paid no heed to the calendar.

His years might be seventy-one. But his age is undetermined.

"You don't seem to rest much—?"

He prostrated himself plethorically upon the vast surface of a sofa under the window.

"I always rest," he said—staccato. "I never worked in my life."

"Then whatever you would call it?"

"What interests a man can't be called work," he went on.

"I have merely been interested. I have railroaded most of my life because I liked railroading. I don't call it work."

He puffed with colossal energy at the Cuban cigar which had the audacity to go out. It pointed upwards like a tiny funnel.

And at this point Sir William began to unfold his philosophy of man's labour upon this earth based upon a practical psychology. It reminded me somewhat of Rabelais' yarns about Pantagruel; and of Carlyle's description of the evolution of Cagliostro. It was the behemothian note upon the perfectibility of man; compounded of Darwin and Herbert Spencer and Van Horne. It dealt with the seven—or whatever number it is—ages of man.

Then he lighted the cigar again.

"All men—are born lazy," he said.

Probably he spoke from experience. He was born in Illinois. While a mere youth and just out of school he became deeply interested in nature. There was once a book which he came across; a book of zoology or something of the kind, full of drawings; which so interested the lad who had to return it before he had got its contents mastered, that he made a copy of every drawing and all the words of the book besides.

It was just after the Civil War when he got into the real swing of railroading. It was the days when young men got ahead much faster than nowadays; when the war had killed off thousands and left more room for thousands more to shove up—although it scarcely seems probable that William Van Horne had to wait for any dead man's boots. He had the eye of a shrewd, seeing-round-the-corner young man; and he must have had the grip of a grizzly bear. Railroading was just about the restless, half-romantic sort of business that was able to keep him from going into literature or art or music or theology.

"I was always ahead of my equipment," he said. He took three more puffs at the extinct cigar.

"I looked up to superiors—sometimes with contempt."

Van Horne delights in paradoxes.

"Well, I spent forty years of my life in the country where I was born. I came to Canada in 1882."

He would then be something like the smooth circumstantial personage whose picture appears on cigar boxes; a man younger than his years and older than his times and fond of the out-of-doors.

"I liked the C. P. R." he went on, after he had