

Personalities and Problems

9---Hon. William John Hanna, K.C.

Who Has More or Less Definite Reasons for Remaining in Public Life

By AUGUSTUS BRIDLE

THE politician who has never gone on a coon-hunt may be a good Canadian; but he has missed something. I remember one recent member of the Ontario Legislature who only ten or twelve years ago went for a coon-hunt in one of his back fields of corn right next to a patch of bush on the rear concession. That was Letson Pardo, then member for West Kent.

There may be in the present Legislature more than one other member that recollects how at the end of a day's work slashing down ten-foot corn with the sickle, he was so dog-tired when the chores were done after supper that he swore he wouldn't budge off the place; how the neighbours' lads came across with a yellow coon dog and a sharp axe and a lantern—and he went; how they streaked back the lane and sat on the rail fence hearing the katytids while the coon dog scurried through the wet corn; and when he let a yelp out of him the pack were off through the corn, slamming over the "punkins" and through three kinds of burrs, till wet to the hips they got to the swamp-elm where the old dog had the coon up a tree—when the real business of the evening began. Maybe the coon wasn't up that elm; but the elm had to come down anyhow. Maybe if he was, he quietly sneaked off to a white oak when the elm started to fall. And if he stuck to it till it was down, he hit up a fresh trail to another tree further in the woods; and that kind of thing might go on till two in the morning before the coon was slung over somebody's shoulders by a thong of bass-wood bark. But any fellow in the gang that wanted to quit the trail and hike up to the hay-mow because he was weary—well he never heard the last of it for years to come.

Which is thus at length described because first of all W. J. Hanna will recognize in the picture a familiar scene from his youth in the county of Lambton; also because going on a coon-hunt and going into politics are a good deal alike when you come to trace them up—as may be noted from a few of the things Mr. Hanna had to say about politics the other morning.

Just for identification, it will be remembered that the Provincial Secretary for Ontario is the man who a few weeks ago declined several times to be chairman of the Dominion Railway Commission at \$15,000 a year. He is the man whom even his enemies, if he has any, regard as perhaps the most effective and useful member of the Ontario Cabinet where he has been since 1905; who besides being indispensable to Sir James Whitney, has to his credit two notable reforms in this Province—the new rural Ontario police and the Central Prison Farm at Guelph.

W. J. HANNA got his big shoulders and thick chest on a Lambton farm, near Lake St. Clair where the hub of the world is Detroit, where the swamp-elms used to go across the border to the cooper-shops of the United States, and from where hundreds of young bushwhackers piked out to the lumber woods of Michigan. Hanna remembers those days. He remembers when the superintendent of the dining-car service on the Grand Trunk bought eggs in Chatham, Ont., at four cents a dozen. That was in the '70's when he was a young gaffer lazily husking corn in his father's fields, anywhere from twenty to twenty-one bushels of yellow Flint in a day with a bone husking peg, tying up the fodder with basswood bark.

These homely details are recalled because they were the economic beginnings of W. J. Hanna before he knew anything about politics beyond making a hero of John A. Macdonald. They are the prelude to what in many cases might have been the story of a millionaire.

But W. J. Hanna is in no need of borrowing money to pay his life insurance. From his own admission—he hoped he would have been better off if he had spent the last nine years at private law instead of in a legislature. But before he got into the Ontario government he had some years in which to get off to a good start. Sarnia used to be considered rather a dull town, sort of a second fiddle to Port Huron. But Sarnia happens to be the port through which some of the oil goes out that comes from the oil-wells of Petrolea. And as a good share of the capital in those wells has its headquarters in the United States—oh, well, this

has nothing to do with the case. Mr. Hanna is a lawyer. He may not consider himself a rich man. But he likes to look back on his homely beginnings in Lambton Co.; and he has learned to hear yarns about the remarkable achievements of other men with a sense of humour—as becomes a plain servant of the people.

Up in his four-square office as big as a barn, with cool, lazy palms on the floor and portraits of political celebrities on the walls, he was sitting at his flat desk twiddling rather drowsily with a red



"Tell me—how many men in politics lack the necessary courage to get out of it?"

and blue badge—probably the one he wore at Herb. Lennox's picnic. He seemed to have half an hour to himself; at any rate the secretary brought in only three announcements of callers in that time. And he was in the mood when a man would as lief talk about the good old farm as discuss politics. Most of the other ministers were away fishing. Sir Galahad in shirtsleeves was not making an uproar as he sometimes does. The buildings were serenely quiet. And the Provincial Secretary was settled down into a huge thick lump in his chair, from which he blinked through his spectacles in a good-humoured sort of way—and did not smoke.

They don't allow smoking in Queen's Park. Which was the reason why, having just lighted a fairly decent cigar before I got there, I did as the old rural school-teacher used to do with his pipe when on his way to school—he stuck it in a fence-corner till school was out. I knew W. J. Hanna had once been a school teacher. So I lodged the cigar in the crotch of a lilac bush down near the Macdonald monument and left it in hiding there

to be called for when the interview was over.

Why a man stays in politics—was the main part of the subject.

But it had a prelude: Why does a man leave the farm?

In Hanna's case there is a story to this. When he got out of the Sarnia Collegiate at the age of seventeen, he went school-teaching. The school was three miles and a half from his father's farm; which is a remarkable tribute to the reputation enjoyed by young Hanna. Once in a blue moon a farmer's son succeeded in landing a school anywhere round home. One almost suspects that he had an uncle on the trustee board; or perhaps the trustee saw in this thick-set, somewhat pugnacious-looking youth the promise of a large public career. They may have been looking forward to the days when they could look back and say,

"Oh, we knewed young Hanna had it in 'im to be offered a fifteen-thousand-dollar job and turn 'er down. By gum! didn't he teach our school three years, very first school he had? Kep'm in order, too, and brung 'm along like sixty—he did!"

But of course the young pedagogue never heard any of these smooth things when he began teaching other young Lambtonians how to succeed in life. He boarded at home and tramped the three miles and a half to school every day, carrying his dinner in a basket. Very likely he tended fires and swept; and went visiting all the folks as regularly as the preacher, very often staying over-night, sleeping with the hired man. Being a good Methodist he would be sure to attend all the means of grace; teaching in Sunday-school, going to prayer-meeting—perhaps singing in the choir. Anyway he was popular enough to get the school the second year; and then again the third: and it's likely that if his third-class certificate hadn't run out he would have got it three years more.

BUT he decided he had enough of school-teaching. By the end of his third year he had close on to a thousand dollars saved up. Is there in all the annals of Canadian public men another case of a youth who in three years could get together nearly a thousand dollars from school-teaching? I don't know what salary he got; but it must have been four hundred a year, probably raised to four hundred and fifty.

"No," he admitted, "I didn't spend much in riotous living. I rather think I must have been a pretty close young coon to have hung on to so much of my salary. But when I got it—" He lunged up and took a grab at the desk as though he would rip off the top. "I had a heavy temptation!"

"On—oil wells, perhaps?"

"No," he said. "If I could have got another thousand anywhere—I think I'd have bought a farm."

Here again he showed originality. I guess his father didn't work the boots off him at home; and it must have been a shade more of a genteel business farming in Lambton than it used to be down in the hardwood bush of Kent. The land was good; fit to raise almost anything in reason. But the young teacher couldn't raise the extra thousand; so he spent the nine hundred in going to law school.

"I was glad afterwards I didn't," he said as he recalled the slump that took place in farm lands after the completion of the C.P.R. "Yes, a lot of the farmers' sons went out west when the C. P. R. was finished. We had the spectacle of valuable land declining in value just because there weren't men enough left to keep the value up. I saw a farm that in 1883 was worth \$7,500, slump in three or four years to \$5,000. I saw where my little \$2,000 would have gone into a very large hole."

"And now, I dare say there are farmers around Sarnia—?"

He took another savage yank at the desk.

"Let me tell you—there's one farm along the lake up yonder, that the owner wouldn't take a hundred thousand dollars for to-day."

"Uh—has it got a gold-mine?"

"Well, I was as sceptical as you are till I saw it—but if I owned that paradise of fruit I wouldn't take \$100,000 for it either."

What sentiments of envy the Secretary felt he