GEORGE HAM

A SKETCH

BY

NEWTON MacTAVISH

GEORGE HAM

SKETCH OF A GENTLEMAN
ON WHOM THE SUN
NEVER SETS

BY

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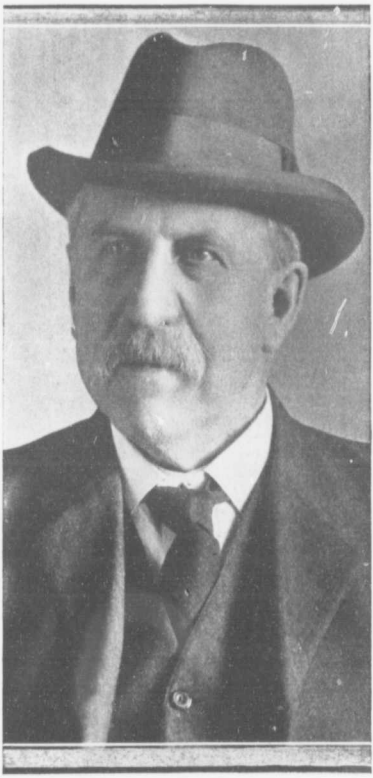
Fifty Copies Printed Privately



GEORGE HENRY HAM is a large body of superfine humanity entirely surrounded by the Canadian Pacific Railway. He is bounded on the south by the line to Drummondville, on the north by the branch to Ste. Agathe, on the east by the Quebec and Maritime sections, and on the west by the four-thousand-mile stretch that ends at Vancouver. Among the eighty-five thousand employees he is the only latitudinarian. And he is a latitudinarian simply because he has more latitude than longitude, latitude of movement as well as of mind. And being a latitudinarian he was free when a Roman Catholic friend called him by telephone recently and complained that his wife was playing Protestant hymns on the piano—he was free to say, "Have the place fumigated and send the bill to the Archbishop." Any lawful day you may find him in his own office, unless he happens to be running up to Ottawa, or down to New York, over to Chicago, through to Vancouver, out to San Francisco, or across to Drury's. For he has what is known in university parlance as a travelling scholarship.

His office is in the headquarters of the railway, at the Windsor Station, Montreal—just off a long corridor that makes you feel when you enter it as if entering the big end of a telescope. You could pick him out because he is the only one that never appears to be working. If he is there at all, he is either just coming in or going out. If you are coming in, he is going out—or across. If you are going out, he'll go out with you—or across. And once you see him, you will never forget him. For he always looks the same. He always has looked the same. And after all, why shouldn't he? For into the many perplexing, annoying, and tragic vicissitudes of an unusually eventful life he has never failed to infuse the saving grace of good humour. The fun of laughing at the ridiculous side of things has kept him young, and for a quarter of a century he has provoked more wholesome mirth than any other man in the Dominion. And while as a matter of fact his humorous and unique personality has greatly increased the fame of the Canadian Pacific Railway, it is equally true that he has been able to render peculiarly valuable service in several important adventures. All of which goes to prove that the genuine humourist

must possess the basic quality of seriousness. I have seen George Ham in his official capacity as representative of the C. P. R. stir men to the height of merriment while he himself was weighted down by some acute personal bereavement or rendered almost helpless by intense physical agony.

But I had been remarking that he always looks the same. For he usually wears a complete suit of plain gray tweed—trousers, waistcoat, and coat. "Neat, but not goddy," as he himself says in his admirable brochure, "The Flitting of the Gods." The pockets of the waistcoat are always bagged under the pressure of cigars carried there against every emergency, and the trousers are mostly of the regulation length, although he once complained of a pair being a little tight under the arms. Above all, there is a soft felt hat, which is worn outdoors as well as in. It covers a head not otherwise wholly covered, a head that has had more changes of pillows than any other head north of Forty-Nine. I cannot say whether the moustache improves his appearance, because I have never seen his face with it off. It is possible, of course, that it covers a feature suggesting some villainous tendency which so far he has been able to subdue. If so, he has been

subduing it a long time, for he was born in the town of Trenton, by the Trent, on the 22nd and 23rd of August, 1847; the occasion is known in Canadian history as the Trent Affair. There was another affair of the same name fourteen years later, but it was not purely Canadian, being merely a demonstration of British and American diplomacy. Nevertheless, it almost caused a misdating of the real Trent Affair from 1847 to 1861, which would have been a grave injustice to the whole Trent valley. But George, by this time an overgrown lad jealous of his natal glory, and with the blood of his United Empire Loyalist forefathers seething in his veins, enlisted in the Canadian militia and stood ready to defend his people and his country. It is only just to say that he was not at that time killed in battle; and while the second Trent affair is sometimes mentioned by historians, everyone now knows that the real Affair took place in 1847, the birth-year of George Henry Ham. Owing to these things, but mostly to the fact that he repeatedly refused to run away from home at an early age, he still speaks with a slight Trentonian accent, though distinctly enough to be understood in nine Provinces, especially when making an after-dinner speech.

And that reminds me of an occasion when he was responding to a toast to the Canadian Pacific Railway. He said he would rather be President of that railway than be Mayor of Westmount or laid to rest under the tallest shaft of marble in the English-speaking world.

It is said that his right palm is callous from much hand-shaking. Whether it is or not, one thing is sure, his heart isn't. For if there is a big, generous heart in the world, it is George Ham's. But I was attempting to describe his appearance, not his besetting sin. I had got as far as the moustache. On either side of that adornment there is a deep wrinkle which an undiscerning person might mistake for a sign of old age, but which as a matter of fact is merely a result of the efforts of an optimistic man to play a joke on his friends by appearing to be pessimistic. For George Ham is fuller of optimism than some persons are of philanthropy. In that condition he displays a fine expansive figure, in keeping with his five feet, twelve inches of height when well heeled. He has indeed a soldierly appearance, due no doubt to the fact that he was the first Canadian war correspondent, that he enlisted in the Canadian mi-

litia at the age of fourteen, that he served during the Fenian Raids in 1866 and 1870, receiving a medal for merit; that he was with Major-General Middleton at Fish Creek, that he was on the steamer *Northwest* when she ran the blockade; and, lastly, that in 1914 he was appointed by the Minister of Militia at Ottawa an Honourary Lieutenant-Colonel of the Department of Intelligence. Any one wishing to study his early literary style may search *The Mail* (Toronto) of thirty or more years ago and there read his despatches from the front during the last uprising under Riel. He was a well-known man in the West, even in those days, and it is said that he passed through the lines one night when if he had been any other man than George Ham he would have been shot dead on the spot. It was during the course of this rebellion that a friendship developed between him and Middleton. The friendship began one evening when George rode out upon the prairie, following the General, who had ridden away alone and who, George feared, might be surprised by Indians. Soon he perceived that the General had halted, and coming closer he overheard him speaking freely in the vernacular. For the General had rid-

den away to have a quiet smoke, and was trying, unsuccessfully, to light his pipe, a trial that is oath-provoking on the prairies. George offered to light it, and he succeeded—with the first match. Thereafter the General regarded him as the greatest man west of the Great Lakes. But George always was an adept at such tasks, even before he took to after-dinner speaking. But his speeches have not been restricted to dinners, for once by a speech (just before dinner) he earned the appointment of official station-opener. A station had been built not far from Toronto. George, being present on the occasion of the opening, was called on to do the act officially. He stepped forward, and in an apologetic manner said that he did not know whether to open it with a key, a crowbar, or prayer.

He felt like praying one time when, Hamlike, he surrendered his sleeping-berth to an unfortunate lady who was so fat that no one but a brute could go to sleep while thinking of her sitting up all night in the day coach. He was travelling in company with Mr. Edward Farrer, and when the two parted for the night Farrer told George not to worry about getting up in the morning, for he would call him at the right time. But as George

was about to retire, the lady came puffing into the corridor and announced that she had not been able to get a berth.

"Why, there's one right here for you," said George, without any pretence at gallantry, as he pulled aside the curtains of his own berth.

The lady, little suspecting that she was compelling an honest man to sit up and play poker all night, slept serenely in the berth until morning. That was well enough, but sometimes fate will not let well enough alone. And in this instance Farrer stood for fate. He knew nothing about the fat lady, and therefore, to ill-use a Baconian phrase, he hied him hence, in the gray of morning, and, pulling apart the curtains of the Ham berth, shouted: "Get up, you old villain! Last call for breakfast!"

One should not infer from this that George Ham has always slept on the bumpers, for on one particular occasion he shared the stateroom with the late William Stitt, General Passenger Agent. George says Mr. Stitt was the heaviest snorer east of the Kootenay. And Mr. Stitt used to say that George Ham was the easiest liar this side of Ananias. However that may be, George's revised version of the stateroom affair is that Stitt snor-

ed like a dustless cleaner. George was in the upper berth, so he reached down and gave the snorer a slight pressure under the chin. The snoring ceased suddenly and then a raucous voice asked, "What time is it?" George told him it was three o'clock. Half an hour later the snoring was louder than before. George struck downwards again.

"What's the matter?" growled Stitt. "Can't you let a fellow sleep?"

"My father used to tell me," said George, "never to go to sleep with a lie on my conscience."

"I don't give a hang about your conscience."

"Well, I told you just now it was three o'clock. As a matter of fact, it was three-fifteen."

"Oh, go to ....!"

George says he hasn't gone yet. And I do not believe there's a man anywhere who would like to see him go. For he is deservedly the most popular man in the Dominion. That would be a pretty strong claim for one who had never entered public life. But I cannot make it as such, for George Ham was at one time a sort of *Pooh Bah* in the city of Winnipeg. He was an alderman, a school trustee, a licence commissioner, and the registrar of deeds. I am not sure

that he occupied all these positions at once, nor do I know whether he was commissioner of dog licences or a registrar of good deeds. In any case, no one begrudges him the huge emoluments of these offices. And although he has been out of public life for about thirty years, there are in the Dominion but few men who are as widely known as he is. And to know him is to like him. For he is the kind of man whom you can call George fifteen minutes after first meeting him. Because he will call you Tom, Dick, or Harry right from the start, and thereby open the way for a lasting friendship. If I wished to strengthen my claim as to his popularity I could enlist the opinion of any railway man in Canada, any newspaper man in Canada, any politician—indeed, any all-round good fellow. For he himself is the prince of good fellows, and, to use a phrase that is much abused, he is as well a gentleman and a scholar. It might be expected, in order to make his attributes complete, that I should record him as a judge of good whiskey. But as a matter of fact, his judgment is better as to ginger ale, a beverage which, curiously enough, he had to eschew a few years ago owing to ill-health. He did not let the incident

pass, however, without marking it by one of his characteristic observations. For, as he himself explained afterwards, they first cut out the appendix, then the thyroid cartillage, then, worst of all, the booze. His cheerfulness in time of sickness has been a marvel to his friends. And it is marvellous, also, what he has survived.

"You must have a great constitution," said a caller at the hospital one day.

"Yes," said George with a grim smile, "a great constitution, but no by-laws."

His good humour is irrepressible, and although it has been recorded only in the minds of his friends, he won the admiration of Mark Twain, who presented him with his portrait and autograph. I have never known him to be at a loss for a brilliant sally, and his wit has been summoned many and many a time when other men would have been at home in bed. At a luncheon tendered a few years ago by the late Senator Jaffray to Colonel Watterson, I was placed next to George, which is a privilege that Sir Wilfrid Laurier always requests when he attends the annual dinner of the Press Gallery at Ottawa. George was by no means well, yet his vivacity was not in the least affected. Opposite

us sat Mr. (now Sir John) J. S. Willison and Mr. Joseph Tarte. These two engaged in an argument that involved Quebec and Ontario. As Mr. Tarte seemed to be floundering, George, being a fellow-resident of Montreal, leaned forward and in a stage whisper urged him to "deal in glittering generalities."

It is quite right, and natural, to suppose that a man of George Ham's popularity would be the object from time to time of a great many presentations. He has run the whole gamut, from bedroom slippers to gold watches and travelling companions. He has received travelling companions almost to the point of embarrassment, just like the bride of thirty years ago used to receive cruet stands. And the worst of it is he has never liked the formality of a presentation, and he has been heard to say that he would rather receive an increase in salary any day than have to reply to a presentation of two gold cuff links suitably engraved. I recall an occasion when he tried to hide from a committee that had bought something handsome to give to him. He had accompanied the members of the Ontario Legislature to inspect the Agricultural College at Guelph, and on the way back, shortly after leaving the

city, everything was ready in the last car—everything except George. He was not in sight. Two of the party went to fetch him. They found him somewhere up near the engine. It was a long train, and George had to walk back through car after car, until finally, as he entered the last one, he muttered to himself, almost inaudibly, "Great Caesar! They'll have me back in Guelph again, first thing I know." Then he received the present, and replied with the kind of speech that has made him famous, not so much because of what he says as because of his inimitable manner of saying it.

His great popularity is due in part at least to his spontaneous human sympathy. In everything except politics he is liberal, so liberal indeed that he can be sorry even for Judas Iscariot or for one German Emperor. His sympathies are so wide in fact that they have earned for him the singular distinction of being the only man member of the Canadian Women's Press Club. Of course, his membership is honourary, and although it is many years since he quit the field of active journalism, he is *de jure* (the italics are mine) still a newspaperman. He began as a printer, and has been successively reporter, war correspondent,

editor, and publicity agent. Just what his position is in the Canadian Pacific Railway service it would be difficult to define. Whatever it is, it is generally well known that his personality has done much towards making the road popular. At one time he was called the General Publicity Agent. But for a complete definition we have to go back two hundred years, to one Alexander Pope, in whose writings we find these time-honoured words, "Guide, philosopher, and friend." We borrow them, and here rival their author in the application. For they apply to George Ham with rare fitness. And almost every important party that has crossed Canada in the last twenty years has been accompanied by him in that amiable capacity.

Under such circumstances the roadbed is always smooth, the meals tempting, the porters obliging, the waiters good-natured, the time-table accurate, and the sun perpetually shining. For George Ham's is a shining personality. And it will go on shining long after many great men are forgotten. Then let us take off our hats now to this one on whom the sun never sets.