

The Habitant

A Picturesque Figure

by Edgar Wallace, 1875-1932

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HE was seventy years old, was this Habitant, and his name was Du Bois. As a matter of fact, it is still.

His face is lined and seamed with the joys and sorrows of his years. A large, generous mouth, grey twinkling eyes, a chin white with the stubble of three unshaven days, and a hand heavy and big. He smokes—and smoked—a tobacco which smells like nothing so much as a conflagration in a soap factory. Often as not he grows it himself, and its aroma reminds you of the fact that tobacco is sometimes called a weed. His French is the French of Louis Quinze, his English is broken and charming. His piety and devotion to Holy Church are beautiful in their simplicity, and his sentiments are Canadian. If he is more than usually progressive they are Canadian-French.

He appeals to me, this Habitant, as a most unregenerate, lovable, treasonable rogue. A big-hearted, gentlemanly Anglophobe. I think I rather like him for his native antipathies. I do not know whether this speck of grit in the national bearings is not almost as healthy as over-much lubricant. Nor do I think I am doing him an injustice when I point out this—from a British point of view—weakness of his. He sees things out of proportion, does this Habitant. There is a story told which illustrates this.

A Story.

THE French lumberman who came down from the backwoods, where news is scarce, found Quebec in mourning.

„De Queen ees dead,“ explained an acquaintance.

„Mon Dieu!“ said our lumberman, and then, thoughtfully, „Who have got de job?“

„Edouard,“ was the reply.

„Ba gosh,“ and the lumberman grew more thoughtful, „‘e mus‘ have good pull wit‘ Laurier!“

It is a little world of its own, French Canada. Outside its limits there is nought worthy of consideration. And it is a beautiful world. A world of forests, dark and sweet-scented; of broad-bosomed rivers and flashing mountain streams. A world of snug homes and kindly curés, of little fenced gardens and big fenced fields. A world that wakes with white dawns, and works from the moment the red sun gilds the village spire till the spire’s cracked bell tinkles the Angelus. Horny-handed, bowed-backed, hard-faced, and simple-minded are the people of this world, earning their living by the sweat of their brow year in and year out without question or complaint. Content to till and harvest as their fathers did before them: happy to live the life, hopeful to die the death, of their class and kind, such is the way of les Habitants.

An Atomic Survival.

WHETHER they love England little or much; whether or not they look askance at an Imperialism unifying the aspirations of—to them—an alien race; wherever and however their ideals be grounded, or their conscious efforts directed, they are none the less excellent citizens of Canada, and helpful, however unwillingly or unconsciously, in the building up of Greater Britain. They are an atomic survival of mediaevalism; their laws, their customs, their very speech are relics of another age. The Grand Seigneur, with his High Rights, passed not more swiftly in France than did the Reds of the Midi—that hungry, heroic crowd—in their march northward. Untouched by the bloody shear that worked a frenzied people’s will, intimidated by no loaded tumbril jolting a pallid aristocracy to destruction, the Grand Seigneur is to-day a person—in Quebec. Perhaps he profited by example, and perchance his right of pillory, pit and gallows, and others more unspeakable, are as so many shadows; perhaps he has grown bourgeois, and instead of exercising his lordly will to remove the popular grievance, he writes to the newspapers—but there is sufficient of the

old sieur left to be remarkable. „Quaint old Quebec,“ they call the town of that name. Quaint is the term that describes all French Canada. And as to loyalty to Great Britain—bear with me while I sound the Habitant, and piece together from his broken English the sentiments of Habitant Canada.

M'Sieur Chamb'lan.

„PLAINTEE Englishman come to Canada now: on Ste. Rose dey come also—et ees mos'ly politique-fiscalité, yas?“

Crudely enough I put the fiscal problem before him in a few words.

„I s'pose mese'f dat beeg beezness on Englan'—Yas? Milor' Chamb'lan—pardon, M'sieur Chamb'lan—mak' plenty troub' wit' de fisc. De Canayen-Français, you compren', not de Englishman-Canayen—hees not worry wit' fisc or w'at Englishman t'ink. You tink dat cur'is? Mais!“

It is just lovely to listen to him, this seared old man with the patient smile. He is so artless in the confession of his political faith, he is so confident in the honesty of his views. Sometimes, abandoning the rugged, home-made reasoning, bejewelled with metaphor of forest, field, and river, he drops into the stilted dogmatics of his favourite newspaper. You recognise as you listen, and welcome almost as a friend, the tricky phraseology of the partisan leader-writer. Then he breaks back to the lake and the rapid as texts for his little sermon.

„Englan' she lak man dat tak' canoe d'écorce on beeg rapide. One tam she float firs' rate, ev'ryt'ing smoot' lak glass. Dat w'en you mak' beeg beezness wit' all worl', eh? Bimeby n'odder contree cam' long, an' dey tak' leetle bit your beezness, an' den n'odder she tak' leetle bit, an' den n'odder. Som' lak you tak' canoe up rapide, she mak's dam' hard. So Chamb'lan 'e say, 'De curran she run too fas' as we can pull—we mus' mak' de grande portage—yas?“

Briefly, I sketched to the Habitant the possibilities of preferential tariffs, and the closer union of the Empire. That portion of the scheme which deals with the question of a contribution to Imperial defence met with his emphatic disapproval.

Patriotism.

„W'AT use mak' de foolishness lak dat?“ he inquired—for him—impatiently. „S'pose you mak' trouble wit' La Russ; you 'ave beeg war wit' her—you holler out, 'Come, Jean Du Bois, I mak' beeg fight wit' La Russ, you com' right 'long an' bring wit' you all de frien's you can fin.' I say, 'La Russ don' mak' troub' w't' me, w'y shall I mak' worry wit' de Englishman, her beezness?“

All of which, as I sternly explain ed to the Habitant, is most dreadfully unpatriotic. And what is patriotism? asked my Habitant.

„Love for your country,“ answered I, unthinkingly, „and a readiness to sacrifice, if needs be, your life at her need.“

The Habitant looked a little puzzled. This, said he in effect, is my country. Here was I horn as was my father before me. Here are my children and my grandchildren. I know these lakes, these woods, these fields, as I know my own garden. My grandfather fought for this land, driving out the Yankees in 1812,

while I carried my rifle in the Fenian invasion. I speak French, but France is not my home. I live under the British flag, but England is nothing to me. I am a Canadian first and last, and if he who loves his country best is the finest patriot, then there is no greater patriot than I.

Briefly this is the attitude of French Canada. It is actively loyal to Canada; it is not actively disloyal to Great Britain. „Canada first,“ this is its motto. Only there is really no second—absolutely none. If you can understand a passion for Quebec, with an apathy for the rest of Canada, and an attitude of supreme indifference toward the remainder of the British Empire, not to say the civilised world, you can understand the French-Canadian and place him at his value. He is not an Imperialist, he is not a „Rule Britannia“ loyalist: he represents Isolated Parochialism at its best and worst; he is an anachronism, a bit of the seventeenth century living on the fringe of the twentieth. And, withal, he is rather lovable: if his outlook is narrow, his humanity is broad: if his ideas are small, his heart is large. I like the Habitant—Toronto, forgive me—on first acquaintance he is pleasing, Perhaps if I had to live alongside him all my life— But then, I have not.

