

CANADA IN SATIRE

AN ANGLO-CANADIAN

DURING the last ten years the press of the Old Country has been publishing beautiful tributes to the spirit of Canada. But the January issue of perhaps the greatest English quarterly has an article about us which few would call beautiful and none would call a tribute. It is a piece of satire, —frank and bitter and biting. Here is a startling change, and the satirist is one of ourselves. Mr. Carleton W. Stanley in the last number of the *Hibbert Journal* has given us a judgment to think about, to refute if we can, to act upon if we have to acknowledge its truth. His article is entitled "Spiritual Conditions in Canada", and he certainly does not spare us. Mr. Stanley may be right or wrong, or partly right and partly wrong. But, as our American neighbours would put it, he has at least "said something". In rapid succession he has characterized our churches, our educational institutions, our newspapers, our literature. His main points will here be first summarized, and then some criticisms will be offered upon our critic.

I.

It appears that we are on the downward path towards sheer materialism, and that—especially in our large cities—the impetus has been given by immigrant Jews. It is they who have done much to make the power of wealth so incredibly great in our social life. They were once pariahs and persecuted; now they are exploiters, with no glimmering of public duty, men whose citizenship is a private possession to be put in one's pocket or deposited in the bank at interest! Jews control our theatres and music-halls; they have rapidly conquered the professions, especially the profession of Law; and they are now leaping into politics. Their origin was in the communities of eastern and southern Europe, and on their way hither they stopped—to their own detriment—in the United States. Thus, in one of our richest Canadian classes, "the culture of New York Jewry passes current". Even the churches have become infected. Twenty years ago they fed the needy poor and ministered to them. Now they rail at working-men, take sides against strikers, move out from a slum district to the suburbs for the luxurious taste of motor-driving worshippers, and plant an occasional mission among

the poor "as they would plant one in Ceylon". Mr. Stanley doubts whether there are now six pulpits in Montreal and Toronto combined from which a Hugh Latimer could deliver his sermons. The ministers sell automobiles or run poultry farms or deal in real estate in their spare time,—“everything but their Master’s business.” A church is named after a millionaire who built it or provided a pipe-organ, and therein the minister preaches “his hollow eviscerated gospel”. Gymnasia, swimming pools, cafeterias and the like are the chief tokens of initiative. But there is no readiness to reshape doctrines or take up a new position in a changing world. The successful preacher is he who “most nicely leaves it in doubt whether Christ or Mammon is his message”:

No wonder that our theological colleges have become Barnardo institutions of a sort, importing from the old country the very dregs of illiteracy and characterlessness to keep up the supply of divines. Right down to our elementary schools. . . . there is one lesson taught, one gospel preached, “There is no God but money, and Canada with its unparalleled natural resources is the most God-fearing country in the world.”

Mr. Stanley assures us that it was not ever thus. He remembers the ways of his parents and grandparents. But the change has been accepted with a complacent mind, and herein lies the horror.

II.

The universities and schools ought to be a bulwark against materialism and a witness for the things of the spirit. But our critic finds them as feeble and as degenerate as the churches. Teachers are drafted into them “by the pressgang, as it were.” “Most university positions have incumbents who have no qualifications for their work.” Some are young women, “of little experience and intelligence.” They have been hired on the principle of accepting the lowest tender for the teacher’s post; and, when none would apply, the standard was lowered. A teacher’s examinations and matriculation requirements are “not much more than half as high as they were twenty years ago”. Only a few of the sixteen Canadian universities have ever adhered to any standard whatever, and the worse have outbid the better to get students on easy terms until “A Canadian university degree has come to be the shadow of a name”. The expenses of a college course have been increased because our millionaires present buildings to universities without providing for their maintenance, and the ample dormitories charge a high rent for a room. Thus the poor man’s son has no such chance as he used to have.

And the professors! Forty or fifty years ago the Canadian professor was one of the well-to-do men in a community, and was influential in moulding opinion. "To-day he has the social position of a Roman client, and is the butt of the newspapers". The "magnate" of a place usually owns a shirt factory or canvasses for automobile orders. Of course there are exceptions. Here and there one finds a noble example, reminiscent of the past, a professor of splendid mental powers and acquirements, who plies his academic task "in threadbare poverty and general contempt." Men of European fame have not enough salary to clothe their children. And there is even the *prosperous* professor,—some mountebank who makes a fortune out of scribbling rubbish and flattering the vulgar in our worst yellow newspapers. An occasional pupil will imitate the higher sort, but the common run will become as hypocritical as their teachers. And the university president sets the pace. He goes up and down the country "haranguing Canadian Clubs, conferences of dentists, and so forth, and urging that the universities be better equipped for turning out engineers and practical men who can 'exploit our unparalleled natural resources.'" Mr. Stanley has a poor opinion of even those institutions that were once our pride, and the rest of course must be still worse. When the light has grown so dim at the centre, "how dark is the night in the outer regions!"

III.

What about the newspaper press? One vast firm, we are told, controls by advertisement the income of all the newspapers in a city. A quarter of a million children advertise "the colossus" on the covers and title-page of their schoolbooks, and to the colossus the press is completely servile. Our newspapers, under the pressure of money, have wholly divorced themselves from the actualities of our politics, and they are less and less considered. No progress in Canadian literature is discernible. Not yet have we produced a novel that will live. We are indeed publishing more books, throwing up more rubbish in the shape of books than in art. But we are shut out from being a nation of poets by that old principle enunciated by Wordsworth that poetry comes from emotion recollected in tranquillity. Who can be tranquil in such surroundings? Mr. Stanley heats seven times the furnace of his wrath for the "Canadian Authors' Association":—

The forming of a Canadian Authors' Association is anything but a sign of improvement, and the Association at once debased

itself by a much advertised "Canadian Book Week" (our fish-mongers annually attempt to stampede us in like fashion with a "National Fish Day" and our Protestant churches and flower-shops work hand in hand on "Mothers' Day"—every good son in the country is then expected to send his mother flowers, and every pulpit is expected to ooze with sentiment over maternal affection).

IV.

But our critic would not leave us entirely depressed, and those who live in the east will perhaps forgive him a good deal for the sake of some comparisons he institutes between the eastern and other parts of Canada. The grace of life, he says, is to be found in the Maritime Provinces above any other place in the Dominion. Those provinces have been at an economic disadvantage, especially since Confederation; they have had no great booms; they have lost much of their best blood to New England, to Montreal and Toronto, to the United States. But they have likewise been saved from tidal waves of immigrants, and have thus been allowed to grow as a tree grows:—

What of the "good life"? One hears better conversation in a club in Halifax or St. John than in the clubs of Toronto and Montreal,—to take a very superficial instance, and not to press the matter too far.

Mr. Stanley thinks it no accident that the most genuine poetry has been written by a Nova Scotian. And he has a kindly word for French Canada. He notes that it has escaped "the itch for Prohibition, the itch for motor-cars, and the itch for real estate". The habitant has been a hard worker and has had a hard climate, but he is a source of gaiety in himself, and has never isolated himself in a lonely farmhouse, but has lived in villages. Some of the best artistic work in etching and painting has been done by French-Canadians.

Moreover, even in the dark field of the press, Mr. Stanley sees some tokens of a coming better day. He rejoices in Mr. Crerar's manifesto at last election, as containing "more clear thinking than any political speech or platform we have ever had in this country". The unexpected success of the Farmers' Party was, in this writer's view, most encouraging, and he regards some recently established publications in Toronto and the Western provinces as signs of a better sort of journalism. But he sees his country as still split into contrasted types. "A Torontonion and a Haligonian are as unlike as Cockney and Welshman. Between Montreal and Winnipeg

there is a chasm more unbridgeable than that between Dublin and Belfast". Mr. Stanley thinks that Goldwin Smith's old prediction has been verified, and that sending emigrants from the British Isles to Canada has proved just an indirect way of sending them to the United States. The article closes with an acknowledgment that between the hopeful and the sinister features one cannot strike a balance. "One tries to hope, even when most conscious of the sad lack of real inspiration in our life, and the appalling materialism of our ambitions, our judgments, our pleasures, our whole activity."

V.

This is great stuff, enough to furnish forth material for a dozen debates at young men's literary societies, and to set people at ladies' tea-parties wrangling for many a gay afternoon. As one of Mr. Hardy's sagacious characters has said, "A little chat about the bad times always puts me in good spirits." True or untrue, fair or unfair, Mr. Stanley's rhetoric sparkles. The Old Country reader, no matter how great the extent of his knowledge or ignorance about Canada, will revel in these lurid pictures, these quaint comparisons, these epigrammatic thrusts. But, apart from the literary feast, it does make some difference to know whether the "facts" are true and the inferences fair. Another Canadian may properly be heard in reply.

Now, speaking for myself, I am bound to say that I do not recognize the authentic lineaments of the clergymen I have known in these Mammon-serving toadies to whom—according to Mr. Stanley—our churches have entrusted their spiritual guidance. I know a great many ministers, in many different places, who are not selling automobiles or dabbling in real estate, but struggling to the best of their limited powers with that high task which they have chosen. If they selected the Church on unworthy grounds as a promising career, I must say that the choice did no credit to their wits, and they show no other sign of being unusually stupid men. Mr. Stanley explains that he is not indicting ministers "wholesale", but he speaks of the "grossly material and idolatrous influences" to which "the common run of church-goer" is subjected, and it is my experience that the common run of church-goer—who must be a disciple of the common run of minister—is not being demoralised to the extent that he suggests. Our critic points out that the churches of twenty years ago did not take sides against strikers and rail at working-men, apparently insinuating that the churches of to-day commit these offences. But I can recall how in the last Cape Breton

Coal Strike it was complained that most of the clergy were on the side of the miners. In a recent issue of *The Dalhousie Review* the alert gentleman who writes the sparkling "Topics of the Day" attacked the clergy in the United States on quite the opposite ground. Here are his significant words about the "Reds":—

Of course they always have local ministers on their side. That is only natural.

Critics of our Canadian ministers often genially explain that the ministers "toady" to the working-class to make themselves popular! The clerical lot, thus cast between the upper and the nether millstone of two sorts of criticism, is far from enviable.

Mr. Stanley is not given to the weakness of the under-statement. When he says that "Most Jews in Canada have no glimmering of the duties of citizenship", can those of us who have known many public-spirited Jews refrain from asking whether he is sure of his proportions? When he says that "Most university positions have incumbents who have no qualifications for their work", does not one feel that the statistical evidence on which such a reproach could rightly rest is difficult both to procure and to appraise? I have consulted men who have grown old in the educational service of Canada, men who are by no means responsible for either the merits or the demerits of our teaching profession, men whom I have again and again found to be somewhat acrid critics of "things as they are", and have been unable to find any corroboration for the view that teachers' standards are not much more than half as high as they were twenty years ago.

In short, Mr. Stanley is a very clever young man, and—like most clever young men—he has an impulse to "lash the Age". I cannot help feeling that the Age would be more effectively lashed if the thongs of the whip were not so often swung in mid-air. To vary the metaphor, he reminds me just a little of the Spanish Armada, in which the artillery was vast, but the gunners' practice was poor, and not a few tremendous shots sailed magnificently over the enemy's head. The satirist, especially when endowed with a gift of mordant speech, is likely to excel rather in the sting than in the exactness of his descriptions. For example, the social place of a university professor in Canada is no doubt lower than it should be. It is lower than it should be everywhere, and "the cry goes up 'How long?' in every academic centre of the old world as well as of the new, where the Juggernaut car of commerce is crushing the spiritual values. Over eighteen centuries ago Juvenal had to

complain that the rewards are not commensurate with the merits of life:—

Probitas laudatur et alget.

But is Canada in this respect a sinner beyond other places? Our critic speaks of his four generations of Canadian ancestry, and it is an excellent feature in any man's criticism to be severe towards those he loves whilst he is charitable towards the alien. But charity is sometimes dangerous to justice, and "Far off fields look green." Nothing is more frequent than to hear Canadians reproach themselves because in their country the reverence for high art has been lost in the cult of the dollar. But the English, not to say the American, professor will hear with a cynical smile that this vice of materialism is specifically ours.

Mr. Stanley does not indeed say that it is ours in unique degree, but the trend of his article for English readers is to suggest that Canada is a specially appalling example. One may heartily commend much that he has said; for he has written well, though with less precise reference to this Dominion than he appears to suppose. No doubt it is perfectly true that the clergyman, the professor, the school teacher who comes here from an old country will feel the lack of that conventional deference to which he was accustomed. No doubt he will find that he has to win more respect for his personal qualities and can rely less on the inherent dignity of his office. No doubt the finest achievements of learning and science are in new countries less appreciated, and the social consideration of such workers on the high levels of thought is insignificant among a public that understands what the plutocrat has accomplished but to which the accomplishment of the *erudit* is utterly unintelligible. But in Canada, as probably in no country of the old world, there is a chance for the man of learning and the man of science to appeal with success to a wide public audience, and to make his influence felt in public affairs, *provided he understands how to speak to the masses*. Nor need such popular speaking be the debased frivolity which our critic admits to be successful and even to lead to "a fortune". The "shy and secluded scholar" cannot do it, and it may be granted at once that the shy and secluded scholar has in Canada less than his proper recognition. But the capable teacher of the times is, I think, better appreciated here than elsewhere. And there is no loss of learned prestige when one thus brings down his learning from heaven to earth. The successful fisherman is he who "understands the psychology of the trout."

It is indeed true, however, that educational work is everywhere

at a discount, and that the shrill pretences of respect for it are accompanied by practical disregard of its claims. In Canada the problem is complicated by our vast distances and our scattered population. We have a smaller supply of the very best academic teachers and scholars, because our colleges are too numerous and so obstinately reluctant to amalgamate for more effective work even where amalgamation would be practicable. Without assent to Mr. Stanley's "wild and whirling words" of denunciation, we may agree that in too many universities we are forced to use, for junior posts at least, men of less than the adequate qualification. The office of the teacher in all countries has been made less and less attractive—except on purely disinterested grounds—to the ambitious and the able. And it may be doubted whether protests will avail to stop the decline. More and more it is coming to be true that the very voice of protest is hushed, and that our ablest young men—except such as have the spirit of the martyr or the fanatic—are silently withdrawing their own powers and energies from an educational career that is despised to other careers that are theirs for the taking. But it is not good that they should all thus bow to the logic of events. A voice of fierce invective, like Mr. Stanley's, is to be welcomed; for the last hope of amendment is gone if everyone just makes his own quiet arrangement to "get from under" and save his own interests.

One welcomes Mr. Stanley too because he is himself in the ranks of business, and cannot be supposed to be biased. But one doubts whether at that blissful date "twenty years ago", to which he so often refers, things were as good as he assumes. That date seems to be the time of his own boyhood, and he is still too young to be thus a wistful idealizer of the golden age of his earlier youth. He reminds me of those who used to talk about a vanished "Golden Age," those dreamers about a circle of chivalry whom the poets have encouraged because they minister to the pleasures of the imagination. Has not George Meredith spoken of "the bewitching silken shepherdesses, who live though they never were"? A critic once wrote of *Punch*—"It is not what it once was". "Alas!" said Mr. *Punch* in the next issue of his inimitable journal, "Alas, it never was."