

SNAPSHOTS OF CANADA

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I LAID the foundations of my impressions of Canada during my childhood years, a quarter of a century ago. My father was then a graduate student in Experimental Psychology at the University of Toronto. I remember how he used to write to me little letters on Canadian boys and girls—how they skated, how they danced, how they received telephone messages and such beautiful little things. It all thrilled me then. My uncle, Dr. Simon T. Paul, was at the same time doing his doctorate in medicine at Dalhousie University. The little presents he sent me from Halifax are still the treasures of my happy childhood.

At the Tail End

The climate of Malabar, my home on the south west coast of India, is described as six months hot and six months hotter!

My father landed at Montreal, shivering. He was wrapped in a raincoat instead of an overcoat! He didn't know the grand difference between the two! But he says, that people were so polite they didn't stare at him for this Himalayan incongruity in his dress.

Another interesting experience of his was connected with the Simcoe Post Office at the Varsity Campus, Toronto. In his anxiety to send a letter to mother, he dashed to the counter past the long queue, scoring a decisive victory over many non-violent blondes and tomato-colored boys. When he veered round, he realized in a moment his uncivilized behaviour. Humbling himself to dust, he surrendered his leadership and joined the silent line of mortals at the tail end!

The Chequered History of a Canadian Watch

When my father returned from Toronto, the first object that attracted me most on his person was a golden pocket-watch with his initials T.P.V. artistically engraved on its back. It was given to him by a Canadian, who later on wrote remarkably long letters of over fifty pages, discussing all things under the sun—the climate of Canada, the Negro problem, the Palestine question, and so on. My father carried the watch close to his heart. It was a mysterious object to me. Freshly equipped with virgin laws in psychology, my father thought that I might develop a "watch-complex", and so he taught me how

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to read it and how to wind it! He used to place the watch in the hollow of my tiny ears, and what a delirious thrill the tick, tick gave me! And one day, he went to the extent of opening it up for me, and I beheld a shining mechanism!

Fifteen years later, when I went to Lahore to study at the University, he gave me the watch. Before he did so, he extracted a promise from me that I would never lose it or sell it. For the next four years, it was my faithful companion. For me it always was a visible link with the Lady of the Snows.

After I had taken a master's degree in chemistry, my father wanted me to join the Government Service. But I gave an ultimatum: I must do more research! I clung to Lahore. I wasted my money in restaurants, to satisfy my incurable craze for tea and coffee. One evening I found that I was left with four anas (8 cents)! I was ashamed to beg for money from my father. How to avert catastrophe? To sell the watch or not to sell the watch, that was the question! What a restless night I spent! I knew that my father would never forgive me if I sold it. But when there is no peace in the stomach, what else can one do? In the morning I went to my friend, Madhu Kabadi, the shrewdest journalist in Lahore. He had been in love with my watch for a long time.

"Madhu!" I said to him with wet eyes, "Madhu! here is the watch! Give me anything for it! But promise that you will never part with it! When you look at it, remember that it once belonged to your dear friend!"

His purse, which had often responded to my financial crises, was full of sympathy this time also. In my pale palm, trembling, one hundred rupees (\$30) sparkled!

But my mind was in the far away maple land, with the friend of my father, who was unknown to me. What a world of affection was embodied in that watch that had welded two souls from the ends of the world!

The history of the watch to-day is mingled with the rise and fall of Lahore to the Muslims. I wonder whether Madhu Kabadi had to leave it, perhaps on the dusty road to Amritsar, to be trampled by the millions of starving, fearful, tearful Punjabis who ran away for their lives!

Lover of Halifax Fish

Long before my uncle came to Canada, he was influenced by the greatest Canadian who ever came to India—a medical missionary named Wanless. Wanless established the famous

mission hospital and the medical school at Miraj, and was knighted for this wonderful work. My uncle was his student at the medical school. Thus he was introduced to the art of Hippocrates by a Canadian; and he was made into a brilliant surgeon by a Canadian University, Dalhousie. The years he spent at Halifax are often joyously recalled by him. Before he went there, he was a fish-hater, but by the time he came back, he was a fish-eater, a strange crossing of the floor! To-day, even when a fine fish, cooked and seasoned with the far famed spices of Malabar, steams under his very flat nose, he sings praises of Halifax fish to such a degree that his wife, whom he courted for a few days less than two decades, changes color from soft rosininess to Post Office red at his partiality for the foreign stuff!

Keep to the Right

Unlike my father, I arrived at Buffalo wearing a heavy overcoat made by a New York firm. I was also fortified in Canadian ways.

In my home, I have many things bought from Eaton's. Some of the coats that I wore in my younger days had the flourishing Eatonia insignia on them. You can imagine what a thrill I had when I walked into the gigantic Eaton's stores in Toronto.

One of the precious instructions that my father gave me before I left India was that while crossing a street I should look to the left during the first half and to the right during the second half! In our country we always keep to the left. There was thus a mild confusion in my long settled traffic habits. Only after I realized the dangers of "narrow escape" from automobiles did I respect implicitly the instruction. Believe me, I have knocked down two or three girls (who were evidently on diet, experimenting with their "shrinkage" problem) by my cosmic precipitation down stair-cases, blindly keeping to the left!

Go and Have a Scrub

My mother tells me that I was very serious while a boy. According to her reminiscences, during that quiescent period I once indulged in pyrotechnic laughter! That was when my uncle narrated to me how a barber at Halifax refused to cut his hair because he was black! The garden where I played with my childhood sweetheart was my beautiful world. The complications arising out of pigmentation never intruded into the Eden of my little mind.

Almost a quarter of a century rolled away before I stepped on the snows of this great Dominion. Without subjecting me to spectroscopic analysis, the fairer sex instinctively evaluated the wave length of my color and passed the verdict that I could easily be taken for a tanned Canadian—a veritable victory for the colored race!

I can boldly testify that I have not suffered the pangs of color bar in this country. A lady with a slight leaning to the left but with her centre of gravity in the right gave me a peculiar sensation when she blurted out that the Hotel X in the city of Edmonton refused to admit colored people! To substantiate her statement, she pulled out of history the case of two flat-nosed Chinese who underwent extensive humiliation in that hotel.

Though I have an exquisite ability to gulp castor oil, I could not swallow what she had told me. As a law-abiding citizen of the Dominion of India, British-Protected, a Christian whose blood is tinged with the spirit of the Apostle Thomas, who came to Malabar, I determined to see my fate! Armed with my thin passport, No. 2090, which proclaims: "These are to request in the Name of the Governor-General of India all those whom it may concern to allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance and to afford him every assistance and protection of which he may stand in need," I walked into the dining hall of the aforesaid hotel in a perfectly Gandhian manner. The "Zero-hour" never struck! Instead, the hostess very politely guided me to a table. An apple-cheeked waitress, with admiration in her eyes apparently for my novel color, served me food. It was a very humble dinner that I ate, composed essentially of harmless mushrooms, salt and pepper. I belong to a starving nation, where people live on vegetables and dream of a compensating rebirth.

I have observed a singular reaction in children. They leave marbles, doll, dog, cat, skiing equipment, hammer and sickle, and strain themselves to have a good, concentrated look at me. But my darkness has never corrupted their sunshine and caused them, like Diogenes, to cry cynically: Keep off! Instead, after the initial phase of mystic wonder, cool serenity shines on their faces, and they murmur, "Hi!"

In this free country, however, one incident occurred that could easily be an excuse for an atomic war between the Dominions of Canada and India. A child intercepted me, as though I was an enemy bomber, while I was taking my evening walk.

"You look black," the little one exclaimed, her China-blue eyes revolving like a searchlight. "Please go and have a scrub!"

Drown Myself

Within twenty-four hours after my arrival in Canada, when I told some newly introduced young Canadians that the tea served here was good for neither man nor animal, they were shocked. I don't like to be a target of violent attack for my severe but honest judgment. So now, as a safety measure, I quote the glowing, immortal words of Arthur Hartley of England, a first-class tea taster of over seven decades' experience: "Canada? Oh, they can't make tea there . . ."

I ask for a jug of tea. The waitress looks at me twice. "Tea?" "Yes, please!" She then takes a jug and fills it, without rinsing, with hot water. Out of a special box she pulls a measured quantity of tea, already corseted in a translucent bag with a wee bit of lace-like thread attached to it. She drops the whole paraphernalia into the hot water. When the lid is on, the thread hangs out. The tea is before me . . . "Ten cents, please!" . . . I hold my destiny by the thread as a Canadian mother holds her precious child by a leather strap when they saunter on the sidewalks. I give a whirling motion to the bag to hasten dissolution of the tannin . . . The thread slips through my fingers into the brewing medium. Quickly I reach for a spoon. Muttering, I fish for the thread like the Cingalese for oysters in the depths of the Indian Ocean.

Finally the tea is ready. It is all color, auburn, like the flowing hair of the waitress. It is all color—no aroma, no flavour, no lie! It is like the lukewarm water that one reluctantly drinks after a dose of Epsom salts! Dissatisfied, I drown myself in a bottle of Yankee Coke or Canada Dry!