

MONSIEUR L'HABITANT

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THE roads between Montreal and the Laurentian hill country are all paved now. Twisted arrows point the way, gaudy signals announce the railroad crossings, steel bridges span the rivers and ugly signboards mar the beauty of the landscape. It was not always so; we were not always civilized. Indeed ten years ago most of these very highways were so narrow as to make two way traffic next to impossible, so muddy that few automobiles ventured far, so poorly marked that the stranger was almost certain to lose his way. Morning and evening the roads were used as cow-paths, and during the hay harvest foot travellers were squeezed into the ditch by awkward racks. And even now some of this rural backwardness remains, for gasoline engines have not made so deep an impression as elsewhere. If you step from the highway, it is into another world. The townsman's bustle changes to a rustic dawdle, sidewalks vanish and milk pails appear, and the dandies of urban extravagance are lost in the three-day whiskers of pastoral poverty. You have passed to a land where the spinning wheel is still in fashion, where sour bread is baked in outdoor ovens, a land of wooden shoes, shoulder yokes and birch-knot pipes. If you listen attentively, charming folk songs will reach your ear, watch and merry clog dancing will catch your eye, fiddles and mouth organs will allure your fancy—and perhaps you will tarry a while.

As a boy I used to travel these hills on my bicycle or, if the season was wet, on foot. In the field I found the habitant in coarse black trousers and once-white shirt ever ready to return my boyish salute. Sometimes I saw him sitting on the doorstep in the evening, his day's work done, smoking peacefully while the housewife bustled about her endless chores; or of a Sunday, rocking steadily in his chair amid the constant chatter of an ample family. As I grew older, I learned to speak a little in the *patois* which all polite Parisians so thoroughly despise, and this new accomplishment brought me new friends. I now stopped to chat with the store-keeper of the village, pretending to admire the gaudy trinkets on display, but slyly comparing his showcases with those of rival tradesmen; or perhaps to practise my newest idioms on the smith and his cronies who were always friendly to the passing stranger. My conceit grew much faster than my vocabulary, however, until I

began to linger in the shadow of the church, hoping I could persuade the good curé to direct me to the sunniest glade, the highest crow's nest or the jolliest trout stream—he knew them all. And so I spent my schoolboy holidays among the hills and the habitants.

During my first long vacation from the university I went farther afield. Many pavements had been laid in the meantime, tempting the motorist from his former haunts, and I was afraid that this progress might have driven the sturdy race of habitant from the earth for ever; that when I was able to call on my friend, I should find him gone away for good. I needed money to help me through the winter, so I took a job as a fire-ranger, and, as by this time my bicycle had passed on to a younger brother, I made ready to travel afoot or in canoe.

No rustic who stands for the first time beside the Royal Bank Building (our measure of hugeness) can ever feel more awful than I did when first I stood among the hills. It was evening when the train left me at a little wayside station, from which there appeared to be no escape except by a road that seemed to lose itself at either end in a series of ripples. Mountains surrounded me at a distance, and in the twilight they seemed to reach the sky. Old Lessard, whom I knew only by reputation, was to have met me, but he was nowhere in sight, nor indeed was anyone—I was alone and miserable. A tidy shanty stood before me bearing a conspicuous label *Waiting Room*, and I thought that surely I must find inside those inevitables of the railway station, telegraphs and the uncoated agent. However, a look inside was enough to persuade even the most trusting that the label was intended to be read very literally; you could do no more than wait in a ten-by-twelve shelter, lined with uncomfortable benches and lit by three small punctures that were intended for two windows and a door. As the minutes passed, I became more and more impatient until at last I ventured across the road to the only other refuge in sight, where an assortment of posters announced that I would find the postmaster—liveryman—hotel-keeper—garageman—shopkeeper of the neighborhood.

I am one of those who firmly believe that salesmen are born and not made. The enthusiastic literature of the Salesman's Institute or of the Royal Society of Commercial Engineers, inviting enrolment in their excellent courses, is wasted on me; and the numerous diplomas they offer leave me quite cold. Had I been intended for the great profession, I would have been endowed with more energy, a greater ability to talk nonsense persuasively, and a deeper love for correct clothes. Esau was a tireless hunter, a sure man with his bow, a handy man about the camp, an aimless

idler if you like, who never understood the art of bargaining and failed to evaluate nicely the surrender value of his birthright; still he was a happy man, and I readily accept him as an ancestor. What care we if no one can teach us how to trade bad whiskey for a buffalo robe? Do any of us envy the insurance peddlars or the peanut vendors who now make snobbery fashionable? We were born pigmies, and we can never be taught to grow.

You, my reader, may be untouched by my feeble arguments, but you would certainly agree with me if you ever set eyes on Burbot Monette. The moment I saw him, I knew he was born into the great race—that Nature had endowed him with the salesman's instinct. A keen, shrewd, steady eye gave you the hint; a round, merry face supported the theory; the ample waist-line settled the matter. Here was certainly a man whom you might refuse but you could not possibly ignore, and upon whom excuses were completely squandered.

Nor were his talents wasted in so small a community. Later in the summer, when I found that the local school was by far the finest in the district, I found too that this was Burbot's doing. He knew that if his customers were able to read and write, his mails would increase and the sale of stamps would yield him larger profit. His waggons monopolized the carrying trade in the old days and his motor truck in the new. If any of the modest gentry needed a night's shelter on their way to the city, where could they find better accommodation than in the little hostelry across from the railroad stop? It is true that gasoline was then, and still is for that matter, a new commodity in the hills; but Burbot with his usual foresight had cornered the market. And you, my reader, must remember that these were all side lines—artifices that the proprietor used only in coaxing customers to the counters of his shop where were transacted the only real bargains of the place. The policy had brought results. Within the span of ten years the one room grocery had grown to a five room departmental store; and if, as I suspect, the business still paid only slender profits, the reason was no doubt that within the same period of time the family had grown from two to fifteen.

When I entered the door, merely to inquire after old Lessard, I had five dollars in my pocket: before I left, two of these reposed securely in the till. Burbot was the wizard who performed this miracle. Would I stay to supper? It was long past meal-time, so I did: (cost, seventy-five cents). An hour or two later the bargains of the candy counter were shrewdly pointed out, and the glimpse cost me twenty-five cents. I bought a humble substitute

for my favourite pipe which lay with my tobacco on my desk at home, (thirty-five and fifteen were punched on the register). You may think that I was careless in these purchases, and perhaps I was, but at any rate my last was a real bargain. Burbot acknowledged only one failure in his progressive policies, and he invited me to take full advantage of it. The villagers had not taken very readily to the tooth brush or the safety razor, and consequently six tubes of toothpaste and six of shaving cream lay where they had been put several months before. Knowing well the trend of modern business, the shopman felt a little hurt to see a portion of his stock lying so long on the shelves; I bought it outright for half a dollar.

Perhaps it was well that Father Lessard came in just then to rescue me from further recklessness. A bargain whets your appetite, and there is no telling what I might not have purchased if I had been left any longer under the shopkeeper's spell. As it was, my coachman was more than two hours late in arriving, and, after the usual polite enquiries about families and crops, my two new acquaintances parted, and we set off.

Were it not for the high steeple of the parish church, St. Mattieu would be difficult to find in daylight, for it nestles comfortably in a little valley, and with the coming of darkness that beacon vanishes and there is none to take its place. It was not later than half-past ten when we drove into the inn-yard, yet every light in the whole village was extinguished and had been, I guess, for more than an hour. We banged rudely on the kitchen door, and the good Mère Trudeau tumbled out of bed (we heard her tumble) to light a hasty lantern and let us in. There was no sort of introduction—just a gruff "bonsoir" from all three of us—and without more ado I was led to the room at the top of the stairs while my hostess noisily rummaged about in the kitchen. Lessard bade me a hurried good night, Mère Trudeau's mannish voice called me down stairs, and looking at the oil-clothed dining room table I saw five fried eggs and eight ample slabs of bacon heaped before me. Having neither the heart nor the vocabulary to protest, I set to work with a feeling that I would not get very far. Instead of waiting to see that I ate the plate load, as I certainly expected her to do, the good lady snuffed out the kitchen lamp and, instructing me to do the same with the lantern, waddled out of sight. Appetites are difficult things to measure. I seldom have any trouble in deciding whether or not I am hungry, but I never can be very sure just to an egg or so how much I can hold. With a heavy stomach but with a light heart, I took my lantern and climbed up the stair to bed.

One day and two nights were hardly enough for me to explore properly all the mysteries of this peculiar mountain hotel, but during the early minutes of my first morning I solved at least one of them. At home I have known my friends to read their newspapers somewhat carelessly and then to throw them into huge piles whence they travel into several channels. In our house we used them to light the fire, and many times my loyal eyes have seen the royal family burnt in effigy as the sparks slowly began to chase each other up the chimney. Sometimes on Monday mornings I have also seen the gay leaders of our society or the statesmen of our generation peeping at each other from beneath the ill-fitting lids of garbage cans. Once or twice I remember that financial embarrassments led me to sell some of these useless papers to local tradesmen who wrapped their merchandise in the news of the world. But to such very commonplace uses the habitant has added several novelties. In the Trudeau household, to take an instance, the beds were lined between the springs and the mattress with old copies of *La Presse*. That was why when I awoke I heard my every movement echoed almost weirdly from the depths beneath. Of course, I had to get out of bed to investigate this mystery, and as I detest novelty, especially in my bedroom, in two mornings I became a confirmed early riser. Sometime later, in another and a wilder hostelry, my list was further supplemented, for I found the walls and ceilings papered with the news. Most had become ancient history by that time, but at any rate here was a useful way of recording when the last layer of covering had been applied.

Leaving the little village almost as suddenly as I had found it, I took my partner and set off for the woods. This partner of mine was a shy little man by the name of Albert Brossard, to whom I was introduced in a great hurry on the morning of my departure. The smell of culture was too evidently upon me, and our first meeting was, I think, undoubtedly a failure. Once again it was Lessard's job to tote us and our baggage to the border of our district, the shore of Lac Brule, and I always look back upon that ten mile journey as one of the worst, because I was perched upon the high driver's seat with Lessard to talk with, while from a sense of inferiority Brossard insisted on riding on the load with his feet dangling over the side, or else keeping alongside of us in a dog-trot. However, once we boarded our canoe all was different. There we chatted like old friends until, by the time we reached our base of operations, I at least could have written an authoritative biography and Brossard, for his part, was prevented only by the fact that he was illiterate.

To-day there are not many competent schoolmasters in the mountains: twenty years ago, when Petit Bert (we used to pronounce it che Ber') was a boy there were not many schools. Everybody now makes a pretence at learning his A. B. C.'s, although few indeed may reach the multiplication table; but a score of years back, education depended entirely upon the curé's disposition, and more often than not he was lazy. Even when I visited St. Mattieu, the schoolmistress was a girl of only sixteen who had studied in a convent at Three Rivers and, from all I could judge, might have barely passed her high school entrance examination under any other educational system. She taught only in the morning, and yet the afternoon was no holiday, for every day after dinner the priest came over to spend the afternoon in religious instruction which was by far the greater half of the curriculum. Memory, not mind, is what we need under such a system: and when our chances of eternity are all nicely figured for us by mathematicians in black petticoats, we have no need either for an alphabet or for figuring. Two decades ago these foibles were not only apparent, they were indulged in to the full; so "tit Ber" went for three years to school without learning so much as to write his own name.

One of the forest ranger's duties is to placard every trail with conspicuous warnings against negligent campers. I quite forget how many hundred we nailed up in the course of one summer, but I do remember that these placards were always an unwelcome part of our pack, and consequently we disposed of them as speedily as possible. Haste never pays, however, for after one busy morning's work I found that my partner had put several of the notices upside down, as he could read not a word of the text. So a schooling had some advantage after all, even in the woods! When pay day came, I had not only my own cheque to look after, but my partner's also, and again and again I alone stood between him and the perfectly honest company accountant who figured out the amount of our wages. Once in a long time it became necessary for Ber' to write home, a duty which also fell on my shoulders, and the letters were all decorated with an uneven cross that testified to my being a legal attorney. In the end I found my friendship sorely taxed by these unusual demands; for besides performing my duties as a sort of supervisor, I was become banker and scrivener as well.

During all our travels I carried Maupassant and La Fontaine in my knapsack, not so much from any particular love for French literature as from the sad necessity that I must write an examination in it when I returned to my university. Whatever leisure the flies and mosquitoes allowed me in the long evenings I spent in

thumbing the pages of this little library, and once I ventured to read aloud to my companion. From that time the habit grew, until hardly a week passed but we spent an hour or two with these delightful romancers. The classic prose and the poetic licence made some of the stories difficult to understand, handicaps that I fear were somewhat aggravated by my poor pronounciation, but as a rule the keen eye of the listener betrayed a deeper interest than that of the reader. As we travelled over portage and lake I often heard a chuckle and, upon enquiring, found that it was prompted by the simplicity of the villagers of Goderville or the artifices of Sire Fox. A more determined philanthropist would no doubt have gone out of his way to kindle greater interest in a mind so pliable and a soul so willing, but as I have never been an ardent reformer, I merely left the seed to grow as best it might.

My mail brought "tit Ber" plenty to look at. The gaudy comic supplements of the Sunday papers were indeed a sumptuous feast to an eye that could read nothing but by pictures. Still the daily editions were not discarded until after I had been thoroughly quizzed about the cartoons and picture galleries. In one of these we found a murderer, and this drew from my companion the amazing comment,

"You know dat is wan t'ing wat I never see, a good hanging."

A little curious, I enquired further.

"Wall you see," my friend continued, "when I was yong teller an' work in beeg factoree by Montreal, my girl shes live ver' close on de jail so she can see all de hangings. Dese affair tak' place de early morning, jus' 'bout de tam I start my work; but wan day de rope she broke or somet'ing an dey pos'pone de business ontil night." Here the little habitant put aside the stick he was whittling, and he took up the story again with dreadful earnest. "My girl shes tol' me to come roun' for see de show, but jus' before de whistle blow Batisse is tol' me dat dey mak' wan more pos'pone ontil de nex' morning. So I tak' my tam an' fix me up bien swell. 'Bout height o'clock I am arrive chez my girl as she is mad comme le diable.

'De whol' show, shes off,' I say.

'Oho you mak' beeg mistake ma frien', shes mak' reply, 'de noose shes fix, de ol' feller is fight de guards, an' you is miss de mos' bes' hanging what I never see.'"

Thinking that the occasion called for some modest word of sympathy, I muttered something of little consequence, but I had as well saved my breath. "Tit Ber" put my mind at rest, or perhaps he provoked it further, by telling me that his brother-in-law had

just been appointed sheriff of Three Rivers. "An' if you want for some to de firs' hexecution in de new jail yard, I will axe him for put your name right nex' to mine on de lis' for inviter," he added thoughtfully.

Even religion did not divide us. Our Sunday was a busy day, for in dry seasons we were constantly on the move, camping on the tail of some fishing party or other to make sure they had smothered all their sparks. The nearest church was miles away, and so was the nearest priest, so many weeks passed before we realized that we were accustomed to kneel at different altars. We had been spending a few days with one of the up country families in a very distant corner of the woods, when on a Saturday "Tit Ber" asked me if I would care to "faire le chapelet." Here was certainly a new phrase, and in an effort to lift the doubt that was apparent from my vacant stare, he added the uncomfortable question, "Do you ever go to church?"

I do, and I told him so; but still he appeared in grave doubt, because there was no sign of a rosary in my kit. I stammered a word or two intended to convey the impression that I was a staunch Protestant who despised prayer beads and the like. Fortunately he understood not a word of it, (I say fortunately because I have since learned to be more considerate) for, as I afterwards found out, he had never heard of dissenters before, and imagined that the whole world belonged to his communion.

It seemed the better part of valour to follow submissively. We hastened to the kitchen of the "big house", where the whole family was gathered to await our coming. Pots, filled with a smelly dinner, simmered noisily on the stove, faintly hinting to me only the thrilling largoes of a cathedral organ. Socks and half-mended trousers hung carelessly on a wire along the wall, and these were the only colourings that marred the simple bareness of our chapel walls. The company seemed little disposed to worship when we entered, for there was hilarious laughter as one of the youngest dropped his pet kitten into the water-bucket. But all at once there came a silence, with all the suddenness, though with none of the miracles, of that early Pentecost. We took to our knees. One by one the beads were told, and I guess I understood as much of the ceremony as any of my neighbours. I had not come to scoff exactly, but I had certainly little intention to worship; yet as I bowed my head I felt that He who counts devotion to be of heart and not of knee considered me no hypocrite.

Slowly and steadily the darkness nibbled into daylight until we began that distressing task—saying good-bye. We took a hasty

parting from the various families along the run; I took a last dip in several of the lakes; from time to time we paused along the portages, now well worn with our travel, to revive old memories both hateful and happy; but while I live I shall remember longest a twilight picture which I saw from our last camp.

Toward evening on a Sunday we came suddenly to the shore of Lac Fou. Before us lay a stretch of smooth water, rippled only here and there as some gay trout rose to capture deftly his evening meal. The shore line was cut deeply by a series of bays, leaving it impossible to imagine even a rough circle or oblong, and no doubt it was this queer lack of plan that had induced the first adventurer in the country to christen this the crazy lake. When we reached the shore it looked crazier than ever. A raging fire had swept the district only a year or two before, leaving just the barest skeleton of a forest and uncovering to the eye naked, rocky cliffs on two sides of the water. Upon a little knoll, close beside the shore, we built our camp, for a season's practice had taught us how to turn even an inhospitable ruin into a comfortable bed-room in less time than it takes a housewife to dust her furniture. Supper over, I wandered aimlessly until I saw the gorgeous colours of the sunset glinting slyly from behind the cliff ahead. I walked, I ran, I stumbled, picked myself up hurriedly, and scrambled somehow to the top where I found a rocky arm-chair ready for me to sit in.

If you, my reader, should ever travel in my footsteps, here you will find a picture. Unless the birches grow faster than they used to, you will find at your feet a deep border of black which sets off the varying shades of the further wood. Evening and autumn between them have turned the maples into almost every shade of yellow and red; the nightly frost has gradually painted the birches brown; only the evergreens remain inviolate, standing like sturdy sentinels among their smaller sisters. To the south you will notice thick mists which remind you of factories and mills, of greed and misery. Perhaps you will feel home-sick and long for a bath tub and a light—but for my part, I shall always be content among the habitants and the hills.