



Ralph Connor's "The Foreigner"

NO one can visit the Canadian west and remain indifferent to the advent of the swarms of Slavic people commonly known to us as Galicians. Upwards of one hundred thousand have come, bringing their strong bodies and ready hands, but hot blood, a strange tongue and minds that in problems of government and principles of justice are centuries behind the western world. The importance of this situation nationally makes us greet as a great Canadian novel "Ralph Connor's" newest book, "The Foreigner," for he has interpreted this problem with the heart of a missionary and the insight of a statesman (Westminster Publishing Co.).

It is not only a story of keen human interest, but it is a sociological document. It is a revelation of the western life of to-day and a few years back as it affects two great races, namely, the Galicians, who have come from afar, and the Canadians, already there. It is a call to a higher appreciation of the responsibilities of nation-making, a duty that means so much for the future, and yet is so apt to be overlooked in the desire for a heavy wheat crop, or a quick turnover on a new townsite lot. It is, as well, a story of unbroken human interest, a considerable advance on some of this author's recent work. "Out of breeds diverse in tradition, in ideals, in speech, and in manner of life, Saxon and Slav, Teuton, Celt and Gaul, one people is being made. The blood strains of great races will mingle in the blood of a race greater than the greatest of them all." So says the author, in his optimistic preface.

In Winnipeg's North Side.

The principal character in "The Foreigner" is Kalman Kalmar, a young Galician, who as the story opens, in the early eighties, is a boy of eight with his poverty-stricken mother and elder sister in the crowded north side of Winnipeg. In his description of life there and farther west Dr. Gordon is again the merciless realist, his pages redolent of drinking, fighting and Southern lust. It is to be hoped his picture of Galician life in Winnipeg, if not an exaggeration, is an isolated instance.

The same hope may even be expressed in regard to the life described on the Night Hawk Ranch in Saskatchewan, for the debauchery of Jack French and his man Mackenzie is not a credit to a country of churches and enlightenment.

To come back to the story: Kalman and his mother are in the clutches of another Russian, Rosenblatt, who appropriates the money sent out by the woman's husband for her keep, and forces her to take in lodgers to the number of twenty-five. In her two-roomed shack, and overflow even into her own bedroom. The conditions described are revolting, and into the drunken frenzy of a wedding feast comes unexpectedly Paulina's husband, with the inevitable result of vengeance, jail and a general melee. Here is a glimpse of this scene of festivity in Winnipeg:

And This in Canada:

In the main room dance and song reeled on in uproarious hilarity. In the basement below, faint and fed, men stood packed close, drinking while they could. It was for the foreigner an hour of rare opportunity. The beer kegs stood open and there were plenty of mugs about. In the dim light of a smoky lantern the swaying crowd, here singing in maudlin chorus, there fighting strangely to pay off old scores or to avenge new insults, presented a nauseating spectacle.

Kalman, the wronged husband of Paulina, had entered the pleasant gathering in disguise, and before the police took charge had killed a Polek and badly wounded Rosenblatt. But Rosenblatt was not killed and he lived to do much more injury to the house of Kalmar. One day young Irma, Paulina's daughter, threw off her sheepskins and head shawl and became a Canadian girl of bewitching beauty. When Sprink, Rosenblatt's secretary, attempted to kiss her, Kalman rushed to her aid and was nearly killed by the older vampire. Henceforth the scene of interest is in Saskatchewan, for Kalman was sent to the Night Hawk Ranch by his friend and protector, Mrs. French, Jack French's sister-in-law, and old flame. The early years on the ranch were full of trial and discouragement for Kalman, owing to the rancher's sullen dissipation until his periodical case of whiskey was exhausted. Under the influence of French when sober and from frequent contact with Brown, a voluntary, altruistic sort of home missionary and doctor at the edge of a nearby Galician colony,

however, he grew in mind and evolved in ideals. His turn came when he discovered a coal mine and, better still, the love-lit eyes and golden hair of the daughter of a wealthy Scotchman seeking investments. The step seemed a long one, but the transformation of Kalman from the dirty newsboy in Winnipeg to manager of the Night Hawk coal mine and son-in-law of Sir Robert Menzies does not seem unreasonable, and is a fine sociological study. The end was not achieved, however, without more trouble with Rosenblatt, and one day there was a killing off of characters that reminds one of a Shakespearian tragedy.

Steps in Assimilation.

Apart from the main thread of the story several characters and incidents are of more than passing interest. When Kalmar, the Russian Nihilist, departing for fourteen years in penitentiary for the north side brawl, asked a fellow-Nihilist to wipe out Rosenblatt, Joseph Pinkas replied:—"Master, this is a new country. All that we left behind. That is all well for Russia, but not for Canada. Here we do not take the oath to kill."

The influence of existing forces for Canadianizing the foreigners is well illustrated in the case of Simon Ketzels:—

His rapid transformation into Canadian citizenship he owed chiefly to his little daughter Margaret. It was Margaret that taught him his English, as she conned over her lessons with him in the evenings. It was Margaret who carried home from the little Methodist mission near by the illustrated paper and the library book, and thus set him a-reading. It was Margaret that brought both Simon and Lena, his wife, to the social gathering of the Sunday school and of the church. It was thus to little Margaret that the Ketzels owed their introduction to Canadian life and manners and to the finer sides of Canadian religion. And through little Margaret it was that those greatest of all Canadianizing influences, the school and the mission, made their impact upon the hearts and the home of the Ketzels family.

Another type worthy of immortality in these pages is embodied in Sam Macmillan, the freighter, who preceded the railway on the Edmonton trail. He possessed a picturesque vocabulary of profanity, which he used especially when the horses mired in a sleugh. On one occasion an Anglican Bishop who was a passenger implored him to desist, saying the horses did not need it to urge them on.

"Just as you say, your Reverence," replied Sam. "I ain't hurried this trip, and we'll do our best."

At the next sleugh the experiment was tried. Ordinary language was used, but the horses did not budge. A half hour passed, with no results.

"It is growing late, Mr. Macmillan, and it looks like rain. Something must be done," said the Bishop.

"It does that, your Lordship, but the brutes won't pull half their own weight without I speak to them in the way they are used to."

Another half hour and a similar conversation. Then the Bishop gave in.

"Well, well, Mr. Macmillan, we must get on. Do as you think best, but I take no responsibility in the matter." Then he retired from the scene:—

Macmillan seized the reins from the ground, and, walking up and down the length of his six-horse team, began to address them singly and in the mass in terms so sulphurously descriptive of their ancestry, their habits and their physical and psychological characteristics that when he gave the word in a mighty culminating roar of blasphemous exultation each of the bemired beasts seemed to be inspired with a special demon and so exerted itself to the utmost limit of its powers that in a single minute the load stood high and dry on solid ground.