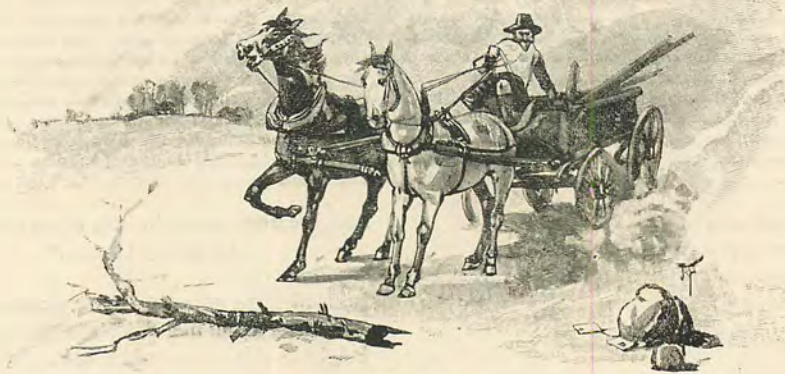


PICKINGS FROM THE PRAIRIE.

BY WILLIAM TRANT.



LETTERS FOR POST.



THESE words are written in a log shanty, situated on the vast prairies of North-West Canada, a region that has been aptly described as the "Great Lone Land." I have not a neighbour to the north or west of me within a distance of sixty miles. Adjoining me on the south is an "Indian Reserve"—that is, some hundreds of square miles of

prairie set aside by the Government for the home of the red man; and to the eastward of me, at distances varying from two miles to seven miles, reside ten families, forty-two persons all told, six of them being wives, and twenty-two of whom are young men and maidens, infants and children. These households, with myself and family, form the "settlement" about which I have taken up my pen to write. We are all English, with the exception of one family, which is French-Canadian. None of us are of the sort of persons that emigration agents and emigration literature describe as fit and proper persons to emigrate. Indeed, with the exception of one person, and the French-Canadian family already mentioned (who have been bred farmers), we are all of the kind whom the emigration office says had better stay at home. I have noticed this blunder, by persons who ought to know better, in other countries I have visited; and I have been assured by one who knows, that the City clerks have made the best diamond-diggers in South Africa. In "Our Settlement," as I will call it, one settler was trained as a surveyor,

another as a lawyer, two have been clerks, two have been commercial travellers, one is a stonemason, and I have but just left the pen for the plough. It is seen, therefore, that a settlement is not, as is often supposed, a fortuitous concourse of Scotch crofters, Irish cotters, and the "residuum" of large towns. That there are many of these in Canada and the United States is true, but in this wide expanse of the North-West



IN THE NEW.

IN THE OLD COUNTRY.

they are so scattered as to be but rarely seen in ordinary course.

This little batch of families, whom I will designate "we," becomes, very naturally, a community with identical interests. There is no trade rivalry amongst us, but, on the other hand, a sort of tacit co-operation, none the less real that it is not formulated. There is no social rivalry, for we have all the glorious privilege

of being equally independent. We have each of us our little weaknesses—*cela va sans dire*. A young girl with a new dress “all the way from Toronto”; a young farmer with a new horse; the man with the largest acreage under crop; none of them hides his or her light under a bushel, though there be but ten families to see its shining. As none of us has much to talk about, it is but natural to talk of one’s neighbours, and it is their faults rather than their virtues that come under discussion. These, however, are little sins compared with the envy, hatred, and malice of towns; and are but ripples upon that ocean of mutual and reciprocal obligation without which our little community could not hold together for a moment. Take, for instance, the simple operation of shopping. Twenty-two miles from “Our Settlement,” across the Indian Reserve already mentioned, is a cluster of two score of wooden houses; this is our nearest “town.” Whenever any of us have to buy anything it has to be bought here. When, therefore, one of us is called “to town” on business, he is entrusted with the shopping for the whole settlement, and comes back with his waggon or buck-board laden with groceries, drapery, etc. Our mails are managed in the same way. This acts well enough during the summer, when we contrive a weekly visitation to the town; but in the fall, and during the long winter, we are often put to great inconvenience—first, because persons do not care to face the weather without adequate reason; or, secondly, the snow-drifts may have hidden the trail or rendered it impassable. I have known communication between the town and the settlement suspended for periods ranging from one week to five weeks. We then have to trust to any chance passer-by to take in our letters to the post office; and it is surprising, in the circumstances, how seldom a letter or a newspaper miscarries. Some-

times, when we know the trail a person will take on his way to town, we place our letters (stamped, or with the money for stamps) under a conspicuous stone, near to which we throw a tree across the trail to attract the wayfarer’s attention. He knows the signal, dismounts, secures the letters, and takes them to post.

In “Our Settlement” the dignity of labour is thoroughly recognised. No man is thought the worse of because he works; indeed, he is thought worse of if he do not work. And why should it not be so? What with fencing, firewood, and logs for building, tree-felling is a principal occupation with us; and why should we be thought any the worse for doing from necessity what a celebrated English statesman does for recreation? Last year “Our Settlement” elected me treasurer of a committee for celebrating “Dominion Day,” Canada’s national holiday. I found that my first and chief duty was to carry posts and stakes to my fellow-committeemen, so that they could fence an arena for athletic sports. One of “Our Settlement” has just been made a J.P. Four years ago he was a stonemason in Cornwall, and he still works at his trade for two dollars a day. The same feature pervades all society out here on the prairie (note that I do not write all “grades” of society). The storekeeper from whom we buy our groceries is our member in the Legislative Assembly, and the keeper of a temperance hotel is our senator. This recognition of the “horny hand” is but natural. A man out here cannot be one thing and seem another. There is not sufficient privacy for that. All of us, having homesteaded, have equally had our farms given to us for nothing beyond a registration fee of ten dollars. The acreage each person has under crop is known to the rest of us; we can count his stock of sheep, cattle, and ponies. When he buys



“MANY WILL BE LATE” (p. 483).



“ ‘ BACHING ’ IT.”

anything we know from whom he has purchased and the price he has given. When he sells anything, we know to whom and for what money. A man's financial status is as clearly known as J. Stuart Mill could have wished when he described the reluctance of persons to disclose their incomes as “a low state of public morality.” This equality is inimical to the chatter of Mrs. Grundy, and, to my mind at least, is one of the charms of prairie life.

A feature peculiar to life in a settlement is “baching it,” a short phrase for “bacheloring it.” The men who live by themselves have to do everything for themselves. When a man “baches it,” his shanty consists of but one room, generally built of logs. If he be a tidy and a cleanly man, he periodically scrubs his floor; he carefully stows away his bedding during the day, his cooking utensils are neatly arranged on his shelves, perhaps alongside a selection of the best books; his walls are decorated with the portraits of his relatives and friends, and by the latest pictures sent out from England; and his rough furniture, most of it made by himself, is, at any rate, clean. In such humble though tidy abode, the dashing young fellow who was a favourite in drawing-rooms, and the “best waltzer known,” may be seen, pipe in mouth, mending his stockings (for he is a tidy man), or reading, or writing home, or kneading dough, or up to the arms in suds as he scrubs away at his fortnight's washing. There is, however, the very opposite of the above description—viz., the untidy man, with unkempt hair, unwashed face, linen a stranger to the washtub, the interior of his shanty all higgledy-piggledy. There is, however, much to be said to excuse this. The young fellow who has been hard at work all day is too tired to set to household work in the evening—too tired even to cook. Leaving his plough, or his axe, or his spade, just where he may happen to be (where it will remain until he

next wants it), he is too tired to knead, so makes damper with or without baking powder; too tired to trouble about a roast, he will cut or chop off a piece of pork from a joint and cook it anyhow; he cares nothing about “tidying up”; neglects his ablutions; tumbles into his unshaken bed with his clothes on, and sleeps the sleep of the fatigued. The habit grows upon him: he becomes dirty both in appearance and in fact, slovenly in all he does; while his shanty, unswept and neglected, soon bears an abundance of living proofs that it is a stranger to the housemaid and the chambermaid.

The best way to “bach it” is for two to live together. One can then do the indoor work while the other attends to the farm, and they can vary the work by going “turn and turn about.” Many do this, and live with all the ease of unconventionalists, and all the comfort of cleanliness. The two clergymen who take it in turns to visit “Our Settlement” live in this way. Both are graduates of English universities, and doubtless know what are the luxuries of life. And yet they “rough it,” if roughing it consists of being one's own cook, washerwoman, chambermaid, and servant of all work. In summer, when they visit us, there is often no better bed for them than a haystack, and yet they say that they are happy and have no desire to return to the life of the old country.

The mention of clergymen presupposes public worship, and I can assure my readers that, out of the world though we be, we are not without that privilege. We have no church, it is true, but we have fortnightly visits from the gentlemen mentioned, and service is conducted and the communion administered in one or other of the shanties most conveniently situated. Nothing short of a blizzard keeps our worshippers away from these gatherings. The snow it shall snow, the wind it shall blow, and the thermometer not make up its mind whether to rise to

thirty below zero or fall to "forty below"; but still, there are bearskins and mufflers and fur caps; and the ponies can find the trails, however hidden; and snowdrifts are mere nothings (on service Sundays). And so our farmers come, three, four, five, and seven miles, to join in the worship of the Lord who loves us all. Of course, there may be delays, and many will be late; but the parson waits, until the tingle of the distant sleigh bells is heard, and the laggards are seen coming between the last bluffs, with signs of a breakdown or an upset, or some such catastrophe born of the rigours of the Canadian winter.

Not only have we "Our Church," so to speak, but we have "Our School." We are proud of our school, and we have reason and justification for the pride. The only rate we have to pay is a rather heavy one we have laid upon ourselves to educate the settlement's children. This has been done to build a school, which we have accomplished by borrowing \$500—*i.e.*, £100—on debentures, repayable in twenty equal annual instalments. We gathered the stones ourselves from the prairie, hauling them with our waggons and oxen; our J.P. and his sons built the school with their own hands; and within the building "young Canada" is being educated. All these details may appear trifling, but it must be remembered that there are hundreds—nay, thousands, of such settlements on the North-west prairies. It is thus a nation is being formed, is concreting itself, so to speak, and the trustees of our schools, our J.P.'s and so on, are creating that municipal life which is the strength of a great nation. Literally, it is but one step from a log hut to Parliament House. I have had a glimpse of electioneering in Canada. I think the public meetings out here are conducted on a better plan than in England. In Canada the opposing candidates attend each others' meetings, and as long a time as one speaks is allowed to his opponent, and the succeeding speakers follow,

one on each side alternately, the time at disposal being fairly divided between them. At the finish a show of hands is taken as to the fitness of each candidate. This statement of both sides of the question makes the meeting far more interesting than merely hearing one side, while it offers an excellent opportunity for examining and cross-examining the candidates.



"ALL THE WAY FROM TORONTO" (p. 481).

I have given above a short account of life in a Canadian settlement. It is a pleasant life, because it is as free as the air that blows across the prairie. Jack is his own master, and has only himself to consult and to please; and altogether it is a jolly life, notwithstanding that it is devoid of those pleasures and luxuries that constitute life in a great city.

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS.

THEIR happy paths that side by side
Went smoothly on, at last divide!
And now, with tender, fond delays,
Here, at the parting of the ways,
With long farewells, and hand in hand,
The lovers stand!

Once more they seem to tread again
The green, sequestered, quiet lane,
The banks by which the river ran,
And, where the leafy woods began,
The track—just wide enough for two—
Their footsteps knew!

They think, with heart to beating heart,
How soon their lives must drift apart!
Her faltering tones, his looks, declare
A truth that meets us everywhere,
That joy, though sweet, is at the best
A transient guest!

Duty, whose promptings fill our days,
Stands at the parting of the ways!
Follow its guidance unafraid,
And keep, true lover and fair maid,
In hope and patience close at heart,
Though far apart!

J. R. EASTWOOD.