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PREFACE

Rummagings 2: Stephen Leacock

(The first number of “Rummagings” appears in *Canadian Poetry* 51.)

It has long been known that Stephen Leacock based several of the characters in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912) on people in Orillia, Ontario, the small town near which he spent much of his boyhood and nearer which he built the summer cottage where, from 1907 onwards, he spent most of his summer holidays. Leacock himself admitted that at least two characters in the book—Henry Mullins and Judge Pepperleigh¹—were based on Orillians, and in 1951 B.K. Sandwell recalled that he “heard Leacock tell practically every one of the Sunshine Sketches as dinner-table anecdotes, always with the most explicit reference to Orillia and to Orillian personages”(163). One of Leacock’s sketches that may not have had its origin in Orillia is “The Mariposa Bank Mystery,” where, as any reader of the book will readily recall, the lovelorn bank clerk Peter Pupkin is driven by the sight of Zena Pepperleigh “danc[ing] four times with a visitor from the city” at The Firemen’s Ball, “to go...into the office of the bank and get his revolver and see if it would blow his brains out” (108). The “mystery” to which the sketch’s title refers is, of course, the result of Pupkin and the caretaker of the bank mistaking one another for an armed bank robber, and discharging their revolvers with harmless but sensational and, finally, felicitous consequences for Pupkin, who is initially rumoured in Mariposa and reported by “the afternoon papers in the city” to have been “shot dead” but, eventually, revealed to have received no more than a graze on the head (111-14).

During the years when Leacock was living in Toronto, teaching at Upper Canada College, and embarking on his career as a humorous writer, a news story appeared in *The Globe* that may well have planted the seed of “The Mariposa Bank Mystery.” A dispatch from the newspaper’s Guelph correspondent, the story appeared under the title “A Young Toronto Man Injured” on May 22, 1895:

Mr. E. Homer Dixon...was accidentally shot in the Dominion Bank about half-past 10 o’clock last night. It appears that Mr. Dixon was at the theatre, and left before the last act. Mr. R.D. Saunders, accountant, and Mr. A.K. Coulson were working in the bank, and Dixon went in to see them. After chatting with the two men, according to the report of the manager, Mr. Pep-

ler, who made a thorough investigation, Dixon picked up the teller's revolver and jocularly pointed it at Saunders, who cautioned him to be careful, remarking that if he were not more careful somebody would be shot, to which Dixon replied, 'That's all right.' A little while afterwards Dixon, still having the revolver in his hand, went backward and sat down in a chair at the back of the box. Coulson noticed him leaning carelessly forward on the chair and remarked to Saunders that, 'We had better take that thing away or he will be doing some injury to himself.' Saunders moved towards Dixon to take the revolver away from him, when it was accidentally discharged by Dixon, and he dropped from the chair to the floor. Two physicians were in immediate attendance, and the ambulance procured to take the injured man to the General Hospital. The physicians found that the ball had passed through the upper part of the left abdominal wall, piercing internally the liver, stomach and several folds of the intestines. The wound was dressed, but no effort made to recover the bullet....The patient is quite conscious, but his condition is doubtful. He is 22 years of age, and has been employed in the bank for about six months.

Subsequent reports have Dixon "lying in very critical condition" (May 23), "considerably improved, and...[with] a fair chance of recovery" (May 24), and "still improving...[with] good hopes of...entire recovery" (May 25). After being rumoured and reported dead, Pupkin experiences an even more rapid and, in every sense, comic improvement:

At eight o'clock [the following morning] it was known that Pupkin was not dead, but dangerously wounded in the lungs. At eight-thirty it was known that he was not shot in the lungs, but that the ball had traversed the pit of his stomach.

At nine o'clock it was learned that the pit of Pupkin's stomach was all right, but that the bullet had struck his right ear and carried it away. Finally it was learned that his ear had not exactly been carried away, that is, not precisely removed by the bullet, but that it had grazed Pupkin's head in such a way that it had stunned him, and if it had been an inch or two more to the left it might have reached his brain. (111)

Sandwell's assertion that Leacock habitually developed anecdotes into fictional sketches, brings well within the bounds of credibility the possibility that Pupkin has an ancestor in E. Homer Dixon and "The Mariposa Bank Mystery" in "A Toronto Man Injured" and subsequent reports. In identifying a source for the Mariposa Belle in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, Arthur Lower adds his "compliments to [Leacock's] shade...for the suc-

cessful and shameless way in which he stole” material for his fiction (169). Yet further compliments may well be in order.

They may also need to be extended to Leacock’s “shade” on account of another possible source for Pupkin. Given the interest in “imperial organization” that culminated in his lecture tour of England, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa in 1907-08 (see *Sunshine Sketches* xvi-xvii and Doyle 151-52), Leacock is unlikely to have overlooked Sara Jeannette Duncan’s *The Imperialist* (1904),² where he would have encountered the following description of bank clerks in her “analysis of social principles in Elgin” (40):

Others might be more substantial, but there was an allure about a young man in a bank as difficult to define as to resist. To say of a certain party-giver that she had “about every bank clerk in town” was to announce the success of her entertainment in ultimate terms. These things are not always penetrable, but no doubt his gentlemanly form of labour and its abridgement in the afternoons, when other young men toiled in till the stroke of six, had something to do with this apotheosis of the bank clerk, as well as his invariable taste in tailoring, and the fact that some family influence was probably represented in his appointment, Privilege has always its last little stronghold, and it still operates to admiration on the office stools of minor finance in towns like Elgin. At all events, the sprouting tellers and cashiers held unquestioned sway—young doctors and lawyers simply didn’t think of competing....

(40)

Pupkin is not a local boy, but his appointment is the result of “family influence,” his “taste in tailoring” is distinctive, and he has no serious rivals for the affection of Zena. He may even have a specific literary ancestor in Squire Ormiston’s only son Walter, the bank clerk who is charged and brought to trial in the early pages of *The Imperialist* for the theft of five thousand dollars from the Federal Bank in Elgin, a robbery that took place while he “was sleeping, or supposed to be sleeping, upon the premises” (34, 78). If Peter Pupkin does indeed owe part of his character to Duncan, then perhaps the “sunny little town” (5) of *The Imperialist* also joins Orillia in the background of Mariposa.

Notes

- 1 See Sandwell 162-63 and, for a wise commentary on the vexed “question of Leacock’s relationship with the people of Orillia, especially after the publication of *Sunshine Sketches*,” James Doyle 154.
- 2 The 1905 volume of George M. Wrong and H.H. Langton’s Review of *Historical Publications Relating to Canada* contains a lengthy review article by Leacock of three books on Imperialism that were published in 1904, C.H. Chomley’s *Protection in Canada and Australia*, Adam Shortt’s *Imperial Preferential Trade from a Canadian Point of View*, and Edwin S. Montagu and Bron Herbert’s *Canada and the Empire: an Examination of Trade Preferences*. The footnotes to the review article reveal Leacock’s extensive knowledge of periodical literature on Imperialism, but make no mention of *The Imperialist*. I am grateful to André Narbonne for bringing Leacock’s review article to my attention.

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