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Grace Tomkinson

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MR. ZERO OF CANADA

by Grace Tomkinson  
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*look for photo*

A huge grinning negro, over six feet tall, weighing 230 pounds, standing on a table on the sidewalk in St. Mark's Place, New York! Beside him, the picturesque, benevolent figure of Urbain Ledoux, "Mr. Zero" to the world of the unemployed, preparing to auction him off as a worker, to the highest bidder. Facing the "block", filling the sidewalk and half the street, a crowd of people, just the ordinary Bowery crowd; men mostly homeless and out of jobs, dirty-faced ragged little urchins of the neighborhood, two Chinamen, reporters weaving in and out, slatternly women peering from basement doorways or leaning from upstairs windows, and in the background, two trucks, holding news and motion picture camera men.

Previous to the auction, Mr. Ledoux had collected some two hundred workless, forlorn men in a room above the basement soup kitchen known to New York as "Zero's Tub", and asked how many were willing to be put up at auction. The first to offer was this burly negro. Mr. Zero proceeds to exhibit his physical qualifications in the approved manner of slave markets of two generations ago.

"Here I am offering a man for sale. The highest bidder for his services gets him. What am I offered? Come now! Bid on this man! Superb muscles. Never been sick. What am I offered for the labour services of an American? His wife and child are up against it, and I ask you to bid on him."

When the negro has been disposed of, a Scotsman steps up; but when he sees the cameras pointed at him, his courage fails and he drops back. A Hungarian college man takes his place, expressing his readiness to accept any kind of a job till he gets on his feet. The cameras click. The crowd surges closer. Above the roar of the L. trains clanging down Third Avenue and the persistent honk of the horns of automobiles waiting to get through St. Mark's place, rises the calm, clear voice of the auctioneer:



"What am I offered for this man?"

New York has many remarkable figures who may be counted on to draw a crowd at any time, but none is better known than the mysterious Canadian, familiar to most people as "Mr.Zero". The big city doesn't approve of him. He has told it that it has an economist, a "Wall Street" mind, that finance, commerce and industry are its gods, not moral issues. He works out his ideas, not at all orthodox, in most unconventional ways. Yet New York can't help being tremendously interested in the man. Everyone knows of his spectacular methods of helping the unemployed. Many of his demonstrations, such as his famous "gandy dance," executed with snow-shovels, are nipped in the bud by the police, chiefly because they are utterly unable to cope with the crowd he never fails to call out.

He is an odd sort of celebrity, worshipped by the masses, who pull their shabby caps respectfully when he passes; tolerated curiously, suspiciously by not a few, studied by psychologists trying to sift out his motives (who but a madman would stick to a crazy enterprise in a dingy Bowery basement without some scheme for ultimate gain?) shadowed by reporters and photographers (for he is sure to be doing, or about to do, something original or startling); and cultivated in vain by socialists, communists and other ists, who want to convince him that all he needs is to be linked up with one of their great programs. Yet in spite of all the notoriety that the press and movies have conspired to give him, no one seems to know much about the man himself.

He is simply "Mr.Zero", sprung from nobody knows where, looking very like William Jennings Bryan (and some say like P.T.Barnum), who is eternally busy in cold weather, providing five-cent meals for his great jobless army in his self-supporting restaurant, "The Tub," scouring about for shelters for his down-and-outers when park benches are uncomfortably chilly, untiringly planning ways to keep their need before the public. But the Canadian who knows his homeland has only to see him and hear him speak, to place him at once.



The man who has kept New York City conjecturing and guessing for years but could have come from no place on earth ~~xxx~~ the Province of Quebec. He is the perfect example of the impulsive, warm-hearted, eloquent French Canadian, and he first saw light in the little village of St. Helene, near St. Hyacinthe, in 1874.

After the auctioning stunt was over and the crowd had gone, we went back to St. Mark's Place and heard his story. When Urbain Ledoux was a boy studying for the priesthood in the Seminary of St. Mary, in Marieville, Quebec, he came to know of Mr. Belleau, who had been appointed from Maine to the position of American consul at Three Rivers, and the young student's dreams took on a change. As his parents were then living in the United States, it occurred to him that he might one day be eligible for a similar position, the highest honour the American Government had given a French Canadian. He set himself a new goal, and the age of twenty-one saw him established in Three Rivers as successor to the very man he had envied. From there he was promoted to the same post in Bordeaux, France. He made influential friends, and was appointed Field Secretary to the American Peace Foundation, and had apparently a brilliant career before him, when a chance sentence from someone started a new train of thought in his mind. Since then he has thrown himself with characteristic energy into what he briefly sums up as "doing good"

He scientifically chose New York as a field because of its many needy. He began with a sixty-five-cent capital, in a tiny cellar in St. Mark's Place, to try to build up a non-charitable shelter in which men could live on little and keep their self respect. "The Tub" is still unpretentious, but it is clean and orderly. On the walls are strange souvenirs left by hobos who have accepted its hospitality, and Mr. Zero's own motto that explains his enterprise: "To bring a greater share of love and beauty into the lives of those too long deprived". The actual work of the place has been taken over by members of the "Old Bucks' and Lame Ducks" Club, as they ~~xxxx~~ style themselves, ~~they~~ men who have been helped over a hard place at some time by themselves, ~~they~~ are reported to have fed as many as 200,000 in one winter.



Ledoux comes fairly by his fighting blood. His great-great-grandfather emigrated from the Old France to the new in the seventeenth century. His mother's ancestor came over with Lafayette, and later settled in Montreal.

Ledoux's own father took part in the Papineau insurrection, and was exiled with the rebel. He came back later to his home in Chateau Gay, where he was a blacksmith and the official annonceur for the village. After he had auctioned off the last of the roosters at church fairs, he would challenge those present to a wrestling match, and he became the champion wrestler of the section. After a time he sold his forge and went off into the unsettled wilderness to help to found the village of St. Helene. Stories of the hardships of that period have been handed down; of the rough log cabin without a floor; of how the family subsisted one whole winter on a kind of soup made by cooking together salt pork and the leaves of the white birch. Members of the Ledoux family still live in St. Helene, and one of the pioneer's sons holds his father's position of annonceur. When the young Urbain became consul at Three Rivers, he was given a grand reception by the town.

During the Civil War, when a call came for weavers in the American cotton mills, both of Ledoux's parents left, with relatives, for Connecticut. They were married and lived there ten years without children. At length, homesick, and with a husband's health undermined by factory work, they turned back home, to take a strip of land in Quebec. There, at last, their first child, Urbain, was born. The elder Ledoux seems to have displayed some of the characteristics which come out so strongly in the son; daring initiative, qualities of leadership, and a love for French Canadian traditions and literature. In his factory days in Connecticut he once took part in a strike in which the leader, when given his opportunity to speak, was stricken dumb. The French Canadian Ledoux, stepped out from the ranks and voiced the grievances of the men, fearlessly.



When he returned to the United States, eventually, he started a new occupation in New England, the making of rosaries and other accessories to the religious services of his Church. He became known over the country as a bead-maker, and made rosaries for years in his home in Old Orchard, Maine. Beside this work, his hobby was introducing a literature in their own language among his fellow countrymen in the eastern states, and the fostering of old traditions in a new land.

Urbain Ledoux inherits his father's love of literature. While still a boy he helped to edit Le Figaro, later merged with La Samedi. When he came to Three Rivers, the only library there was a small one of old religious books in a sacristy. He was instrumental, after some trouble, in founding the Laviolette Library, with both French and English books. He tried in every way to bridge the then existing gulf between the two races. Each section of the population had its own open air rink. When the two met, once a year, at hockey, it was necessary to call an ambulance. Ledoux pointed out that, by uniting, they could keep up a larger, covered rink, and the Laviolette Rink, also named for the founder of the town, came into being.

Ledoux's faculty for keeping things moving, which has helped him to fill the eye of the big metropolis, continued to show itself all the time he was in Three Rivers. A group of French students in Montreal had been trying to arouse some interest in French theatricals. They appealed to Ledoux for help. He organized a tour of the Soiree des Familles through the New England states, and its success led to the founding of the Comite Francais, made up of these artists and others from Paris. This group laid the foundation for later French Canadian theatricals. They travelled as the Troupe Nationale, kept up a dramatic school, and fostered native drama such as the plays of L.O.Davide.

Ledoux's reminiscences of that time concern many well known figures. Louis Frechette, Marc Sauvalle, Israel Tarte, were his friends, and also Madame Albani. He told us of his first meeting with Laurier. He had come up, a youth, from his little French Canadian paper in Maine, to report the aspiring



Premier's first speech of the campaign in Sorel. He found on arriving that the meeting, which was out of doors, was already so crowded that it would be impossible to get within hearing distance. In desperation he contrived to get a note to the chief speaker, telling of his plight, and that he was one of his countrymen. Laurier immediately came to the edge of the platform, beckoned the young stranger to come up, and asked Marc Sauvalle to share his desk with him. Ledoux's friendship with both men dated from that day.

It seemed like a dream to be sitting in an East side basement, our chairs tilting on the uneven stone floor, listening to habitant tales of old Quebec and stories of the "silver-tongued orator." The air of the nickel-a-meal cellar was dim with savory steam from the soup the cook was ladling out, and which reminded us of that less appetizing birch-leaf soup which sustained the Ledoux ancestors. Since Mr.Zero has a theory that a man, to regain his feet, must put up a good front, a barber and a tailor were in their respective corners, the former cutting hair for ten cents, the latter sewing on buttons and renovating shabby suits, gratis. The "Old Bucks and Lame Ducks" moved about, placing bowls of soup, platters of whole wheat bread and coffee on the white oilcloth covered tables. Mr. Zero, no longer a mystery, in the centre of it all, looked not at all like a fanatic or radical, but rather the urbane foreign diplomat, or, possibly, the revered "father" of some parish church in his native province.

There seems to be no end to the man's amazing experiences. Since his decision to champion the unemployed, he has, to gain inside knowledge of living conditions, worked in all kinds of places, at all sorts of jobs. He has ridden on box cars and rods, as a hobo, washed windows and scrubbed floors met big business men, like Henry Ford as an employee in their plants and, later across the table, at labour conferences. He claims to have studied the newspaper and moving picture world, here and abroad, in order to understand publicity methods, which he considers necessary in his work. He appears to



have dietetics, physical culture, economics and a score of subjects at his fingers' ends. It is reported that he goes into a rigorous course of training each fall in order to be able to share the winter's hardships with his men.

He seems to have no illusions about his underworld friends. He has a slogan "An empty stomach has no ears". He has at least shown the rest of us who spout fine theories, that his ideals, however high flown, can be given practical expression while prosperous Wall Street minded N.Y. watches this idealist with cautious interest. Mr. Zero goes on stirring things up as he did as a young consul in Three Rivers.

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Commentaries by Charlotte Michaud of Lewiston, whose parents were acquainted with ~~huk~~ Ledoux, his father, and his sisters.