

Chapter 10

POLITICS AND THE DEMON RUM

CABBAGETOWN PRODUCED its fair share of successful men of affairs: but it exceeded its quota in just one category-municipal politicians, some of whom attained greater stature. There were no poets or celebrated artists, no novelists that we recall. But if we include a couple of blocks westward, we had Walter Allward, creator of the Vimy Ridge Memorial, who became an internationally-known sculptor. Fred Brigden and the late Dr. Charles W. Jefferys, distinguished artists, were also graduates of Dufferin School, but not in my time. Musicians? Alas, no. Philosophers? No doubt, but not of the sort that commit their thoughts to paper or have them carved in brass or stone.

Why then should there have been such an unusually large number of men who later became mayor of Toronto born in the east end? It can only be conjectured that the example of one fired others with ambition. In a neighbourhood where there is a great hockey player or prize fighter there is apt to be unusual interest in hockey or the ring. The champion is sure to have hero worshippers. One of Toronto's early mayors was "Square-Toes" Metcalf, and yet he was long enough on the scene to be admired by his neighbours and to be pointed out by mothers to indolent boys of my generation as an object lesson "There" they would say, "is, Ex-Mayor Metcalf. If you'd only do your work properly and wash behind your ears you might be a mayor yourself some day." This is our guess at the high frequency of municipal figures from this part of the city.

My uncle Robert Fleming was an alderman as far back as I can remember, and perhaps as a child I supposed that he had been born one.¹ He was the only Liberal in the family. In those days the Liberals were called Reformers or Grits, the latter being a term of contempt. The rest of us were Conservatives, though my father who, being a surveyor, was in the city only for a few months each year, was probably somewhat of a heretic in politics. At least I can remember being shocked one day when he quoted that immortal saying of Sir John Macdonald's, "A British subject I was born a British subject I will die," and made the smiling comment, "Twaddle." I thought of the little boys who had shouted "Go up baldhead" at Elijah, and shivered.

My Uncle Robert was a prohibitionist, vowed to touch, taste and handle not, and fifty or more years ago the number of saloons in Toronto was an issue at every municipal election, to be followed a generation later by the discussion of the street car service. There must have been hotels in the city, but I never saw one as a boy; but within an area of half a mile from the grocery store there were probably a score of saloons and liquor stores. They were supposed, in our house, to be the scene of the most frightful orgies. The customers were usually poor, and I suppose that the saloon keepers were to make a decent living they would find it necessary to sell more than was good for their patrons.

Between them and the prohibitionists, led locally by my uncle, a feud raged. The saloon keepers were not kept on the defensive. They attacked the prohibitionists hotly. One of

them who had a groggery on Regent Street testified before a group of his cronies that one night by some error he had strayed into a prayer meeting. The lights were turned out for a considerable time and when they were relit, upon the floor in a most reprehensive position was a leading prohibitionist clutching a female in his arms. None of his hearers doubted him for a moment. It was conduct characteristic of church-goers in general, they believed, and of prohibitionists in particular.

When I speak now of churches and church-goers I speak of the Methodist church in particular, for it was the only church with which the store had any affiliation. First our people went to the old Richmond Street Church, then later they moved to the Metropolitan; and later still split up between Berkeley and Parliament Streets. Though we were too young to attend church, except for services on Sunday, through the week these places were social centres. There would be concerts and discussions and debates and here, I believe, several of the politicians first learned to stand up and speak and think while on their feet.

Occasionally there was literary discussion, and on one occasion Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* was the topic. My uncle, who was to take a leading part, had never read the book, nothing would ever induce him to read it, but he had been dragged into the programme and his wife, having read the book, briefed him on it. When he rose to speak in reply to the debater who had led off, his first words were, "*It is plain to me, after having listened patiently to Mr. Swait, that he has not even read the book in question.*" At this Mr. Swait flushed with guilt and shame and glanced pathetically at his wife. At another time my uncle spoke with respect of the two great authors Thackens and Dickerly.

The store naturally was interested in civic politics, and it was a significant compliment to my uncle that although he was a Grit in a ward where Grits were in a small minority, and a prohibitionist in a community in which the non-prohibitionists were also apparently in a majority, he should have been elected alderman. In old St. David's ward the Tory Orangemen were undoubtedly the dominant faction for many years, and my uncle was not an Orangeman. In fact to find an Orangeman in those days who was also a Grit would have created the same feeling of astonishment that the sight of a red-headed Chinaman would have produced. But his ability, wit, practical common sense and courage were generally appreciated, and in after years, when he was a mayoral candidate, he drew support from all religions and parties, and from all strata of society.

Nevertheless, I recall one occasion in which he defeated B. Osler (later Sir Edmund) who was to become a great financial figure. Many citizens of Toronto for years thereafter dated the beginning of the deterioration of the city from that fateful day in January when the young upstart from Cabbagetown, who had recently collapsed financially because his real estate holdings had engulfed him, actually defeated one of the great men of the city, a man born of the ruling class, a man in whose financial status everybody had the fullest confidence, and a man who, it was felt, was making a serious personal sacrifice by competing for what must have seemed to him a paltry prize.

This generation of pessimists has long since died out, but went to its grave firmly convinced that the impending ruin which was plain for everybody to see had really had its beginning when E. B. Osler was defeated. Thereafter, they were convinced no gentleman would lower himself to contest a municipal office.

But once or twice another gentleman faced the dust of the arena to win the laurel. One was a merchant prince. He went bankrupt early in his second term and had to resign. The other, a kindly stylish gentleman was wrecked on the phrase "*pink tea*." It appears that he had acquired the good old English custom of having five o'clock tea served in his office. The reporters fell on this innocent habit with devastating ribaldry and the mayor found it impossible to withstand the laughter of the public which, perhaps unjustly, had come to the conclusion that he spent his time in drinking tea instead of being diligent about the public business.

For many thousands of Toronto citizens sixty years or more ago the most exciting period of the year was the fortnight or so before the municipal election. There were meetings in every public hall in the city. They might last for three or four hours; and to people who rarely went to the theatre, and whose sports entertainment was limited in the winter months, they provided an amusing and often an exciting show. Then, as always, property owners were chiefly interested in keeping taxes down. Tenants, as always, were indifferent to taxes and were in favour of any proposal to spend the public funds. But what most of the audience at a political meeting were interested in were the personalities which were generally a feature of them.

I remember one campaign in particular, after my uncle had lost all his property and was overwhelmed with debt. His poverty-and the presumption that it was a just judgment upon him-was a feature of the campaign. He was accused of not having paid his grocery bill. To prove the charge a somewhat shame-faced grocer was invited to come to the platform and testify that as a matter of fact there was an outstanding grocery bill which the candidate had not settled. How he came to have run up a grocer's bill in any other store than ours is something I am not at the moment able to explain. The charge could not be denied, but it did him little damage with an audience probably more than half of whom were also indebted to a grocer and had only vague, if virtuous, ideas of how they were going to pay him.

On another occasion he, the proclaimed champion of the prohibitionists, was accused of having liquor in his own house. This was a terrific sensation until it was explained that the liquor consisted of a case of stout used by his mother-in-law, an aged lady in delicate health. This did not injure him in the eyes of the prohibitionists and may have aroused some sympathy and respect in the ranks of the liquor users.

On still another occasion, when the working men were fighting for a minimum wage rate of 16 cents an hour, he was accused of having paid less to a man in his own employ. My uncle denied this flatly. His accuser promised to produce the exploited workman at another meeting. Of course the hall was jammed. A shifty-looking citizen was half

pushed, half carried to the platform, and stood there confronting my uncle, and obviously not liking the prominence into which he had been thrust.

"*You worked for me?*"

"*Yes, sir.*"

"*And I paid you less than 16 cents an hour?*"

"*Yes, you did.*"

"*How old are you?*"

The man told him. "*How many years ago would it be since you worked for me?*" The man hesitated but eventually came out with it.

My uncle made a swift calculation and said, "*Then at the time you would be a boy of sixteen. I remember you now, and a more useless tool I never had around the shop.*" The applause was enough to lift the roof, and the useless tool slunk scowling back into the obscurity from which the exigencies of a municipal campaign had dragged him briefly.

Then there was another meeting somewhere in the west end. It drew a packed house, for it had been announced previously that the publisher of an evening paper and his editor were to appear and make certain charges. What the charges were I do not recall, but they were probably something short of embezzlement and something more than being hard-up-more unpaid bills and debts, I suppose.

The publisher and his editor sat side by side, and at the appointed moment the editor rose and made his charge. My uncle denied whatever it was and then went on to say something about undoubtedly owing a lot of money which some day he expected to repay. He paused and added impressively, "*But however short of money I have been I never put my property in my wife's name so that my creditors would be defrauded,*" The publisher turned and he looked fixedly at the editor who had remained standing, and now sank into his seat. The editor and the publisher continued to stare at each other, the latter with a wild surmise. No words passed between them, and they shortly afterwards left the hall accompanied by hoots. The person who had turned his house over to his wife was the editor, and the information had come to Uncle Robert through Peter Ryan, registrar of deeds, only on the day of the meeting.

If I have spoken a good deal about debts and bills owing it is because they played a general obligato to the progress of the store, so I had better try to end the story of my uncle's debts, which were at one time appalling. Eventually they were paid off with interest, some of them twenty years or more after they had been incurred, sometimes to the creditor's sons and daughters who had never heard of them, long after they had been outlawed by time.

The story of Robert Fair, as later told me by Roly Harris, late City Commissioner is typical. Mr. Fair was a neighbour who owned a hardware store. He was an old family friend and it was natural that when my uncle was building houses he should buy what hardware he needed from Mr. Fair. When the collapse came he owed Fair several hundred dollars, and Mr. Fair too went out of business, obtaining a position in the works department.

Many years later when my uncle was head of the Toronto Street Railway Company, the Electrical Development Company, the Toronto Electric Light Company and perhaps some other organizations in which Sir William Mackenzie was interested, he telephoned Fair and asked him to come to his office. In some distress of mind Fair went to Harris. "*I think,*" he said, "*that R.J. wants me to go to work for him. Now I don't want to go, I'm perfectly satisfied here, but you know how R.J. is.*"

Mr. Harris said that he knew how R.J. was, but told Fair that he ought to go anyway. A week later he again reported to Mr. Harris the reason for the interview. R.J. had asked him how much he owed him.

Fair, staggered, said he owed him nothing that he knew of. What did he mean? He meant, it appeared, the old account for building hardware. Fair said he didn't know. He had forgotten all about it.

"*Anyway,*" he said, "*we made money together, R.J., and we lost it together and I haven't thought of it for years.*"

But R.J. had thought of it. He asked Fair if he hadn't kept the old accounts.

Fair said he hadn't, but it was possible that Mrs. Fair had.

R.J. said he thought it likely, and asked Fair to get them from his wife.

Sure enough the old yellowed bills were found, and though Fair protested that he didn't want to be paid and would not accept any payment, he was overruled by R.J., who as Mr. Fair knew only too well, had alarming persuasive powers. Tens of thousands of dollars were thus paid over, every cent owed, debts discharged that the most sensitive honour could acknowledge. There was one exception. My uncle told me that he felt no obligation regarding some mysterious debit created by a covenant mortgage. What that is I do not know. It must be pretty disreputable, because my uncle said he would never pay a debt which he had incurred because of a covenant mortgage. So I surmise it to be some sort of legal blackmail.

Several of our customers were employed at the gas works near the foot of Parliament Street. As they came north to King Street they had to pass two saloons. There was another at the corner of Queen, and no other saloon until they reached St David Street, two blocks north. Many of the homeward bound workmen got by the King and Queen

Street traps safely, only to fall a victim to the saloon on the corner of St. David Street, about three or four doors south of our store. The hotel was gone by the time I was old enough to remember, but Aunt Polly used to tell me with indignation that the owner of this saloon used to stand on the sidewalk urging men to enter his groggery, almost forcibly propelling them, which it would have been easy enough for him to do, for I remember him as a dark, formidable looking man with a black beard and a high colour.

As I have said, there were so many of these little saloons scattered throughout the city that their owners could hardly make a comfortable living. If their relatively few customers took only a drink or two and went about their business. They had to be encouraged to drink more than was good for them, for that was good for the saloon keeper. This plain fact is what gave vitality to the prohibition sentiment, or, as it was then called, the temperance sentiment, which has been such a strong factor in Toronto public life from that day to this.

But the reformers made the fundamental error of supposing that the fewer places there were in which liquor could be sold the less liquor would, as a matter of fact, be sold. There is, of course, a happy medium between a monopoly in which all the liquor sold in Toronto would be consumed in, let us say, the Maple Leaf Gardens, and the opposite extreme in which there would be a saloon keeper in every block depending for his livelihood solely upon the amount of liquor sold.

The saloon keeper at the corner of Parliament and St. David Streets was probably no worse than the average man who had to make a living out of the drinking habits of a comparatively small number of his neighbours. Naturally he urged them to drink, naturally they drank too much. Thus they were unable to pay their bills, and the commercial sentiment of the community was turned against those who had brought them to indigence, which might be permanent if they lost one job after another.

Looking at the home-coming workers who were diverted into the corner saloon. and knowing the trouble that was impending for their families, Aunt Polly once predicted that the saloon keeper himself would someday come to want. Twenty years later she was proved a prophet. The man came into our store one winter morning, and showed us his hands; scratched and torn from the work he had been glad to take-tearing down a brick wall. He begged us for God's sake to let him have a pair of gloves or mitts so that he could go on with the work. Our Aunt gave him a pair of leather mitts and he went away.

Our own family was particularly bitter against the liquor traffic because one member of it at least had become a victim. But there was another lesson passing the door every day of the week—a drunken man or woman in the hands of the police being taken to No. 4 station on Wilton Avenue. There were no patrol wagons in those days. There was the Black Maria which conveyed prisoners from the various police stations to Court Street where they would be arraigned before Magistrate Denison. If sentenced, this vehicle would transfer them from the court to the Don Jail. But when an arrest was made the policeman and his prisoner would make their way through the streets to the nearest police station on foot.

There was hardly an arrest that was not a disgusting and shocking spectacle. Today people would consider it horrifying. For if the charge was drunkenness., which it generally was, the prisoner would usually be pretty helpless and would have to be half-dragged, half-carried by the police. It was the same with women. Perhaps most of the prisoners would do their best to stagger along beside the policeman, followed by a crowd of youngsters. With others it was a point of honour to put up the strongest resistance.

It used to be said of one of the Murphys' neighbours of ours, that it took ten policemen to arrest him. He was a very tough citizen though we do not know that he ever did anything more criminal than get drunk and resist the police. When he was drunk he would be certain to pick a fight with somebody thus creating a disturbance that the police could not ignore. So they had to tackle the redoubtable Murphy who, with fists and feet flying, would need a small squad to subdue him. He never walked to a police station in his life. Nor was he ever dragged. He was carried, with blood flowing from his head, and perhaps from the noses of a couple of policemen whose disheveled uniform testified to the fact that to arrest The Murphy was a task for strong men.

The head of the family was a typical Irishman, with whiskers that looked like those seen on a stage Irishman a generation later. He was a peaceable man, a veteran of the Crimean wars, so it was said. He used to stand in the lane running behind the houses on the west side of Parliament Street, and hold a clay pipe in his mouth. Then his next door neighbour, who was a noted marksman, would aim a rifle and shoot the pipe out of his mouth. It did not occur to anybody, I suppose, what might be the ultimate billet of the bullet. Mr. Murphy was given a small reward for this display of hardihood and confidence.

Uncle John Cauldwell had a family of four sons and five daughters all of them at the time unmarried. His family occupied half of a large double brick house, of which my father owned one half and my aunt the other. For a time after my mother's death, and before my other Uncle John had returned to run the store we lived in the southern part of the house and Grand Uncle John and his family in the northern half. From this northern half one bedroom on the ground floor had been cut off and merged with the southern part. In this room my brother and I slept. It was thus directly over the basement of the northern section, and it was in the basement of these old fashioned houses that the dining rooms were.

Grand Uncle John, like the full-blooded Irishman he was, used occasionally to like to have a glass of beer or maybe a glass of whisky after his day's work, or at least before returning home for supper. On such occasions the meal was likely to be somewhat delayed. Then when he would go home, beaming, but undoubtedly slightly flushed a chorus of reproaches would greet him.

It was certainly common enough in Cabbagetown for a citizen to drop into a saloon at odd intervals, and there need have been no fear that Uncle John was begging himself and his family when he bought two or three drinks for whisky sold at five cents a glass,

and the best part of a quart of beer was the same price. But his family, especially Aunt Margaret and the marriageable daughters, used to think it a shocking sight when Pa rolled in at peace with all the world, half an hour late for his supper.

The family would be half through the meal by the time he sat down, and he would greet them cordially. Then listening in the room overhead we would hear the thin whine of Aunt Margaret's voice. John ought to be ashamed of himself. A fine example he was setting to his sons. What would the neighbours think? And, yes, would chime in a couple of the daughters, what kind of friends of theirs could he expect to visit a home when a man was making a beast of himself coming staggering up the street with a hundred people watching him and feeling sorry for his family?

The truth was that there was no staggering. There was no disgrace. Everybody who knew Grand Uncle John liked him and respected him, but it had become a habit for the soprano chorus to reproach him. The lamentation would go on for perhaps ten minutes in all of which time we would hear not a word from Grand Uncle John, who would continue to eat his supper. Then our delighted ears would be rewarded with a sudden roar accompanied by the sound of a huge fist descending on the table, and the rattle of lumping dishes. "*Not another word out of you!*" Grand Uncle John would shout.

And save for some half-audible whimperings there would not be another word. There would be a silence broken only by Uncle John's contented munching. But everything was right with the little world in the basement again. Pa had been properly rebuked for misconduct, and the rebukes had continued until one of them contained the expected sting and the meek man had revolted. Everybody was satisfied, including the two boys overhead.