

## Chapter 4

### THE QUEEN, GOD BLESS HER!

CANADA AS A DOMINION was less than ten years old when I was born; and it was natural enough that in my neighbourhood at least, in which most of the adults had been born in some other country, the celebration of its birthday was not fervent. In fact, I can hardly remember that the first of July had any particular significance. It fell too close to the Twelfth, for one thing, to have established a distinct identity.

Whatever sentiment of patriotism and loyalty we felt was embodied in The Queen's Birthday, May 24. For Toronto boys of my generation, and maybe for boys throughout Ontario, the three great days of the year were Christmas, the Twenty-Fourth and the birthday

of the individual boy. Easter was nothing. New Year's was not much either except that with me for three or four years it marked the date on which I began a new diary which I would keep up for the best part of a month. It also marked the coming of another period of time in which I would have another birthday.

The twenty-fourth of May was the beginning of summer. On this date it was usual for us boys to shed our winter flannels, which in our family were called "*flannels*." Only in the winter did we have underwear. We had only the one kind, the thick, scratchy kind, which were a torment when first put on. In the summer we went in our shirts, our pants, and shoes and stockings-no underwear. The thrill we received when we got rid of the underwear is suggested by the line of Rupert Brooke who describes a swimmer "*into cleanness leaping*"; and connected with it, somehow or other, was a feeling of gratitude to Queen Victoria. Perhaps subconsciously we felt that if it had not been for her we should have had to wear sweat-soaked "*flannels*" all the year round. "*God bless the Queen,*" we cried with our elders.

We had a picture of the Queen in our living room, a highly coloured oleograph, which revealed a haughty, rather short tempered lady with an imperious nose and a vast bosom covered with sashes and royal insignia. Nowadays we should not regard it as the picture of a wholly agreeable human being. But then we should no more have criticized it than a companion picture of Jesus on the Road to Emmaeus. In truth, our boyhood imaginings suggested to us that God was a member of the Royal family, or the Queen a member of the Divine family. God and the Queen were equally remote, and as it seemed to us, of about approximate ages.

But I must say that in our little corner of the world the Queen's birthday was celebrated with greater fervour than any anniversary connected with God, with the exception of Christmas Day. Of course, on the Queen's birthday we did not get presents. That was its only disadvantage. On the other hand, to a boy who had all he wanted to eat of all kinds of food every day of the year, the special feasting at Christmas was meaningless. At the store we were as apt to have a turkey for dinner almost any day throughout the

winter as a steak or a roast of beef. Raisins and oranges, which had probably a Christmas significance to many other children, had none for us. Lacking presents, Christmas might have been just another day in the year so far as I was concerned, and I certainly was not brought up like a young heathen.

But on the twenty-fourth of May we escaped from the woolen underwear and probably put on a pair of rubber soled running shoes. It was the first day of summer. We might also go fishing in Ashbridge's Bay, or, as we got older, we might go to Rosedale to see a game of lacrosse. There would be sure to be firecrackers, and more especially the stone crackers which we preferred, because in addition to causing a disconcerting noise they were a sort of missile, and with a handful of them we could make a man jump.

I bear a faint scar on the inside of a finger which marks one adventure with a firecracker that was a failure. Back in the orchard I saw a young cousin, a couple of years older than myself, with a disposition to bully me and my brother. I noted a hole in the seat of his pants through which the skin gleamed whitely. Once when he bent down I happened to have a squib in my hand. The squib, I should say, was formed of a firecracker which had failed to explode. The cracker is then bent in half, exposing the powder. When a match is touched to the powder there follows a gratifying flare. The chance to set my cousin afire was too great to be resisted. I plunged into the business of arson; but unfortunately one end of the cracker escaped from my finger and the stream of fire, instead of rousing my cousin, turned inward and, with a smell of burning flesh, I ran yelling to the house.

Sixty years ago it was not until a Toronto boy reached high school that he came into contact with organized sport. The public schools offered little or nothing. The yards themselves were too small for boys' games and there were no public playgrounds. There were no football teams, even for adults, the first we remember being a team from Osgoode Hall of which the late T. L. Church, M.P. became secretary. Thus he began his popularity with the sporting and athletic elements of the city which he retained as long as he lived.

The young boys made their own sports. They played in the streets and on vacant lots of which there were more than enough in Cabbagetown, and on the Don flats, except on such occasions as they went to the Rosedale grounds to see a lacrosse game or to the ball park just east of the Don where they could see professional baseball. There was no hockey, but there was shinny. There were groups of youngsters who had lacrosse sticks and baseball gloves and bats and they used to play against each other more or less informally, but without any league organization that I ever heard of.

It was on one of these corner lots that I displayed an outcurve to the admiration of everybody but the batter and the catcher, who, having caught the ball with some difficulty, said "*Don't put it on again, Vern.*" The curve was slightly more noticeable than the curvature of the earth, and was what was called an "*out-drop.*" I had acquired the trick from an older relative. Once its novelty wore off, it was less effective than a straight ball for it was much slower.

The Don Flats in those days was the only large playground near us. We played lacrosse, football and baseball there after we felt that we had outgrown corner lot. They were also used for more dubious amusements. Kegs of beer would be transported in express wagons and a dozen or two dozen men would spend a couple of days and nights drinking. The flats were handy to the Don Jail and frequently some prostitute, emerging after having served her thirty days, would find herself surrounded by an amorous escort and would disappear for purposes which even small boys in grocery shops could guess only too well.

As the boys grew up some of them attached themselves to other baseball and lacrosse clubs, which were actually in leagues. But most of them made out-of-town matches by correspondence, when we played with teams of similar age. I remember on one occasion when we travelled to a little country town to play a lacrosse game against a team which, like us was supposed to be composed of members fifteen years old or younger. Our opponents, who had bass voices, seemed old enough to shave. They were two or three inches taller, and weighed twenty pounds heavier, but there was no nonsense about birth certificates, and what happened to our team is what might have been expected to happen.

Maybe the country boys were bigger because they were cleaner living. Certainly, they were healthier looking, although they chewed tobacco while some of us smoked cigarettes. The popular tobacco, apart from Macdonald's blackstrap, which we sold in the store, was a shredded tobacco known as Beaver Cut Plug, and described as "*the gentleman's chew*." The popular cigarettes were the Derbies, pronounced as spelled, and costing a nickel for 10; Athletes, pronounced with three syllables, and Sweet Caporal, both of these costing twice as much as the Derbies and probably better cigarettes as regards Virginia content than any cigarettes made in Canada today.

Around the store we played catch, tag, and prisoners' base and follow-the-leader and duck-on-the rock. I acquired an undeserved reputation for daring when I was always willing to be leader in follow-the-leader. Each player was expected to do exactly what the boy in front of him had done, to touch the same thing, jump in the same place, and duplicate the same hazards, if hazards there were. But the leader had the advantage, If he jostled a man in the street, or banged something against a door or window, that he performed the act unexpectedly and was in full flight if anybody resented his impertinence. The boy who came later, and the other boys later still were really running into traps already set for them, and were the heroes of the adventures.

But reprisals were never serious. A man would hesitate before he would clout a half-grown boy, and if there were two or three of them, his hesitation was apt to be disastrous.

One of them would have grabbed him below the knees and the citizen would be on his back before he knew what happened, and two or three young urchins would be punching him viciously. Then the boys would scamper off before he could collect

himself and he would be left to rage and dust off his clothes. If he should get hold of one of the youths and attempt to chastise him, there would be in all probability a passing woman to denounce him as a brute, and perhaps a bigger man to ask him truculently why he didn't pick on somebody of his own size.

Our fights among ourselves were frequent enough, but none of them ever resulted in any serious damage. A black eye or a tooth knocked out is the worst one could expect. The fights, as often as not, took place "*up the lane*" behind the Dufferin School after school was out. A crowd of fifty or a hundred boys would assemble, and usually there would be a man of some dubious sporting instincts who would stand by to see fair play, and that nobody was hit when he was down. There was no shaking hands in these venomous little encounters, either before or after. Sometimes a boy would put a chip on his shoulder, and dare his opponent to knock it off. When he did, the fight was on, and this took the place of the hand-touching formality in the prize ring. I have always doubted the cordiality of this gesture, and have never seen a real friendly hand clasp.

There was a curious phrase in use in those days. A boy did not say "*I can lick you*" or "*I've a good mind to knock your block off.*" He said "*I can take it out of you*" and there would be speculations as to whether Jim could "*take it out of*" Bob and at the end of a fight a boy would be entitled to say "*I took it out of him.*" What the "*it*" was I do not know. Maybe a common expression of Uncle John's affords a clue. Many a time I have heard him say "*The old Boy's in you as big as a woodchuck.*" Maybe the internal "*it*" was pride, or a bloated opinion of one's importance or competence.

I recall, too, that some of the tougher boys wore large metal rings which took the place of knuckle dusters and would inflict a nasty wound. But one steered clear of them as a rule, and, as they were considered chicken-hearted, they did not seek many chances to bring them into play.

Pea-shooters were another weapon which had great popularity from time to time. Living next door to a flour and feed store I had always an unlimited supply of ammunition, and I recall with pride that I was the source of annoyance and irritation to many a neighbour whom I had some cause to dislike.

Methodists, when I was a boy, if they strictly adhered to their doctrine - and it seems that all of them were strict adherents - regarded the theatre as a place of vice. I remember one of them, who considered himself rather broad-minded, admitting that as far as he knew there was no open immorality on the stage itself, but doubted that the same would be true behind the scenes. There he supposed the orgies and revels took place. But Methodists were human enough to require some relaxation, and this was provided by "grand concerts."

There are no such concerts in the large cities nowadays, though they may continue as a cultural institution in smaller centres. When we speak of a concert nowadays we think of a musical entertainment. The old time concert was more of a salad. There would be two or three singers, one probably a comic, maybe some bell-ringers, and certainly an

elocutionist, and perhaps an Indian club swinger. But the elocutionist was generally the star.

For many years the most popular entertainer in Toronto was a comic reciter named James Fax. He was a small, slight man, with an extremely mobile face, which he could twist into the most humorous shapes. It seems to me that later on, when I became a theatre-goer, I saw many renowned comics on the stage who were not so funny as Jimmy Fax. He had one song, entitled "*Mr. Nobody*," of which I recall a line or two:

*What's a married man when he's at home? Nobody, Nobody!*

And I have seen scores of people with the tears running down their faces made almost helpless with laughter when Fax sang this song. In fact there was something almost childlike in the ecstasy of delight into which adult audiences would abandon themselves at the concerts. One reason was that a concert was not a nightly nor even a weekly amusement. Less than half a dozen a season would be the allowance that the Methodists - and others -perhaps struggling with some twinges of conscience permitted themselves.

The Faxes of today, if there are any, go into the movies or burlesque. The singers continue in the church choirs, or, if they are especially gifted, find their way onto the stage, or into light or even grand opera.

But what has become of the elocutionists? Are they extinct?

Perhaps, as the name itself may be unfamiliar to some readers, I should explain that an elocutionist was a person who gave recitations, dramatic or comic or sentimental. The elocutionist was usually a woman, and the most renowned in my youthful days was Miss Jessie Alexander. Undoubtedly she and some others of the period could have found a place for themselves on the stage, for they were not only talented mimics but had trained and expressive voices. If they'd had singing voices as well they might easily have starred in light opera.

Miss Alexander used to thrill her hearers with "*The Death Bridge of the Tay*," a poetic version of a notable Scottish railway disaster. A favourite comic encore was "*The Tale of a Little Peach*," by Eugene Field if I am not mistaken, and there was another accompanied by elaborate pantomime whose punch line was, "*There ain't goin' to be no core*" - probably by James Whitcomb Riley. It is true that our tastes were not cultivated, but I am happy to know that artists like James Fax and Jessie Alexander still continue to fill concert halls and delight audiences, as they did in earlier days.

There were of course many performers with fewer gifts, but generally with more determination to make the best of what they had. They generally gave imitations of original entertainers unknown to their audiences except by reputation, men like Albert Chevalier, the great coster-singer, for instance. We knew one of them who used to entertain her friends with her comic gifts, which were considerable, who formed the

ambition to become an elocutionist and was drilled for more than a year before she made her public appearance. It was not her fault but her teachers, I suppose, that she represented the elocutionist at her worst. She rolled her eyes and her "r's," and her own real humorous self was wholly concealed in the cloud of precise and emphatic pronunciations which had been drilled into her, altering her whole personality. Her debut might have pleased elocutionists, but only distressed her friends and admirers. It was nearly ruined, by the way, for lack of a suitable gown.

This gown had been bought at considerable expense and laid away in an open cardboard box under her bed. It was not brought out until an hour or so before she was to put it on. Then it was discovered to contain a strange cat and a litter of kittens. She almost fainted with shock, and it required the combined labours of herself and two or three women friends to make the robe suitable for the occasion. With proper training this girl could have made her mark in the field of entertainment.

I now have the opportunity, for the first time I think, to express my bitter resentment against Will Carleton who was the composer of a horrible poem, a "*tear-jerker*," entitled "*The First Settler's Story*." This was a favourite number with elocutionists because it was certain to cause many who listened to cry. From me it drew only silent curses.

The tale dealt with a settler who once coming home tired and irritable from a day's work found that his wife had forgotten to pen the cows in a field and that they had strayed away. He spoke angrily to her, and she went weeping to bed. Sometime later he came home again to find the wife missing and a pathetic little note saying that she had forgotten to pen the cows again, that they had wandered away and that she had gone in search of them. The distracted husband followed and found her dead. It seemed to me when I heard "*The First Settler's Story*" that it was a tawdry thing, and that it was unfair to harrow the feelings of an audience with a tale of such disproportionate punishment for a single outburst of anger. I thought so then and I still think so. Even a certain bawdiness would be preferable to this sort of perverted romance, which probably taught the lesson that a husband should not be angry with his wife, and may thus have contributed to some sluttishness here and there.

But bawdiness was not more foreign to a church festival than to a Toronto concert in the old days, before the coming of smoking concerts, which were for men only, and at which some healthy earthiness was expected and did nobody any harm. But, oddly enough, while the slightest suggestion of sex would have been abhorrent had anybody been venturesome enough to essay it, a horrible vulgarity was common enough. For example, I recall a song which described a nuptial night, the humour consisting in the fact that the bride wore a wig, had a glass eye and a wooden leg all of which she removed before getting into bed. The audiences roared over this, probably because the women present had no such artificial aids to their appearance as the bride in the song, and rejoiced in a sense of superiority. People delighted in this ghastly song who would have risen and walked out if anything like a French bedroom farce had been presented.