

## Chapter 6

### WE MADE OUR OWN FUN

IF THE CABBAGETOWN GENERATION, which came of voting age about the beginning of the century, was not more self reliant, resourceful, ingenious and likely to succeed in the world than the generation which followed it, the science of reasoning from cause to effect is discredited. So far as the east end of Toronto was concerned, at least, there were no organized sports or amusements for boys. We had to make our own fun and create our own interests. There were no Big Brothers or Settlement Workers to do it for us.

Behind every house in the district there was an out- building of some sort, in addition to a privy which some wit called "*exposed plumbing*." It might be a barn or a stable; it might be only a shed, because most of the houses were cellarless and the fuel was kept outside. Behind our store was a combined stable, driving-shed and hayloft; and in these environs we had our first pets.

Most of the other boys had pets, too. They might be pigeons, or rabbits, or guinea pigs or bantams or even white mice; and generally there was a dog attached to the premises. So the boys instead of being entertained by movies or radio made their own fun with their various little hobbies. They fed their pets and tried to cure them when they fell ill, and traded them and brought their friends in to admire them, and thus created for themselves an interest that helped make life exciting; for few of us ever suspected that it was exciting enough merely to be a healthy boy. Looking back we can all see the error of looking forward then toward the time we would grow up, and could smoke if we felt like it, and stay out till eleven o'clock at night if we wanted to.

But the generation before must have been even more ingenious and enterprising, and presumably still more likely to succeed in the world, though we cannot say that on the whole it fulfilled this latter prospect. There was not much money to be handled, the result being that our people did with their own hands and by dint of their own patience and cleverness the things which their grandchildren now summon somebody over the telephone to do for them.

I cannot recall seeing a mechanic of any kind enter the store unless it might be to buy something. Certainly the store provided no market for his skills. Uncle John did everything. He had been born on an Irish farm where money was even scarcer than it was in Cabbagetown. If anything went wrong with the clock or the plumbing Uncle John attended to it. If there was some carpentering to be done, he did it. When an unfinished attic was to be made habitable, it was Uncle John who saw that it became so. No marine was ever a handier man, and I suppose that what is to be recorded of my uncle could be said in general of all the men in the neighbourhood. They built up the city in a personal sense, in a way that it has hardly been built since, for they did their own building.

Though our store did in the end fall into the bankruptcy toward which it had been staggering for a long time, in our family there was a horror of debt and a passion for a precise accounting. I can remember Aunt Polly's saying that as long as she owed anybody a dollar she felt that she did not own a dollar.

I can remember, too, her telling me about the financial transactions that were common between her and my mother. Father as a surveyor would be away from home sometimes six months in the year; and he would be paid sometimes not more than once or twice a year. In the interval our family had to depend on the store for support and nourishment. When the time came to settle accounts my mother might owe my aunt \$203.45. She would pay my aunt not \$200 or \$205, nor even \$203.50, but exactly \$203.45, and the two loved each other as much as sisters ever loved. I once laughed at Aunt Polly for this scrupulosity between sisters. She stared at me and said, "*We didn't know any other way.*" That was the kind of honesty I was taught; if ever I strayed from it, the fault lay surely within myself.

Our winter indoor amusements were few. Among them were the game of authors, something like euchre, but instead of ordinary playing cards we had suits made up of the name of well known books by authors then well known, now probably forgotten. Crokinole was another parlour game. Later on after my aunt and uncle had shaken free from all religious organizations, we were permitted to play euchre. There was no hockey, but there was its ancestor, shinny, played either on an ice surface or in the street. But there was plenty of skating, either on the Don or on the two rinks not far off. One used to be near the corner of Oak and Parliament Streets; the other was Moss Park, on Shuter Street, then a nice residential area, but now disgraced with the name of a slum. Boys and girls would skate arm in arm most decorously to the strains of a half frozen band. Here we used to see in its full beauty, what was called the Moss Park Swing. It was nothing but a full strong stroke, with a considerable movement of the buttocks which the younger boys thought silly. The older ones had probably different ideas.

Most of our customers and most people in the neighbourhood earned their living by the skill of their hands or the strength of their shoulders. There were few white collar workers, unless we include the shopkeepers, whose collars were not always white. It was perhaps natural that in such an environment physical strength should be the most valued and envied of human attributes. Men boasted of their muscle, and most of them were ready to prove that they were better men than their neighbours.

That is one reason why street fights were so common. I saw many of them which seemed to follow a single pattern. A quarrel would break out on a doorstep, would stagger out to the sidewalk and wind up in the middle of the road amid shrieking women trying to save their husbands from injury. There would be considerable blood about, but I never heard of anybody who had been seriously hurt. The boys' fights were even less serious, the loosening of a tooth being generally the most painful result. But we all sought to develop muscles, which in those days among boys of our age were about the size of oysters. We strove with Whitley exercisers, with Indian clubs and with dumbbells. A burly man named Murdock Macdonald used to come regularly to our place and

give the boys lessons with the Indian clubs. They not only helped physical development but the swinging of them became something of an art and at local concerts it was common enough to see an Indian club swinger toss his clubs about with great skill. There was not one of us who did not regard John L. Sullivan as his hero and beau ideal. There was not one of us who would not rather have been John L. Sullivan than have been a Sunday School Superintendent or even the Archbishop of Canterbury if we had ever heard of him. There were local pugilists named Popp, father and son, and the Biddle brothers who sometimes gave lessons in their art. Later on there was Prof. Halfpenny, a former British army sergeant, as I remember, who taught boxing, and had teeth about an inch long which he used to grind ferociously as he invited his puny pupils to lay into him. Our normal activities did something to help develop us physically. When I was fifteen I could do more with a bag of oats or potatoes than I could today.

I can remember three sound thrashings at home. One was given me on Sunday morning by a husky uncle after I had been found bullying a younger brother. It did me good. Another was a literal horsewhipping inflicted by another uncle whom I had outraged by making some indelicate remarks to some young girls who were picnicking in our orchard. What I said I do not remember, but I am sure I never said it again.

The third thrashing came from the hand of my father wielding a strap from a theodolite cue. As I have said, he was a surveyor, was often absent from home for months at a time. Returning once he opened an envelope containing several letters in red ink, purporting to be in his hand and carrying his signature. They had come from the headmaster at Dufferin School, and were excuses for my having been late or absent on several occasions. The notes were the composition of a somewhat older friend named George Reed who lived across the street from us in Parliament Street and was a sort of invalid. At least he was nearly always in bed and nearly always consuming toast and tea. The marks of both were visible on the letters in which he took considerable pride in composition. What attracted attention to them at the school was probably the fact that they were all signed by "*Mr. John McAree*." I felt that it was hard on my father having to strap his oldest son a day or two after returning from a long absence. It was the only time he ever beat me. Milder reproof consisted of tapping me on the head with his knuckles.

This reminds me of a young friend whose father had married again, a Christian woman who did more than her duty by her two step-children. She loved one of them as she had been her own daughter but she did not understand boys; and particularly she did not understand how a mother would have dealt with a mischievous son of twelve or thirteen. That is all that was wrong with the boy. He was like all other boys, and his mother would have understood how to deal with him. That is to say she would have spanked him when he offended. But his step-mother's sense of duty would not permit her this indulgence. Scrupulously she kept her hands off him even when she caught him red-handed in some mischief, but she did not on that account, dismiss it from her mind.

So when her husband returned at night, and the warmhearted youngster rushed to embrace him, she would intervene. She would recite the calendar of the day's misdeeds,

and the wretched father, instead of embracing the child as he wanted to do, would be called on to perform a sort of hangman's office and thrash him for his own good.

Aunt Polly's spankings were applied with a slipper which she removed from her foot at the same time turning the culprit over on her knee. I remember the last one I received. I had grown strong enough to offer some polite resistance which impeded her blows. When she finished she turned her head away but I saw a smile. She was evidently proud of my growing strength, though I never realized this until long after. But Aunt Polly did not need to resort to corporal punishment. She had a tongue that could cut like a blacksnake whip. In our family the young offender was chastised by whatever older relative happened to be on the spot. It might be a father, an aunt, or an uncle. But among boys generally I found that they would submit to punishment from their parents which they would resent and resist if applied by an uncle. One of them said to me once, "*Gee, I wouldn't let no uncle whip me,*" This remark was brought back to my mind many years later by a drawing in *Punch*. It represented a circus parade, and an elephant had just passed having snatched the cap from the head of a small boy. His enraged mother was shaking the urchin demanding, "*What did you let him do that for?*"

To boys of the period and in a neighbourhood where half of them were breeding domestic pets of some kind or other there never was any mystery about the grosser form of sex. Nobody told us anything about the bees and the flowers and the storks. Once an uncle warned me of the horrors of masturbation, and I think that neither of us was ever so much embarrassed in his life. Personal sex was an extremely intimate and rather frightening thing, but I cannot say why. In all the years I lived in the store I saw nothing of any sex irregularities. They might have taken place; there were haylofts. But there were few if any other conveniences provided.

I believe that the outward appearance, generally speaking, was correct. People in the neighbourhood were more moral than they may since have become. One reason is that they worked harder than they do now. When a woman had borne half a dozen children which was not an excessive average and had the work of looking after them and running a house as well, she had little time to devote to making herself seductively pleasant to a roving male eye. Indeed she had little hope of it. And if a liaison were contemplated how would it be achieved? Certainly nobody had an extra fifteen or twenty dollars to make feasible a surreptitious trip overnight to Niagara Falls. Besides there were the neighbours. Every woman, except those working elsewhere, was working in her own home while her husband was absent. The eyes of half a dozen neighbours or more would turn naturally a dozen times an hour to the house next door. It would be impossible for any seducer, no matter how furtive, to enter one of these houses without the news being spread halfway around the block in the next fifteen minutes.

Morality, it might be said, was imposed on the married women in Cabbagetown. It received its death blow when the first apartment houses were built. Before then if one was seen entering a door there was nobody inside whom he could hope to meet but, let us say, Mrs. Kennedy. But when the apartment houses came, a stranger entering might be looking for Mrs. Kennedy or half a dozen other women. The neighbours would be

completely baffled. No longer did the neighbourhood unconsciously set a watch on Mrs. Kennedy and help keep her moral record unblemished. No longer would anybody be able to whisper a warning to a grim faced Mr. Kennedy on his return from work. After the coming of the apartment house Mr. Kennedy would have to employ a private detective if he happened to be curious as to his wife's conduct in his absence.

I suppose that in Cabbagetown of those days there were what we used to call whore houses, but always pronounced as if spelt "*hooer*"; but I never had one pointed out. Yet, there was one of these places less than half a mile west of the western boundary of Cabbagetown on the south side of Queen Street, and the number I can recall after all these years. It was 149, and I think it was as well known as another place known also by its number - No.4, which was the police station on Wilton Avenue. How well known it was even to children of ten, twelve and fourteen may be illustrated by an incident that occurred one afternoon in the Dufferin School. Our teacher, a Miss Henderson, was standing at the blackboard instructing us how to address an envelope. She wrote a name then turned to the class with the chalk in her hand and asked for a street address, any street address. Somebody said "*149 Queen St. East*" and there was a spontaneous burst of laughter from the room of both boys and girls. Miss Henderson's face flushed and she wrote some other address on the blackboard.

One of my mother's sisters<sup>1</sup> was married to a printer who worked with the *Globe* at the time of the shooting of George Brown. There was never a more devoted husband and father; but this devotion had its alarming side. For example his wife would not dare to offer to share her hymn book with a strange man in church lest she should provoke her husband into a passion of jealousy. Once when a doctor was coming to examine her, he insisted on remaining in bed beside her while the embarrassed doctor made whatever examination he could under such stem chaperonage. After her death he never looked at another woman, though he was a comparatively young man at the time. This was considered very much to his credit, though the general habit of the store people was to marry and lose a wife or husband, usually a wife, and then remarry.

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<sup>1</sup> "One of my mother's sisters" is Isabella, her twin. George Brown was also one of the Father's of Confederation with Thomas D'Arcy McGee.