

Chapter 3

KIN AND CUSTOMERS

OURS WAS A property-owning family, and at times the rents from half a dozen shops and as many houses helped maintain the store, and at other times the income from the store helped pay the taxes and the mortgage installments on the property¹. In those days I learned from experience that the tenant does not pay the taxes. The landlord pays them when the houses are vacant, and while in these days to speak of houses being vacant may have an unreal and even dream-like flavour, there were times, there were periods of years, when the houses were vacant most of the time.

In addition to normal mortgages and defaulting tenants - two of whom in the course of one winter chopped up the cellar stairs for fuel - we had another monster to contend with. This was the Church of England, to whom we paid ground rent, and, as most of the family were Methodists, this seemed an exaction almost papist in its fiendishness.

One of these shops was rented to a butcher named Richards, another to a tailor named Burns. If we had only a milliner and a shoemaker we might have been thoroughly independent and with no more need for money than the Swiss Family Robinson. When the butcher was behind in his rent, we could get meat as a partial offset. The same was true of the tailor, at least theoretically. Actually the man seemed incapable of making clothes for any of us, and our idea is that the flaw lay in the fact that he was perhaps unable to get the material on credit. We did contrive to get a suit out of him on one occasion which had the advantage of almost fitting anyone of three of us who were considered eligible for it, but not precisely fitting anybody.

There was also a baker who occupied one of the family stores but he was no great advantage to any of us because we sold bread in our own store, and Aunt Polly made all the cake and pies we ate. I remember this unfortunate baker chiefly because he was consumptive and had seven or eight children. His wife did most of the work. She would tend and nourish her husband up to a certain point and then he would seem to suffer a relapse, at which time the whole burden of the business would fall back upon her. Nine months or so later she would have a baby, but we were too young at the time to see any connection between the fluctuations in the baker's health and the arrival of another child.

Across the road was a barber, an erect man with a military mustache whom we generally saw in underwear, except on the Twelfth of July. Then he would appear in a silk hat and frock coat and start the great march with McKinley L.O.L. He would return three or four days later in his underwear, and it was considered unsafe to ask him any

¹ William Fleming bought the first property. He loaned his son R.J. money to buy his first property, the first of many. R.J. started in the hay and feed business at the north-east corner of St. David and Parliament Streets and later opened a real estate office on King Street in 1884.

questions about the metamorphosis, which would have been startling had it not occurred with such regularity.

This barber was no wit, and yet we think he made one of the wittiest remarks that was ever heard in Cabbagetown. One holiday morning I, as a neighbour and friend, was being given a haircut in his shop. The blinds were down; but the front door was unlocked. The barber and I were exchanging philosophical remarks when the door opened suddenly and a man, evidently in a good deal of hurry entered the shop. He started to take off his coat and demanded abruptly of the barber who was regarding him with a hostile stare, "How long will it take me to get a haircut?"

"It will take you till tomorrow," replied the barber coldly. "Don't you know this is a holiday?" On hearing of the death of a friend he had one unvarying comment. "Well," he would say, "it'll be your turn and my turn before it's his turn again."

Once or twice I have gone to reunions of the Dufferin Old Boy's Association, but had the painful experience of knowing hardly anybody present. The others seemed to have gone to the school either before I did or after, so that for all the boon companionship to be had I might as well have gone to a gathering of La Salle Old Boys.

I have found myself similarly placed when asked about the quaint characters of Cabbagetown. Friends a few years older have often begun, "D'ye mind old So-and-So?" and to their disappointment I have had to say that I did not remember him, greatly to my regret. Perhaps if I could recall today some of our neighbours I would identify them as "characters," but when I moved among them they seemed much like anybody else.

However, it seems to me now that the old characters were gradually passing from the scene by the time I became a normally observing boy. The city had begun to grow up. The cabbages had largely disappeared from Cabbagetown. Parliament Street had been paved with cedar blocks, the street cars were running, even if they were horse-drawn; the high wheel bicycles were giving place to the safety with the pneumatic tire. Telephones were creeping in here and there, and the generation that had been actually born in Ireland or Scotland or England was growing old.

Large communities are not favourable to the development of these eccentrics called "characters". Apparently they require a closer-knit community for their full flavour to develop. Maybe the police do not regard them with indulgence. They are apt to be considered nuisances. In any event there are not many that I recall as customers of the store or neighbours who might not today, with very slight changes, be the customers of a hundred other little stores in Toronto.

But there is one that I shall always remember because she was a beggar. That was Mother Hagen. She was a little, old woman with yellowish white hair, white eyebrows and white eyelashes under which her eyes looked pink. She was always swathed in black, and wore a little black hat or bonnet. Wherever she went she carried a large basket and in this she used to collect the broken meats on which, presumably, she and

those for whose support she was responsible kept body and soul together. She walked with a kind of waddle and as likely as not would be followed by a group of children chanting, "Old Mother Hagen, do your pigs eat straw?" Mother Hagen would turn and scowl and mutter, and then, resuming her walk would pat her buttocks rhythmically to show contempt or indifference until the pestering youngsters dropped away.

I do not know whether Mother Hagen called at the store on her rounds. If she did, it is probable that she did not profit much. A good deal of charity was dispensed from the store, particularly when times were bad, and times usually were either bad or worse; but there was a certain rigidity about it. A stray beggar would have no more chance of success if he dropped in to ask for a dime than if he had walked into a bank on the same mission. The first essential for help was not the plain need for it, but the reasonableness of the claim. This could be established only by some link of family or friends.

Our Aunt Polly who held the family purse was quick to answer any appeal from one who had any claim upon her, but she was cold to outsiders. Her idea, founded on her own practice, and probably from a family or clan tradition was that people should look after their own. If they looked after their own, then other people would look after their own, and there would be no real destitution. Her own were, of course, neighbours and relatives, or the relatives of neighbours, and there would also have to be a sound reason to explain their temporary misfortune. This hurdle passed, they would be given goods or coin, usually goods, which were always more plentiful than coin.

There was an underlying streak of hardness in my mother's people, without which they could not have survived. If they had yielded to every solicitation, or, had not investigated every pitiful tale, they soon would have had nothing for their own, or for themselves. This streak partly explains why the store continued to pay its way for so long. Uncle John would have had his family on the street in a year because of his generosity. He was like another relative who went through bankruptcy, probably because he lived up to a frequently repeated principle, "I claim it's a mean man that sends out a bill." And he thought a man was doubly mean who expected to collect a bill.

Many years later Uncle Robert,² who was on the road to wealth, was stopped in the street by a man who recalled old times and begged for a loan. My Uncle mused for a moment or two and then said, "See me in my office tomorrow morning about 10." The man turned up promptly full of hope, was shown into my uncle's office, and my uncle began, "I just asked you to come up here, Simpson, because I couldn't say to you on the street what I wanted to say. As you reminded me, I've known you for many years and I want to tell you that a meaner or a more worthless sot I never came across. I would no more lend you ten dollars, or a dollar, than I would send it to help the Germans. Now get out and never speak to me again."

² "Uncle Robert" is R.J. Fleming.

On another occasion when my uncle was watching the progress of a house he was building he stopped to speak to a man. Aunt Polly and I were standing some distance away and when Uncle Robert approached we could see that he was convulsed with mirth he was trying to conceal, apparently from the man who had returned to his labours. When Uncle Robert was able to speak for laughter, he said to Aunt Polly, "I asked the man why he wasn't doing a good day's work, and d'you know what he told me?"

"No. What?"

"He told me," gasped Uncle Robert, "that he had only got out of the hospital a day or so ago." To my astonishment Aunt Polly joined him in laughter that caused the tears to roll from their eyes. They thought it was one of the most preposterous excuses a man ever gave, like the landlord Bill Nye tells us who sought to excuse an outrageous overcharge on the ground that he "needed the money."

There never lived two warmer-hearted people than Uncle Robert and Aunt Polly, nobody more quickly moved by suffering or injustice, yet they saw nothing but the ludicrous in a man excusing his feeble labours on the ground of ill-health. They considered that he was simply robbing my uncle by drawing pay for work he was unable to perform, and his innocence in revealing the fraud struck them as comedy in the richest vein.

"I was born in a stone house and I've never lived in as good a one since,³" Aunt Polly used to say but the last years of her life were spent in a much better one. Her birthplace was somewhere in County Down, near Dromore where my mother was born. Like so many of the family on my mother's side of the house her mother was twice married. Her first husband was a man named Noble. No family records of him survive, but he was Aunt Polly's father. As long as she and her brothers and sisters lived nothing so angered them as an incautious reference to the fact that Aunt Polly was only a half sister. She was more like a mother. Her mother's second husband was William Fleming, who, like my grandmother was dead before I was born or at least when I was too young to remember him. He was never so happy they used to say in the store, as when he was driving a cart. He was a man of small ambitions and perhaps not much sense, but he was a rigid pietist. He would not let the women folk polish the stove on Sunday if it had been forgotten in the midst of other Saturday chores. He frowned on pretty clothes, and while my mother and her twin sister lived under his roof they had to hide their more attractive outfits in the store. There they would go on Sunday to array themselves in their best, and returning would get into their everyday clothes before going home.

How my grandmother saved up enough money to pay the passage to Canada of herself and her two eldest children I never heard, but I think she had a small holding.⁴ She had

³ "Stone house" was George Noble's house on the old coach road (now called Bridge Road) outside of Dromore near Omagh Co. Tyrone. Polly's mother was married first to George who died in 1839, then to William Fleming, who lived on the farm across the road.

⁴ Not to spoil a good story, William is clearly listed with his family on the Sesostris when it left Londonderry for Quebec. No doubt he was not interested in business, as his son and brother-in-law John Cauldwell were. He loved farming, and earned enough money as

saved up the money painfully and then sent her husband to the city to buy the tickets. Whatever he did with the money we never found out. But somehow or other he lost part of it. This did not deter my grandmother. She made a swift decision. She and her two children would cross the ocean and my grandfather would remain at home until she could send for him. This was probably satisfactory enough for my grandfather who, I gather, was not unwilling that his women folk should work for him. As long as he had a cart to ride on he was a happy Irishman. When grandmother died he must have been an elderly man, but he married again, this time a widow.

The fact that Aunt Polly had been born in a stone house may have been the basis of her family pride, which she sought to instill the rest of us. In the neighbourhood we were regarded as comparatively wealthy. Didn't we have a store packed with groceries which other people bought so that we had their money as well as the groceries? It is true that in the end we went into bankruptcy, but that too was regarded as evidence of standing in the community; none of our neighbours and few of our customers ever had enough credit in the first place ever to go bankrupt. Customers could also always drop into the store and borrow a quarter or half a dollar until pay day. In addition Aunt Polly was the most beautifully dressed woman in the neighbourhood. If she was vain of anything it was her pretty bonnets, generally of a mauve shade, or with mauve trimmings.

It was not vanity or conceit that she tried to implant in all of us. It was a decent pride, and if this involved our thinking that we were a little better than our neighbours, what of it? We were, weren't we? "Don't little your wit to his" was a favourite expression, the implication being that there were people with whom we should not argue or wrangle as it was beneath our dignity. I do not know that a boy can get hold of a better idea than that something more is expected of him than of other boys, that he has a name and a tradition to uphold, and that he is the guardian of a proud family name. God knows that in those days the family had little to be proud of except a reputation for fair dealing and hard work and the indomitable spirit of its women. But this adds up to quite a bit, and it helped us all to value a good name. It didn't make us any smarter than our neighbours, but it gave us a standard of conduct which was not common in the neighbourhood in those days.

Our confidence in our own rectitude spread to others. One Saturday afternoon an expressman stopped his rig in front of the store, entered and bought some crackers and cheese. He then told Aunt Polly who was waiting on him that he was bound for a picnic on the Don flats and that he had some money he wanted her to take charge of. He said that there was a possibility that he might get drunk. Aunt Polly at first declined saying that she did not know him. But he said that he knew her and that his money would be safe with her. So she consented, he handed it over and left. On Tuesday he returned and picked up his money with many thanks.

a hard-working carter hauling wood from the forest around St. James Cemetery to lease/buy four houses on Parliament Street with land, one of which housed the Cabbagetown Store.

His wife Jane had a business head. She started a huckster-shop selling fruit and vegetables next door to their home at 16 Stanley Street when they first moved to Toronto, in 1850. In 1861 William leased farming land "east of Mill Road, near new "gaol" erecting (Don Jail) where Sumach Street intersects and on the other side the Toronto General Hospital". William died three months later on April 8, 1876, three months before Vern was born.

Aunt Polly was a famous cook, but she explained to me once that when she was first married she knew little about cooking, which is not surprising for she married when she was quite a young girl no doubt because of her sincere love for Uncle John, but no doubt also partly because she thought as the wife of a hard working young tailor she might be able to do something for her brothers and sisters who were younger and not earning much. She told me that she became a good cook when she was nursing my mother through a long convalescence after a bout with smallpox. The invalid's appetite was capricious and it fell to Aunt Polly to tempt it. It was from her I learned a long time ago that a steak is properly cooked on a dry hot pan, and I pass along the knowledge which even yet is not universal.

One day there was some sort of special occasion, maybe a birthday, and Uncle John requested that a chicken be roasted. It would have provided an ample meal for half a dozen of us. When a couple of neighbours dropped in an hour or so before dinner Aunt Polly pressed them to stay. Uncle John looked rather glum, but said nothing. Then two or three more came. A couple of relatives followed, and despite the desperate looks of Uncle John, they all responded to the urging of Aunt Polly and said they would be pleased indeed to have dinner. When we came to sit down at the table, there were fourteen or fifteen people grouped about, and in the centre was a moderate sized chicken. There was some sweat on Uncle John's brow as he began to carve. He was an expert, and he had sliced the bird so finely that he was able to cover three or four plates without making any large visible inroads on the carcass. But his anxiety had become acute and the guests began to laugh. He looked up, and at that moment from the kitchen emerged one of the girls carrying a steaming twenty pound turkey. Uncle John gave one look, threw up his hands and collapsed in his chair.

Despite his generosity and golden heart, he was a confirmed grumbler, and at table would be heard to remark in answer to a question about his food, "It's, good enough, what there is of it," or, "There's plenty of it, such as it is."

Uncle John had been in the Fenian Raid⁵ as a member of the Queen's Own Rifles, and his experience there had provided the bitterest disappointment of his life. Apparently he was an extra good marksman, for he had had the honour of being called upon by his commanding officer to fire a sighting shot. It was the first shot of the engagement, at least of this particular phase of it. His target was a noble one, nothing less than General O'Neill himself, distinguishable by a great broad green sash about his body.

It was the great moment in my uncle's life, as he stepped forward with his musket. "I leveled on him as steady as ever I leveled in my life" he was wont to tell us. He fired but nothing happened, except the obvious fact that the musket had been discharged. There was no visible reaction from the Fenians.

⁵ Battle of Ridgeway 1866. A thousand well-armed Fenians crossed the Niagara River. John Verner's No. 1 Rifle Company was sent off to intercept them with no blankets, not enough food and bungled orders. Seven of his comrades lost their lives. This event strengthened the resolve toward Confederation.

Uncle John and his commanding officer stared at each other in amazement. Then Uncle John examined his rifle. He had made a fatal error. The sighting was wrong. The sights were set for the wrong distance and I suppose that O'Neill's life was thereby spared. For an Orangeman like my uncle, this was gall and wormwood indeed; in the company of Orangemen ever after it tinged his conversation with regret and apology.

The musket he used remained a family heirloom. One day a young cousin looked at it and explained to a friend, "That's what Uncle John uses for war."

Uncle John had a brother who was a farmer in the Bolton district. This brother had two or three sons who also became farmers. They were all prosperous, thrifty people. I never saw them in the summer, but in the winter they called at the store frequently with a sleigh loaded with butter and eggs and fowl. They were always cordially welcomed and had a good dinner, while I saw that their horses were fed. Then would follow a discussion of what they wanted to sell and we wanted to buy.

Sometimes we would buy something. Sometimes we would not. The farmers were strict businessmen. The fact that they had had a good meal and that their horses had also been fed did not enter into their mind when they discussed the price of eggs and butter. As often as not they would conclude that they could do better at the market and away to the market they would drive. I think Aunt Polly and Uncle John felt that between relatives the stark mercenary motive might have been more decently disguised, but I do not remember that they complained; although the fact was that between us at the store and them on their farms there was little visiting back and forth, except when the farmers, who probably had risen at five in the morning, had stomachs to fill and butter to sell.

One of these young men has lingered long in my memory as a humourist of the first water. He has the distinction of making me laugh more heartily than ever I remember having done since. It was on one of the rare occasions when I spent a night at Uncle George's farm. His sons were then unmarried, strapping young fellows in their early twenties. In those days everyone who could grow a moustache grew one. A clean shaven young man, unless he happened to be a priest, was almost as great an oddity as a bearded woman. The idea was that hair on the face bespoke virility. It was also presumed to be extremely attractive to ladies.

Now the hairs of the first mustache tended to be silky, and lacked masculine bristliness. Sometimes they were hardly visible until they had been growing for a couple of months. Young men would joke with each other about their inability to produce moustaches and on the evening I remember the youngest of the three brothers took a good deal of hob nailed joshing about his failure. Then Cousin Henry produced his immortal joke.

"Tell you what, Jack," he said. "You ain't goin' the right way about raisin' a moustache. Tell you what to do. When you go to bed at night you take some molasses and smear it on your lip. Then in the middle of the night the hair will come out to get the molasses

and you have some strings handy and tie the hairs when they come out and in the mornin' you'll have a fine moustache."

I laughed until I was nearly helpless and the adults seemed to be hardly less amused. I suppose I was between three and four at the time, and since then I have often wondered if Cousin Henry continued his career as a humourist, or whether this was just one of those rare eruptions of foolery that come to the gifted only a few times in the course of their lives.

It was a cousin of Cousin Henry's who came to work in the store when he was a young man, learned the grocery business with us, started a store of his own in partnership with a brother, and failed.⁶ Then he got a job with the Eaton company, rose until he managed the whole grocery department of the store, then the whole floor on which the grocery department was, and became eventually a director of the company.

That generation must have passed on by this time, but I have no doubt that the sons or grandsons of Henry and his brothers continue to be successful farmers on the land that Henry's father cleared out of the bush. Uncle John must have spent some part of his early life there for I have heard him tell about carrying a bag of wheat on his back to a mill in Toronto, and carrying back the resulting flour. We are only about a century away from this primitive way of living.

I have three clear pictures of my mother who died when I was about six. The first is sitting beside her in a Parliament Street horse car. There was some dispute about her paying a fare for me. She refused. The conductor must have said something and she answered, "Well, put me off, then." Naturally he didn't put us off, and for the first time in my life I saw what I was later to hear described as "eyes flashing fire," The next was seeing her lying in bed, within a few days of her death, my aunt sitting beside her and my infant sister who was to cost my mother her life, being nursed. As I walked up to the bed my mother withdrew her breast from the baby and smilingly offered it to me. I drew back in disgust, and the two women shook with laughter. The last picture was my mother as she lay dying. My father knelt at her side, his face buried in the bedclothes as he prayed that she might be spared, while she smiled and clasped his hand. A day or two later I saw yellow roses for the first time on her coffin and ever since they have reminded me of death.

Death in those days came earlier and oftener than it does now. My mother died of puerperal fever.⁷ The doctor who attended her had a large bushy, greyish beard and, though one of the best known practitioners in the city, knew nothing about how puerperal fever was carried from one woman giving birth to a child to another. He might even have come into the room where my mother lay after having curried his horse and given his hands a brief washing. Our family blamed him for neglect and broke a long

⁶ George Wolfe was the cousin of Henry Verner who became a director of the T. Eaton Company.

⁷ Vern's mother was Rebecca Fleming McAree.

connection as the result of my mother's death. It is odd to relate that his grand-daughter was later married to my cousin, and so the children carry the blood of the old doctor mingled with that of his patient. Six or seven years later my mother's sister died in childbirth,⁸ though whether there was neglect or ignorance in this case I cannot say. In the same week my little sister died. She had been adopted by Aunt Polly and Uncle John and was the delight of their lives. She was carried away by diphtheria, and the doctor in attendance had ordered that on no account must she be given a drink of water. On that, he said, her life depended.

So with bleeding hearts they had to stand at her bedside while tormented by thirst she begged for a drink which they dared not give her. I doubt if the soars of the dreadful wounds inflicted in those hours ever completely healed with either of them though they were to live for another forty years. Another aunt used to say that sorrows never come singly because we can bear them better that way, and it may be that the death of a sister and of a beloved aunt within a few days of each other were more easily borne because they came almost together. It was like a single blow to us boys, not a double one.

And since those days some of the fear and most of the mystery has been taken out of tuberculosis. We used to call it "consumption," and reticence was maintained about it by the family of the afflicted one just as reticence is now observed about cancer. There seemed to be a suggestion of the disgraceful as if the poor consumptive were like an unmarried girl about to have a baby. Consumptives were kept indoors for the most part; night air was supposed to be especially dangerous to them, and this sort of treatment no doubt hurried the end in many case. No consumptive ever hoped for a permanent cure.

⁸ My mother's sister was Isabella Fleming Thompson. Her husband was Joseph Thompson, a printer at the Globe, whose feisty editor George Brown, one of the Fathers of Confederation was later shot by a disgruntled employee. Isabella and Joseph's son, also named Joseph, became Speaker of the Ontario Legislature. Their daughter Belle, became known for the quality of her tea and her hospitality at BELLE'S TEA ROOM, located on the ground floor of her home at 44 Oak Street.