

## Chapter 5

### SCHOOLDAYS IN CABBAGETOWN

A FEW YEARS AGO a book was published with the almost perfect title for a collection of memoirs, *I THINK I Remember*. Unfortunately it is copyrighted.

If one has the habit of keeping a diary, or a note book in which occurrences are jotted down when they are fresh in the memory, one can be pretty certain that what he thinks he remembers actually took place. But we all have certain memories that are likely to be accurate. For instance, if I want to look up a passage in a book I have read some weeks ago, I can remember pretty well whether it was on the left or the right hand page, and whether it was nearer the top than the bottom. I have a friend who would probably remember the number of a page rather than the position of the passage.

I have another friend whose memory for figures and numbers and statistics generally fills me with amazement. I have travelled with him for several weeks at a time, staying in perhaps a dozen or more hotels. He at the end of the trip could probably remember the number of each room where we slept. We could go out at night in a large strange city, wander about the streets for hours I with no idea whatever of our direction and he able to take the shortest route back to the hotel. For incidents on the trip, his memory would not be as good as mine; at least for some of them.

My own memory, like the memory of everybody else, will recall some incident of childhood that seems to have no significance whatever, but that must have seemed of tremendous importance at the time, else it would not have lingered. For instance, I remember vividly going with the family to meet an uncle who was arriving at the Union Station. He was standing on the steps and jumped off the train before it actually stopped. I shall never be able to forget that, and it is probably occupying a space in my subconscious mind that might be much more usefully employed.

The advent of the moving pictures, and the current passion of newspapers for printing pictures, some of them utterly meaningless, few of them actually illustrative of the narrative, still less taking the place of narrative, have caused a further blurring of the memories of most of us.

For instance, did I ever see John L. Sullivan? I should like to boast that I had, and in private conversation may have done so. But I cannot be sure. I have seen so many pictures of him that I cannot be certain. If he appeared in Toronto at a time when I was interested in him I probably saw the man. But a notebook might show that I was confusing him with Jim Corbett or Bob Fitzsimmons. If before I had seen a photograph of Sullivan I had had an opportunity of seeing the man himself there would be no possibility of confusion. This would be the first and the deepest impression, which might be modified by subsequent pictures but could not be obliterated.

I remain in doubt whether I saw the Duke of Windsor, though it happened that when he was in Toronto at a certain place, I was in the same neighbourhood about the same time. But I had heard his voice, I have seen him in the movies, have seen hundreds of photographs of him, and have thus built up such a mental image that a view in the flesh would hardly make any impression on my mind. I don't suppose it matters much to either of us.

I make this digression by way of recalling some memories of the Dufferin School where I gained most of the formal education that was ever any use to me, chiefly under the guidance of Miss Lottie Wiggins. Memory suggests that she moved with her class as it was promoted twice or even three times and thus had a better opportunity than most public school teachers of making her mark on the scholars.

Before this I remember the principal, Mr. Richard Lewis, whose son, John Lewis, became a prominent newspaperman and author, which led to his career having an anticlimax in the Canadian Senate. Dick Lewis, as he was called disrespectfully by schoolboys who cowered in his presence, was at the time a man with a rather straggly gray beard. To a boy of ten, a man with a gray beard might have been any age from thirty to ninety. He was a specialist on articulate late speech and the rules of grammar. I suppose he taught classes as school principals did in the day before they became executive officers with two or three telephones on their desks. He was also lame, and was called Gimpy, which seemed to give us all some satisfaction.

I remember Mr. Lewis haranguing the whole school in the yard, though what was the occasion of the address I do not recall. But I remember his saying, "*You're all fools and blackguards. Your mothers are fools and your fathers are blackguards!*" And I more than think that he was accustomed to say "*Go home to your mother and don't come back till your father comes with you.*" Mr. Lewis seemed to be in a state of perpetual exasperation with his pupils for reasons that are not hard to guess, and I cannot say that he did anything much to mould my mind or character, apart from keeping me in a state of terror when I had occasion to be alone with him.

It was a part of his duties to strap disobedient boys. I was reminded of the ceremony of the strapping when many years later I saw a man hanged. Sometimes the assault was made in the principal's office. The occasions I remember were those when the strapping took place in the school room just before the class was dismissed in the afternoon. The culprit, white faced but defiant, would be made to stand in front of the class, and Mr. Lewis would enter with a large black book, in which the strap lay as a sort of marker. I think the regulation required that every strapping should be entered in the book, so that if there were any unhappy consequences, such for instance as the victim dying of heart failure, there would be a record for the authorities. On one such occasion the book containing the strap was left just inside the door while Mr. Lewis turned to some other pressing business. When he returned the strap had vanished and no amount of questioning ever revealed what happened to it. I might be able to throw some light on the matter but I am now writing only about what I remember.

Neither Mr. Lewis nor his successor Mr. Byfield was at all perfunctory about administering the strapping. Both of them were obviously performing a stern duty, but it is not impossible that some degree of satisfaction approaching pleasure entered into it. They laid it on lustily. The boy was obliged to stand with his arm stretched slightly less than shoulder high in a horizontal position palm upward. His other hand would be clenched. The strap would descend, the executioner's whole body following the downward swing of his arm, and a gasp would run through the class. If there were girls present some of them would be sure to cry. The boy would then lower the arm and rub his hand along his pants, and clenching and unclenching his other hand, would raise it for the punishment, though it seems to me now that it was pretty severe considering how ill protected was the average boy's skinny hand. Indeed, it was a point of honour for a boy not to cry, and the braver he showed himself the more his position was strengthened with his mates. But he would be white and shaking when the thing was over, and at night, if remembered pain and humiliation made his pillow wet, it would not surprise me in the least.

Girls were not strapped, that I remember; nor do I recall how many strokes were usual. I think maybe five on each hand. The last were likely to be mere token blows if the punishing teacher was less in earnest than Mr. Lewis and Mr. Byfield, for by that time the boy's arm would have fallen far below horizontal and he would suffer only a glancing stroke.

I suppose I was strapped along with the others, but if so the incidents have passed from my memory completely, from which I would suppose that they did me less good than was expected. A large person ill-using a small person is a memory that I am glad to think does not remain in my mind to trouble me of nights.

Except for my father, there was no professional man intimately connected with the life of the store. We were far from being a literary family. Aunt Polly was a Bible student; Uncle John read the newspapers: Uncle Robert read the newspapers, and magazines and books connected with Jersey cattle. The home library, so far as I remember it, consisted mainly of the works of John Wesley, a score or more of volumes, none of which I ever opened. There was also a life of Dr. Livingstone: and some curious fat little leather covered books illustrated in colour which might have had some value, and which many years later I gave to a friend who was a sort of connoisseur. What they contained apart from the illustrations I do not know.

My earliest reading apart from school books was the weekly issues of detective stories, chief of which were *Old Sleuth* and *Old Cap Collier*. There was a weekly paper of American origin which I read for the few months of its existence. It was called *Success* or *Always, a Winner*. The feature of it I remember best was a comic character named Bones. He struck me then as very funny and I dare say would be superior to most of the comic characters of today.

Then when I was about fourteen, or perhaps a year or two younger I found a gold mine, glittering in yellow; the first really yellow backed novels I ever saw, though I had heard

them denounced frequently. This was the complete works of Charles Dickens, in a cheap edition. The books were lying bundled up on the floor in Uncle Robert's real estate office.<sup>1</sup> In a fit of absent mindedness or good nature, or perhaps to get rid of an importunate salesman he had bought the lot, probably for a couple of dollars. He was glad enough to give them to me, and that is how I became acquainted with Charles Dickens at the early age it is proper for one to make his acquaintance. To no other accident in my life that I recall am I more deeply grateful than for this chance meeting with a great author.

Thenceforth a great part of my reading was in the fiction current in the day but including also the great novelists of the nineteenth century. A great deal of it was worthless, or rather of less value than it might well have been, for I hesitate to say that any reading is absolutely worthless for one who is to become a writer. There is always some sort of nourishment in it, even if it is mere roughage or the sort of grit that is necessary for the processes of digestion in some birds.

Aunt Polly had the respect of the almost bookless and unlearned for a book of any sort. She had also a kind of instinct which told her that my passion for reading might be a sound one and in the end "*when the picture was completed*" prove to have been useful and indeed essential. It was she who stood up for me when the reverend leader of her religious sect suggested that my time might be more profitably engaged than it was. It was she who defended me against Uncle John when instead of bustling round the store I remained reading in the dining-room or living-room raising an occasional eye to peer through a window into the shop if a customer entered.

The family had all the current Methodist contempt for what was called trashy reading, and dime novels and yellow backed novels, but curiously enough I was permitted to read what I thought right. Perhaps if my father had been at home more and freer to supervise his son's education he might have intervened and saved me from reading a lot of third and fourth rate stuff. He himself was a reader of scientific works, but a great admirer of Thackeray, George Eliot and the Brontes.

A standard Christmas present for several years was a bound volume of the *Boy's Own Paper*, known as the *Boy's Own Annual*. Not until years had passed did I grasp the fact that the annual was really a weekly. If I had, I think I should still have preferred it as a Christmas banquet, and not doled out in weekly servings. *Chums* was another occasional visitor and of course there was the Public Library at the corner of Church and Adelaide Streets where I was a faithful visitor, and made the acquaintance of the authors who were then aiming at an audience of boys - Henty, Kingston and Ballantyne.

To this day I remember a humorous story in the *Boy's, Own* which I think would be good enough for any magazine today. It described how two boys in their miscellaneous reading of odds and ends in a school book learned that a ton of steel if made into watch mainsprings would be worth I do not know how many thousand pounds. They

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<sup>1</sup> Uncle Robert is R.J. Fleming.

determined to buy a ton and have it made up. Then the thought occurred to one of them that if it were this simple other people would have long ago enriched themselves. But the other one retorted, "*Who do you think would look in an old school book for a thing like that?*"

Poetry I learned to love, like most boys, who learn to love it and carry that love into later life, from selections in the school text books, probably beginning with what used to be known as the Third or Fourth Reader in the public school grade preceding the entrance examinations into high school. It was not, as I have since learned, poetry of the highest sort, but it was just the poetry for sixteen-year-old boys and girls. It was the kind of poetry one liked to read aloud, to spout, to shout-lines from "*Marmion*" and "*The Lay of the Last Minstrel*" and Macaulay's "*Lays of Ancient Rome*." The other day I was reading that some critic said that this was the real purpose of poetry-to be read aloud or recited. It is a test that would put an end to much modern poetry. Whoever hears of one of the moderns being shouted in sheer exuberance by a modern reader, boy or man? Probably the queer typography and the almost complete absence of capital letters would discourage any addict from sharing his delight with an audience.

For the developing of my literary taste from boyhood on I owe a great debt to Sir Thomas White,<sup>2</sup> a kinsman of mine, who also had passed under the influence of the old store. He is essentially the man of letters turned banker and statesman. I learned about Kipling and Stevenson from him and of many another writer of prose and poetry. It was from my father that I also learned something about Milton and Carlyle.

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<sup>2</sup> Sir Thomas White briefly lived at the Cabbagetown Store and worked there as a clerk. He became Minister of Finance in World War 1 and was once acting Prime Minister for Prime Minister Borden. Many of his poems were published.