

Chapter 9

GOD AND MY AUNT POLLY

OURS WAS a religious household. We all went to church on Sunday morning, and sometimes on Sunday evening. The younger members went to Sunday school. I have an idea that, though a Methodist, I joined the Baptist Band of Hope, though with what hope I cannot say. But I cannot remember that there was much religious talk in the house. Probably we were too busy being honest tradesmen. My aunt at one time taught a large Bible class. Uncle Robert was a pillar of the Parliament St. Methodist Church from his youth up. His affection for this church was such that on his second honeymoon he was accompanied by the minister and his wife.

Uncle John, I fear, was like myself a person of not much religious conviction, but, like the rest of us, he did what Aunt Polly wanted, and one of these things was that, clad in a black frock coat, he should attend the Metropolitan Church where we had a pew in the gallery. I remember that my father was one of only two members of the congregation whom I could see kneeling when he prayed instead of simply bowing. He seemed to me to be repenting or imploring with a passion altogether foreign to his rather cool and retiring nature.

Aunt Polly was a woman of one book, the Bible; and many a text she quoted for our edification. How she came to drift away from Methodism for twenty years or more only to return when she was a very old lady to a church of this denomination, I never heard. But drift she did. She became a member of a small and probably unorganized sect of inveterate holiness, made up of former Methodists. It appeared that these dissenters and Protestants had dissented and protested themselves out of any regular religious body and formed one of their own. It was headed by a former Methodist minister, and he was the only educated person in the curious little group.

There was one member, Tommy something or other whom I should have recognized, had I been a few years older, as a plain half-wit. He was rather a silent man but given to occasional oracular outbursts which I could not understand; but then they seemed to make a great impression upon the others. They were accepted as hitting the nail exactly on the head, just as a precocious child sometimes will. In retrospect they seem to us much like the remarks of Barnaby Rudge and were received by the group in much the same rapt spirit as Barnaby's mother listened to the words of her semi-imbecile son.

Other members were tradesmen and clerks. Women predominated, and it happened that the women took their families with them. Because of this my brother and I met several boys and girls of our own age who became our friends.

This group had no regular meeting place. Sometimes the gathering would be in the minister's home. Often enough it was in our house. There was not a day in the week when one or other of the brethren or sisters did not have a meal with us, for my aunt was the most hospitable person in the world, and while cash might be scarce at home

on occasions there was never any shortage of good food. No doubt this had an appeal to the schismatics.

So far as I could understand at the time the feature of the religious faith of these people was that God talked to each of them directly, and concerned Himself about the most trifling incidents of their lives from day to day. They consulted the Bible, I believe, and honoured it and read texts from which the minister expounded, but they had gone to that extreme of Protestantism which they felt needed no Bible, still less a clergyman, to explain to them the ways of God. He was with them always every hour. They had only to listen to the still small voice and they would know exactly what to do. They could make no mistakes.

Of course they did make from time to time what seemed like mistakes, but they had a catch phrase which explained this. "*Wait until the picture is completed,*" they would say. They were fond of telling a story about somebody who was watching the making of a wonderful tapestry, but could not make head or tail of the pattern. It turned out that he was looking at the wrong side.

All these people became in time customers of the store, very good customers, too, in so far as the extent of their orders were concerned. Uncle John used to look over some of their accounts and mutter to himself. He did not mutter in Aunt Polly's hearing. She had the utmost confidence in these holy people. They would pay in good time, she was sure.

I do not know how the minister supported himself; and my guess is that his chief source of income would be the offerings of his flock. He had two sons, one a professional organist and the other a law student. They both lived at home and were no doubt helpful to their father and mother. But the organist died, and I remember that this incident gave birth in my mind to a first conscious speculation about death. "*What a pity,*" I reflected, "*what a terrible shame that Alf should die and his gift of music be taken out of the world forever.*" There were two daughters, one of whom might at this period have been old enough to be an earner in some genteel employment. But I suspect that the Cabbagetown Store must have been the main reliance of this family for some years, as it was of many another family.

Aunt Polly might have been indulgent from time to time, and deeply loyal to those she loved or who had a claim upon her, however slight, but she was a woman of hard common sense, as we'll see. She was quite aware that from a strictly economic point of view some of her religious associates were among the worst customers the store had. Some of them, of course, were good customers. But there were a few who seemed not in the slightest degree troubled about their mounting bills, and were rather oddly amused that Aunt Polly should mention bills to them. They thought she was guilty of at least an incongruity, for it must be obvious to anybody that in running up bills they were doing God's will. In fact everything they did was according to God's will, wasn't it? Well, then.

These intimate revelations were to them as dreams are to other people. They were in continuous communication with God. Even when they were sleeping God was talking to them, giving them instructions that were supposed to govern them in their hours of wakefulness. Where hallucination began and honest belief ended I do not know. I doubt if anyone of these people was a conscious hypocrite. But all of them were people who would probably be guided by emotion rather than by reasoning; and like all other people the path that was easy was the path likeliest to be chosen. So the bills ran on and on, and Uncle John's mutterings became more audible. In fact he regarded the association much as Tony Weller regarded the Rev. Stiggins' congregation - but, let me add, with a good deal less justification.

Then one day the thing ended. Aunt Polly had a revelation, too, or rather a counter revelation. She had been told most explicitly that after this date it was her duty to cut down on credit, and to insist that overdue accounts should be reduced. She had been informed that this was not only her duty to herself and the family whose main support she was, but also a duty to her friends the holiness brethren and sisters.

I was not present when she made this communication to the somewhat disconcerted group, but I know it would be done in a low, pleasant voice and that her face would be no worse than placid; it might be smiling. But I know that nobody who listened to her would for a moment think she could be shaken or cajoled. I believe some of the accounts were paid in full and some others considerably reduced. Our list of customers was also curtailed. But I do not recall that there were fewer guests at dinner or lunch, or rather I should say at dinner and supper, for I was a grown man before I found out that there were a great many people who had their dinner at seven o'clock in the evening and even later.

Aunt Polly dropped out of this organization later, and ended her days, I believe, as a member of the Eaton Memorial Church, though she was not much given to church going as she grew older. No church could have given her anything. She had it already in her heart; and by her very nature she was the giver not the receiver. I may be mistaken about the Eaton church, but at least I know that the minister preached at the funeral of Uncle John. To hear him extol Uncle John, in a voice choked with emotion, it might have been Paul preaching the funeral oration over Timothy. Uncle John would have been astounded, and considerably flattered if he could have heard it.

Culture in the neighbourhood was rare. Most of the inhabitants would not have known what the word meant if they had heard it. But there was one form of art that they could enjoy even if their understanding of it was limited. That was music. We were all church-goers and when we went to church we sang, all of us and as all good Methodists did at one time. No doubt the music ministered as much to the spiritual needs of the congregation as the sermon, though none of us could have said where the one ended and the other began. In our home was a grand piano, made, I remember, by Dunham, and a melodeon, upon which my mother had played. It was decided, perhaps as a matter of thrift that since there were two musical instruments available it was a waste and a shame that nobody was able to perform on them. I was chosen as the likeliest

pupil. My first teacher was a Miss Emily Levy, who was unable to discover that I had any particular gift. Under Miss Levy I mastered *The Blue Bells of Scotland* and the *Vesper Hymn*. Then, in what must have been the store's weightiest decision in a month it was decided that I should study under Theodore Martens. At this time Mr. Martens charged the incredible fee of a dollar an hour. When news of this extravagance was noised about it was not believed at first. It was impossible that a music teacher should be paid a dollar an hour; it was equally incredible that hard headed people, such as my family, could be found who would pay it. Why this Martens would earn in a day as much as any half dozen or more families in the neighbourhood would earn in a week. I did not remain with Mr. Martens long, but long enough to learn how to play *God Save the Queen* without mistakes. Our relationship ceased soon after he had suggested to my aunt that there was an approaching theatrical performance of *Lucia de Lammermoor* coming, and that my musical obtuseness might be touched if I could be permitted to hear it. In other words he had the effrontery and immorality to suggest that I should go to the theatre!

Among my friends when I was a schoolboy I can recall just one Roman Catholic, Mike Kennedy, who lived across the road. Our immediate neighbourhood was inhabited almost exclusively by Protestants, though there was a Roman Catholic colony south of Queen Street and east of Parliament. Though the distance from our store was less than half a mile, we had no contact with it, except on such special occasions as the Twelfth of July or a rehearsal for it when an Orange lodge or band of Loyal Young Britons would march with fife and drum into the enemy territory looking for the trouble it generally provoked.

I am not an Orangeman; neither was my father. Two uncles were. Another was not², and in politics generally found himself opposing the Orangemen, who were generally Conservatives. But there is no doubt that I was brought up in a strong Protestant environment, imported from Tyrone and Armagh. My elders had Catholic friends; but a boy makes his friends only among his neighbours or at school, and in Toronto sixty years ago the separate school system was already established. Mike Kennedy was the only Catholic neighbour of my age, and of course I met no Catholics at school. So it happened that I made no Catholic friends until I had almost grown up and was not dependent upon a home and school environment for my acquaintances.

Mother Hagen was, I have no doubt, Catholic, and she dressed always in full black like a nun or a priest. To Catholics then and now the sight of the black garbed members of their faith was no doubt welcome. To young Protestants they seemed of ill omen. They seemed to shut off the light; to be a warning against fun and gaiety. In other words, they were different from us and our elders, and thus innately formidable and even menacing.

I recognize now that this was nothing but an unreasoning and unreasonable prejudice. Most boys outgrow it as their experience of the world widens, especially as their experience of Catholics widens; but it has inflicted a wound that may be not without consequences. It would not have existed, I think had it not been for Separate schools.

It seems natural enough to boys that they should go to different churches. They realize that church is a place where they are taken by their parents and that they have no election in the matter. Therefore they think it perfectly proper that one parent should take his children to one church and another parent take his children to a different church. It is not so with schools. Schools are places where boys go themselves. They go there obviously with the single aim of being taught things. So when some boys go to one school and other boys go to another school in the same neighbourhood there is something to be explained. The explanation is that one school is for the Catholics and another for the Protestants.

This division of the boys of a neighbourhood as soon as they are old enough to go to school has always seemed to me to be an evil thing, from the standpoint of a common citizenship and a common Canadianism. It creates a division at a time when divisions are least desirable. It makes boys conscious of religious differences when they are far too young to understand much about religion. What they understand is the difference between religions. It tends to make separate groups where there should be one group or where at last different groups should be different according to the different tastes of those who form them; certainly not because of their parents' religion.

Especially in Canada, which is one of the least homogeneous countries in the world, where so many of our problems are based on differences of language, religion and cultural inheritance, the primary difference of public and separate schools seems to be a calamity. A Catholic friend of mine once argued thus with the late Archbishop McNeill. He said the Archbishop listened attentively, and nodded his head in agreement from time to time. My friend thought that he had perhaps persuaded the Archbishop, who himself had not attended a primary separate school. He was mistaken. When he had finished the Archbishop said, "*Yes, but what about your immortal soul?*" It is at this point that argument ends.

But I should like to ask whether, if the Separate schools give sounder religious instruction than the average Protestant is likely to receive, the product of those schools are in any way superior to their Protestant neighbours? Are they wiser, more law abiding citizens, better trained to make a success of what they undertake? Are they happier? Do they live fuller lives? The answer seems to be that they are only better Roman Catholics.

In the immediate neighbourhood there were quite a few Orangemen; they used to meet in Wiggins' Hall on St. David Street and no doubt nurse the ill feelings towards Catholics which had been inculcated when they were younger men in Ireland. A really militant organization was the Orange Young Britons, made up of husky, strutting young men, mechanics and labourers who were extremely provocative. They would parade frequently and always made it a point of invading a neighbourhood east of Parliament Street and south of Queen Street where there was quite a Roman Catholic settlement. These parades always wound up in fist fights and the throwing of stones. The Catholics were in a minority and therefore at a disadvantage; the police, too, were generally

sympathetic to the Young Britons and they were infrequently punished for their assaults. There used to be a tradition that an Orangeman would wear his plug hat in the Twelfth of July parade, and that he would lend it to his Catholic neighbour for the walk on the 17th of March. This, I believe, was largely a fiction, for the Irish Protestants I knew would refuse to surrender their equity in March 17th to the Catholics. They clung to their Irish memories and prejudices just as tenaciously.

When I was about thirteen or fourteen Uncle Robert devised a means to have Biblical truth inculcated in us. He offered a prize of one dollar to each one of us when he could recite by rote a book from the Proverbs. If a year hence we could remember it we would get another dollar. Thus I learned several books of this ancient wisdom, much of which I remember to this day. My brother was even more diligent, and since we shared the reward, or at least I shared his, I would urge him to the solemn duty of memorizing a chapter. So he learned more of the Bible than I did and I have no doubt is grateful to me for his wide acquaintance with the Old Testament, especially the Proverbs. Originally the prize offered by Uncle Robert was not a dollar but a pair of pigeons. He did not say what sort of pigeons, but he had the idea of pigeons which could be bought at the St. Lawrence Market for a half a dollar or less. I still remember his shock when he had to pay \$5 for a pair of Jacobins I had bought. He then established what he considered the sound money basis of a dollar a chapter.

Many years later, he noticed a pair of new woolen gloves I was wearing and I told him I had paid three dollars for them. "*Well,*" he said, "*I'm glad you can afford them. I couldn't.*" He was a wealthy man at the time. So I offered to give them to him but he declined. His ideas of money were unconventional. At another time when I was breeding Irish terriers, one or two of which I had given him, I remarked that I didn't know where I could find a suitable stud for a favourite bitch. I said there were none around Toronto. "*How much would a good one cost?*" he asked.

"*Oh, about \$500, I guess,*" I replied.

"*Well why not get one?*" he countered. "*I was never one to stick for a dollar or two.*" My Uncle Robert would refuse to pay three dollars for a pair of gloves but would not hesitate to spend \$1,000 on a Jersey calf.

Among our occasional winter excitements were visits from evangelists, generally Americans. We remember particularly Sam Small and Sam Jones, both we think, reverends by whom we were converted for the second or third time, I do not remember which. They were large boisterous men given to shoutings and sweatings. What they said I do not know, but they left us with a conviction of sin and a resolve to do better. Their influence was transitory, and that was probably the reason they, or others like them, would return regularly while the evangelists were approved in the store. My Father, an Anglican, appears not to have been affected. He was a deeply religious man but shy and seemed to think that his beliefs were a private matter between him and God and not to be paraded about from platforms or penitent benches.

Nevertheless, my uncles and aunts approved when from time to time I stood up, thus indicating that I was saved. Indeed, the understanding was that everybody in the neighbourhood was saved, except perhaps the Catholics and the drunks and the dead beats, for I never heard of any local atheists or agnostics. In other circles about this period infidels must have been rampant for Darwin's theories and the arguments derived from them must have been common enough among the more educated. But of this strife no echo reached as far as the Cabbagetown store. Probably I was nearly through my boyhood before I heard a word or read a line which questioned the orthodox religion of those days, and when I say orthodox I mean the old-fashioned Methodism.