

A MARITIME SMALL TOWN IN THE NINETIES

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FIFTY years ago, Westmount ranked somewhere between a village and a town. It had a post office, five churches, three hotels, a dozen shops, and a railway station, from which the fussy little trains of the B. O. R. leisurely made their way with shrill whistles back and forth from the world. The streets were broad, and shaded by elms and maples. An occasional ship came hesitantly up the winding river at high tide, and slipped apologetically into its berth as if a little uncertain of its reception so far from the sea. To the north a long range of high hills shuts out the winds of the great bay beyond them, and the broad valley beneath is filled with apple orchards. Occasional sea-fogs spill over these hills, but never remain. Sunlight lingers in the valley as if unwilling to say goodnight; and those who live there, no matter how many regions they have traversed, say (no doubt erroneously) that that sunlight possesses a mellow quality unlike any sunlight ever seen.

The centre of the town life was its little college . . . since grown to a university. The college building, together with a Ladies' Seminary and a Boys' Academy, stood on the top of a gentle rise of land to the north of the main street, and its elm-shaded lawns flowed down to the wide marshes and old French dykes which flanked the distant river.

I have lingered a little over the description of this place. I lived there longer than I have lived anywhere else; since one must have a home somewhere, I have always called Westmount my home.

Like all small towns, Westmount had its odd characters. There was the village barber, Dan Banks, whose profane and skeptical witticisms clipped the excesses of a somewhat self-righteous evangelicism that pervaded the town. This, of course, made his shop a lure for us as we wandered up and down the sidewalks on off-afternoons. The good masters and mistresses of Westmount resented this union of wit and wickedness, and forbade any intimacy with him beyond what was required by the growth of our hair.

There was the station-master, Frank White (always called Frankie), a diminutive person with a glass eye, whose shrewd and caustic comments gave him Cyclopiian powers of torment and

reduced men of low degree to vanity and men of high degree to a lie. Frustrated and maddened as they were at times by his impish resourcefulness, I have no doubt that their lack of Ulysses's boldness was all that saved Frankie his sound eye.

The senior doctor of Westmount, Doctor Bancroft, had long established himself in the esteem of the people by his bread pills, his off-hand ways and his love of horses. With these weapons he withstood till the day of his regretted demise the advance of medical science. "Come to my office", said the good-humoured doctor to Frankie, whose sound eye was troubling him. "Yes, I'll be there," snapped Frankie, "but I'll have to come on all fours, and all I'll get will be a bread poultice."

I started my education in Westmount at the public school. The principal was a stone-mason who, for undivulged reasons which baffled the gossips of the town to the end, had fallen back upon an earlier vocation. His scholarship was meagre, but he had the teaching gift. He held our loyalty mainly by taking part in our sports. Those were the leisurely days of cricket, and one morning as I drew near the school, I heard a joyous uproar and soon learned that Mr. Reed (his name was James Reed), had given us a cricket set. We played with it at recess, and we remained to play after school. The French language taught to a few of us after hours became henceforth a burden, and one day when an unusually sharp crack of the ball came in the open window, our impetuous teacher shouted: "I see that cricket has again defeated the French. Get out and play, all of you; we shall take up the study of French when the cricket season is over." He followed us out and joined in the game. He was on the town eleven, a match between it and the "Wanderers" of Halifax was imminent, and he wanted the practice. We saw through it all, and exonerated him.

The match with the "Wanderers" was the social and athletic event of the season. The Westmount team was captained by Dave Graven. Dave was the acme of all the physical excellencies. He was tall, broad and muscular, and easily surpassed all local competitors not only in athletics, but in his efficiency in all kinds of mechanical work. He possessed self-confidence, and an impeturbability which no reverse ever shook and no success ever inflated. When he accoutred himself in the now forgotten panoply of the ancient game and, standing at the wicket, slowly turned his taciturn face in scrutiny of the fielders, confidence sat in my heart.

The day of the match arrived, and I got up early and uncalled. Ten o'clock found me on the cricket-field, eagerly awaiting the call of "Play ball." The city team had arrived on the little morning

train, and we scanned its members critically for signs of weakness. Their nonchalant air irritated me. The colour of their flannels was not the shining white of the newer suits of the local team, but shaded into a seasoned putty colour, which bespoke long practice and a corresponding skill. I tried to persuade myself that it was an inferior colour, but I never succeeded. I once saw the world's champion cricket team, and I was not surprised to note that its flannels had the same indefinable smoothness and the same elusive shade of white.

To my intense satisfaction the match was a draw. Our teacher gave me his seal ring to keep for him when he went to bat, and although it was a bit tiresome to keep the hand that wore it always in view, I managed to draw a number of envious glances. Dave Craven, of course, saved the day. His swift, round-arm bowling, his steady and accurate batting and his active fielding did wonders. Hack Reeves, the under-hand bowler and wicket-keeper, was second in scoring honours. His wicket-keeping vocabulary was admirable, if not comprehensive. When he said: "*How* is that?" the umpire paid due and judicious heed. When he said: "*How is that?*" the official pondered and sometimes said "Out." But when he said: "*How is that?*" the dire and welcome verdict was almost always a foregone conclusion.

Our beloved teacher, a little too fat and perspiring very much, contributed his quota of runs. The lowest score was made by a large, flabby Englishman, whose knowledge of how cricket ought to be played was exceeded only by his own ineptness in playing it. He always sat apart and greeted each failure to catch the ball, no matter how unpardonable it was, with: "*Well* tried. *Hard* luck." In view of the happy conclusion, his sins of omission (he usually fumbled the ball) were forgiven.

In the evening the little train, with the visitors on board, tootled and puffed down the quiet valley and away to the city, leaving me standing with a group of happy hobbledehoyes among whom I was contented to feel myself of the least account. That evening my chum Frank and I sat on the front door-step by the yellow rosebush talking over the match, till the door opened and a voice I rarely disobeyed said: "Jack, come in to bed."

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Each morning in the Westmount school our teacher began the day by reading the Bible. He was not a religious man as Westmount understood the word, and always read from the Book of Proverbs. This served the double purpose of fulfilling school regu-

lations and furnishing the wherewithal with which to point his quick and effective punishments with apposite scriptural sanctions. Looking up one morning from his perusal of Solomon, he detected Jim Sangster disturbing the peace. He put down the Bible, seized Jim by the collar, propelled him to the door and with a vigorous smack shot him outside. Shutting the door, he returned to the desk and with solemn countenance read: "Cast out the scorner and contention shall go out; yea, strife and reproach shall cease."

The first period of the morning was devoted to geography and history. Those were the days when Gordon and the Mahdi kept our pulses throbbing with news from the East, while Louis Riel fulfilled a similar mission in the West, and Mr. Reed took happy advantage of the opportunity to teach his callow charges the twin virtues of loyalty and patriotism. During one hour of each day the air I breathed was saturated with an unquestioning love of all things British, and an equally credulous suspicion of all other things. I respected and feared the Deity, but I adored Queen Victoria. My heart swelled when I thought of her. I would often stand absorbed in front of the large steel engraving of her coronation that hung in our front hall. Had it not been for the danger of detection by my brothers (to whose iconoclasm everything was fair game) I should have performed some act of adoration. I suppose some outlet for my feeling was necessary, because one day I went up to the attic and there secretly and hopefully indited a poem: "To Her Gracious Majesty, Queen Victoria." (I have never done as much for God, for which sin of omission I am sure of Divine and human forgiveness). I got as far as "England, the home of our Queen," when my muse fled. I might have returned to the effort, but my brother Jim discovered my abbreviated preface to fame. His profane jeers effectually weakened my resolution, and I sadly left the expression of such sentiments to the poet laureate. Long afterward in a Canadian city I saw a statue of the late queen. Underneath it was inscribed: *Victoria, Queen and Empress, Model Wife and Mother*, but in the interim I had become acquainted with the newer school of biographers—and John Reid and the attic in Westmount, along with many other things, had turned to dust.

When we had lived two years in Westmount, I was taken from the public school and sent to the Boys' Collegiate Academy, a preparatory school to the College. I think my mother was always a little skeptical of the cultural values of the public schools. It came to my mind years afterward that she usually prefaced her references to my companions there with some gentle but disqualify-

ing adjective. My own opinion of the change was unalterably determined on the first day of attendance at the Academy by hearing myself called "Mr." I could scarcely believe my ears. It was evident that I now belonged to another order of beings. Well, as long as too much was not demanded of me I would play the part, but let the powers that conferred the title beware.

My associates were beyond doubt different. Their clothes were better, and their manners, perhaps on that account, were also better. The democratic spirit of the town was then tintured with the flavour of an educational (possibly also a moral) aristocracy. I was henceforth looked up to as a bit of a snob by my former companions, and I must be pardoned (it is difficult not to look down upon those who look up) if I occasionally lived up (or down) to their opinion.

The quality of my home life and of my intimate companionships remained the same. We mingled freely with all classes in the little town. The lines of social cleavage were not distinctly drawn, although there were more decided social differences than there are in these more free and easy days. Bridge, the modern "open sesame" to coveted circles in the smaller towns, was not yet known. The Anglicans were the only people who played whist, but they constituted a very small proportion of the people, and were regarded as an almost alien and not altogether godly group.

I had been taught to regard card-playing and dancing, with the use of tobacco and wine, as major offences. (There were other equally heinous sins, but they were not mentioned above a whisper in polite society. Reference was made to them mostly in secret conclave and in the ten commandments). The heavy artillery of the pulpit was trained on these four sins. I was therefore surprised when, on returning from one of his many journeys, my father (who was fond of travelling) brought home a game called "Nations", and taught us to play. This game turned out to be a disguised form of whist. It was some time before I learned that unfortunate fact, and I shall never forget the feeling of disillusionment with which I made the discovery. Thereafter my father forbade us to play it, but it was too late, and in our secret haunts we continued the diversion with "spot" cards, as they were called. Our minister, the Rev. Lewis Thompson, continued to declare with emphatic smittings of the dusty pulpit cushion that "the devil was in the paint and the devil was in the paper".

As I sit here and try to recover my ethical opinions during those years, I recall with distinctness that I began quite early in life to regard with skepticism the rigid prohibitions in the midst

of which I grew to boyhood, and my memory of the day on which I made my declaration of independence is very clear. My father and I were working together in the orchard when I suddenly made the decision. (I had the habit of putting off unpleasant decisions and then making them suddenly. It robbed imagination of its worst weapon). I told him that I saw no harm in dancing and playing cards, and that I intended eventually to practise these and other forbidden amusements. I added that I should refrain from things which I considered wrong. My father poised his pruning knife in the air while I talked, looking at me as he would have looked at a new variety of apple. When I had finished, he continued to look at me for a little while and then said: "Do Marshall and James" (my older and younger brothers) "think as you do?" "Yes, sir."

As we stood thus, the sound of carriage wheels drew our eyes to the street. The Reverend Thomas Henshaw was passing. Twice a day, with planetary regularity, the Reverend Doctor drove down town for his mail. Mrs. Henshaw was a very small woman, and he had evidently purchased the pony and carriage with an eye to her requirements rather than his own, because he was six feet two inches tall and proportionately broad.

Dr. Henshaw was the best-liked of the town clergy, not because of his eloquence or learning, in which his possessions were not above the average, but because wherever he went, he exuded the kindness and serenity of an April sky.

He sat in the little carriage, and his wife sat on, or rather clung to, what was left of the seat beside him. His knees were drawn up nearly on a level with his chin. His body was bent forward, his elbows rested on his knees, and his big hands apparently shoved on the reins, so that as the pony ambled mechanically along you got the idea that some invisible contrivance propelled the whole equipage. My brother and I had once seen his wife shake a tiny finger at him and say: "Naughty Tommy," and, of course, we always called him by that name.

My father's eyes vaguely followed Naughty Tommy "calmly fulfilling his God-given hest" till he disappeared in Johnson's Hollow. Then he pursed his lips, considered the distant marshes a little while, quietly said "Very Well", and went on pruning.

The consuming question at that time in Westmount was whether the town should or should not have a municipal water supply. Politics were for the time discarded. Gordon in the East and Riel in the West were forgotten. Arguments about the form of baptism were shelved till a more convenient season.

Even prohibition was waved a hesitating adieu. Politicians, religionists, patriots and prohibitionists discarded their old weapons and donned the armour of "Water" or "Anti-water".

The resulting alliances were novel and interesting. "Devil Dick" Barnhill, the notorious purveyor of ardent beverages to thirsty wayfarers, Dan Banks, the witty and too tolerant barber, Dave Wallace, the ribald and humorous entertainer of peripatetic loafers, had long refused the healing waters of the Baptists, the earnestly flung life-line of the Methodists, the soothing ritual of the Anglicans and the doctrinal expounding of the dour Mr. Bolton of the Kirk.

But they lived, together with the clergy, near the centre of the town where the water was poor, and were therefore forced into an embarrassing entente with them.

Public meetings were called to discuss the question. At one of these the Reverend Mr. Thompson was put up to speak by the pro-water party. Mr. Thompson was an ardent prohibitionist, and could not resist the opportunity to extol the virtues of pure water. Accordingly he urged his "Christian friends" to secure "a town supply of God's pure water with which to offset the devil's brew of the rum-seller". It chanced that "Devil Dick" was sitting in one of the front seats; and, at this untactful remark of his new ally, his face darkened and he shook his fist at the speaker. In the silence that followed, Dave Wallace, who in his search for the humorous had wandered in and was sitting in the front row in the gallery, leaned forward and said: "Never mind Ned; you'll have more water to water down your rum with."

On the following day the usual mixed assembly of citizens was animatedly discussing the situation in the barber's shop, as much for the purpose of provoking the quips of Barber Dan as to discover the merits of a town water supply. In the midst of the discussion Devil Ned entered. Barber Dan waited for him to settle himself in his chair. Then he stopped cutting my hair, walked over and spat with nice deliberation and accuracy into the beehive stove, turned to the expectant group and said in his smooth and ironic voice: "Well Ned, they say you were sort of put out at the parson last night, but you needn't have been. He was speaking, as he told you, to his Christian friends, and sure you're neither the one nor the other." Before morning, Barber Dan's remark was repeated to every citizen of Westmount, and duly took its place among the traditions of the town.

Those who favoured the new project were led by the redoubtable Frankie White. The dignified and immaculate Reverend

Doctor Graham, president of the College, whose governors were fearful of taxation, led the opposition, which was composed of the college constituency and the residents of the East and West ends of the town where the water was good.

The struggle became quite bitter, and it is said that on one occasion a brief encounter took place between the two leaders and that the wasp-like attacks of Frankie left the ponderous president quite discomfited.

The contest threatened to sink to the scandalous, and the private lives of certain prominent citizens were scrutinized with a view to party advantage. Whispers, floating about like thistle-down, came, as they always do, to the ears of the younger generation, and we who belonged to it heard serious doubts cast upon the reputations of staid and seemingly untempted citizens.

The dispute dissolved in contagious mirth in that crucible of reputations, the barber's shop. It was on a Saturday night, and an unusually large number of the unshaved citizens of Westmount were awaiting the razors of Dan and his Saturday night assistant. Someone had ventured to reflect on the character of a decent citizen to whose views on the water question he was opposed. The silence that followed his unkind remark was broken, as we all hoped it would be, by Dan. "Mister," he drawled, with a glance at his victim as bright and sharp as his suspended razor, "I don't know very much about the gentleman you have mentioned, but I have felt sort of sorry for him ever since the time he came to my door looking for a dozen eggs that had been laid by hens without a rooster in the flock. He said that his wife wouldn't eat any others."

Victory in the water contest ultimately went, as it did in other towns, to the "Wets" who I am sure, should they hear a word now so sinister, but then so worthy, applied to them, will sleep none the less quietly in their long home on the hill above the little town.