

CHAPTER I

The Search for Escape

"The trouble with you, Rose, is that you are too idealistic. You have been throwing energy and enthusiasm into fighting for the rights of the underdog while the 'wise' boys have been working for themselves. Now they can ride with their wives and sweethearts in cars while you have to hoof it and your wife and family have to thumb a ride or walk".

"I know it, A.J., I know, but if a fellow has something burning inside, if he sees the rights of Labor continually trampled underfoot, sees Greed going from victory to victory, it's fight we must. However, I'm beginning to see that this policy hasn't been playing fair with my family; but one gets into these things"

"Listen, Rose! don't be a sucker. Barnum correctly said, 'never give a sucker a break'. Abe Lincoln was an idealist and he got shot for his efforts. Now, listen, young man, in this depression-ridden province there are three industries open to the ordinary guy if he plays ball with the powers that be. These industries are lumber, politics and rum. All you know about lumber is to saw and nail it up for someone else. What you have learned about politics has been an eyeopener to oldline politicians. Speaking as your friend and as a politician of some experience, I can't understand how you fellows came so near to upsetting the established order with only one thousand dollars in your treasury and no rum to give the boys. You have something on the ball there. Now as for rum, I know you don't drink so you have missed a lot of fun. But at present time there is money in it, big money. Our industries are closing down, our young men are leaving in droves for the West and the States, — there is nothing for them to do here. Look at our bootleggers in shiny new cars eating up the dust on our highways. Do they carry a lunchbox? Not much; they can flash a roll and live at the best hotels. So wise up."

"A.J. I would jump into the West River before I would turn bootlegger."

"Now don't get hasty, I'm just giving facts and the setup of things as they are. Now what are the facts of this fight of yours for what you call 'the Rights of Man'. Four years ago the old corrupt Czar government of Russia blew up and a lot of long-haired guys the world over took it as a signal for world revolution. We hear strange battle cries about 'the Dictatorship of the Proletariat', 'Workers of the World unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains', You, along with the rest keep hooping [sic] it up."

"I know nothing about the Bolsheveki"

“Don’t interrupt until I’m through. You along with the rest keep whipping up the storm to throw out our old established politicians. Now both you and I know that Germany hasn’t been crushed. Our capitalistic system couldn’t stand it. Sooner or later another big war is sure to come. The centre of this storm is in the same place that it has been for two thousand years — over in Europe. Here in Nova Scotia we are on the fringes, out in the sticks. The only time Nova Scotia has ever seen prosperity has been when there was a war. Halifax was built for war, thrives on war, geography takes care of that. Now that we are at peace depression is with us again. Building activities will soon cease and a carpenter with your reputation for Labor activities won’t be able to get a job. Then what about your family and whose fault will it be if they are hungry and cold. You and your Labor Party can’t stop injustice by making a pencil-mark on a ballot. If you believe that story you sure are a sucker.”

The time was 1921, the place was the spacious veranda of A.J. Bannerman, successful lumberman and politician of New Glasgow and Barney’s River in the County of Pictou. From the time he had been a country boy passing along Marsh Street to New Glasgow, he had admired the stately home of J. Fred MacDonald, Collector of Customs. With the passing years it had become a burning ambition to own that house, to be a prosperous citizen and live the life of Riley while directing his numerous enterprises. He loved the beautiful hardwoods of his Barney’s River woodlots and for many years had picked out choice boards, had them dressed and seasoned to adorn his prospective home.

With several successful lumber deals put through during World War I, he had bought the property and had hired some of us carpenters to panel the spacious halls and rooms with birdseye maple, ash and birch. A.J. prided himself on being a democrat and he was a colorful personality, and interesting talker. Our friendship has been long and lasting, something to be valued.

To get a clear idea as to how and why I became involved in the rum-running game it is necessary to give the background of what had been my experience in the class struggle.

I was born and lived as a boy on a farm on Fraser’s Mountain just on the outskirts of New Glasgow. The scenery looking down on the East River, Pictou Harbour and the Cobequid hills beyond was and still is an artist’s dream. My father, who although a poor farmer, was well-read and had something of the poet in him, for he loved to sit on the doorstep and look down to old Pictou and tell of the days when he could walk across the harbour on the decks of sailing ships as they awaited their turn to coal at the “loading ground” during the American Civil War. My mother believed in hard work and education for her children. It was a severe blow

to her when I stopped school at Grade VIII. It wasn't that I couldn't learn for studies such as history, English or geography were more of a pleasure than a task. My refusal to go to school was the result of a perverse Highland pride stirred up because I couldn't dress as well as the town boys.

On Christmas, 1903, my father presented me with a book that made a deep impression on my curiosity and imagination. It was a children's book of stories of the French Revolution. Why he ever picked that one as a Christmas present for a boy of fourteen is still a puzzle to me for he was a firm believer in God, the Queen and the "status quo". This old book is still in my possession and is something to be cherished: the Fall of the Bastille, the Insurrection of Women, the Six Hundred who knew how to die are stories more vivid than the seige of Stalingrad, El Alamein or the hanging of Mussolini. But greatest of all impressions was against the injustice and corruption of sanctified power. My greatest hero was Danton the Titan of the Revolution whose thunderous voice fired all France to hurl back the armies of Prussia, Austria and England.

Hail to thee Mighty Danton, thy strategy has saved me many, many times in the darkest hours. "Audacity, audacity and more audacity". It is a strategy that only can be called forth in grave emergencies. And it works.

I learned the carpenter trade, spending long hours at correspondence courses dealing with the building trades and drafting, joined the Carpenter's Union, served in its several offices. Through the Union we got better wages and shorter hours. A more conservative labor union is hard to imagine.

With the building of the Eastern Car plant in 1912, there came to Pictou County many workmen who had travelled widely and were real Reds. Some had belonged to the "wobblies" — the old I.W.W. — and the Western Federation of Miners. One such tough brainy son of toil was Cliff Dane an Australian boilermaker. He organized the American Federation of Labor and a Trades and Labor Council. The Carpenter's Union sent me as one of their delegates. From the literature passed around at Council meetings there dawned on me the first insight of the growing class-struggle.

During those formative years, Rev. A.J. Ramsay was minister at the Kirk. He organized a Brotherhood with a forum for discussion. He was a man who had qualities of tenderness and kindness; attributes of which I had known but little in my hard life. He must have sensed some glimmers of intelligence for he loaned books of immortal classics to me. These works piqued my curiosity to find out what springs of actions made people behave as they did. It was to be many a grim year before I could get a satisfactory answer to that question.

In those far off days before World War I it seemed to be a very good

world in which to live, with those church discussions on Social Justice and Christian Socialism becoming a reality. Wanting to be on the "band wagon" of this millenium I threw energy and enthusiasm into making St. Andrew's Brotherhood a success. It was a fool's paradise in which we were living, it was little we knew or understood the strong currents that were running under our social structure.

Mr. MacColl, Superintendent of the Nova Scotia Steel & Coal Co. was the leading man in the church at the time and he gave it as his ruling that Socialistic discussions must cease. But my curiosity was whetted, I wanted to know more about the new horizons. So I attended every meeting of the Trades & Labor Council, coming to the conclusion that those rough-neck boys in those smoke-filled rooms had a better theory of the coming revolution than the good people in church parlors.

From such sources came the burning desire to fight the oppression of the capitalist. His sacred privilege of the right to plunder the masses must be taken from him. This was my fight so I threw energy and the best years of my life into the class war. During those years I saw many a good cause ruined by key men getting drunk at vital moments when they should have been sober. I was at one with the forces of temperance.

This struggle continued until 1920, when, as Secretary-Treasurer of the Labor Party we almost elected Henry D. Fraser. In fact on election night he was elected by a majority of 52. But through some skullduggery that could not be fathomed he was unseated next day.

This was the highpoint in my career in the struggle of the underdog to get his share of the gravy. After this crushing disappointment to the boys the recriminations flew thick and fast. Vannie Nicholson, an astute Labor leader and talker came to the meeting, three sheets to the wind, where we had to settle outstanding bills and demanded a recount of the ballots. I told him that our candidate had himself insisted that we drop the matter and take a trimming, and lashed out at him and others for getting drunk at the critical moment. It was a furious row. Next meeting was election of officers and I got fired. I walked out of that meeting and have never since gone to a Labor meeting.

During 1917 I got married to a smart attractive girl from Charlottetown, P.E.I., Bertha Garrick. To this day it is puzzling to know why she ever took such a crude bumptious fellow as I was in those days. We built a snug home, but it was mortgaged. When our two children were born I was forced to see that we would soon face disaster in the series of small depressions that were upon us. So I tried a small grocery store. But we had to buy in the dear market of inflation and sell cheap when the slump came. So we were cleaned out. There was little hope of getting out of the whirlpool of economic necessity by working at my trade and I was becoming despondent.

So my friend's advice to get into the rum trade was not to be lightly turned aside. But it was sickening to think of getting into the liquor traffic.

One other thing I tried. Some friends believing there was some talent of self-expression lurking in my head persuaded me to try writing stories. What a laugh that one was! Anyhow several courses in English and story-writing were tried and I almost made good with a story sent to MacLean's magazine. The editor told me to see if I could repeat on another theme but it was just a fluke. Years afterwards I understood why I could never be a story-writer.

However, in all this welter of studying there was one chapter in one book that as I look back on it has amply repaid the effort. The chapter was on "Argumentation" from Gerung's *Outline of Rhetoric*. In all the mass of undigested books that had come my way this was the first time I had come across the scientific method of correct reasoning. It is hard to teach an old dog new tricks but through the succeeding years in my crude way this has been the method used to solve problems and satisfy curiosity on human behaviour.

CHAPTER II

The Sale of a Soul

Until 1925 rolled around I had tried several ventures to breach the wall of defeat that had piled around me. In the spring of that year another election for the Provincial House was necessary. People were stirred up about the conditions in the Cape Breton coalfields. Men who had served overseas were now behind trenches and barbed wire fighting company police. Ministers of the then Liberal government refused to go to the coalfields to see what the trouble really was. Instead more police were sent in and men were killed. The miners and their friends went around the country gathering produce to feed their starving families while the system of absentee ownership had Government approval.

The Conservative board of strategy at Ottawa sent down Edgar N. Rhodes to organize an effective opposition to the government that had been in power for over forty years. My political sense told me that Nova Scotia was due for a political turnover and as I had worked for the Tories in the old days it became my resolve to get in on the ground floor for whatever jobs were to be passed out with a change of Government. It needed the strangling of conscience and scruples to put me in the ranks of Tories as a mercenary, because I knew that one party was no better than the other. But the grim law of necessity and the hard facts of losing my home