

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

and seeing my family destitute drove me along. "Audacity, audacity and more audacity", Danton's battlecry, I took for mine.

My wife didn't want to me ever again mixed up in politics so I didn't tell her that I was going to attend the Conservative Organization meeting that April night. What a godsend I must have seemed to the Tory board of strategy! Alex MacGregor — Big Alex as he was known — was the commander-in-chief. James R. MacGregor was secretary. For short to-the-point talks I had the knowhow to put fire and vigor into the crowd. The Tory daily, the *Evening News* played it up in good style next day. Oh, there was lots of ammunition in 1925 to throw at the Grits! The people were sore.

Being called a renegade by old comrades was hard to take, but my hand was set to the plough and there was no turning back. For me the only alternative to the remote possibility of getting a government job was failure and death.

In successful politics one of the tricks is to tell a half-truth loud and long enough and the people will accept it for the truth. This strategy has been worked over and over again yet the people go for it every time.

So this was the idea that I had to sell, that if a Labor candidate could not be elected, the next best thing was to elect friends of Labor, thus the miners could get a settlement and get back to work. Big Alex had proven a friend of the workingman during the war years when he had obtained a high rate for the steelworkers during the war. The thing to do was to accept his party's candidates. Big Alex was astute and couldn't be played for a sucker.

A theme I followed while stumping pleased him greatly. For years the Grits of Nova Scotia had believed and had acted as though they had the Divine Right to rule and own Nova Scotia. This attitude I kept hammering, and attacking again and again. Others took it up including the press.

Our candidates were John Doull, successful barrister and brother-in-law of Big Alex; Allie MacQuarrie, merchant and prominent sportsman of Westville; Robert Douglas, promising young farmer who had broken the Grit strangle-hold on Granton in the municipal elections.

Fred Milligan, an old personal friend, was Ward chairman on the West Side. Fred was a smart aggressive businessman and Town Councillor who had lived for a number of years in the States, and knew how to hustle and get things done. In political action we could talk the same language so that we helped each other heal many a sore spot. The old diehard Tories in the fight were like all Tories, loyal to their class, forgetting nothing and learning nothing.

We were a motley lot of stumpers but we had a new line and didn't resort to the old line of indulging in personalities. Our slogan was,

“Rhodes will bring the boys back home”. The tide was coming in so we rode the crest of the wave. We had a lot of fun campaigning in remote hamlets and schoolhouses. Someone generally had a bottle of rum and although I didn’t drink, it could be observed that there was great value in rum as a morale builder at elections.

There was an unforgettable moonlight night in June when we were returning from a meeting at the Garden of Eden schoolhouse in that gem of beauty at Eden Lake. Coming over Blue Mountain we stopped at a roadside spring with its trough hewn from a big log. The boys were mixing the drinks and I was drinking in the witchery and aroma of the woods when we heard the roar of a motor coming up the mountain from Sherbrooke. A big touring car passed us going at fifty miles an hour. “There comes some of our election rum”, said one of the boys.

I asked Harry MacGirr who supplied the rum and as we were under prohibition, why it was that liquor Inspectors never touched us. Harry, being Irish and a natural politician, said, “Cliff, don’t be so damned innocent. Election rum is like Holy Water. It is understood by all to be sacred stuff, not to be seized. Inspectors know that it must be left alone if they want to hold their jobs.”

“Harry, do you believe that votes can be bought with rum?” “That is doubtful, but the workers must have it. The trick is to keep the gluttons from stealing it for their own use. This stunt makes the rest of the boys sore. The scavengers who hang around committee rooms are no good to the party or anyone else. Sooner or later as election day comes near you are sure to get your share of the rum. If you can’t use it, others can. Being as you don’t drink, you’ll be trusted with two or three gallons. Water it down but leave the smell. That is too good for some of them.”

Thus began my education in the ways and wiles of handling rum. How different from the puritanic Messiah-like campaign of the Labor party. True it was that Labor now had candidates in the field but it was pitiful to see their lack of steam.

There were amusing incidents aplenty. Some fights, for tempers ran high. Neil MacMillan a great Tory, kept a small store on High Street. For years I had made it a habit to drop in and have a chat. He had a lot of native Cape Breton wit and could tell a good story. The truckman who hauled coal in the neighbourhood was J.R. MacDonald, a fierce Grit from the Gulf Shore. One day when in Neil’s store, J.R. came in and an argument started over an article in the Eastern Chronicle, the Liberal bi-weekly published by its noted editor, James A. Fraser.

Said J.R. “MacMillan, I’ll be tellin’ ye again that it was a MacDonald who wrote yon letter, The Honourable E.M. himself. I’ll bet ye two dollars on it.”

“Och, well now J.R. I holds no brief for James A. Fraser, but there was never a MacDonald could write like he can. And it’s not bettin’ I’ll be on the likes.”

The wild blood was aroused at this jab, as leaning across the counter, J.R. said, “Y’re scairt, are ye”?

Neil was a stout man with great aplomb. Looking over his glasses he said with dignity, “Och, let me tell ye, MacDonald, I was placing bets an’ winnin’ them in the United States when ye were spreading manure with yer bare hands down the Gulf.”

One of the most droll political speeches I’ve ever heard in my life was during that campaign by an old schoolchum, Bob Fraser. Bob was an electrician who loved to hobnob with the great and near great. They found him amusing and Bob’s mind was a mirror for their thoughts.

On this particular night the meeting was in the schoolhouse at Marshdale at the headwaters of Barney’s River. Bob began by saying, “Mr. chairman, ladies and gentlemen, I don’t know if you know who I am but I’ll tell you who I am. I’m Robert H. Fraser, the son of Jim Simon Fraser, a grandson of Yankee Tom a merchant known and respected throughout our province. The dearest and sweetest moments of my life have been spent in the arms of a nurse from Barney’s River. But it is not of frivolous things that I came to talk about this evening, but of what happened when I was coming home from visiting my sweetheart the other night. Passing the home of a dear old lady, I heard sobbing. I went in to comfort her for her boys like your boys were driven out of Nova Scotia by the Grit Government. Said she, “oh Mr. Fraser, I’m so happy that I am crying. I’ve heard from my boys and they are coming home. God bless Mr. Rhodes, he is bringing my boys back home”.

There was an unforgettable thrill to that campaign. Nevertheless sometimes I would lay awake at night and try to take stock of myself, knowing that Rhodes could never make good and “bring the boys back home”, reasoning that neither he nor anyone else could break the tragic consequences of geography and stupid laws. At best a Tory victory could but break the Divine Right of Grit bureaucracy. To be honest with myself I was but a mercenary, conceiving my first duty to be to my family, to provide food and shelter for them. The scavengers that hung around the committee rooms were pitting their wits against the Executive to get a bottle of rum or five dollars for their vote. My purpose was different only in degree. But play the game I must and keep my big mouth shut against radical speeches. And never, never, never lie to myself.

As the eve of election drew near, the intensity of the struggle increased. Two nights before the climax Harry MacGirr took me aside and cautiously whispered, “Cliff, the time for talking is over. We must make

our Ward solid. A prominent rumrunner has kicked in twenty kegs of rum to each party. Don't ask his name. We can't trust this Grit Inspector, Thompson. He isn't a gentleman. The town Inspector is O.K. He don't want to touch the Grit rum without Thompson getting nasty. So we have to do some scouting in cars to see that the distribution point is protected. We may work it so that Thompson will get drunk and carefully laid away. Be at the Market Square at ten-thirty tonight".

I'll admit that I was scared good and plenty for organized law-breaking had never been in my line, and a plausible story had to be told the wife about the purpose of the evening. She hated rum in all its forms and it was generally hard enough to get away to go stumping.

But there was a thrill and kick to the danger that lured me on. I asked the higher-ups in the party about the rum but they disclaimed all knowledge of such vile proceedings. I wondered about this paradox at the time but lost all such naive considerations later on in life. Liquor inspectors had a formidable reputation to me. I knew Tom MacKay slightly, Thompson only by reputation. He was County Inspector but had authority anywhere by virtue of holding a commission as a provincial constable.

It was this atmosphere that gave me the first inkling of the farce of prohibition. Was there no one in earnest about law enforcement. Was it but another pious dream getting kicked around by the natural cussedness of man?

But such moralizing must be forced to the back of one's mind. I was part of the machine and victory must be the only present objective.

At ten-thirty Harry and I circled the streets in a car belonging to one of the faithful. We picked up a good Tory cop who told us that Thompson was "up to Casey's", a celebrated joint run by an ex-painter who could not make a living at his trade. The cop told us to come around later and he should have further news. This was my first experience in stalking a human suspect and this one was a limb of the law. Later on we got a report that Thompson had a quart of rum and nothing was to be feared from his activities that night.

The distributing point was in the basement of a modest home. The tenants were socially prominent but unemployment had made the man of the house a seeker of a government job. The windows were covered with heavy cloth: a feeling of elation and coming victory filled the workers as they industriously filled the gallon cans. Cars came and went with party stalwarts from the country getting theirs first. Some one reported that the same thing was going on in a Grit hideout. I got three cans without trouble, a young chap and I went to his house and watered down two gallons pouring the ammunition into pint bottles. The other gallon we kept for election night celebration.

That June polling day dawned fair and bright. It wasn't necessary to buy votes, all we had to do was to keep the tide rolling. Grit workers surged around the poll with their air of Divine Ownership. It made one's blood boil and we worked all the harder. Deeds of valor were performed by men and women who had never before been interested in elections.

The people were aroused and showed it when the returns were added up. Each of our candidates had majorities of over three thousand. What a celebration we had that night. The Tories had been in the wilderness of opposition for over forty years so they had to make up for lost time.

In the midst of the delirium that night in the Arena Rink where the Tories had their headquarters, someone asked me as a leading ward-worker to make a speech. I was excited about the overthrow of the old government with their superiority complex and it made one feel good even if it was Tories that were taking over. It was the only radical statement made by me during the campaign. I said something about "it being the happiest work I had ever undertaken to take part in this victory in which the Grit aristocracy had been thrown to the dust and common man had come into his own". Big Alex got me in a corner later and slapping me on the shoulder said, "Clifford, that speech of yours was great". And he laughed long and loud, for he had little love for the established aristocracy, having made his way to the top by sheer ability.

CHAPTER III

The Valley of Humiliation

In the weeks that followed the change of government I was doomed to disappointment in getting a job. One thing that made me bitter was the fact that prominent job-holders under the Grit regime came asking me to use my influence to keep them in their soft jobs.

One day when I was getting building material in J.J. Grant's lumber yard my old friend A.J. Bannerman hailed me. He started away by saying "Cliff, this is the first time I've been around since election. Come on and have a drink. You sure gave us a h--- of a trimming. It is hardly possible that you came through that campaign without taking a drink".

"I did that, A.J. and I handled a lot of it. But now that the election is over there is not a man I'd sooner have a drink with than yourself even though I don't like the taste of rum".

"You'll have to learn to handle rum if you are going into politics. It is part of our lifeblood in Nova Scotia. Now that your feet are solidly on the Tory doorstep, get inside and rum is a good introductory card at any time."