

TOMMY

By Eric Koch

In early September 1943 I heard from several philosophical fellow-scholars that the university was sending a train-load of students to Saskatchewan to help with the harvest. Since many, if not most, able-bodied men were overseas there was a severe shortage of labour. No news could have been more welcome and I, heroically, signed on.

Most of the students, who had also volunteered, were urban types like me and had acquired whatever knowledge they had of Western farming from the movies. I had been in Europe several times, and often in New York, but had never been further west than Oakville. So it was about time I went. Moreover, if I was lucky, and I often was, I hoped that Joe McTaggart, the farmer in, I hoped, the aptly named Lucky Pond near Weyburn in whose barn I was billeted, knew something about the Saskatchewan C.C.F., which was said to be in the forefront of advanced thinking about postwar Canada. Even here in stuffy old Ontario the C.C.F. had made a big breakthrough in 1942 when it became the official opposition. The unknown school teacher, Joe Noseworthy, had decisively defeated the former Tory Prime Minister Arthur Meighen in York South.

I found the two days and two nights on the transcontinental train by no means too long. I was in boisterous company, largely thanks to the engineering students who brought with them a treasure of bawdy songs:

*Hitler, he only has one ball,
Goering, he has two but very small,
Himmler has something simmler,
But poor old Goebbels has no balls at all.*

I loved that song, even the tenth time we sang it while passing through the forests and along the lakes of Northern Ontario until we came to the prairies, when we became entirely dependent on the fortunately inexhaustible repertoire of the engineers.

In Weyburn about a dozen farmers were waiting for us with their trucks. It was late afternoon. We were divided up. I was one of the three philosophers assigned to Joe McTaggart, a worn-out middle-aged man with a sad, lined face who looked us over without much enthusiasm and then said, no doubt to stifle any false expectations, "You won't find many books here."

"That is not why we came, Mr. McTaggart," I tried to reassure him on the way to his truck. "We have more than enough books at home. We came to help."

"Well, we'll see about that," he mumbled. "I'm Joe. Nobody's called me Mr. McTaggart for twenty years. And my wife is Anne."

The uncomfortable truck ride took at least two hours while it was slowly getting dark. We were in the back, no one sat in the front next to Joe. The truck had no springs. There was acute disagreement among us whether the half-harvested fields we passed grew wheat, oats, barley or flax. We left the question open. There was a strong chilly wind. We passed a number of dilapidated, abandoned buildings and a few

barely legible signs. It was not clear whether they were names of farms or habitations of some sort – Bison, Riel, Blackfoot.

At last we arrived. Joe took us directly to the barn, pointed to the outhouse at the back and told us to wash up at the well and then come to the house for dinner. In the airless, hay-filled barn three bunks awaited us, covered with blankets and pillows. In our studies we had specialized in stoicism. Throughout our stay in Lucky Pond we did not complain about anything, not even among ourselves.

Mrs. Anne McTaggart was everything her husband was not. She was cheerful, lively, engaging, interested in the outside world and took a motherly interest in her guests. There was also a silent but ravishing girl, eighteen-years old, an evacuee from Canterbury by the name of Penny. Both had prepared a generous and tasty dinner that they served while, unfortunately, not sitting down with us men – they ate after we left. We fervently hoped that sooner or later we would have the opportunity to break Penny's silence. The ample ham and potatoes dinner, the various vegetables and salads, and especially the climactic apple pie, all this stood in dramatic contrast to the sparseness of the furniture in the poverty-stricken house. We sat on orange crates and spare tires. Evidently, the McTaggarts had not yet recovered from the drought and the Depression and could not yet afford to buy chairs. It was quite possible that they received a subsidy to feed us.

The next morning at five thirty our amiable hostess came to the barn to rouse us. She had already done a number of chores. We barely managed to comply. However, our spirits revived when we were served an amazing breakfast – juice, bacon, eggs, potatoes, fresh coffee. The lovely Penny remained silent.

After breakfast Joe drove us out into the field and told us what to do – to stoop down and, with the help of rakes, gather the wheat in stooks so that later, after the sun was out and the dew had been burned off, they could be gathered by the rented threshing machine.

The first two hours were tolerable but by the time the sun was out my back hurt so much that I could hardly bend it any more. My friends did no better. We did not complain – we just groaned. When Joe came to pick us up at four and looked at the meager results of our efforts he just grumbled something unintelligible, which no doubt meant that he hoped we were better at book-learning. We could hardly sit up during our second dinner. I asked Penny whether she would give us a massage, which we desperately needed for our sore backs, but she merely smiled sweetly and shook her gorgeous head. Efforts to unfreeze her would have to wait for another day. Anne said, no doubt correctly, the first day was always the most difficult for people who weren't used to farm work.

The next morning we were surprised to note that we could rise from our bunks and even stand up and walk upright to the outhouse. At breakfast, Penny rewarded us for this achievement by speaking to us for the first time, going as far as to say, "Would you like another cup of coffee?"

When Joe drove us out, she even waved to us.

I called out to her while Joe switched on the ignition, *Morituri te salutant!* She laughed and said – yes, she actually spoke again – she had taken Latin at school in Canterbury.

Things were looking up!

The second day was bad but a little better than the first. As for Penny, it was impossible to know what actually had brought about the change in her – it did not really matter. She was positively voluble at dinner.

“Are you interested in politics?” I tested her.

“As a matter of fact I am,” she replied eagerly. “My father is a Labour M.P.”

All of us students sat up. We asked her to tell us more. She had a brother fighting in Italy under General Alexander. Her father had fought on the Somme in the Great War and was on several military committees in the House of Commons. She grew up in a family where politics was discussed every day at dinner.

“Penny has been telling me about her family,” Anne told us. “We are so happy she came to us.”

For once Joe spoke too.

“I agree,” he said. “Very fine family. Good socialists, like us.”

“That’s right,” Anne went on. “Just for Penny I have invited our member in the Legislature for dinner tomorrow. He was chosen the leader of the C.C.F. at the convention earlier this year. I went to school with his wife Irma. She’s coming, too. You’ll enjoy meeting both of them.”

I knew I would be lucky in Lucky Pond.

“Oh what a good idea,” I exclaimed. “I was hoping to learn something about Saskatchewan politics while I’m here. What’s his name?”

“Tommy Douglas. He was our preacher at the Calvary Baptist Church in Weyburn. Everybody says he was the best preacher in the West. And certainly the funniest. Born in Glasgow, maybe that’s why. Irma and I met him at Brandon College. He was our member in Ottawa for a number of years but he came back home to lead the C.C.F. here. A most determined politician. Well, you’ll see for yourselves.”

The prospect of meeting this man, and asking him what kind of revolution he expected after the war, made my third day of back-breaking labour endurable. It suddenly became remotely conceivable that eventually we might actually make a tangible contribution to saving Joe’s harvest.

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“What kind of revolution?”

The amusing little Scottish preacher-politician chuckled as he buttered the bread that Anne had baked for the occasion. In his and Irma’s honour, Anne and Penny sat at the table with us while a neighbour’s wife and her rather plain daughter served. I had popped my question directly after we had finished the tomato soup.

“Do you mean what colour, Quentin?” he asked. “Red? Blue? Green? White? Do you think Irma and I will be able to go to a store in downtown Weyburn and pick the revolution of our choice? Which colour would you pick, Irma?”

“I’d like mine beige,” Mrs. Douglas’s eyes were sparkling behind her glasses. “Definitely beige.”

Her husband turned to me.

“What makes you so sure we’ll have a revolution, Quentin?”

"In Toronto, we can't go the movies on Sundays," I responded. "The young will rise against the old. In Montreal the French will rise against the English because they forced them to go to a war 'for the English king.' And they will rise against the church. I want to know what'll happen here."

Tommy rubbed his prominent chin.

"What do you think will happen in England, Penny?" he asked.

"We'll abolish the capitalist system," she said without a moment's hesitation. "I mean, it really already finished itself off when it caused the Depression. We'll give it the final kick in the pants."

"Hear, hear," said Joe.

"Well, I am a hundred percent with you," Tommy Douglas said. "But I wish I knew how to do it. Do you, Penny?"

"Of course," she said. "I would take one step at a time. I would appeal to everybody's better instincts. Persuade people to cooperate instead of putting all the emphasis on competition."

Tommy beamed.

"I couldn't have said it better myself," he said. "I was afraid you were going to say 'gather all the capitalists on Piccadilly Circus and hang them.'"

Everybody laughed.

Tommy turned to me.

"You seem to be a bright young man with a lively imagination. Are you prepared to save my political life?"

"The answer is yes, of course," I said. "If I can. What do you have in mind?"

"I want you to go to the visitors' gallery in the Legislature in Regina next Monday and accuse me of being a communist. None of the dummies in the Liberal or Tory parties ever give me a proper chance to make it clear that socialists are not communists."

"I'll do my best," I said. "If Joe will let me go."

Joe nodded. "Sure. I'll arrange it."

"But how would my performance save your political life?" I asked.

"Because there's one man at the top of my very own party who wants to cut my throat. He thinks I'm a communist. We'll never get anywhere unless I speak up clearly in the Legislature and demonstrate to the whole world that I'm in Penny's camp. I'm in favour of evolution not revolution."

I turned to Joe.

"Would you allow Penny to come with me if she wants to?"

"Sure," Joe said. "Why not?" He turned to Penny. "Do you want to?"

Penny clapped her hands.

"Of course," she exclaimed. "What an adventure!"

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Penny and I were the only visitors in the visitors' gallery.

Way below, Tommy was in full swing. He was speaking about public health.

"Mr. Speaker, does any member of this Legislative Assembly not know that people with money can secure the medical services and hospital care they need while people without money cannot?"

“Stick to the subject,” a member on the front bench demanded. “We’re talking about Bill 112.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Speaker, this is very much to the point. There’s no point enlarging the hospital in Moose Jaw unless we face the fact that we have all the facilities, right in the honorable member’s riding, and yet only the rich can afford them and there are very few of them.”

This was my cue.

“Eh, you down there,” I shouted at the top of my voice, “why don’t you go home to Moscow where you belong?”

“Well done!” Penny whispered to me.

“What was that?” Tommy cocked his ear. “Do I hear the voice of the people?”

“You certainly do,” I went on shouting. “If people like you had their way you would have the state seize every farmer’s land, close down all the banks, seize everybody’s savings and shut down every parliament. You’d crush democracy and establish a dictatorship of the proletariat run by little creeps like you.”

Tommy was silent. No one had a better sense of theatre. He allowed an entire minute for the full significance of my words to sink in.

Slowly, the Liberal premier John William Patterson rose. His reputation of being singularly unimpressive seemed wholly justified.

“The people have spoken,” he said with a faint smile. “I note that for once the Leader of the Opposition is tongue-tied.”

“Come on, Douglas,” a front-bencher demanded. “Say something.”

“It is not often,” Tommy began, speaking slowly at first, “that this House has the benefit of words of profound wisdom uttered by a no-doubt distinguished visitor who, without a word of reprimand from the Speaker, is permitted to break all the rules of civilized debate. These very rules do not allow me to suggest that the Speaker may be biased on the side of those who accuse little creeps like me of being an enemy of freedom. Therefore, I suggest we will for once allow Mr. Speaker to get away with it.”

“Thank you,” the Speaker smiled. “No doubt if you were in my shoes you would have the ‘distinguished visitor’ – all eyes went up to me – ‘forcibly seized and arrested.’”

“No, Mr. Speaker,” Tommy said. “I would do no such thing. I would have him drawn and quartered. Now let me reply to him. No, sir. You mention Moscow. As I understand it, Moscow is the home of communists. You seem to think that I would feel at home with communists in Moscow. Is that right?”

This time the Speaker intervened.

“The honorable member knows very well that he cannot conduct a dialogue with a visitor in the visitors gallery. Would he please cease and desist.”

“Yes, Mr. Speaker. I will abide by the rules of the House and I am grateful to you that you administer them so faithfully. We socialists have nothing in common with communists – except one thing. We also believe that those who have money and privilege should share their wealth with those who don’t. But we think that these goals can be achieved through evolution, not revolution, by persuasion, not force, by cooperation not competition, without confiscating anybody private property, in the conviction that God gave us all the power of reason, the commonsense, the inborn feeling for justice, to make this possible.

No force is needed because if things are explained properly it will be obvious to everybody. Only those will oppose us who prefer their own welfare to that of the rest of us, and we all know what the gospels have to say about greed and selfishness. Communists don't believe in persuasion. We do because we believe free people will choose the right course simply by reason of being free. I am grateful to you, Mr. Speaker, for having given me the opportunity to state my case for once without the usual interruptions."

There was a roar of thunderous applause from Tommy's followers.

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In the truck on the way back to Joe's farm Penny gave every sign of thoroughly enjoying my passionate kisses.

And in the following spring, on June 15, 1944, Tommy Douglas led his party to victory. The C.C.F. got 53 per cent of the vote and 47 of the 53 seats in the Legislature. He immediately offered the man who was going to cut his throat a seat in the cabinet.

And sent me a note saying that he owed his victory entirely to me.