

Men of Principle

By Frank Green

The very first guy that I got to know at the Thirsty Trout was Don Watt Sr. It was the first time that I went in to this pub the week before Christmas when the place was full with a cheerful holiday crowd. When the phone rang the bartender yelled, "Is Don Watt here?"

It was Don's daughter calling and when the new bartender said he didn't know him, she said, "Oh that's easy, just look for a little guy who looks like Poppa Smurf."

A quick look around the nearby tables and the barman spotted a five foot nothing leprechaun with white mustache and goatee and wearing a little flat tartan hat at the table on my left. He came over and said, "Are you Poppa Smurf?"

"No bout adoubt it, that's me," Don said with a twinkle in his blue eyes, "is Pam worried about the old man again?"

After he spoke on the phone for five minutes he turned to me and said, "I haven't seen you in here before. What's your name stranger?"

"I'm Frank Green," I said, "I work over at the college."

"Good to make your acquaintance," he said

Since the bar was really busy, that was the extent of our conversation that night. But in the following weeks I noticed that he was one of the regular customers, usually sitting with Nat Hickey, a retired Hydro lineman or Sam Watson, a retired Air Force man. Don was often engaged in an animated argument with whoever was opposite him. As my aunt, Mary Gleason used to say, "He was an awful man to arg. He'd arg and arg." You could always tell when he was about to make a final pronouncement on any given topic. Don would lift his glass and swirl it for dramatic effect a couple of times in a clockwise direction before saying something like: "The fool and his money are soon parted." (This often directed towards me and my Nevada ticket addiction once he got to know me.)

Although a proud Scot by ancestry, Don usually didn't sit at the Scotsman's table on the other side of the bar, since they were mostly Glaswegians, and he was a highlander. Sam Watson drew Don's ire one night by saying, "For God's sake, Don, you were born and bred in Liverpool, you're English, not Scottish!"

"You're an ignorant damn fool, Sam!" said Don not even pausing for a swirl, "If I was born in China would you say I was Chinese?"

In fact, Don spent a lot of time tracing his family tree and had made notes on ancestors and cousins in Scotland, England, Canada, the United States and Australia. I tried to convince him that he should get a second hand computer and learn enough about running it to use the Internet for his searches. I even brought Don home to demonstrate on my computer how easy it would be but he decided that he was too old a dog to learn that new trick.

For decades Don had been a self-educated union man in the UAW before it changed its name to the CAW, reading a lot of politics and history, attending week-long union schools and once privileged to sit at the feet of Walter Reuther, whom he considered to be the greatest union leader of his era. As part of his commitment he had worked, door to door in election campaigns for the New Democratic Party both federally and provincially and before that for the old CCF. When Bob Rae won the election in Ontario, Don was surprised and elated like all the other NDP supporters.

“The people’s flag is palest pink, a great improvement, don’t you think!” he sang.

But he felt betrayed when Rae appointed former Liberal Treasurer Bob Nixon to a plush job in London, England. In Don’s eyes, Nixon had misled the public about a hidden deficit before the election and didn’t deserve to be rewarded by the new government.

The glass swirled and Rae, like many another politician before him received a relentless Don Watt condemnation: “Now he’s singing, ‘The working class can kiss my ass, I’ve got the foreman’s job at last.’ Damn politicians! They all **piss** in the same **pot!**”

I pitched in with the old Will Rogers’ axiom, “We have the best politicians... **money can buy!**” but it didn’t have Don’s fire.

At other times he recited whole poems by Rudyard Kipling, Robbie Burns or Robert Service since he had beaten the boredom of months at sea by learning poetry by heart during his ten years in the British merchant marine as the ship’s electrician.. One of his favourite verses was Burns’

From scenes like these, old Scotia’s grandeur springs,
That makes her loved at home, revered abroad:
Princes and lords are but the breath of kings,
An honest man’s the noblest work of God.

He would tease me about being a Catholic. “It’s not so bad being a dogan, Doc, he would say, “I had an Irish grandmother who was a left-footer too.”

One evening a local United Church minister and advocate for better housing for the poor came into the Trout after a meeting upstairs. She was wearing a bright orange dress cut dangerously low. I knew her so when she went to the bar for a glass of white wine, I stepped quickly over from the table and said, “Your money is no good here, Reverend Jane,” and paid for her drink. Knowing that Don was an admirer of hers, I said, “Why don’t you come over and meet two of your biggest fans in London?”

The Reverend agreed and followed me over to the table where I introduced Don and Sam. She graciously joined us for a half hour and had a spirited conversation with Don about socialist goals, the good old days of the CCF, the Winnipeg General Strike and the Regina Manifesto. “You know,” said Don, “Clarence Peterson, the last Premier’s old man, signed it. He’s had a helluva lot of nickels through the till since then.”

“F***in’ right!” said the Reverend, somewhat to the surprise of the rest of the table.

After the buxom Reverend excused herself to join her friends, Don, blue eyes bright, swirled his glass and said, “Yes, I haven’t been to church in years, but I could see myself getting religion again.”

“By golly, that was nice of the Reverend to join us,” said Sam, shifting his shoulders proudly, “it must have been my Air Force charisma that lured her over.”

“Spoken like a Brylcreme boy,” said Don, “when will you recognize once and for all that the Navy is the senior service?”

Don maintained a healthy skepticism about union politics, just as he did about all forms of authority. He could have risen to high national office in his union after he beat a well known communist candidate in a local election. “Yes, he said, “the national president courted me, calling me the ‘giant killer,’ since the big boys were afraid that the commie might sully the union’s reputation. But I had a young family and I didn’t want to move to Toronto. Anyway, I’ve noticed the similarities between the leaders of big unions and big corporations: the same insatiable personal ambitions, the same unscrupulous willingness to use people, etc., so I decided to stay local.”

At the time of the Charlottetown Accord for constitutional reform, the leaders of the big union that Don had belonged to most of his working life was officially in favour of the deal. All local officials were told to tow the party line and to talk it up with local members. Archie Bailey, the local president, a fine man well respected for honesty and dedication to the rights of the workers, (“The f***in’ membership rules!” was his keystone principle.) was doing his best to follow orders even though many suspected he didn’t really agree with the union’s position.

One night he was walking by the table where Don and Sam Watson were sitting and Don flagged him down. In no time there was a big argument, with Archie trying to defend the union’s official policy against Sam and the more vociferous Don. Every time Archie tried to say something, Don interjected, “What’s your point? What’s your point?”

After a half dozen interruptions, Archie blew, slamming his fist down on the table so hard that beer glasses flew in all directions. “Jesus Christ, Don, if you’d stop butting in all the time, I’d tell you my goddam point!”

Everyone was so taken by surprise, there was silence in the whole room for a good minute. Then

Sam started to laugh so hard his shoulders were shaking uncontrollably and everyone else joined in. Archie apologized for losing his cool and bought a round for the table. "In the next argument, I want you on my f***in' side," he said to Don, "just like back at Midwestern Automotive."

Don had been top union man at one of the automotive parts companies in London and he had saved many a man's job. But with a twinkle in his eye and a shrewd look, he would say, "Back in those days I used to say to myself, 'Just once I'd like to represent an innocent man!'"

"Why I remember one character named Denny Dooley that I was always getting out of scrapes. He always pushed everything to the limit, like the bathroom breaks. One day when he came back from a particularly extended one, the foreman said, 'That was a hell of a long shit, Dooley!'"

"'Well, it would have been,' said Denny, 'but it broke.'"

But for all his skepticism, Don was a true believer. He knew what a union was for and he would fight for the people he represented. I had heard stories about how he had single handedly brought the company to its knees over severance pay so one slow evening, I said, "What really happened with that big American company Don?"

"Do you really want to know? he said, the old fire burning in his eye.

"I sure do Don," said I.

"Well, it must have been fifteen years ago now," said Don. "Midwestern Automotive was an American company that made parts for all the big car companies. The branch plant here in London was running for decades and a lot of the hundreds of men had been there for twenty or more years. I was the plant chairman for the union when the company decided to close our plant and had no intention of providing any kind of a severance package."

"I knew there was no way we could stop the plant from closing, but I figured we deserved some severance pay. So as soon as I heard what was going on, I demanded a meeting with the top local manager. 'You can't just shut down and leave these men without a cent,' I said. 'These men have been loyal and productive workers for decades, they made lots of money for Midwestern Automotive over the years!'"

"'Look, Don, I hear what you're saying,' he said, 'I sympathize. But you know I don't have a goddam thing to say about it. I just follow the orders that come from the f***ing Head Office in Detroit.'"

"Well," said Don, "I knew that even if he was a lying sleaze bag, this time he was also right. I knew I was talking to the monkey, not the organ grinder, so there was no way I was going to get anywhere talking to him. But what to do?"

"So what did you do, Don," I asked.

"As a matter of fact," said Don, "I came in here with a couple of my executive members and we

argued for hours about what to do. We were no farther ahead, so I went on home, half in the bag. When I told my wife Pat about the problem, she said, ‘The only way you’re going to get anywhere is if you can get support from the American union in Detroit. Why don’t you go down there for a few choruses of *Solidarity Forever?*’ “

“ ‘You know, Hun, you’re right,’ I said. So I got on the phone and made an appointment with the head of the union in Detroit, Henry Brown. The next afternoon I was in his office, not far from the tunnel in downtown Detroit.”

“Henry Brown was black, at least six feet six foot two tall and must have weighed 300 pounds. He wasn’t overly friendly when I went into his office, but he listened carefully while I told him how the company was planning to shut down our plant without a nickel of severance pay for the men who had worked there for so many years.”

“It took me about ten minutes to tell him the essential story and he didn’t interrupt me once. When I finished he asked me a couple of questions to be sure he understood exactly what was happening. Then he said in that big deep voice of his, ‘Little brother, this ain’t right, it just ain’t no way to treat the workers.’ “

“Then he said, ‘We have a bargaining session tomorrow morning. We’re about to settle our master contract for all five American plants covering six thousand workers. I want you to come with me to that meeting little brother. We’ll put you up in a hotel tonight.’ “

“The next morning I walked into the meeting with Big Henry and his bargaining team at nine o’clock sharp and Henry told me to sit at his right hand. We must have looked like a funny pair to the management lawyers across the table, little Poppa Smurf and Henry the big black giant. As soon as the head of the management team started to say, ‘Well, I think everything is in order, let’s get to the signing,’ Henry put up his huge right hand to stop him.”

“ ‘Now Mr. Jones, I know that when we left here yesterday morning, we all thought we had a deal, and we were going to meet today just to sign it. But yesterday afternoon I learned from my brother here that the company ain’t treating our Canadian brothers right. And I’ll tell you one thing, Mr. Jones, we ain’t going to have no deal here in Detroit until the brother here tells me that the Canadian brothers are treated right.’ ”

“ ‘But Henry, we had a deal yesterday, and I fail to see what the Canadian situation has to do with us here. The bean counters said the plant in Canada is losing money. Of course we feel sorry for those workers, but it’s just the way it is, it’s the facts of life.’ ”

“The big hand imposed silence again. ‘Maybe your hearin’ is a failin’ you, Mr. Jones. This here meeting is over. I’ll be glad to meet again when I hear from the Canadian brother that him and his brothers are bein’ treated right.’ “

“With that, the whole union bargaining team and I walked out of the meeting room. ‘Have a nice

trip back, little brother,” said Henry as I left his office.”

“ ‘Do you think they’ll do something for us, Henry?’ I asked.

“ ‘Don’t worry, little brother,’ said Henry with a big laugh. ‘They’re mighty anxious to get that master contract signed. Let me know what happens at your end.’ “

“So what happened, Don?” I asked.

“Two days later, our bargaining team got called in and we were given a decent severance package for all the workers, close to a week’s pay for each year of service.”

“You must have felt great and very grateful to Henry.”

“Oh sure. I’ve seen Henry several times at conventions since. We always have a big laugh about the look on the faces of the management side of the table when Henry’s big hand went up.”

“What did you do after your job ended?”

“Aye, there’s the rub,” said Don. “It took me a few weeks of fruitless job hunting to realize that I had been blackballed by every manufacturing company in the whole city. That was the price my family and I paid for standing up to the company and winning with the help of the American union. Once or twice I was actually hired but then the next day the boss would say, ‘Gee, I’m sorry, Don, but there’s been a mistake. The job’s disappeared overnight.’ I was out of work for months. Not easy when you have four kids.”

“Then I saw a job in maintenance at the post office advertized by the federal government that I was well qualified for. But before I applied, I went and asked for help from the local Liberal MP, Charlie Turner.”

(Charlie had been a locomotive engineer before entering politics and during his five successive terms as the MP for London East always fought for safety on the rails. When Trudeau was running for the leadership of the federal Liberal party, Charlie was the president of the London East Liberal Party Association. Word came to Charlie that Trudeau was going to be in Guelph if Charlie wanted to see him. Choo Choo said, “I’m in London if Mr. Trudeau wants to see me.” Pierre came to London. Trudeau came to have great respect for Charlie’s political smarts, appointing him Chief Whip in 1980.)

Don went on, “I was straight forward with Charlie, explaining that I had been a card-carryin’, door-knockin’ NDPer for years,”but he said, ‘I’m here to represent all my constituents, not just Liberals. You seem like an honest man to me and I believe what you’ve told me, so I’m going to talk to the Cabinet Minister in charge. If that doesn’t work I’ll go to see the boss.’”

“Who do you mean?” I asked..

“Pierre Elliot Trudeau himself,” he replied.

“So, what happened,” I asked

Swirling the glass a few times for effect, Don said, “I got the job and stayed there ‘til I retired.”

“So that was the end of your working life,” I said.

“Yep,” said Don.

A few years after this long conversation with Don, we heard that Charlie Turner had died. Don said he was going to the wake to pay his respects so I went along with him. There was a huge crowd since Charlie was so well respected for his years of service. When we got through the long line past the coffin we had a chance to talk to Charlie’s very dignified wife who told us that Charlie had three careers, as a railroad man, musician and politician.

“Above all, your husband was a man of principle,” said Don.

“So are you and Henry, Don,” I said as we headed out.

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