

## TWO PREPARATIONS FOR THE REVOLUTION

*By Eric Koch*

“May I pour you a glass, Monsieur Moyne?”

Without waiting for an answer Jeanette, the dimpled, brown-eyed receptionist, poured cognac in a glass and handed it to me.

“Monsieur Lavigne will be ready in a minute. He’s very busy this morning. He came back from Quebec City last night, you know.”

I had known André for a couple of years and had, behind my father’s back, put a few thousands dollars into one of his gold-mines. I cleared a twenty-five percent profit in six months. André was one of a handful of wealthy Montreal businessmen who was not an *anglo* and did not have an office on St. James Street. He had controlling shares in companies dealing with pulp and paper, textiles, furniture and insurance. He was also involved in gambling and prostitution and had excellent contacts in Chicago and Sicily. He and Madame Adrienne Désy jointly owned most of the houses on de Bullion Street around the corner, which she managed. Montreal was, after all, an Open City. I thoroughly approved of André’s flamboyant taste in furniture in his office on Clark Street, near the corner of Sherbrooke. It was distinctly different from the drably respectable style prevailing on St. James Street.

The date was August 25, 1943. My plans for External Affairs had collapsed. All they had for me were desk-jobs. I need adventure. So I had to turn them down.

On August 24, Winston Churchill, President Roosevelt and Mackenzie King and their respective retinues returned home after conferring in Quebec City for a week.

André emerged.

“Please come in, Quentin.” I love to hear the French pronounce my name. “I am delighted to see you.”

As usual, we spoke French. Once more I was struck by the contrast between his appearance – he looked like an undersized small-town dentist – and his compelling personality and sharp wit.

“Well, André, how did it go?” I asked.

“I picked up a few useful little morsels from talking to various lackies. Of course, I wasn’t allowed to stay in the Château Frontenac and never got near the Citadel. So I never set eyes on any of the Big Three. Or rather, the Big Two. I have trouble thinking of Mackenzie King as Big.”

“So what did you learn?”

“The English countryside will soon be crawling with GIs. There will be no more Dieppes, that’s for sure. So I’m investing in chewing gum and nylons. That’s how the American boys will buy the girls. The great debate seems to have been whether to invade from the south, as the British want, or from the north-west, which is the American preference. Or both. But I was thinking ahead, to the post-war period. There will be a tremendous demand for prefabricated houses. First in England, then on the continent. Including Germany. And later, Japan. With lumber from Northern Quebec. So I’m going to concentrate on that. Now, Quentin, what brings you here?”

I was prepared for the question.

“I have also been thinking ahead. But along somewhat different lines. I have a proposition for you. It’s based on the assumption that there will be a social and cultural revolution after the war. Entirely bloodless. In Ontario against the stranglehold of the puritans. And in Quebec against the Church.”

“And against the English, Quentin.” His eyes sparkled maliciously. “I advise you against mentioning the word ‘conscription’ around here.”

“I promise I won’t.”

“So what’s your proposition? Buying up used churches? Converting convents into holiday resorts? Finding new homes for the Montreal English in Toronto, in Florida and the south of France?”

“Not at all. My proposition is much more exciting. I predict that in Ontario and in Quebec the respective revolutions will bring to power the Party of Love. Not English love, not French love, but egalitarian Universal Love. Now, what do amorous boys need when they want to win the favour of girls?”

André raised his eyebrows.

“Don’t tell me....”

“No, no, no. Not what you think. Nothing vulgar. Nothing you can buy in a drugstore. On the contrary. They need music, uplifting music, to put the ladies in the mood for love. In short, they need the means to serenade them as they do in Spain and Italy.”

“What are you up to, my friend?” André asked. “Come out with it! Do you want me to finance composers of love songs?”

“No. Not at all. My suggestion is elementary. I want you and me to form a company to finance the manufacture of guitars. On a vast scale. Using wood from Northern Quebec. Guitars won’t only be needed in Canada but all over five continents. It should be called the Universal Love Company.”

Never before had I seen André so impressed by another’s person’s idea. He opened his mouth but no sound came out of it.

I pressed my advantage.

“May I go one step further, André? You realize, of course, that after the war the demand for services in your houses on de Bullion Street will go down rapidly. There will be lots of good jobs for women. They will therefore be happy to oblige their men just for the love of it. The few customers the remaining girls will have will be under-employed priests. So I propose you put the liberated girls to work in the new guitar factories. Madame Désy will be Director-General of Personnel.”

André turned on the intercom.

“Jeanette, please bring in the bottle of cognac immediately, And don’t forget a glass for yourself!”

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I was so exhilarated by this experience, and so excited by the expectation of rich profits in the postwar future, that I resolved to find out who would be the revolutionary leaders in Ontario.

I had heard that private boys’ schools were desperately looking for teachers to take the place of the men who had volunteered for service overseas. It was not so long ago that I myself had left Upper Canada College and I had no doubt that I could do a better job than most of my former teachers. To get a job in the public system one had to have certifiable qualifications. That was not necessary in a private school.

Two members of the board of Morningside College in Oakville, Ontario, were fathers of friends of mine at U.C.C. Oakville was half way between Toronto and Hamilton. So I put on my U.C.C. blazer and the Old School Tie and presented myself to the headmaster, the Reverend Bertrand Smallwood. He was born in England.

“It’s been a source of ever-lasting sorrow to me,” he said after the preliminaries were over, “that I’ve never been able to persuade any Canadian member of my staff to take an interest in cricket.”

“Let me be the first one, sir.”

I knew the job was mine.

“The way things are going,” the Rev. Smallwood lamented, “we are moving further and further away from the Empire and getting closer to the Americans.”

“One wonders,” I sighed, “what the country will be like once the war is over. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if there were to be some big changes.”

“All for the worse, no doubt,” the headmaster said. “Now to business. I’m afraid we can only pay you fifteen hundred dollars a year. Of course you will live on the school grounds. You’ll find it perfectly comfortable and congenial. I’m afraid when you pay your income tax you will have to add the value of your room and board. And on Saturday nights you may enjoy the dinner-dances at the Oakville Country Club, which I hope you will join. The fees for our teachers are quite reasonable. How is your French?”

“We had an excellent French teacher at U.C.C.,” I replied.

“Splendid. Our man is taking basic training in Petawawa. The boys liked him a lot.”

Once I started teaching in the fall, some of them also they liked me a lot, too, especially the ones in the lower grades and the ones in the higher grades who were not much younger than I was. For these I became particularly popular when, with the headmaster’s reluctant permission, I got in touch with the girls’ high school in Oakville and arranged French conversation classes, outside school hours, twice a week, on their premises.

But I had trouble with the middle grades. The future revolutionary leaders practiced on me. Their weapons of choice were spitballs, aimed at me whenever I dared to correct irregularities in their irregular verbs.

One of them was the son of Edward Gallagher, the hugely wealthy president of the Gallagher distillery. He lived in a mansion in Port Credit.

When one of his son’s spitballs hit me on the nose I seized him by the scruff of his neck and threw him out of the classroom. I may have torn his shirt very, very slightly in the process.

Next day, his mother went straight to the headmaster to complain. She brought a torn shirt with her as evidence.

The Reverend Bertrand Smallwood gave me a sermon. Properly administered corporal punishment for breaches of discipline in the form of caning, he said, was entirely within the traditions of the school and usually highly beneficial. But it had to be performed according to certain rules after tempers had cooled down.

I did not tell him that the punishment I had inflicted was wholly designed to benefit me and not the boy.

After the Christmas holidays, a delightful new teacher, Johnny Mercer, joined us. His field was science. We made friends immediately. He said he had gone to Eton, was the younger son of Lord Elton and had come to Canada after having been rejected for service in the armed forces for medical reasons. So we had a great deal in common. We soon developed the agreeable habit of going for long walks in the dark after dinner across the apple orchards next to the school grounds. Although there was light snow on the ground, there were still many juicy apples on the trees. We usually picked a few and put them in our coat pockets.

After only two Saturday evenings dancing at the Oakville Country Club, Johnny had already established which of several lonely wives of absent husbands were in urgent need of male attention and would welcome overtures. He had been invited for nightcaps by three of them and was considering his options. I only had one offer from a handsome lady, no longer in the first flush of youth, who complimented me extravagantly on my well-groomed blond hair, my steel-blue eyes, my aristocratic nose and my “lithe” – yes, that is the word she used – my “lithe” body, which she hoped to get to know better.

Johnny also told me, while we were wandering across the fields, that he happened to know that Britain’s gold reserves, bonds and stocks, had been shipped to Canada on the light cruiser *Emerald* and were now in specially constructed vaults in the Sun Life Building on Montreal’s Dominion Square. They were worth seven billion U.S. dollars, and were guarded day and night by officers of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. He added, in case I was curious, that he considered it totally impossible to break through the R.C.M.P.’s defences and that I should not for a fraction of a second entertain such a notion. However, he added, his father was on the board of the Sun Life and, using his name, one might ingratiate oneself with some of the underpaid security officers of the company and devise a usable strategy to gain access from inside. After all, why should such treasures be locked up for the duration, doing nothing?

Two nights after this conversation, at about two o’clock in the morning, I was awakened by the sirens of a police car. Terrified, I was sure I was going to be arrested for stealing our neighbours’ apples. But no, the police was not interested in me. They were interested in Johnny Mercer who was immediately taken to the Oakville police station and charged with breaking and entering the Port Credit mansion of Edward Gallagher, the distillery magnate, two weeks ago. Court hearings were scheduled in ten days’ time. The Reverend Smallwood fervently hoped none of the parents would find out.

Next morning I visited Johnny at the Oakville police station. He was in excellent spirits. He said that since the outbreak of the war he had successfully played Robin Hood, stealing from the rich to give to the poor. Mr. Gallagher’s jewellery had yielded fifty thousand dollars, which he had given to the Red Cross to distribute to poor bereaved families of Canadian soldiers who had died for their country.

The magistrate assigned to Johnny’s hearing had been one of the stars of U.C. Follies while he was studying law in the early ‘thirties. He was about ten years older than I and was one of the great campus wits. We had often played tennis at the Rosedale Tennis Club. I went to see him and told him the truth.

Johnny got off on a technicality and returned to the staff of Morningside College. We both gave up our teaching careers simultaneously at the end of the year. There were many other ways, we decided, to do our bit. In any case, I did not want to be held responsible for the carelessness of one of the participants

in my French Conversation classes who had impregnated a girl in the janitor's office during our usual fifteen-minute recess for cokes and hot dogs. How could I look after everything?

Johnny and I promised to remain in touch. He told me just before we parted that his real name was Boris Sokoloff and that he came from St. Catharine's where his father ran a drugstore.

The theft of U.K. government bonds from the vaults of the Sun Life Building six months later, worth a million dollars, was known only to a few insiders. Even they did not know how it was done.

Quite properly, the Red Cross refrained from asking any questions about the origins of the unprecedented sum donated to it by an anonymous donor soon afterwards.