

# A Man Who Does the Unexpected

Concerning J. W. Flavelle, Merchant, Capitalist, Public Citizen and Honorary LL.D.

No. 30 in the Series, Personalities and Problems

By AUGUSTUS BRIDLE

CALLING at the office of the William Davies Co., down on the Don, I asked an obliging office boy at the inquiry desk,

"Is Mr. Flavelle in?"

"Mr. Who?" said he; and the name was repeated, but the boy looked quite bewildered.

"Well, you see, sir, I haven't been here very long and I don't know who Mr. Flavelle is."

"Well, he's the president of your company, and he's the man that built it up into the very powerful concern it is. There he is now."

"Oh! Which is him, sir?"

That boy took a long look at the president, who came so softly past in a grey cutaway coat, reading a letter. Mr. Flavelle is probably the only corporation president in Canada who wouldn't be known to a new office boy within twenty-four hours. He went into one of a row of offices like big box stalls along the front of the building; one of the homeliest offices in Toronto, plain as a board fence, three survey maps of Toronto on the walls, no Turkish rug or elegant brass cuspidor, no mahogany drawers or even a litho. of old John A. On the desk the president's Christie hat stood beside a little black bag.

J. W. Flavelle is the most impersonal capitalist in this country. In all his twenty-odd years with the Wm. Davies Co. he has seldom if ever been known to raise his voice beyond conversational level. He is one of the most-talked-about and the least-known-about men in public life. No man in Canada has taken so many public service bulls by the horns without going into parliament; and there aren't ten men in the House of Commons who have made such a practical study of public affairs as this easy-smiling, well set up, unemotional Flavelle.

SCAN the list of Mr. Flavelle's extra-mural activities: Chairman of the Toronto General Hospital Trust, which has recently opened a new hospital costing \$3,500,000 in the heart of Toronto; one of the most completely equipped hospitals in the world.

Member of the Hospital Board since 1895.

In 1905 chairman of the Commission that re-organized the University of Toronto.

For five years proprietor and president of the *Toronto News*.

In 1905 chairman of the Toronto Board of License Commissioners.

Several years member of the Methodist Board of Missions.

Once superintendent of a big Sunday-school.

President of the National Trust Co.

Director of the Bank of Commerce.

Vice-president Robert Simpson Co.

Vice-president Toronto Penny Bank, 1905.

Sundry other items too numerous to mention.

And if you ask anybody associated with Flavelle in any of these concerns you will be told that he took hold of every one of them as though for the time being it was the only business he had in the world, with the possible exception of the *News*, which cost him more money than all the others put together, and less energy than any of them.

Merely as an incident of his career, J. W. Flavelle became a millionaire. Just when doesn't matter; probably he himself doesn't know. In fact the number of things this impersonal, easy-going dynamo doesn't know about himself are enough to puzzle any would-be biographer. From boyhood up till 1913 actively and passionately interested in the affairs of other people, he confesses with a peculiar certainty of tone and manner that he finds no particular quality in himself that should have dragged him into so many roles on the public stage. He doesn't pretend to think that he has ever taken a role. As he says,

"Since ever I came to Toronto a great many men more or less in public affairs have been very kind to me. I have been given many opportunities to do things outside of my own business."

And he glanced placidly through the glass partition at a small army of bustling clerks in the big general office, quite well aware that in the huge factory and plant beyond, hundreds of men were busy converting live hogs into prime bacon, lard and so forth, for more than one of the world's markets. He remembers that when he took hold of the pork-packing business he knew nothing about hogs on the hoof. In his provision business in



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Peterboro' he dealt in dead hogs and potatoes, butter and eggs and flour and feed. That happened to be the thing that came his way. He took hold of it. He never had any ambition to be the chief pork-packer of Canada; and at the present time J. W. Flavelle, with all his public affiliations, has no false pride that makes him want to belittle the Canadian hog. To him facts are plain facts; work is every man's opportunity, no matter what it may be; every man gets out of life what his own ability and industry and lines of interest entitle him to—no more and no less. And from his chair in the office it looks as important to economize the hog as to reorganize a university or establish a great hospital.

An obviously passionless man, he placidly leans back in his chair, opens a casual letter, gazes out of the window at a box-car bumping along a siding; back into the office where it looks as though everybody works but father. And he takes a long period of extremely valuable time to convince the interviewer that there is nothing in his personality worth any one's while to investigate, nothing in his career that ought to interest anybody as a spectacle, but if people choose to take an interest in whatever it has been his privilege to do, why there's no real reason why they shouldn't know at least the plain facts of the case.

Just back from two important corporation meetings down town, his car at the door ready to whisk

him away again any moment, he talked quietly about his life and work. There were no cigars in any of his drawers. He has never smoked; never taken a drop of liquor; never played poker; never gambled on the races; never owned a yacht or a motor-boat or a private car, or been honorary colonel of a regiment or bowled on the green—well I guess that's about as drab a list of negations as it's possible to set down about any full-blooded, healthy millionaire in the world.

Perhaps that's one reason why Flavelle has been able to do so many big things for which he got no salary. He cuts out every form of energy-dissipation. Calmly as a high priest at an altar he proceeds to carry out the one thing at a time, with no merely human interest in the passing show about him. Other men may smoke and tell yarns and clink glasses and guffaw their heads off; he has no objections, but having no particular talent along that line he simply doesn't do it.

But he is no ghost. Physically, J. W. Flavelle would be about as hard to tucker out as Van Horne, who says he never was weary in his life, or D. D. Mann—or the very devil. Nature gave him the strength of a lion and the apparently unsentimental character of a man to whom everything has its appointed place in a world of law regulated by an ever-present, all-seeing Providence. Early in life he learned the calm joy of self-mastery. He would have made a good Brahmin. He could go hungry and lean and half sick if need be through the turmoil of a busy life—and smile and smile. Some think he smiles too much. That's his own business. There's a Christianity about smiling in the world's face. I don't think Flavelle ever had the blues visible to anybody else; but there were times in his career, if he would only permit the writer to set them down, when he had the stage all set for blue ruin, and when nothing but his calm kind of Christianity ever could have fetched him out to a happy last act.

SOME men keep business and benevolence in two compartments. Mr. Flavelle runs them as a team. He put the William Davies Co. on its feet and made it a small empire of stores. He set out to run the branch banks a tight race for the occupation of prominent corners all over Toronto, and if the banks hadn't been so numerous he might have won out. He demonstrated that consolidation is a good thing in the provision business; and that it pays not only to be a middleman, but to be both a middleman and a manufacturer. The big pork factory down on the Don, and the Harris Abattoir, are the production end of the business. The hundred stores or more in Toronto and other towns are the distributing machinery. But when people go to a butcher shop there is no reason why they shouldn't be as much interested in a package of tea or a bottle of pickles or a pound of cheese as they are in bacon and sausages and tenderloin steak. There was a reason why all these things should be handled by one organization; and why every store of that kind should look as much like every other store of that kind as one pea resembles another.

But outside his own business he was always dealing with the unexpected, somewhat because he never thrust himself in the way of a mortal thing outside his own office. Things happened to Flavelle, just as they do to many other men who seem to have had a chart of their lives from the beginning, when the Lord knows most of them hadn't. He had a tremendous capacity and appetite for work, and a clear perception of where work needs doing. Other men have some of one and some of the other. Flavelle has both in a high degree. Where many men argue about the thing that ought to be done and raise Cain about the hit-and-miss way in which a lot of public people do things, Flavelle eliminates the argument, quietly takes off his mental coat, looks the need square in the eyes and says,

"Well, gentlemen, let's see what we can do right away. If we have information enough let us go ahead. If not, by all means let's get it. This job needs the knowledge and opinions of all of us. But there comes a time when we can't afford to have more than one opinion, and that's only useful as a way in to the work. Now, then, let's clear up the underbrush."

From his youth up interested in public affairs, Flavelle has never cared much for the mere appre-