Tom Matthews
Returns from the Great War

Winnipeg, Manitoba
January 10, 1919

Somehow Tom Matthews had survived. For more than three years, he had fought the "hun," as Canadian soldiers referred to the German enemy, at battle sites such as the Somme, north of Lyon, and at Passchendaele in Belgium, where bad weather had turned the battlefield into a muddy bog. He had endured rats and lice in the trenches, incessant shelling that frightened even the bravest men, a chlorine gas attack that sent him to the hospital for a month, and worst of all, watched helplessly as many fellow soldiers died before his eyes. On the first day of fighting at Passchendaele, Tom was side-by-side in a trench with his close friends from Winnipeg, Harry Smith and John Brighton, when suddenly there was an explosion. John, only 23 years old, whom Tom had known since they both attended Grade One at Gladstone School, was gone; his body blown into countless pieces. Neither Tom nor Harry were injured. Such was the fate that shaped the lives of soldiers during the Great War.

Veterans unite. On 4 June 1919, members of the Great War Veterans Association demonstrated outside Winnipeg City Hall.
ARCHIVES OF MANITOBA, WINNIPEG STRIKE 5, N12296.

Tom's luck finally ran out on August 9, 1918 on the second day of fighting at the battle of Amiens, in France. As his troop was fired upon while advancing on the German defences, a piece of shrapnel tore through the fleshy part of his right hip. The painful wound stopped him in his tracks, but it wasn't too serious. The Canadians referred to such an injury as a "Blighty." Tom hobbled back to the trench and was tended to. As it turned out, the Blighty was bad enough that, for Tom, the war had come to an end.

Tom was 23 years old when he arrived back in Winnipeg in January 1919. He was a much worldlier young man, suffering from chronic pain and feeling bitter about what he had gone through. His parents and younger sister were thrilled to see him, and the reunion calmed him, at least for a few days. But he couldn't sleep; his dreams were wracked by sounds of shattered men screaming in agony and images of gaping holes and wounds. Each night, he awoke in a pool of sweat, fearful that he was once again in the flames of Hell that had nearly swallowed him. He tried to have faith in the future, but it was a constant struggle. "Returned men," as war veterans such as Tom and Harry Smith, who also miraculously survived, were called, believed in the noble virtue of the battles they had fought. Yet when his father asked him to talk about his experiences, like most returned men, Tom could not. The horrific memories were too raw. Tom often felt trapped, as though he were a prisoner of a past from which there was no escape.

Most of the time, Tom felt angry. Angry that he had lost his close friend John; angry that Winnipeg's post-war economy was in a downward spiral; and angry that the city seemed changed for the worse. Growing up on Gertrude

Avenue near Osborne Street, Tom had barely been aware of immigrants who spoke foreign languages and had strange customs. As a young man, if he did encounter any Eastern Europeans downtown, he didn't pay that much attention to them. Now, they seemed to be everywhere he went.

Tom visited Sinclair Construction, where he had left his job as a mason to enlist in August 1914. From the day he had been hired by Frederick Sinclair in 1911, Tom was a quick learner with a knack for masonry. He was admitted into the Bricklayers and Mason's Union and was a frequent visitor to its headquarters at the Labour Temple. Now Tom was greeted warmly at the shop on Arlington Street and the foreman, Mitch Michaelson, told him his old job was waiting for him as soon as he was ready – although not at the same rate of pay he'd received four years earlier. "Times are tough," Michaelson remarked. Tom ignored the comment, but what bothered him was that the company had hired two new employees who barely spoke English. To his mind, these men were nothing but "alien agitators," no different than the "Bolsheviki" who had staged a revolution in Russia. Who knew what threat they posed to Canadian democracy?

Tom had heard about a Winnipeg Trades and Labor Council (TLC) and Socialist Party of Canada rally held in late December at the Walker Theatre. Sam Blumenberg, an outspoken Jewish socialist whose wife Libby owned a dry-cleaning shop on Portage Avenue, had called for a general strike to stop the Allied attack on Bolsheviks in Russia. "Bolshevism is the only thing that will emancipate the working class," Blumenberg had declared. Such comments incensed Tom.

Where was the "New Jerusalem," he wondered, that so many of the men he fought with sacrificed their lives for? It was not to be achieved through the revolution Blumenberg and others of his kind were advocating. Did his friend John and thousands like him die in vain, he wondered?

Tom found some solace in the company of other returned men who felt the same way he did: foreigners like Blumenberg didn't belong in the city or the country and their continued presence was a danger that had to be quashed. He was, however, delighted to see Harry Smith again, who had arrived in the city from Britain a week after Tom had. They had been separated after Passchendaele, when Harry was transferred to another battalion. Harry, too, had been injured in the leg and he walked with a noticeable limp. Neither of them mentioned what had happened to John; it was best left unsaid.

Special police constables were sworn in, allegedly to maintain the peace, on 5 June 1919.
ARCHIVES OF MANITOBA, WINNIPEG STRIKE 16, N12307.

Harry was bitter, too, even more so than Tom. And he was ready to take action, violent action if necessary, to take back the city from the "alien horde" he claimed had taken it over. Tom understood Harry's rage; it boiled inside him as well. But he was conflicted about using violence to effect change, which was contrary to both the lessons his father had taught him and the greater good that he had fought for in Europe.

For the moment, however, Tom was swept up in the resentment that enflamed the passions of many returned men. On the afternoon of January 26, he and Harry joined hundreds of other veterans gathered at Market Square. The plan was to break up a socialist rally. Except when Tom and Harry and other men got there, there were few socialists to be found.

"Are we going to be stopped?" shouted one of the returned men.

"No!" the other veterans yelled in a unified cry of defiance.

"The aliens must be taught a lesson," another man declared.

The mob of veterans began marching toward the headquarters of the Socialist Party at the corner of Smith Street and Portage Avenue. Tom and Harry followed the crowd of veterans as they burst into the party's offices. Emboldened by their actions, Tom and Harry smashed furniture and watched as one of the men burned a large red flag. In that moment, they were convinced

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Royal North-West Mounted Police operations in Winnipeg General Strike, 1919; turning left on William Street towards City Hall, shortly before firing into the crowd.

their actions were both right and just.

Tom and Harry showed up the next day to join in a hunt for Sam Blumenberg. It had been decided that the socialist radical had to be silenced, though no one was quite sure what they would do to him once they found him. Tom, Harry and six other men converged on Blumenberg's home on Good Street near St. Mary Avenue. They banged on the door, but no one was there. They then walked the short distance to Libby Blumenberg's Portage Avenue cleaning shop, the Minneapolis Dye House. There were at least another dozen other veterans already milling around in front of the store. Inside, a frightened Sam Blumenberg scrambled into the store's attic to hide.

Half a block away, Saul and Eva Hershberg walked toward the cleaning shop. Eva and Libby Blumenberg had become friends through their efforts to raise funds for the Canadian Zionist Federation. Yesterday evening, Libby had visited Eva in a panic. She told Eva about rumours that the returned men were after Sam. "They'll never find him," she said, "but I'm scared." Eva had tried to reassure Libby that she and Sam would not be harmed. Libby wanted to keep the shop closed the next day, but Sam would not hear of it. That, he had said, would be a sign of weakness. "We cannot give into the threats of those who want to stop us," he declared.

Seeing the large group of veterans converging on Blumenberg's shop, Eva stopped still and tightly clutched Saul's hand. They watched as the men turned en masse and stormed into the store. Eva cried out and she and Saul ran toward the shop. Harry Smith had Libby by the arm and he and another veteran were pulling her onto the sidewalk. Tom was beside them holding an unfurled Union Jack that another man had given him. Harry ordered Libby, who was crying, to kiss the flag. A crowd of bystanders had gathered, but none said a word. Harry pushed Libby down to her knees. "Kiss it," the men chanted. As she reluctantly did so, a single voice rose above the noisy crowd.

"Leave her alone," said Saul firmly. He gingerly walked forward, still holding Eva's hand.

"Who the hell are you?" Harry asked him.

"A friend. I'm asking you to let her go."

"Or what? You look like a damn alien. What's your name?" Harry said.

Saul ignored the question.

Harry released his grip on Libby. She stood up and ran to Eva who let go of Saul's hand to comfort her. Harry approached Saul, then abruptly pushed him to the ground. He was about to kick him when Tom intervened. Tom helped Saul up, quietly mumbling an apology as the other veterans marched away toward Main Street. "Keep out of our way," Harry warned Saul.

In the days that followed, Tom wrestled with what had transpired in front of Blumenberg's cleaning shop. Deep down, he knew what he, Harry and the other returned men had done was out of control and just wrong. He had not changed his mind about the dangers he was sure foreigners like Blumenberg posed for Canada, but he also believed that mob violence was not the answer. On this, he and Harry sharply disagreed. Harry argued that in this case – as in any case involving aliens – the ends justified the means; the country's future was at stake. Tom felt that taking the law into their own hands would never be acceptable and told his friend, "We can't be judge and jury." But Harry wasn't listening.

Back on the job as a mason at Sinclair's, Tom was working harder than ever but being paid less money – just as the foreman Michaelson had warned him. He was drawn into the only conversations his fellow workers wanted to have: their right to better wages and more respect for every union's right to collective bargaining. Overhearing Tom speak of this one day, his boss Frederick Sinclair accused him of being a socialist. Tom vehemently denied that charge; he was not arguing in favour of a revolution or a Bolshevik government. All he and the other workers wanted was their due respect and proper compensation for their labour.

"That's a lot of hogwash, Matthews," said Sinclair. "There are only two sides in this fight-law, order and the future of democracy on one side, and revolution and radicalism on the other. You're going to have to decide, Tom."

Tom knew innately that Sinclair was wrong; that the world was not that black and white. But Sinclair was as narrow-minded as Harry was. The truth was, many of the other returned men Tom encountered felt the same way he did. Like him, they were working men before the war who had

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"A larger strike is coming," Tom warned Harry soon after the carpenters and masons walked off the job on May 1 because the Building Trades Council's demands of a raise of 20 cents an hour had been rejected by the owners. "Are you going to do the bidding of the bosses, Harry? They fired you from your job at the railway shop and now you're going to fight for them? That doesn't make any sense."

Harry was quiet for a moment. "I don't care about any of that. The aliens have to be stopped and then I'll get my job back. I know that."

"That ain't so," said Tom. "You're a fool. If you turn your back on me and other men all because you're spooked by foreigners, then you will have let down John and everyone else who died."

"Don't ever speak about that," said Harry raising his voice. "I'm fighting for the future of this country in John's memory, and you're acting like a damned Red."

The general strike Tom had warned Harry about began on May 15. Approximately 30,000 workers walked off their jobs and nearly paralyzed the city. The strikers were up against the business community's secretive organization, the Citizens Committee of One Thousand that was backed by the three levels of government. Tom's boss, Frederick Sinclair, was one of its known members. Tom and the other returned men were indeed forced to choose sides.

Tom had already made his choice the moment he went on strike on May 1. But for veterans like Harry and many others, the strike was a Bolshevik-led conspiracy – just as the *Winnipeg Citizen*, the Citizens' Committee's newspaper claimed it was.

Though Harry would barely speak to him, Tom tried repeatedly to convince him that there were no foreign agitators or aliens among the members of the strike committee and that the strikers wanted nothing more than collective bargaining and other union rights, not a revolution. Harry, however, wouldn't hear of it and pointed to signs on milk and bread delivery wagons that read, "Permitted By Authority of the Strike Committee," as proof the strikers intended to establish a Soviet-style government.

Like all the strikers, Tom had a lot of time on his hands. He attended labour meetings at Victoria Park and participated in peaceful marches. On May 29, Tom was at a gathering convened by two returned men: Arthur Moore, president of the Manitoba Command of the Great War Veterans Committee, and Roger Bray, a Methodist lay preacher. When the three-hour meeting was over, it had been decided that a delegation would speak with the provincial government and demand legislation be passed to make collective bargaining compulsory. Tom had agreed to be part of the delegation, and the next morning was at the front of a group of about 2,000 returned men who marched to the steps of the Legislature Building shouting for Premier Norris to speak to them. The premier met with the veterans and promised them he would "do his best." At that, the men sang "God Save the King" and dispersed peacefully.

Ten days later, Tom was disappointed, although not entirely surprised, when he heard that Harry and some other anti-strike veterans had been made "special constables" for the city. The city had been left scrambling when a majority of police officers refused to follow city council's order to sign a loyalty oath and renounce their right to strike. Harry and other "specials" were given wagon yokes and clubs and instructed to "exercise good judgment and restraint" in keeping the peace. Tom suspected that most would not, and he was right.

Only an errand he had to do for his father prevented Tom from being downtown on June 10 when a riot broke out after Harry and other specials on foot and horseback attempted to disperse a crowd of strikers listening to a speech near Portage Avenue and Main Street.

But Tom was at the corner of Main Street and McDermot Avenue on Saturday afternoon, June 21, in defiance of Mayor Charles Gray's ban on parades. He and thousands of other pro-strike returned men had assembled to peacefully protest the arrest of a strike leader four days earlier. Tom could see Harry and other specials in the distance, holding wooden clubs. Turning to look toward Main Street, he was stunned: a long line of North-West Mounted Police in red khaki uniforms began advancing toward him and the other men on horseback, some with their pistols at the ready.

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Winnipeg Streets - Main c.1910 north from Portage.
SOURCE: ARCHIVES OF MANITOBA, 4584