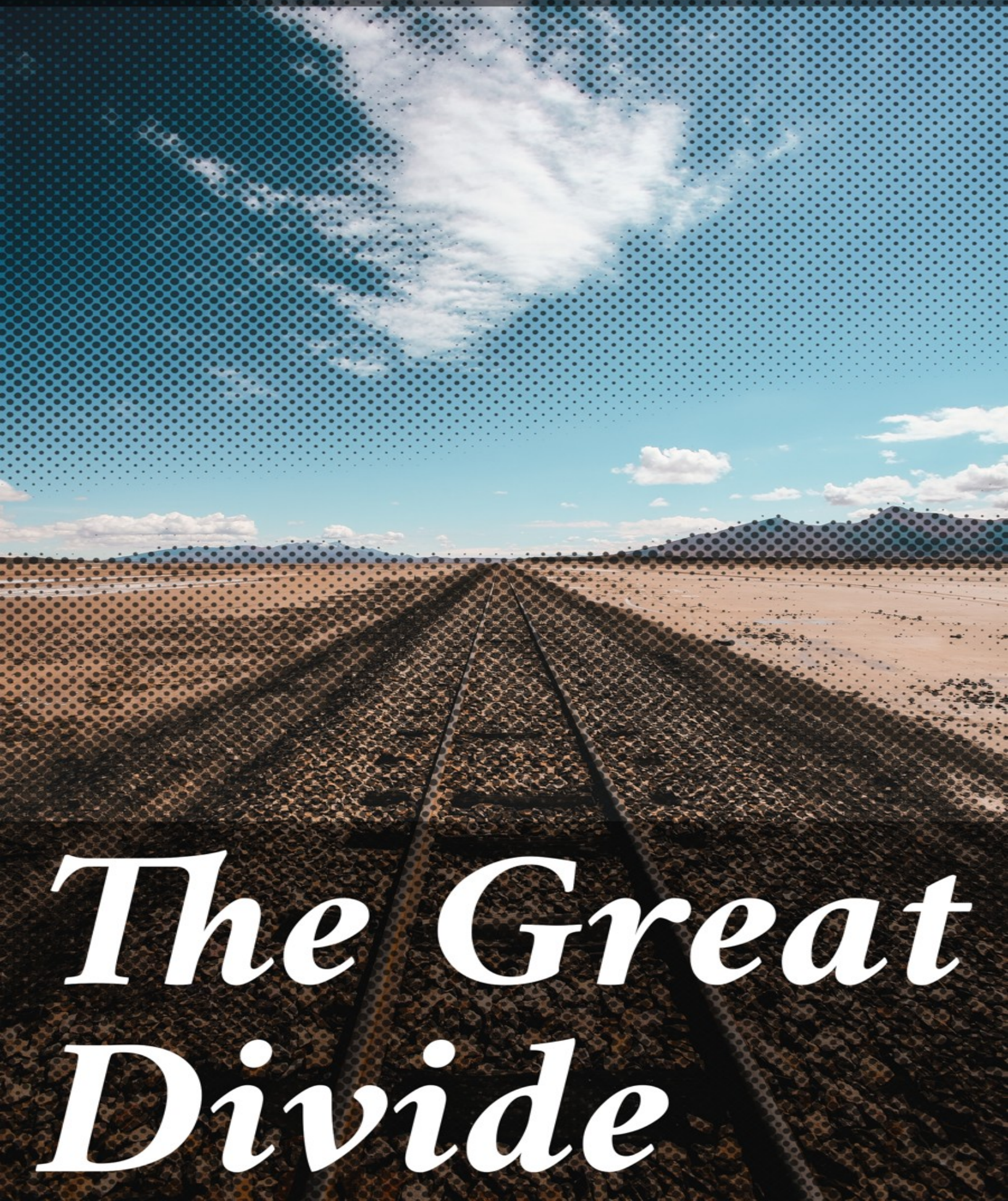
Alan Sullivan



The Great Divide

Alan Sullivan

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FOREWORD

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THIS story is an attempt to recapture something of that period when Canada, as we Canadians know it, did not exist; when the hinterland of the Pacific Coast north of the United States Boundary had just ceased to be administered from Whitehall; and, implementing a promise given in previous years in order to divert British Columbia from the open arms of the neighbouring Republic, Sir John Macdonald's government in Ottawa embarked on the greatest railway gamble ever conceived.

But for that promise and later building of the line, the United States had controlled the entire Pacific Coast from Mexico to Behring Strait, there would be no Imperial highway to the Orient, and Canada's western frontier would follow the axis of the Rocky Mountains.

Aiming at a fair picture of what happened fifty years ago, I have re-vivified many who now live only in memory, associating them with a half-dozen others who, for the purpose of this writing, are fictional, which seems a reasonable thing to do when one considers the strangely assorted multitude that either preceded or followed the steel. A few, a very few, are biographically recorded, but the great majority, their work done, have slipped unrecognized into the shadows of the past, and if this tale does nothing more than give some presentment of the army that lived and died that the steel might go through, the writing will not have been in vain.

With the exception of Big John and Mary Moody, the characters depicted in Yale are all authentic, and I am indebted to my friend Joe Mackenzie, who still lives on the banks of the Frazer, for many of the details in that part of the book; to the Hon. Judge Howay, British Columbia's noted historian, for his kindly guidance; and to Mr. James Taynton of Windermere, B.C., who had personal dealings with Bulldog Kelly.

Also I had the benefit of talks with Tom Wilson, Rocky Mountain Guide, companion of Major Rogers, a man of clear brain, courtly presence and quiet assurance; and with Donald Mann, another pioneer, giant in stature and courage. These two have now passed over the long trail taken years ago by Father Lacombe and those unconquerable personalities in Ottawa and Montreal who breathed life into the all-red line.

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PART I

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CHAPTER ONE

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SHAPED like a gigantic “S” with shallow curves, the pass lay between a tangle of mountains on whose precipitous flanks wild goats sprang from ledge to ledge: above it towered scarred peaks, first to blush under the rising sun, last to retain the dying glory: eastward, westward, the land fell away to ravines and hanging valleys and glacier-fed lakes in whose shining surface shimmered the reflection of gaunt, inaccessible summits.

Each lake, lonely in its beauty, smiled up, bordered with stretches of dark green conical spruce of which the multitudinous spires were guarded by ten thousand feet of solid rock, and swayed by no disturbing winds. Here in a season of the year stalked the gigantic elk, deliberate and unafraid: here were meadows of a lighter green, traversed by winding streams where the beaver built his heavy-roofed home of earth and sticks, damming the vagrant creeks till only a rounded crown was unsubmerged.

By rocky shores where scented cedars curled their gnarled roots over naked boulders, the otter, the mink, and fisher played and hunted, while everywhere spread a chuckle of hidden runnels, and a murmurous sound born of snowy cataracts leaping from mountain palisades into gulfs below. Baldheaded eagles with sheathed eyes and unquivering pinions floated across circumambient space, crumpled talons drawn close against the grey-white of their

breasts. They alone could scale the heights and look down on the austerity of the mountain tops.

This might be seen from the pass in summer time.

In winter an alien world was revealed, a world of white, relieved only where the stony ribs of earth rose vertically, and the spruce still held their warm and verdant hue. Here and here only was there life. No cataracts transfixed the purple distance, every lake was iron-clad, wraiths of drifting snow circled diaphanously around the upper peaks, and the glaciers glinted stark in vast folds of the eternal solitudes.

In the upper regions, smitten by gales born in the Aleutians, nothing stirred, but down where the evergreen spruce gave shelter a wild population moved across the blanket of snow. Pink-eyed rabbits, white as the snow itself, frisked and made their runways, wary of marauding fox and lynx: elk thrust their gigantic antlers between young trees, pawing the snow till succulent moss lay bare: red deer passed daintily in the crumbling trough of their own making, partridge fed in the hemlocks, and the otter ploughed his sinuous overland course in search of food. The black bear drowsed in his burrow, and ivory-beaked ravens with great ragged wings winnowed over crystalline silence.

Near the middle of the pass, a spring formed a tiny pool that overflowed in opposite directions, one part of it moving hesitantly to the west, where, joined by other trickles, it began to hurry down the sunset slope. The other ran eastward towards the Columbia River.

The pass was unknown, and the range made the backbone of a continent: no crossing had been

accomplished, and its fangs filled the sky, unmapped and unconquered.

It fell on a day that Apau, the Weasel, was camped on the slopes of the Selkirk Mountains, and sat with his head between his hands, saying nothing. On the other side of the teepee crouched Anatoki, She of the Pretty Head, while at her empty breast sucked her first and late-born son, Light in the Morning. Her face was thin and troubled as she looked down at the child, then at her husband.

Nodding silently, he put on his heaviest moccasins and capote, slung axe, knife and powder-horn in his belt with the little deerksin sack of bullets, and picked up his long, single-barrelled gun. There was no word of farewell when he went out.

Stooping a little as he walked, he skirted first the edge of the timber, slowly working his way higher: he knew that the greater his altitude the less the chance of finding elk, but somewhere among the naked ridges might be a mountain sheep whose flesh was good, and of whose coat Anatoki would weave a winter blanket for Light in the Morning.

Moving without sound, he came clear of the timber: the day had a quiet greyness, with a touch of snow in the air, and far below he could see his lodge, a yellowish speck in a gulf of distance.

This country was strange to him. A man of violent passions, he had not been acceptable to his tribe on the eastern foothills, so in a season of the year when Anatoki was already with child he crossed the Kicking Horse Pass and journeyed west in search of elk. For weeks he travelled: then Light in the Morning was born, and they moved on, the

child packed in moss and strapped to a board carried on Anatoki's back. Now Apau looked for a place to winter where game was plentiful, but so far with no success.

Leaning on his gun, he stared westward where, it was said, lay the Bitter Water, and there lived other Indians who ate only fish. Searching the ground he could distinguish no sign that any man had ever preceded him: north and south lifted the crests, tossing their heights into a sunless sky, lonely, austere, except at one point where, a little below his own level, their nakedness was broken by a patch of scanty timber that nestled in a cleft of this gigantic rampart: it was miles away, but guided by some instinct, he turned in that direction.

At this moment came a sudden clatter fifty yards off, and a bull elk with great branching horns galloped southward along the slope.

Quick as thought, Apau fired. Usually he would have stalked the animal till he could get a standing shot and make sure of a kill, but to-day he was weak, with no saying how far his strength would carry him. It was a hit. The elk swerved, stumbled, came to his knees, scrambled up and dashed off. Apau, his heart pounding, reloaded, ran forward, and found a gout of blood: scraping this up, he swallowed it, took courage, and hurried on.

At this height the air tasted thin, and his breast rose with long, deep inhalations. Presently he found more blood, dark and thick. Not stopping this time, he progressed in a sort of shuffle, arms hanging loose, knees bent, his black eyes fixed always some twenty feet ahead: he missed nothing; a broken stick, an overturned stone, a scrape of moss—all

were eloquent. Smiling, he thought of Light in the Morning, of Anatoki's sigh of relief at the burden he would carry back, and the bubbling of a pot as it hung over the teepee fire.

Watching the trail, he watched also the country he traversed. Behind the patch of timber which he now neared there seemed to be a great hole in the mountains with nothing beyond but emptiness and air. That on the western side. On the east the ground fell away very quickly into a wide ravine floored with spruce much bigger and older than that higher up: it was sheltered down there, with wood and water, a likely spot for game, and a very good place to camp in. He must remember that.

The elk now came into sight, floundered across a rockslide, swerved into what seemed to be a mountain meadow, and stood for a fraction of time outlined against the sky. Beside a spring it lowered its head to drink, when Apau, steadying himself, fired again: the bullet went in behind and below the shaggy shoulder, the beast quivered, gave a choking cough, and died reaching for the water.

Apau nodded, grunted, reloaded, and moved forward. He was, he reckoned, ten miles from camp, but that did not matter, and fifteen minutes later his strong teeth were shearing into a wedge of half-scorched meat. Devouring it slowly, life began to course more buoyantly in his veins. He would take a hundred-weight back with him, leave the carcass protected in a cache of big stones, and to-morrow pack the rest of it down to camp. Where he stooped to drink at the little pond, he noted that it ran both east and west.

Perched here on the very summit of the divide, and looking westward, on right and left the slopes pitched

steeply down, leaving this unexpected roadway towards the setting sun. In front the land fell away to a lower level in a series of prodigious steps, and widening valleys were visible. These must lead toward the Bitter Water. Regarding them with a mild curiosity, he wondered what the country was like farther on, and determined that some day he would find out.

It gave no promise of the plains whence his people had come, and was far too rough for buffalo, but ought to harbour elk, beaver and deer. His keen microscopic eyes could distinguish no teepees, no feather of smoke, no cutting, no faint suggestion of a trail: he saw a baldheaded eagle, and heard the distant croak of ravens, but that was all. Then, feeling sleepy and a little tired, his lids began to droop.

But Apau, the Weasel, was not alone. Eyes watched him from fifty feet away, small, bright, brown eyes in a leathery skull topped by short triangular ears; for behind a boulder, motionless save for the slow regular breathing of its enormous body, lay a two-year grizzly. The crack of a gunshot had come to him an hour previously, and since then the Lord of the Mountain, who feared nothing that walked the earth, had marked every step of the approaching hunter. Never before had he seen anything that went on two legs.

His deep tawny hide blending marvellously with the tone of his shelter, the great brute had not shifted even when the dying elk shambled up to the spring, for instinct had warned him that danger was drawing near, and like a master of strategy he waited his moment. The smell of meat was in his nostrils, but now it was lost in that other smell of

humanity, than which there is no sharper signal to the wild things of the forest.

He did not stir till Apau’s head sagged forward, then with extraordinary quietness he began his attack, a soundless brown mountain, ears back, his terrible jaws bared: very softly the great paws progressed, sheathing their long, copper-coloured claws, spreading sponge-like on the hard ground while a light wind ruffled his shaggy fur. He had covered half the distance when one displaced pebble made a tiny clatter.

Instantly Apau’s full senses revived, but, snatching at the gun and whirling as he sat, his heart faltered. Little chance was there of stopping this mass of bone and muscle when it came head on. The gun leaped to his shoulder, and he fired. In the same second “He who walks like a Man” lifted on his huge haunches.

The bullet grazed his skull, ploughing through leathery skin and furrowing the lower jaw. There came an infuriated cough as Apau darted to one side. A stone turned under one foot, and he fell. He was conscious of a smothering weight, but after the first swinging blow he knew no pain.

An hour went by. The grizzly, glutted, drank deeply at the spring, and carried what remained of the elk to a cranny in the rocks. Returning, he stood for a moment over the lifeless body of Apau, sniffed, and pushed it with one great paw. Then, leaving the first discoverer of the pass to ravens that would shortly drop out of dull-grey skies, he took his lurching unhurried way to a cavern in the western slopes.

CHAPTER TWO

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On a dull autumn afternoon in 1880, a man past middle age stood in front of the fireplace in a first-floor sitting-room in Batt's Hotel, Dover Street, London: occasionally he glanced impatiently at the clock or stepped to the window to look out. The hour was five and the street unusually quiet save for the *clop-clop* of horses drawing four-wheel cabs.

The features of this man offered points of interest: they had a faintly Jewish cast, though a second glance would have convinced the observer that he was not a Jew: his age was sixty-five, his name Macdonald, his office that of Prime Minister of Canada.

He had greying hair, a large, flexible mouth with curving, mobile lips, thin like the edge of a saucer. They were sensitive lips. The slightly hollow cheeks and shrewd, highly intelligent eyes set far apart under prominently arched brows were suggestive of daring and seemed to invite disputation: the thick mass of hair was tossed back, baring the right forehead, bringing into definition the longish nose with narrow bridge and bulbous tip: the features presented a curious blending of matured youthfulness and benignant cynicism, and in an age of bearded men Macdonald was clean shaven.

He had been waiting for perhaps half an hour when he was joined by two other men, with one of whom he exchanged a quick searching glance that appeared to

impart to each the same disturbing information, whereat Macdonald shrugged.

“Well, Charles, I was afraid of it: the stars in their courses do not favour us.”

Tupper, Canadian Minister of Railways, and Macdonald’s faithful ally, shook his head.

“What did you find, sir?”

“Depression! I reached Hughenden at the hour arranged, and Lord Beaconsfield saw me at once, but what a change! He, too, was very conscious of it. Ichabod! Charles, and the glory has departed: an old, old man now, crippled with asthmatic bronchitis and gout. We talked for an hour—a great effort for him at this stage—and only a spark of the former Disraeli is left. I don’t think he can last long. He still likes the idea of our all-red line, but of course can do nothing now. He asked if we had seen Rothschild—I told him that George Stephen was looking after that—then described how he’d sent Corry—Lord Rowton, y’know—to the Baron five years ago for four million pounds in twenty-four hours to buy the Khedive’s Suez Canal shares. The Baron, who happened to be eating grapes, asked what the security was, and Corry said: ‘The British Government.’ He got the money.”

“And that secured control of the route to India and the Far East,” said Tupper emphatically. “Well, we propose to open the other route the other way round.”

“Beaconsfield agreed at once, and referred to our previous talk in ’75; also he said that if our party had been in power five years ago when he was at his zenith he could

have provided what backing we needed. It is too late now. One anticipated that, but—well——”

“How does he look?”

“Like some eastern magician in a fez, a fantastic red dressing-gown and slippers. He still gets affectionate notes from the Queen, but sees practically no one: he reads, dreams, and examines his collection of portraits, calling them the Gallery of Friendship. He says he would prefer to live, but is not afraid to die, and that he never hated Gladstone but simply couldn’t understand him. He’s only a mummy now, a dried-up human pod kept alive by the fading vision of former triumphs. It was all rather sad.”

Tupper nodded, and for a moment nothing was said while their minds reverted to the purpose that brought them here. That, too, was a vision. They had landed in England with hopes high, hopes that in past weeks had cooled considerably, and Tupper for one experienced a chill in the stuffy chambers of this centre of world finance. British money bags were full, but British eyes turned east rather than west, and the fairy tale of a three-thousand-mile railway through a wilderness of hostile Indians and unchartered mountain ranges did not appeal to Lombard Street. But Macdonald had risked his political life on the construction of that road, and refused to withdraw. Now the vision was encountering the solid unimaginative weight of London, with its power, its bland self-sufficiency, its politic indifference.

“Well,” said Tupper heavily, “if Stephen bumps into the same thing there’s only one thing for it: Canadians will build

the road themselves, and Stephen must form the syndicate and subsequent company. Pope, what's your view?"

Pope, Canadian Minister of Agriculture, agreed at once; then with a smile: "Sir John, you'll have to make it sufficiently inviting."

"If he will take it up, that means the Bank of Montreal, too," suggested Tupper thoughtfully.

"To say nothing of a certain Donald A. Smith."

At this the Premier put back his head and laughed. "Donald by all means, though perhaps not officially—that is to begin with. John Henry, can you suggest suitable terms with such a syndicate?"

This question, the signal for an earnest conversation, occupied them till there came a knock at the door, and there entered the two men who completed a Canadian group that had set out from Montreal a month previously.

George Stephen was tall, with a long, loose, graceful body, flowing brown beard and moustache, and large, kindly, intelligent eyes that held a lurking readiness for humour. Now he looked dejected, and, observing the gravity of the three already assembled, he frowned slightly. Difficulty was in the air, and only on Macdonald's face might there have been discerned a faintly satirical tinge. The other man was Macintyre.

Nodding to the newcomers, Macdonald resumed his position on the hearth rug:

"Well, gentlemen, after some arduous prospecting along different trails we meet again, and I hope you unearthed more than we have. What about it, Mr. Stephen?"

"Practically nothing, sir."

“That’s encouraging—very.”

“We have learned, Sir John, that your idea of an all-red line from the Atlantic to the Pacific strikes no spark of interest in the city, but a good deal of opposition.”

“H’m,” he murmured, “you discussed it with Barings?”

“Very fully, and lunched with Lord Revelstoke.”

“Then you did get something out of it?” chuckled Macdonald. “We should have gone with you instead of elsewhere. Yes?”

“Barings knew all about the scheme—they’ve known about it since the first—and won’t touch it: they think it a gamble, and——”

“It is a gamble—yes?”

“Lord Revelstoke holds that one cannot sell shares in a shot in the dark. Very polite, of course, and I like him immensely, but he was quite firm; he did ask, however, if your Government would guarantee interest on the shares.”

“Impossible,” said Tupper firmly, “that was agreed on the way over. The Government is not going to build this line: we desire it done by private enterprise.”

“So I told him, and got no farther.”

“Rothschilds?” asked Macdonald.

“The same thing,” replied Macintyre, “but more so. My impression is that the Baron considers us too young, the whole country too young to embark on such a project. We came away feeling that the Rothschilds were too accustomed to dealing with crusted old kingdoms and European States to entertain business with a youth like Canada. We smelled money all round us, but couldn’t reach a cent.”

“The City’s like that,” nodded Stephen, “and I’d like to be back in Montreal: you meet a man here and he seems interested—he is interested because he can’t tell when your information may not be of considerable use—he listens—he nods—perhaps asks you to lunch, and you talk yourself dry. Then he asks you to come back in a fortnight. You do come back, when he tells you that having gone into your proposition very thoroughly, he regrets that he cannot avail himself just now—later on, possibly—but not now. The reason is that anyone having anything to sell brings it to London, and he knows perfectly well that within twenty-four hours he’ll be offered something more to his liking. So there’s no hurry about anything. Oh! Macintyre and I have learned a lot since we got here.” He paused and shrugged. “What happened in Downing Street, Sir John?”

Macdonald made a grimace. “Tell him, Charles.”

“Much the same experience as yours: Canada and our affairs are not of present interest in Downing Street, and we weren’t even asked to come back—let alone lunch. We waited three hours for an interview—then nothing. Mr. Gladstone is——”

“Is not Disraeli,” put in Macdonald with a touch of bitterness, “nor is he Lord Salisbury, worse luck, but puffed with recent victory. We were about six months late, but I couldn’t anticipate Disraeli’s defeat. The last time I saw him he was Prime Minister with the country at his feet. Now he is the dying leader of the opposition in the House of Lords. Well, I know how it feels to lead an opposition. Mr. Stephen, it seems that you’ve shot your last bolt?”

“There is one glimmer of support we have heard of, sir.”

“From whom?”

“Morton Rose and Company—they’ll participate to a limited extent—perhaps a few millions—if you approve.”

“Did you ever hear of my disapproving of millions?” scoffed Macdonald.

“It’s the British firm, but American dollars.”

At this, Tupper looked a shade uncertain. “What about it, Sir John?”

“Grab them, Stephen, grab them. Nothing else?”

“Possibly a little from Holland: that exhausts the possibilities on this side.”

“Yet here we are sitting in the middle of the richest city in the world! Frankly, gentlemen, I am astonished.”

This sobering truth left them all silent. The biggest political and mercantile figures in their own Dominion, they were but small fry in London, and each underwent the nostalgia born of fruitless effort; of a sudden Macdonald turned with an exclamation.

“The Grand Trunk is behind all this: I feel it in my bones. What do you think, Charles?”

“I agree, and after encountering that stone wall, I rather anticipated what would follow. Stephen, they were willing to build the line for us, and run it—yes, I can see Sir Henry while he laid down his terms—if—he was very smooth when he came out with that *if*—we did not require them to have the entire road in Canadian territory: that is, they would run through the State of Michigan, then up across the boundary to the prairie country.”

“Which he knew perfectly well we would not have,” snapped Macdonald hotly. “By God! we won’t: ’twould be

playing straight into American hands: defeating the whole project, and putting your friend James Hill in strategic control. No, no, he's thick enough already with the Grand Trunk. I know that you two gentlemen, with Mr. Hill and my political thorn in the flesh, Mr. Donald A. Smith, have shared a good many millions cleaned up on a certain railway deal in the United States not long ago, but that's your affair, not mine, and what we're talking about now is a Canadian line with every damned spike in it a bright red. I defy Mr. Hill to get control of that. At the same time he might be very useful with his money and experience, so I've no objection whatever to his joining you. The Opposition would howl, but that's nothing new. What do you say, Charles?"

"I agree."

Macintyre and Stephen exchanged glances, the Minister of Agriculture began to converse with Tupper in a lowered tone, and presently Macdonald gave his head a characteristic toss.

"Mr. Stephen," he said, "I am going to make you a proposal. Some twelve years ago I pledged my faith to the people of British Columbia that if they would join the other Provinces already in the Federation, the Government would undertake to link them by rail with eastern Canada. But for that they had seceded, and naturally enough, to the United States. I think you are fully informed of this. As you know, I could do nothing till two years ago."

"I understand, sir." Stephen had a shrewd anticipation of what was now coming.

"Well, we began at the Pacific end—with an American contractor. It was not possible to do otherwise: that coast

was cut off from us—no communication through Canada—and California the only source of labour. Also it seemed wiser to break the first ground in the Province we were determined to keep under the flag. Mr. Onderdonk is a reputable man, we are safe in his hands, and he's already at work on the Fraser River. Also we are building from Winnipeg to the Great Lakes—about six hundred miles in all."

"Out of three thousand, Sir John."

"About that. As to the remainder, England is evidently not interested, so it is forced upon me that this must be a Canadian enterprise—in contrast to the Grand Trunk. Canada must play her own hand without English aid. Mr. Stephen, if you and Mr. Macintyre and Morton Rose and others of your friends—including James Hill if you like—I'll take a chance there—will sign a contract to complete this all-red line, my Government will vote you twenty-five millions of dollars in cash, twenty-five million acres of fertile land in the west, and such legislative protection as may be necessary."

Stephen, feeling his pulse quicken, stared fixedly at the speaker. Macintyre sat motionless: Tupper's large eyes were regarding the two merchants with luminous urgency, and into the quiet room crept the consciousness shared by all that here and now gigantic issues were at stake. The thing was too big to be more than fractionally visualized: they all perceived that, and no man could foresee what might not be involved: but it presented an aspect defiantly stimulating that mocked, intrigued and dared all at once. Like growing pains in the muscles of youth, it invited the unproved strength of a young Dominion.

“A big order, Sir John,” said Stephen in a voice not quite steady, “and no syndicate could dream of it without constant Government support.”

“I agree fully: I had hoped that we would find assistance in England: now we’re cast on our own resources.”

“Would you protect such a line from invasion by other roads across the border?” asked Macintyre tersely.

“Certainly,” Tupper assured him, “the object being to create traffic east and west, whereas now it runs north and south.”

“I’m thinking of the mountains,” interjected Stephen, “especially the Selkirk Range: from what I hear not one of your Government Surveys—and there are a lot of them—indicate a suitable pass anywhere near the border, so the line might be shoved up north, shoved anywhere, to get through. Also, so far as my knowledge goes, there’s a thousand miles of territory east of Winnipeg and north of Lake Superior which is simply barren rock and would not bring any traffic whatever. How about that? Admittedly the prairie section might pay, but what else?”

Tupper, glancing at his chief, made a gesture. He was a big man with a broad, square immobile face, large confident mouth, masses of dark hair and opulent whiskers trimmed well back from a strong, clean-shaven chin. He exhaled repose and a sort of comforting solidity.

“As a Canadian, Mr. Macintyre, do you desire Canada to end on the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains?”

“What real Canadian does?”

“Then I put it to you that that is the big question. Sir John, Mr. Pope and I have decided that Mr. Stephen and

yourself are in the first instance the men we need. The Government will back you to the extent indicated: you may capitalize a company for what you think desirable. As to the pass through the Selkirks, Mr. Moberly, one of our best engineers, believes that there is one: as to the thousand miles of barren rock, it is through, main-line traffic rather than local that will justify the road. Its political and national effect will be enormous, and it should bring this city of London within two weeks of the Pacific Ocean."

Stephen sat silent, feeling in brain and body an electrical tingle: he was a little breathless. No opportunity here to weigh this matter coolly and cautiously. On the voyage over he and Macintyre had considered the possibility of drawing a blank in Lombard Street, and their own position in such an event. Now that the blank was drawn the alternative had in some notable fashion assumed proportions infinitely greater than they could have anticipated: it was concrete, yet nebulous: fascinating, forbidding: he could see a beginning, but no end. And Macintyre's expression told him that exactly the same reaction was going on there.

"Is it too big for you, gentlemen?" asked Sir John in a slightly provocative manner.

Stephen, a proud and high-spirited man, felt the blood rush to his face. "We'll try it, sir," he said in an unsteady tone, "we'll do our best."

CHAPTER THREE

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In the month of June, the year 1881, Kelly, The Rake, whose financial prospects were intimately connected with the all-red line, sat on the north bank of the Fraser River, 300 miles west of where Apau died, pulling a narrow strip of fine sandpaper between the lightly compressed tips of thumb and forefinger of either hand: his manner was deliberate, he found apparent satisfaction in the feeling of friction, and when the skin, which was smooth and white, had been reduced to a thin tissue beneath whose transparency the blood was clearly visible, he examined the result with grave approval and drew on a pair of cotton gloves. The Rake being a professional gambler, it was of importance that by touch alone he should be able to determine the pinpoint markings on cards which were practically invisible and too slight to be detected under the horny cuticle of miners and railwaymen.

He was attired in highly-polished leggings of black leather, narrow sharp-toed boots of American make with a glossy shine, a white silk shirt with loosely knotted black silk tie, a long black frock coat, full at the breast, close-fitting over the hips, reaching to his knees, and a large black sombrero hat. His face was sallow and clean shaven, cheeks a shade hollow, his eyes large, dark and mournful: the wide mouth had little pits at the corners of the lips, and his sombre dress and air of thoughtful detachment gave his general appearance a touch of the ecclesiastical.

He sat some thirty feet above the river, his back to the straggling town of Yale with its irregular ranks of flimsy houses, log shacks, tents, frontier hotels with narrow balconies at first-floor windows, stores, saloons and woodpiles, with here and there a squat, stone-built structure. This agglomeration, for the most part devoid of paint, displayed every sign of hasty occupation, and stretched perhaps a half-mile north-east, ceasing abruptly where a mountain torrent called Yale Creek established the boundary of the Indian Reserve on which no white man might build. To the south-west along the clay bank it widened till it ended amongst scattered clearings on the rough shoulders of a rocky mound known in virtue of its outline as the Jew's Nose. On the other flank rose Mount Linhey, dotted with jack pine to its great rounded crown, while still farther north-east the tawny river appeared mysteriously to emerge from a vast rampart of higher peaks, down whose scarred flanks coursed transitory cataracts that at this season of the year escaped from hidden recesses in the mountains, and leaped to sunlight in waving pencils of argent foam.

Sometimes, when Yale enjoyed a quiet night with the wind from the east, one might hear the distant voices of these cataracts blending with the low monotone from the river, which was now sixty feet deep, half a mile wide, and flowed at some six miles an hour; but since Andrew Onderdonk, the American contractor, was building a 200-mile railway through the mountains and had chosen Yale, the head of navigation on the Fraser, for his headquarters, there were but few moments of silence.

Now, a hundred yards behind The Rake, a small saddleback tank locomotive was snorting at the head of a train of flat cars from which a gang of Chinese were unloading material; steel clanged on iron, the voices of men rose in free profanity, waggons creaked, and from upriver sounded the boom of dynamite where Onderdonk was slowly blasting his way through the formidable gorges of the Fraser.

These sounds, however, woke no answering chord in The Rake, and his slack figure lounged comfortably till he heard a voice close by.

“Hello, Kelly: fingers in good shape?”

The newcomer was a man of different appearance, shorter, broader, with heavy face, cold eyes and shoulders like a Texas steer. Known locally as Big Mouth Kelly, he held a position of considerable importance, having secured the contract for burying Chinamen dead of the China plague, a mysterious malady, little understood, which began in the legs that immediately turned black, then mounted to the heart and carried off its victims in a few hours: it did not attack the whites but was common amongst Orientals, and since Onderdonk had on his payroll some five thousand chattering labourers from the Yellow River, and twenty dollars was the interment fee, Big Mouth found no cause for complaint. He was reputed at times to be a shade prompt in his official duties, but because no Chink had ever been known to survive an attack of the disease this was hardly a matter for criticism.

“My fingers are all right.”