SO. SON, SEE?

Legs dangling over the edge of the buckboard, I watched my feet bouncing and cutting a harmless swathe through the thick, dusty bunchgrass that stood high in the middle of the trail.

"How much farther 'til we get there?"

A somewhat natural trail it was, and it didn't take much of a woodsman, which I wasn't anyhow, to see that few wheels had travelled this way. I lifted my eyes from the ground to survey our progress.

"I wonder what it will be like?"

We had climbed out of the lower table land of vast pastures into the open but lightly timbered elevations. The scent of spruce and lodgepole pine sifted through the dust to sweeten my breath. All the sights and sounds of this beautiful country were giving me cause to break into a lovely, little tune I had learned in the small Eastern community where my roots lay.

"What will I do if I don't like it?"

The first note was cracking my lips when I was suddenly jolted from my seat, pitched to the ground, belted by boxes and eventually covered in a pile of goods. I could hear the Chinaman up ahead, jibbering excitedly. Pushing myself from the mess, I grabbed a shovel in time to help our Indian guide chop apart two rattlesnakes that had crossed our path, giving the pack mule a great fright.

"What if something goes wrong right away, what then?"

With everything back to normal, two rattler's tails secure in my pocket, the three of us continued our journey through the Nicola Valley. Sometime before noon, we started our descent into a new valley. Apparantly our Indian friend felt he had completed his job and beckoned me to remove myself from the tailgate. Taking the reins he gave me, I watched him stretch out on a soft sack in the rear of the wagon, opening a bottle of what I was sure was pure rot-gut.

"Who will I meet? What will they be like?"

We heard no more of him until several hours later, when in his drunken stupor, he began singing a song in his own language. I expected to hear the rhythmic beating of drums at any moment to accompany the hollow, lonely wail. The Chinaman, however, was less appreciative of the red man's talents and he quickly threw another sack over him, stifling his voice.

"What if they don't like me?"

We came to the crest of the hill we'd been travelling and I saw Kamloops. It was a small village, situated on the left bank of a river running west. Directly across from the town, another river flowing from the north joined the first. A large lake, further west, accentuated the hills surrounding the entire valley. Being late spring, the hills were dressed green and grey in bunch grass, sagebrush and the odd growth of trees. Whether it was the fact that spring had given this valley some dimension I didn't think could be replaced, or whether it was some strange intuition inside of me, I cannot say: but, whatever, I felt sure that it was here where I would find some goal . . . some . . . some dream . . . something.

I had no chance to stay on this scene, the Chinaman insisted, we hurried on.

"Oh no, we're here. But for how long?"

The dust irritated my throat and caused me to cough. I stopped to remove my hat, relieving my head of the discomforting moisture that ringed it. The wagon came to a halt. Rudely, and with little consideration for the condition of our guide, the Chinaman was trying desperately to separate the Indian from the wagonload of goods. Finally, he was able to roll the red man into the street, creating a huge cloud of dust. He then gestured towards me, suggesting that I take my possessions and part. I obliged him.

I took to the boardwalk to escape the innumerable pockets of fresh droppings that covered the street. There was no escaping, however, the rasping sound that filled the town. Metal on metal, hammer on nail, metal on wood; the sounds of construction, the sounds of Kamloops. The city seemed to be growing before my eyes: the side wall of a blacksmith's shop was being hoisted up with pulleys and horses; a new storage shed was being framed behind a saddle harness and leather store; signs were going up, advertising the new billiard room in the Cosmopolitan Hotel; and all along the street where there was business, there was construction.

"Excuse me, son, I am Cornelius Benjamin Districk." The man had stepped out from a door behind me. I glanced up quickly to see a sign suspended above, 'General Merchandise', noting the pride and authority with which it hung there; well, leastways it wasn't covered with dust like everything else on the street.

"Afternoon, sir."

"Passing through are you, son?"

"No, actually I've come to stay. Looking for a job, I am."

"Plenty of them, son. Just look around you, how about that, eh, what do you see, son, well, tell me, what do you see?"

"Buildings . . . "

"Exactly! Buildings and buildings being built. Just look around you son. Growth, everywhere, growth. Why, there's been some discussion and none of it too idle, son, talk, yes sir, good talk about making this town the provincial capital! And what do you think of that, son? Well? What? Tell me!"

"Very good, sir?"

"Exactly! so it is." And with that remark, the short balding man turned to re-enter his store. At that moment, as he slipped into the shadows behind the door, I had no indication of the role he was to play in my life and in the life of this town.

* * *

No matter how many times I looked around the post, I always found something new, something interesting, something to hold my attention. The intricate Indian design on a tobacco pouch, the blue etchings of an English garden on imported silverware, or the crude but sturdy structure of a butter churn, all these things held me for hours. And other times, well other times, I would sit on my stool behind the sales counter, checking the ledger. There wasn't much to check

during winter though. Summer had been busy and John said it was on account of gold still being found in the creeks and rivers nearby but I knew better, it had been busy because the town boomed in summer. Winter meant a slowdown in construction and many people went south to spend a milder season in Vancouver or Victoria.

I had spent almost a year working at the local Hudson's Bay Company post. The Company wasn't what it used to be. I knew there wasn't really much hope for making a dream, still unfound as yet, come true by sitting behind that counter. The fact was, I liked the old man, John Endera, who was the factor of the post.

Spring meant a pick-up in business. But spring meant more than that to old John. It must have meant more. Every winter morning, he sat on the floor near the wood stove, soaking up the warmth, soaking up memories, and more often than not, he'd share those memories with me. Lighting his pipe, he'd look to see that I was making a good attempt at feigning absorption in the ledger, and then he would start off on a story, talking to himself but knowing perfectly well that he had an audience in one certain young man. Me on the stool behind the counter, he on the floor by the stove, and somewhere between us, a world we both shared. He would take me across the swollen creeks and rivers of the North Thompson during spring; we would hike while spring sunlight found slits to shine through in the thick Shuswap forests; we would travel over the wild mountains of Clearwater, warmed by spring sunshine; we'd go everywhere, all the places unfestered by buildings, leaving the mark of the H. B. C. behind us; and everywhere we went, we went in spring. But, winter was still here, spring not come, and the spell of his stories must and always did break. John would turn away, rising to move to the window opposite. Wiping away the steam, he would peer out into the morning, listening. We could still hear the sounds of hammers. It bothered him. He'd stand there, watching the town grow, seeing it all.

"The town is doomed. Doomed! That bastard Districk, he'll be the ruin of this town yet."

I had seen C. B. Districk only occassionally since that first day on the street. My observations at the time had, indeed, been correct. He was an important man in Kamloops.

"Aye, he's an important man, that Districk. But he's no help to the town, no sair."

"He owns the finest house in town, John, and he runs the best store on the B. C. mainland. He . . ."

"He does at that, lad. But not by a gentleman's honor. Thair is no honor in this new breed of money grabbin' bastards. Aye, he's got a fine house, lad. Built it was, mark me lad, built it was on the profits of pairfidy!"

"Profits or no profits, John, what would the town do without his steamers that work the lake and rivers? what would happen if he shut down the grist mill? what could the town expect if he wasn't sitting in Victoria where decisions are made? what . . . "

"E-e-enough! That will be enough, lad!" He spat each word out

as if coated with venom. "Need I remind you of the unethical, yes unethical, injustice that man has done me? You remember of what I told you, lad?" He paused. I nodded. "Some years back, he stole me business, rightfully mine, mind you, stole it, right from under me nose. Why it just stood to good reason that those C. P. R. sairveyors should bring their business to us. After all, wasn't it through the kindness of the company that they're able to build the blasted railway to begin with!

"The goovernment road passed right by this post, it did. Those C.P.R. sairveyors could no more avoid this post than if they owned it themselves. We were assured of a good and fair trade with them, lad. And what happened? That bastard Districk, with a little help from his friends in Victoria, he ups, well, he ups and relocates the government road so it runs right by his own blasted store!

"We're finished, lad. Have been ever since."

He died a few weeks later. For John Endera, there was no spring.

The absence of old John created a void in my life. Nothing seemed the same at the post and I left to seek new employment. I travelled up the lake by steamer. The C.P.R. was building along the south shore and the centre of activity was a town located halfway up along the shore. I landed a job. At first, the pace was acceptable; but, with operations booming in Kamloops, this town too came under the influence of wild growth. Hotels and stores were erected almost overnight, and a town once pleasantly rural was transformed into an urban brawl. Eventually I drifted, almost unknowingly back to the centre of the area, Kamloops.

Time sped by, I continued to seek some direction but none could I find. John Endera weighed heavy on my thoughts. Perhaps, I was trying to capture some of his essence. If that is true, then it eluded me. So, when it came that one day, C. B. Districk himself approached me, I was not opposed nor entirely receptive.

"Been recently elected as Speaker, son. I need someone to help out at the store. Interested?"

"Um . . . "

"Hate to leave the city at this time with the railroad drumming up new business and all, but things will get bigger and better yet, no doubt, eh, son? Well, you've thought it over then?"

"Um . . . "

"Good. I'll expect you at 6 a.m. sharp, son. Do as you're told, son, and you'll never regret it."

The years moved on and I worked steady at the store. C. B. Districk paid good wages and I had saved enough to consider buying a piece of property at the east end of the city. I knew that the goal I was seeking, nebulous though it was, lay somewhere in that piece of property: sinking new roots, while all around me the city grew. I had some plans, one which included the building of a house on the property, nothing as fine as C. B. Districk's house, but something I would be proud to bring a wife home to. Even though I had let C. B. Districk in on my plans, I was reasonably sure that my goal was only a short step away.

"I have hunger." Most times people would come into the store, buy a few items and be off; I'd never see them again. But this man I had seen before. It was my old Indian friend, the one who had guided the Chinaman and me through the Nicola Valley. And he looked like he had just got up from where the Chinaman had rolled him into the street. His hair hung in strands of dirt and his garments were caked with mud and dust. But he was not drunk, there was no drooping eyelids or turned down corners at the mouth, no, he was sober, proud and sober. A strong odor, an Indian millenium, mixed with the tobacco smell on his breath. I smiled.

"I have hunger."

I continued to smile.

"Indian hunt and fish and gather to eat. Men with hammers make animals go away; not enough fish; not enough berries."

I felt compelled to answer. "Sure, but the government gives you an allowance. They teach you to farm."

"Reserves too small for farming, too small for cattle, too small for horses. You help, give food." He stopped, I said nothing. Not enough money to fence reserve. White men drive cattle off reserve. Need more land . . . "

"But each Indian gets land, if he wants it."

"Twenty acres."

I hadn't known that. Didn't seem right, either. White men were allowed 320 acres to eke out a living. And yet, an Indian without the means or knowledge or power to meet expenses and keep cattle and cultivate land, an Indian was expected to do the same with twenty acres.

"You help."

Piling several cans on the counter, I picked up a sack and swept them in. I held my arm extended in his direction. He didn't move. He did nothing but fix his eyes on me. My arm was getting tired. He said nothing.

"You're right. No white man's food for you."

I dropped the sack and picked up an empty one. I soon had it full with eggs, vegetables, fruit and dried meat. Just as I was giving it to my friend, C. B. Districk, walked in.

"What's this? What's he doing in my store? Well, tell me, son. Eh? And where did he get enough money to buy all those goods?"

"He didn't buy them. I gave them to him. He was hung. . . "

"You what?" He grabbed the sack and threw it on the counter. I heard the eggs break. Turning, he grabbed the Indian and pushed him out the door, slamming it in his back.

"There will be no more business done with them. They can't even look after their own interests. Look at what they've done on that reserve. We ought to reduce the size of their reserve, sell the land, and make a profit! I'm telling you, son, they'll be extinct in three or four generations."

"They need land . . . "

"Land? What they need is . . . oh, speaking of land, son. I

remembered what you told me about that little piece east of town. Well, I got to thinking, son . . . "

"I'm not your SON!" I knew what was coming. There'd been no previous warning, just this sudden betrayal. My fists clenched, then unclenched. So many years of looking for . . .

"Yes, well, I got to thinking that maybe you wouldn't be the only one wanting land to settle on east of town. So . . ."

It was coming. Out of the blue. A thousand years of dreaming, a million years of searching, and then Kamloops . . .

". . . I met with a few men in the city, you know, a few men with a few dollars, and what we did was buy up that whole section east of town. Well, you've got to try to understand."

Understand? Hell!

"I've got this position in the federal government. The other men, well, they've got interests too. But we can help this city. We'll take that land and subdivide it and open up new . . . "

My fist exploded in his face. Blood spurted over his shirt and vest. What good was talk? This man heard no voice but the voice of decision, the voice of power; and that voice was his own. Talk was useless, a fist in the nose not much more.

Here I am, on the crest of the very hill from which I first saw the city. Instead of hitching a ride on a wagon, I'm leaving on my own horse with a few dollars in my pocket. Richer in material wealth, I may be and a little wiser too; but, I am a poor man.

It's not quite spring yet, the hills are still brown from the scars of winter. They're the same hills, the same ones I saw some time ago: they're the same, only a little uglier.