



A PLACE OUT OF TIME

Book Three of The Red River Trilogy

ALFRED SILVER



PROLOGUE

On a bright summer day in 1896, a pair of swallows wheeled and darted above a crowd gathered in St. John's Anglican Cathedral Cemetery in the booming young city of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Dominion of Canada. The crowd had convened for the unveiling of the monument of an extremely prominent citizen who'd recently deceased in Monterey, Mexico, where he'd travelled in hopes of recovering his health.

On the back edge of the crowd stood Sheriff Colin Inkster. He'd rather've been fishing, or even catching up on his paperwork, but fifty years on the planet had taught him that if you're going to be paid out of the public purse you'd better show yourself at public functions. Especially if you'd been born halfbreed back before it was a dirty word. He was one of the few public functionaries who was of the Old Settlers, those who'd been living their lives at The Forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers for generations before The Coming of The Canadians. He could still remember the days when the latch-string was always on the outside of the door.

The monument ceremony today was a bit less uncomfortable for Colin Inkster than the great man's State Funeral in the spring. No hanging about unobtrusively at the back edge of the crowd then. As a public official, Sheriff Inkster had been expected to serve as an official pallbearer. Fortunately, that crowd had been much larger than today's, and all he'd really had to do was stand around and look solemn. And then, as today, most of the attention had been concentrated on the smallish, black-silked figure of the widow. At the moment, she was standing on a temporary platform and taking hold of a velvet cord hanging from the top of the drapery shrouding the monument. She pulled the cord and, through gravity and some artful slipknotting, the monument was unveiled.

It was quite impressive: a tall stone cross on a pedestal, with the wide Red River as a background. Below the cross was a stonecarved wreath of oak and maple leaves, and below the wreath a representation of a Lieutenant Governor's ceremonial headgear, sword and medals. Below the medals was a long inscription:

*Sacred to the Memory of
Sir John C. Schultz K.C.M.G...*

Sheriff Inkster's eyes travelled down to the next line of the inscription, then flicked back up again. There was something odd about the initials after the name, something missing. He would've thought *M.D.* would be in there before the initials for one of the highest ranks of knighthood in the British Empire – after all, the departed was a Dr. before he was a Sir. Well, maybe all the other titles and accomplishments had crowded that out. Sheriff Inkster shrugged it off and carried on reading the words carved in stone:

*Sir John C. Schultz K.C.M.G.
Jan. 1, 1840 - April 13, 1896
Lieut-Governor of Manitoba and Keewatin, 1888-95
Member of the Commons, 1871-82
And of the Senate, 1882-88
Banished for his Loyalty in the Rebellion of 1869-70
A Devoted Patriot, a Constant Friend, a Benefactor
Of the Indians, and an Ardent and Successful Worker
In the Best Interest of the Country – he was endeared
To all who knew him.*

"Pity we *did* know him," popped out of Sheriff Inkster's mouth.

Something resembling a woman's laugh – more like an intake of breath – came from behind Sheriff Inkster. He hadn't thought there was anybody behind him, and he hadn't meant to mutter loud enough to be overheard, certainly not by Lady Schultz at

the front of the crowd. In his time he'd dealt with mobs of drunken buffalo hunters, gangs of dangerously sober bank robbers, just about everything a frontier sheriff could expect to face. But he didn't fancy going toe-to-toe with Lady Schultz.

He turned to look behind him. Standing back as far as they could while still seeming part of the crowd, were the last two people he'd expected to see at the unveiling. But, there was undeniably the grey-crowned, deeply-etched face of Mrs. Janet Sutherland, and beside it the aged-cherub face of ex-Senator John Sutherland in its oval frame of white hair and beard.

Federal Senators by nature didn't become ex, unless appointed to an even higher position, like Lieutenant Governor. People just didn't walk away from a position that guaranteed a handsome salary for life and highly elevated status. But John Sutherland had done just that. And Sheriff Inkster knew something else about John Sutherland that very few people knew – certainly no one had ever told Sir John Christian Schultz or Lady Schultz. Senator John Christian Schultz hadn't been the government's first choice for Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba; they'd offered it first to Senator John Sutherland. Senator Sutherland had respectfully declined.

The Sutherlands were of course standing arm-in-arm, with their off-hands clasped together over where their arms linked. Recently, someone had remarked to Sheriff Inkster how "cute" and "sweet" it was that the Sutherlands always had a hand on each other's shoulder, or sat close enough together that their knees were touching. He had refrained from telling that person there was nothing *cute* or *sweet* about it, and it wasn't a habit the Sutherlands had been in all their married life. Anyone who didn't know already would just twist the words of anyone who tried to explain it. And those who did know were just a trickle in the flood. Like when the Assiniboine River ran headlong into the wider Red, the Assiniboine was rolled under and drowned and what flowed on from The Forks was just the Red River.

Seeing the Sutherlands standing there threw Sheriff Colin Inkster back to a winter's morning twilight a quarter century before, out on that river so charmingly backgrounding the stone cross. There was blood on the snow, men running and yelling, a horse screaming in panic, and over all the other sounds the crowing rage of Dr. John Christian Schultz.

Sheriff Inkster blinked himself back to the present and discovered uncomfortably that he'd been baldly staring at John and Janet Sutherland. John Sutherland said softly: "You're right both ways, Colin – you do have to feel some pity for the man."

"No I don't!" As soon as that had burst unbidden out of Sheriff Inkster's mouth – seemed to be doing a lot of that today – Colin glanced around nervously, to see if it had come out loud enough to attract eavesdropping attention. There were opinions it wasn't healthy to express. Not socially healthy; not healthy for one's salary, and hence one's family.

"Oh, but you do," Janet Sutherland said, "needs must have some pity for him. You see – he never understood."

"Never understood what?"

"What's important."

John Sutherland nodded his head slowly and said: "Yes, he was a very important man."

Then the Sutherlands turned to go, but Colin Inkster said: "Senator...?"

The Sutherlands reversed and turned in tandem, like two arm-in-arm skaters who'd long been circling the same rink. John Sutherland said: "Yes, Sheriff?"

"How...?" The circumstances of the day, and the ripples around it, had ambushed Sheriff Inkster with a wave of perplexity. He hardly even knew how to say the question. "How could it've happened?"

Both Sutherlands went stony. Mrs. Sutherland said: "You know how that

happened, Colin, as well as anybody.”

“Oh, I didn’t meant *that*... That was...” That was the last thing he meant to remind them of, as if they needed reminding. “What I meant was... How could it’ve happened to last as long as it did?”

“Ah.” John Sutherland’s swan’s-down eyebrows eased upward. “That is a question.”

1

On the same day the blue and the grey armies fought their first warm-up skirmish in Missouri, a ridiculous accident a thousand miles north-west started a chain of events that would settle the destiny of more square miles of North America than the American Civil War. The chunky paddlewheeler *Pioneer*, steaming downstream from the U. S. Dakota Territory into Her British Majesty’s vast Hudson’s Bay Company territories, encountered a sandbar that hadn’t been there on her last trip north.

The captain tried all the usual methods to work her free: reversing the sternwheel, fixing spars to the wheel to try and walk her over, sending a crew ashore to fix a rope to a stout tree and try to wind her over with the capstan... Finally he announced to the passengers that the only choice left was to gradually ferry the cargo ashore until *The Pioneer* was lightened enough to float free, then drift over the sandbar and load her up again. With luck it would only take two or three days.

One of the passengers didn’t take it very patiently, but then he never took anything very patiently. He was a tremendously tall and broad young man, with red-gold hair, pale blue eyes and a ruddy complexion. He had been travelling west from civilisation for six weeks – by rail and stagecoach and finally this ungainly tub of a riverboat – and had been told just that morning that they’d be at Fort Garry and the Red River Settlement by nightfall. Now that he was twenty-one and ready to make his own way in the world, he meant to do so quickly and not be held up by incompetence when he was in reach of the place where he could start effecting his ambitions.

He crossed his long arms tightly and turned to glare at the riverbank, away from the captain and his crew fumbling to unship the dinghy they’d been using to store firewood. The riverbank was a snaggle-toothed motley of shorn-off trees and tangled branches. Stories abounded of the Red River’s demonically high spring flood this year, carrying a wall of jagged ice floes in front of it. No doubt the captain would claim that he couldn’t’ve been expected to expect this sandbar because the water had been so high earlier in the year, but the man’s business was to know the river, for God’s sake.

Then a wondrous thing appeared on the crest of the riverbank above the shorn trees: a black-haired boy riding one horse and leading another, heading north. The boy slowed his horses to a walk to look curiously at the beached wooden whale. Despite the black hair, he wasn’t dressed like an Indian, so maybe spoke English. The big passenger cupped his hands around his mouth and called: “Hallo! Is that the road to the Red River Settlement?”

The boy peered backward beyond the rump of the horse he was leading, then forward beyond the ears of the horse he was riding, then called across the water: “There ain’t no road, but this is the way we go.”

It seemed the boy was a bit dim-witted, but he did have two horses. The passenger called: “I’ll give you a shilling if you’ll let me ride one of your horses there.”

“I don’t mind, me whatever.”

The passenger picked up his valise, told the captain to deliver the rest of his luggage to Fort Garry and that he would expect a refund for the portion of the trip *The Pioneer* didn’t carry him, and jumped boots-first into the muddy water. For most men,

the depth of water and strength of the current over the sandbar would've been a debilitating wade, and the clay-mud slope strewn with broken trees a daunting climb, but for a healthy twenty-one year old who stood well over six feet tall...

The boy looked to be about thirteen years of age and was wearing sun-bleached homespun and no shoes. His clothes looked clean enough, but loose and sloppy. He was riding bareback and neither horse had a bridle, only a rope halter tied around the nose. "What's your name, lad?"

"Hugh Sutherland, sir. Well, John Hugh Sutherland to be proper, but... And you, Mister?"

"Doctor." He hadn't actually stayed on at Queen's University quite long enough to graduate, but was quite sure he knew more about modern medicine than anyone at Red River.

"Oh! Sorry, Doctor."

"Schultz. Dr. Schultz. Dr. John Christian Schultz." It seemed only thoughtful to be absolutely specific about it, so that fifty years later Hugh Sutherland would be able to definitively tell his grandchildren about the day he met Dr. John Christian Schultz. Schultz thumbed a shilling out of his waistcoat pocket and held it up to catch the sunlight. "Here's your shilling, Hugh – you'll get it when we reach my destination."

"I don't mind, me whatever." Hugh Sutherland slid down off his horse – the larger of the two, which wasn't saying much – and said: "You better ride mine – t'other one's a buffalo-runner and it ain't good for buffalo-runners to be rid except runnin' buffalo. But I don't weigh much, me – she won't mind. You ever ride bareback, Dr. Schultz?"

"Not horses."

"Well, just hold on tight and don't worry about steerin' – he'll follow where I go. If you leave the halter slack and keep both your knees clamped even-like, he won't get confused."

Schultz didn't have to actually climb onto the pony, just lift one leg over and settle on with his boot toes scraping the ground. The Sutherland boy took the lead with the buffalo-runner – whatever the goddamn hell a buffalo-runner was – and the other horse fell in behind. Once Schultz became convinced that his horse would indeed follow along with no guidance, he let his gaze drift to the right to see the country he was planning to call home. Away from the belt of broken trees along the riverbank there was a waving sea of waist-high grass with bursts of wildflowers here and there. There were a few islands of poplar groves dotted haphazardly, but other than them there was nothing to break a man's vision until the green sea met the base of the sky at a hazy horizon.

Hugh Sutherland had been right that there was no road, but there was a trail of sorts, with shorter grass and interlacing wheel ruts or possibly Indian travois. But the trail followed the bends and twists of the river, making them amble two miles for every mile of straight distance. Schultz said: "Wouldn't we make better time cutting straight north through the tall grass instead of following the trail?"

"Yup, but the musky-toes'd eat us alive. Blackfly season's almost over, but that means the musky-toes are coming on. This time of a hot, dusty day they're curled up asleep; better not to disturb 'em. The Saulteaux call us loony for bathing off the bug-perfection that builds up natural, but even the Saulteaux don't go in the tall grass in the summer 'less they have to.'

Schultz didn't argue – there'd been a couple of times the steamboat had had to tie up to shore overnight, and the buzzing biting insects that swarmed out of the riverbank brush had made sleeping near impossible. Maybe importing mosquito netting would be a good business idea. He took his notebook and pencil out of an inside pocket and managed to scrawl that down without falling off his horse.

Another thing he wasn't going to dispute young Hugh Sutherland about was the

“hot day.” Away from the river, the sun drove down like a hammer and seemed to bounce back up from the baked-hard ground. It wasn’t the cloying greenhouse heat Schultz knew from summers back home in Upper Canada, but being seared like a beefsteak was just as debilitating as being steamed like a Christmas pudding. He was glad for his wide-brimmed felt hat. Straw would’ve been even better, but he wouldn’t’ve wanted to make his first appearance at Red River looking like a ploughman.

The sun didn’t appear to bother Hugh Sutherland, though. He rode bareheaded and the nape of his neck showing between his blunt-cut hair and collarless shirt looked almost brown enough for an Indian, if it weren’t that the hair was curly instead of Indian-straight. Well, not so much curly as leafy, as though the laurel wreath on a History text Caesar had grown together, but this specimen probably had no concept of what a Caesar might be.

The boy’s blue-green eyes and black hair had put Schultz in mind of some varieties of Irish, or Highlander – which would fit with “Sutherland” – but that usually meant a complexion that would freckle and peel instead of go golden brown. Maybe the freckles had all grown together. Or maybe the boy was one of the halfbreeds who were said to make up much of the population of the Red River Settlement. All sorts of unnatural sports were bound to appear when people started mixing races.

Hugh Sutherland said over his shoulder: “So you just come to Red River for a visit, Doctor...?”

Overhearing conversations on *The Pioneer* had educated Schultz to the fact that “The Red River” meant the river; “Red River” meant the settlement. He said: “No, I’ve come to live,” he would’ve added “and to make my fortune,” but it sounded too *Jack ’n The Beanstalk*. “I have a half-brother, a Mr. McKenney, who asked me to come and help him with his business.”

“Harry McKenney?”

“Yes,” although it seemed a bit presumptuous for a peach-fuzzed boy to be referring to a grown man by his Christian name, much less the familiar “Harry” instead of the christened “Henry.” Schultz didn’t quite know what attitude to take to Hugh Sutherland. The boy certainly wasn’t rude – except in the sense of rustic – but he showed no trace of the bashful deference that should’ve overcome a barefoot youth encountering a deep-voiced, broadcloth-suited stranger who’d also revealed himself to be a Doctor. There was something a bit ridiculous about the easy-going chatter on adult matters coming out in a voice that was still changing. Well, it was to be expected that Red River people would have different manners. For half a century now, the Red River Settlement had been an island on the plains a thousand miles from the nearest civilisation, founded by refugee Highlanders shipped in to the middle of the continent through Hudson Bay while the rest of white North America was still gradually working its way west from the Atlantic seaboard.

After the horses had ambled on a little longer, Schultz said: “I could *walk* faster than these horses.”

“Well, I was been running ’em for a while ’fore I saw the boat. Guess they’s breathed out now.”

Hugh Sutherland clucked his pony into a trot and Schultz’s pony followed suit. It wasn’t the smoothest trot Schultz had ever encountered, and with no stirrups to cock his long legs to control his bouncing on the saddle – no saddle, for that matter – it was a case of gripping the coarse mane with both hands and trying not to bounce so high he bounced off. He could’ve leaned forward and hugged his arms around the horse’s neck, but that would’ve been admitting defeat and even less dignified than mane-clutching.

The pony began to shy and panic, and Schultz realised the cause was his valise banging against its neck. So he stuck out his valise-arm away from the horse and made

do with a one-handed death grip in the shaggy mane. After what seemed like a long time trotting – with Schultz oblivious to everything but his efforts to stay on the horse, and to keep intimate portions of his anatomy from getting crushed coming down from the latest bounce – Hugh Sutherland called back over his shoulder: “Guess it’s time to wake ’em again, if you don’t mind.”

Schultz was about to shout back: “*Wake who, blast it!*” when he saw that by “wake” the boy meant “walk,” as the horses mercifully slowed to a smoother gait. It seemed that Red River’s isolation had developed its own peculiar manner of speaking English that would take some getting used to. “Guess” was “gace,” “don’t” was two syllables – “doan’t” – and “dusty” was “dooshty.” *S* was often more like *sh*, in the manner of Highland Scots or Shanty Irish. Schultz was half-Irish himself, but Protestant Orange Ulster Irish. Sober Irish. Not that he didn’t take a drink from time to time, but hardly in the manner of those bog-trotting Papist hooligans that were an embarrassment to his mother’s country.

The road that wasn’t a road began to wind past scattered, squared-log huts with ragtag vegetable gardens and horse corrals. Dark-skinned, black-haired people in calico and leather loafed in the yards. Some waved at Hugh Sutherland, some stared stonily at the stranger, some didn’t look up.

Hugh Sutherland stopped the horses on the edge of a high bank where two muddy rivers joined. From studying maps, Schultz knew that the one flowing in from the west was the Assiniboine, and the wider Red would carry its waters north to Lake Winnipeg and eventually to Hudson Bay.

To the right were two oversized, blackened, snaggle tusks that Schultz knew were the ruins of St. Boniface Cathedral – a corner item in an Upper Canadian newspaper had told of the disastrous fire last winter. Down on the river shore was a floating dock with several people whistling shrilly and shouting what sounded like: “Make dog!” And across the river was a sprawling, oblong, stone and timber fortress with bastions and gunports, and the roofs of tall buildings showing over the walls.

As impressive as Fort Garry was in the middle of all this wilderness brush and prairie, it seemed to Schultz to be rather small for the continental headquarters of the world’s biggest landlord next to the Russian Czars. Except for the tiny Atlantic Colonies and the narrow strips of Upper and Lower Canada along the St. Lawrence River, and the pocket colony of British Columbia clinging to a corner of the Pacific coast, all of North America north of the United States belonged to The Hudson’s Bay Company.

Hugh Sutherland said: “Guess you might’s well climb down off your horse, Doctor – not as it’s much of a climb for you. McKenney’s store and hotel’s on t’other side, and me and the horses live on this side.”

Schultz gratefully scissored his aching lower body off the pony. As Hugh Sutherland jumped down off the buffalo-runner and onto the other horse, Schultz said: “‘This side’? Isn’t this the French side?” Hugh Sutherland looked perplexed. “My sister-in-law’s letters told me that the east bank of the Red River is the French and Catholic side, and the west bank the English Protestant side.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t go calling my grandparents English was I you. Anyway, your sister’s someways right, but it ain’t so cut and dried. You go a few miles further up the east shore – what you called the French side – you’ll find a parish called Little Britain.

“But I *was* born on the west shore, me – on Point Douglas. We don’t live there no more, but we still got fields there and folks still call us The Point Douglas Sutherlands, to tell us from all the other Sutherlands around here. After the flood of ’52 – much worse’n this year’s – we come back from the high ground and found our house on Point Douglas was gone, washed away like most the others. Then my granny looks across the river and sees our house there on the other shore. It’d floated up against some big elm

trees and settled down good as new. So 'stead of building a new house, my Da just bought some yard-land around it from the Lagimodières and we boats across in summer to work our fields.”

Schultz wasn't sure whether the boy were telling him tall tenderfoot tales. Hugh Sutherland looked down at the group shouting and whistling on the dock and said: “Looks like you're in luck, Doctor – sounds like MacDoog is back.”

“MacDoog?”

“Old gentleman named MacDougall runs the ferry. But he likes a drink, so it's sometimes hard to roust him out, and he don't repair his boats, so it can get to be a leaky crossing. When The Company gets too many complaints, they takes away his ferry licence and gives it to someone else. The new fella makes the boats all shipshape and starts runnin' it business-like, so you don't get people backed up on the dock like you see now, shoutin' themselves hoarse to rouse the ferryman's attention.”

Hugh Sutherland smiled as though he were letting the stranger in on something pleasant, and went on, “But, you see, MacDoog trusts people – if you ain't got a halfpenny for the fare, he'll say, ‘Oh, pay me next time,’ even if that's what you said the last time. And if you kill a couple chickens and bring him one, you can ride free all summer. But the new, business-like fella don't run his business that way, and after a few months getting yelled at by people expectin' credit, he gets disgusted and quits and The Company gives the licence back to MacDoog. The fixed-up boats are usually good for a year or two till they start springin' leaks again.”

Schultz waited for the pleasant part of the information, but that appeared to be all there was to it. If both the boy's stories were true, then the Red River Settlement was an even more slipshod, ramshackle, inbred, stagnant backwater than Schultz had been led to believe – which *was* pleasant news for his prospects. He said: “So just how am I ‘in luck’ that MacDoog is back?”

“Oh, he's a nice old gentleman. Give you the shirt off his back, if you weren't partic'lar.”

Hugh Sutherland turned to peer across the river, shading his eyes against the sun – this far north, the sun was still high on a June evening. “Yup, just foot passengers so they're sendin' out the dugout.”

Schultz followed the boy's eyes to the dock on the other shore, where a long, crude, dugout canoe was pushing off. He said: “I'd best get down there, then,” hefted his valise and stepped toward the path angling down the riverbank.

“Uh, Doctor...?”

“Yes, lad?”

“You said something about a shilling...?”

2

With Dr. Schultz's shilling in his pocket, Hugh Sutherland reluctantly turned his horse's head toward the cart-trail that ran between the riverfront houses and farmyards and the fields and pastures stretching out onto the prairie behind them. Hugh had two good reasons to not want to go down that cart-trail this evening: what was waiting for him at home and the stop he had to make along the way. But as his Gran always said, “The longer you put off taking your medicine, the bitterer it will taste.”

He nudged his horse into a trot and held tight to the trailing buffalo-runner's halter in case she took it in mind to gallop ahead. After a half-mile or so he slowed them to a walk as the trail wound past a farmyard much the same as all the others he'd passed by: snug little whitewashed post-and-beam house and barn with chickens roaming the yard.

There were no people in the yard, just as there hadn't been that morning, so maybe he just might get away with it.

Hugh turned the horses inland, into an unfenced pasture with a lone oak tree. Hanging from a lower limb, where he'd hung them that morning, were a pair of homemade, bull's hide and sheepskin hobbles. He reached them down and then slid down off his horse, murmuring softly in Gaelic to the buffalo-runner in hopes she wouldn't bolt again. He knew she was more used to French, but his Gran always said that Gaelic was the best language for talking to animals.

Mercifully, the buffalo-runner seemed to've run herself out and just stood there meekly while Hugh knelt to buckle on the hobbles. Maybe, if he could get her hobbled and himself away before anyone noticed him, they'd think she'd just grazed her way into the poplar grove across the field and stayed in there through the heat of the day. Just one more buckle...

"Bonjour, Jean 'ugh Sudderlan'!"

Hugh looked up. Coming across the cart-track toward him was a white-haired woman in a black dress. Hugh finished the last buckle and stood up with his cheeks flushing warm. He said in his roughcut Red River French: "Bonjour, Madame Lagimodière. I was just, um, I was..."

She said, in her Quebec convent-school French that fifty years in the wilderness couldn't muddy, "You were just bringing back the horse that you stole."

"I didn't steal her! I was just, um –"

Madame Lagimodière laughed. "I know. I saw you through the window this morning. My son-in-law and all his family went up to the lake for whitefish, so I'm alone here for a few days – plenty of time for gazing out of windows. I saw you come riding down the road and stop and stare at pretty Jouyeuse grazing in the meadow, and I could see you thinking: 'I wonder what it's like to ride a buffalo-runner?'"

Hugh couldn't say anything to that but "Yes, ma'am." Not only had she read him right, he wasn't about to argue with the Widow Lagimodière about anything. Her voyageur fiancé hadn't been able to argue her out of coming west with him in the days when there wasn't another white woman within a thousand miles of Red River. "And I know buffalo-runners ain't s'posed to be rid except for runnin' buffalo, but... I thought just once around the pasture wouldn't do no harm, and I don't weigh much... But then..."

"Yes," Mme. Lagimodière nodded, "but then as soon as you had the hobbles unbuckled she kicked up her heels and galloped south. I saw. And I saw you jump on your horse and gallop after her. I was not too worried. I knew the grandson of Kate MacPherson would either bring Jouyeuse back safe or starve to death still trying to catch her on the prairie."

"Do you have to, um... Do you have to tell your son-in-law what happened?"

She laughed, "No, I do not have to tell him – because everyone you passed by on your way back here will be asking him: 'Why was young John Hugh Sutherland leading around your new buffalo-runner?' Probably he will laugh about it. Probably. And now you had better be getting home before your mother and father think you've run away with the Blackfoot."

"Yes, ma'am."

When Hugh turned his horse off the road and onto the Point Douglas Sutherlands' home place, he could see he was in even more trouble than he'd thought. There was no one in the yard, no one shooing the cows out of the barn after milking, no one splitting firewood or weeding the vegetable garden, no one tending the outdoor clay bake-oven... That meant they were all inside and had already started supper.

He put his horse into the fenced pasture with the others and turned toward the house. The house was bigger than Mme. Lagimodière's son-in-law's, but hadn't started out

that way – new rooms had been added on to the sides and back and upper storey as the house grew with the family. As Hugh crossed the yard, the smells coming from the house reminded him that all he'd had to eat since breakfast was a stick of smoked sausage. He could smell roast beef and onions, fresh-baked bread, buttered peas... He could even smell boiled potatoes, and you had to be some hungry to smell boiled potatoes through an eight inch log wall and across a yard.

Hugh stopped at the door and washed his feet in the wooden tub by the doorstep. The water was muddy from his brothers and sisters, but Red River water was always muddy unless you let it stand overnight. He dried his feet with the least-wet of the rags hanging there, balancing himself on first his left leg and then his right, then turned to the door.

Like most Red River houses, the door to the Point Douglas Sutherlands' had a tacked-on entranceway, something like an inside-out closet, to help keep out the cold in the winter and the bugs in the summer. Hugh tugged the latchstring on the outer door and stepped inside. With the outer door closed behind him he was in semi-darkness. He could hear voices inside but was quite sure they hadn't heard him yet. He put his hand on the inner door, reminded himself to at least try and talk proper instead of the slangy way his friends learned from the buffalo hunters, took a deep breath and pushed open the door.

As he'd feared, they were all at the table and well into supper. His father and mother were at their places at either end of the table, and lined along both sides were Donald, Alexander, Morrison, Hector, Angus, Margaret, Catherine, William Robert and Christina – baby James didn't have a place at the table yet. At the midpoint of both lines of children, across the table from each other, were Hugh's grandmother and grandfather. The chair beside his grandfather's was empty.

The conversation stopped when Hugh shuffled inside and pushed the door shut with his hands clasped at the small of his back, but everybody pretended to keep on eating. All except his mother and father. Mum put down her fork and turned to look sadly and disappointedly at Hugh standing in the doorway. Da didn't have to turn, just fixed his stony blue eyes down the length of the table and over Mum's shoulder to pin Hugh against the door.

Da finished chewing his latest mouthful, swallowed and said: "John Hugh Sutherland."

"Yes, Father." It didn't seem the kind of circumstance for 'Da.'

"Come stand at your place."

"Yes, Father." Hugh walked forward slowly and stood behind his empty chair, not knowing what to expect. At the end of the last school year, Da told him he had now grown too much the man to be paddled like a child, but maybe today had put him back in the category of child.

Da said: "Do I recall correctly, John Hugh, that when you, um, *asked* this morning could you take one of the horses... to go have a look at how they're starting to rebuild St. Boniface cathedral, you... *promised* to be back by mid-afternoon to split firewood?"

"Yes, Father."

"Your mother has been worried sick that you might have taken a fall off your horse... and be, um, lying out on the prairie with a broken leg."

"I'm sorry, Mother."

"Obviously," Da went on, "both your legs are whole, and you did not... *fall* in the river and drown..."

Hugh couldn't tell whether his father's emphasis of "promised," "asked" and "fall" were because Da was especially angry about those specific parts of the day's transgressions, or because of that other thing. Da had a kind of halting way of speaking, with lots of ums and uhs, and sometimes a blank pause, and then Da would bark out the

next word that came after the gap. Maybe the halting awkwardness came from growing up in a home where English was a late add-on to Gaelic, but whatever the reason, it was just the way Da was. It could be confusing at times, but there was no confusing that right now Da was definitely angry, in his own measured way.

“So,” Da came to the inevitable question, “why is it that you promised to be home by, um, mid-afternoon, and we are... *halfway* through supper before you come through the door?”

“Well, Father...” Hugh told them about the buffalo-runner and the long chase, slightly embroidering the parts where he’d almost had his hand on her and then she’d bolted again. Some of the younger children had to cover their mouths to pretend not to be giggling, and Hugh’s grandfather was clucking his tongue and shaking his head, with something resembling a smile twisting his wiry beard.

When Hugh got to the end and the buffalo-runner back safe, Da said: “Well, John Hugh, you did the, um, responsible thing in chasing the lost horse until you caught her – but it was your own foolishness that... *caused* her to be lost. I hope this will teach you not to interfere with other people’s animals without permission.”

“Yes, Father.”

“Now sit down and have your supper. And tomorrow you will clean out all the cow stalls.”

“Yes, Father.”

“Say a grace before you eat.”

Hugh murmured: “Thank you, Lord, for what I am about to receive,” adding silently: *And for me not receiving what I thought I was gonna get*, then reached for the beef and potatoes.

When he’d gobbled enough to slow down a little, Hugh took out Dr. Schultz’s shilling and said: “I earned a shilling today anyways – I mean anyway. I wouldn’ta asked him for money, but he offered.”

All eyes along the table were trained at the bright coin he was holding up. Coins weren’t all that common at Red River; The Company printed paper money set at one pound sterling or five shillings. There were a fair number of American and English gold and silver coins about, but most small change was done in buffalo sinews – flat, wide, white strips that peeled apart into better sewing thread than money could buy.

Mum blinked from the coin to Hugh and said baffledly: “*Who* offered?”

Hugh told them of the stranded steamboat and of the big, blonde man who’d waded across the sandbar but wasn’t much of a rider. “Said he plans to live here, too, at least a while. And he’s a doctor, too.”

Da said: “Well, we could do with another doctor. With poor Dr. Bunn, um, taking his heart attack in the flood, we’ve only got Dr. Bird and Dr. Cowan, and Dr. Cowan’s... *first* duty’s to The Company.”

Mum said brightly: “No, we’ve got three doctors, counting Dr. Black. Do you remember what Sally Ross said about Dr. Black?”

Da nodded and allowed his lecture-set mouth to raise a little at one corner. Seven year old Margaret said: “*Granny* Ross?”

Mum nodded. Granny Sally Ross was no relation to the Point Douglas Sutherlands, but she was “Granny” to everyone at Red River who didn’t have their own grey hair. She was an Okanagan princess who’d married a fur trader who retired to Red River and got appointed Sheriff and Postmaster. Besides being a wife and mother, and mother-in-law to Dr. Black, she was a midwife and all-round medicine woman. Many early mornings when Hugh’d been helping in the fields on Point Douglas, he’d seen old Sally Ross making her way back home from some neighbours’ where she’d been up all night.

Mum explained to the rest of the table: “When the news came from Canada that the Reverend Mister Black had achieved his Doctor of Divinity and was now Dr. Black, Sally Ross clapped her hands and said: ‘Now he is a doctor and can make us all well!’”

Even those at the table too young to understand laughed. Donald, Hugh’s only older brother, said as though putting the capper on it, “Ignorance is bliss.” Poor Donald was always mis-stepping by figuring that being the oldest meant he had to pretend to be all grown up. And he read too much, so he could only see things in black and white.

Mum pursed her mouth, then said gently: “Donald, it is true that Mrs. Ross never went to school, but that doesn’t mean she is ignorant. If you thought on it a little longer, it might occur to you that perhaps she was not being a joke, she was making a joke.”

Hugh became aware that the only person at the table who hadn’t laughed when everyone else had was his grandmother. She was sitting rigidly, with her long back and wide shoulders even straighter than usual and her eyes fixed on him across the table. She said in almost a whisper, “You met a tall, golden-haired man by a river, and he offered you a silver coin... and you took it...?”

Granda said: “Now, Catherine, someone who spends as much time in kirk as ye shouldnae be paying any heed to auld superstitions.”

Usually Gran would’ve responded with something like: “*If there is any half-heathen in this family, Alexander Sutherland, it is not me,*” but she said nothing, just kept on staring at Hugh as though someone had stepped on her grave.

Hector said: “More potatoes, please.”