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Translator's Introduction

Edward Baxter

THERE IS EVERY REASON to believe that if Jules Verne had lived another year he would have made substantial corrections to the manuscript of *The Golden Volcano*. If he had reread the book carefully, he would surely have spotted the blanks, the spelling errors (some perhaps caused by a misreading of his handwriting), and the mistakes in chronology and geography that are to be found throughout the manuscript.

In this translation, blanks have been filled in and errors in geography and spelling corrected as far as possible, some by the editor of this edition and some by the translator.

The most useful source for verifying the spelling of names and identifying individuals has been *Klondike: The Life and Death of the Last Great Gold Rush* by the late Pierre Berton (McClelland and Stewart: Toronto, 1963). "Wallace's Map of the Klondike and Indian River Gold Fields," dated February 12, 1898, and reprinted in 1962, was also a valuable source of information. Other useful works included *The Canadian Encyclopedia* and *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*, edited by Gerald Halowell.

Verne used various units of measurement and currency in this novel: kilometers, leagues, miles, hectares, francs, sous, piaster, and dollars. These have all been converted to English units. A kilometer is equal to about five-eighths of a mile. A league is equal to four kilometers, or about two and a half miles. A hectare is equal to two and a half acres.

A franc at that time was worth about twenty cents, and a sou was the equivalent of a cent. A piaster was the same as a dollar, and the word is still in common use in colloquial speech in Quebec.

I have been fortunate to have the constant support and advice of my wife, Barbara, who read every chapter as I finished it and gave me the benefit of her keen sense of readable English prose style. She is not responsible, however, for any errors or shortcomings.

I

An Uncle's Legacy

ON MARCH 16, in the antepenultimate year of this century, the letter carrier whose route included Jacques Cartier Street in Montreal delivered a letter addressed to Mr. Summy Skim, at house number twenty-nine.¹

The letter read: "Mr. Snubbin, notary public, presents his compliments to Mr. Summy Skim and requests that he call at his office without delay concerning a matter of interest to him."

What did the notary want to see Mr. Skim about? Like everyone in Montreal, Skim knew Mr. Snubbin, a very competent man, a reliable and prudent counselor. A Canadian by birth, he was head of the best law firm in the city—the one headed sixty years earlier by the famous Master Nick, or Nicolas Sagamore, of Huron origin, whose patriotic fervor had led him to play a role in the dreadful Morgaz affair, which created a considerable stir about 1837.*

Skim was somewhat surprised to receive a letter from Mr. Snubbin, with whom he had no dealings at the time. However, he accepted the invitation that had been offered. Half an hour later he was at Bonsecours Market Square, being ushered into the office where Mr. Snubbin was waiting for him.

"A very good day to you, Mr. Skim," said the notary, getting to his feet. "May I present my respects."

*This touching tragedy is the subject of a novel entitled *Family without a Name*, in the series *Extraordinary Voyages*.

“And the same to you,” replied Skim, taking a seat near the table.

“You are the first to arrive, Mr. Skim.”

“The first, Mr. Snubbin? Have you invited several people to your office, then?”

“Two,” replied the notary. “Mr. Ben Raddle, your cousin, should have received a letter, as you did, inviting him to come.”

“You should say ‘will receive,’ instead of ‘should have received,’ because Ben Raddle is not in Montreal at the moment.”

“Will he be back soon?”

“In three or four days.”

“I am sorry to hear that.”

“What you have to tell us is urgent, then?”

“In a way, yes,” replied the notary. “But I will give you the details, and perhaps you will be kind enough, as soon as Mr. Raddle is back, to pass on to him the information I am instructed to give you.”

The notary put on his glasses, shuffled a few papers lying on the table, and took a letter out of its envelope. Before reading it, he said, “Mr. Raddle and you, Mr. Skim, are the nephews of Mr. Josias Lacoste . . .”

“That’s right. My mother and Ben Raddle’s mother were his sisters, but they died seven or eight years ago, and since then we’ve lost all contact with our uncle. He had left Canada and gone to Europe by that time. Some important issues had kept us apart. We’ve never heard from him since, and we have no idea what has become of him.”

“Well,” replied Snubbin, “I have just received word of his death, in a letter dated February 25.”

Although all contact between Josias Lacoste and his family had long since ended, this information had a profound effect on Summy Skim. Since he and his cousin had lost both their parents and since each was an only child, they had no immediate family but each other, and their firm friendship made this relationship all the closer. He lowered his head and his eyes filled with tears as he realized that, of the entire family, only he and Ben Raddle were left. They had, of course, made several attempts to find out what had become of their uncle, and they regretted the fact

that he had broken off all contact with them. Perhaps they were even hoping they might meet again some time, and now death had shattered that hope.

Besides, Josias Lacoste had always been rather uncommunicative by nature, and of a very adventurous temperament. It was now some twenty years since he had left Canada to make his fortune in the world. He was unmarried and had a small inheritance, which he had hoped to build up through speculation. Had that hope been fulfilled? Was it not more likely, with his well-known penchant for taking enormous risks, that he had been ruined? Would his nephews, his only heirs, receive a few scraps from his inheritance? It is only fair to say that Summy Skim and Ben Raddle had never thought about that, and with his passing, it seemed unlikely that they would think about it now in their grief at the loss of their last relative.

Snubbin left his client to his thoughts and waited to be asked a few questions, which he was prepared to answer. He was well aware of this family's situation and of the fine reputation they enjoyed in Montreal. He knew that, with the death of Josias Lacoste, Summy Skim and Ben Raddle were the last remaining members of the family. And since the governor of the Klondike had notified him of the death of the prospector who owned Claim 129 on the Fortymile River,² he had invited the two cousins to come to his office and find out what rights they had inherited from the deceased.

"Mr. Snubbin," asked Skim, "was it on the seventeenth of February that our uncle died?"

"The seventeenth of February, Mr. Skim."

"That's twenty-nine days ago now."

"Twenty-nine, yes. That's how long it took the news to reach me."

"Was our uncle off somewhere in Europe, then, in some distant land?" continued Skim, convinced that Josias Lacoste had never set foot in North America since he left.

"Oh no," replied the notary, holding out a letter bearing Canadian stamps.

“So,” said Skim, “he was in Canada and we didn’t know about it?”

“Yes, in Canada. But in the most remote part of the Dominion, near the border between our country and the American territory of Alaska. It’s a region with which communication is slow and difficult.”

“You’re referring to the Klondike, I presume, Mr. Snubbin.”

“Yes, the Klondike, where your uncle went to live about ten months ago.”

“Ten months,” repeated Skim, “and it didn’t even occur to him as he was crossing the continent on his way to that mining region to come to Montreal and shake hands with his nephews. It would have been our last opportunity to see him!”

Summy Skim was deeply affected by that thought.

“What would you expect?” replied the notary. “Mr. Lacoste was probably in a hurry to get to the Klondike, like so many thousands of others—sick people, I call them, infected with that gold fever that has claimed so many victims and will continue to claim many more! The new placers have been invaded from every corner of the world. After Australia, there was California, after California, the Transvaal, after the Transvaal, the Klondike, and after the Klondike there will be other gold-bearing regions, and so it will go on until Judgment Day—I mean until the last deposit has been exhausted.”

Then Snubbin revealed the information contained in the governor’s letter. It was, in fact, early in 1897 when Josias Lacoste had set foot in Dawson City, the capital of the Klondike,³ armed with the obligatory prospecting equipment. Since July of 1896, when gold had been discovered in Gold Bottom Creek, a tributary of Hunker Creek,⁴ the Klondike region had been attracting attention. The following year Lacoste came to the gold fields, to which so many miners were already streaming. He wanted to use the little money he had left to buy a claim, never doubting that he would make a fortune. After doing his research, he purchased Claim 129, located on the Fortymile River, a tributary of the Yukon, the great Canadian-Alaskan waterway.

“It seems,” Snubbin continued, “that this claim had not yet produced

as much profit as Mr. Lacoste expected. However, it did not appear to be exhausted, and perhaps your uncle might have had as much success with it as he hoped. But there are so many dangers threatening the unfortunate immigrants in that far-off region,⁵ the terrible winter cold, diseases of epidemic proportions, the privations to which so many unfortunates succumb! So many of them come back poorer than when they left!”

“Could it have been these privations that killed our uncle?” asked Summy Skim.

“No,” replied the notary, “the letter does not indicate that he was reduced to that extremity. He succumbed to typhus, which is so terrible in that climate and which claims so many victims. As soon as he was infected with the disease, Mr. Lacoste left his claim and went back to Dawson City, where he died. Since he was known to have come from Montreal, news of his passing was sent to me, so that I could notify the family.”

Summy Skim was lost in thought, pondering the situation in which this relative of his might have found himself in the course of what was probably an unprofitable operation. Had he perhaps used up the last of his resources after buying the claim at an exorbitant price as so many imprudent prospectors did? Had he died penniless, still owing money to the workers he had hired? All these thoughts went through Skim’s mind.

“Mr. Snubbin,” he said, “it’s possible that our uncle was heavily in debt when he died. Well—and I guarantee that my cousin Raddle will back me up in this—we’ll never let the name of Lacoste default in its obligations. It was our mothers’ name, and if there are sacrifices to be made, we won’t hesitate to make them. As soon as possible, we must take inventory . . .”

“All right! Let me stop you there, my dear sir,” replied the notary. “Knowing you as I do, I’m not surprised to hear you say that. But I don’t think there is any reason to anticipate the sacrifices you mention. It is very likely that your uncle died without making his fortune, but we must not forget that he was the owner of a claim on the Fortymile River, and the value of that property may be enough to meet every need. Now this

property belongs jointly to you and your cousin Ben Raddle, since you are Mr. Lacoste's next of kin and have a legal claim to his estate."

Snubbin acknowledged, however, that they would have to proceed with some degree of caution. The inheritance could not be transferred until any outstanding debts had been settled. A statement of assets and liabilities would be drawn up, after which the heirs would make a decision concerning the estate.

"I will look after this matter, Mr. Skim," he added, "and obtain the most reliable information available. After all, who knows? A claim is a claim! It may have produced little or nothing so far, but we don't know that yet. One lucky blow with the pick is all it takes to fill your pockets, as the prospectors say."

"I agree, Mr. Snubbin, and if our uncle's claim is of any value, we'll be anxious to get the best price we can for it."

"No doubt, but does your cousin share that view?"

"I should hope so. I don't think it would ever occur to Ben to work the claim himself."

"Who knows, Mr. Skim? Mr. Raddle is an engineer. He might be tempted. What if he were he to learn, for instance, that your uncle's claim is located on a good vein?"

"I assure you, Mr. Snubbin, he will definitely not go out to see it! In any case, he's supposed to be coming back to Montreal in a few days. We'll discuss the matter, and then we'll ask you to proceed, either to sell the claim on the Fortymile River to the highest bidder or, as I fear may possibly be the case, to arrange to honor our uncle's obligations, if it turns out that he went into debt with this operation."

When the conversation was finished, Skim took his leave of the notary, promising to come back in two or three days, and returned to the house on Jacques Cartier Street where he and his cousin lived.

Summy Skim was the son of an English father and a French Canadian mother. This old family traced its ancestry back to the time of the conquest of 1759. They had settled in the Montreal district of Lower Canada, where their principal fortune consisted of an income property that included woods, arable fields, and grassland.

Summy Skim was thirty-two years old, above-average height, with pleasant features, deep blue eyes, a blond beard, and the sturdy build of man accustomed to outdoor life. He was the typical friendly French Canadian, like his mother before him. On his property in that favored part of the Dominion, he led the enviable life of the gentleman farmer, free from cares and ambitions. His fortune, while not large, was sufficient to enable him to satisfy his modest tastes, and he had never wanted or needed to add to it. He was able to indulge his love of hunting in the vast open spaces of the region or in the game-filled forests that covered the greater part of it. He pursued his passion for fishing in the whole network of rivers and streams flowing into the St. Lawrence River, not to mention the many broad lakes to be found in the northern part of the continent.

The house owned by the two cousins, while not luxurious, was comfortable. It was located in one of the quietest neighborhoods of Montreal, away from the industrial and commercial center of the city. There they spent the harsh Canadian winters (although the country is at the same latitude as southern Europe), impatiently awaiting the return of summer. But the fierce winds, unhindered by any mountain range, and the squalls that brought freezing arctic air raged unchecked and with extraordinary violence.

As the capital of the country since 1843, Montreal might have offered Summy Skim an opportunity to participate in public affairs,⁶ but he was very independent by nature, seldom mingled with the high society of government officials, and had a deathly fear of politics. Besides, he was quite willing to accept British sovereignty, which was more apparent than real. He had never supported any of the parties that divide the Dominion* and scorned the world of officialdom.⁷ He was, in short, a philosopher who liked to take life as it came, with no ambition whatsoever.

In his opinion, any change that might occur in his life could only bring trouble, worries, and a loss of material well-being.

It is not hard to see why this philosopher had never given any thought

*Dominion is the name of Canada.

to marriage and was not thinking about it now, although he had passed his thirty-second birthday. Perhaps, if he had not lost his mother, he would have provided her with a daughter-in-law just to please her—for mothers, as we know, love to perpetuate themselves in their grandchildren. If he had married, there is no doubt whatever that his wife would have shared his tastes. Somewhere among the many Canadian families that often have more than two dozen children, a suitable heiress would have been found either in town or in the countryside, and the union would have been a happy one. But it was now five years since Madame Skim had died, three years after her husband, and while she had long been thinking about a marriage for her son, the son himself had not given it much thought. In all likelihood, now that his mother was no longer there, the possibility of matrimony would never enter his mind.

As soon as the temperature began to moderate in that harsh climate, and the sun, rising earlier in the morning, announced the imminent return of summer, Summy Skim would get ready to leave the house on Jacques Cartier Street, although he had never persuaded his cousin to return to rural living so early in the year. He would go to their farm at Green Valley, some twenty miles north of Montreal on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River. There he would resume the country life that had been interrupted by the rigors of winter, which covered all the streams with ice and the fields with a thick blanket of snow. He would be back among his farmers, honest folk who had been in the family's service for half a century. How could they not feel a sincere affection and an unflinching devotion to a kind and generous master, who was always eager to do a favor, even at considerable personal sacrifice? There were many demonstrations of joy when he arrived and many expressions of regret when it came time for him to leave.

Year after year, the property at Green Valley brought in about twenty thousand francs, which the cousins shared, because the estate, like the house in Montreal, was owned jointly. A large-scale farming operation was carried on since the soil produced good crops of fodder and grains. The income derived from this supplemented what was provided by the