

The Chignecto Marine Transport Railway Company

“My father,” said Sir Daniel Kininmonth, settling back in his deep leather armchair, a glass of his favourite whisky in his left hand, his feet pointing luxuriously towards a blazing fire, “applied his knowledge and experience in a number of different projects, not all of which were immediately known to even his closest collaborators.”

The reporter from *The Ross-Shire Metropolitan Recorder and Evening Standard* flipped open his leather-bound black note, licked his pencil and prepared to make notes.

Sir Daniel smiled indulgently. “You may make notes if you wish, Mr - ah - ”

“McManus,” said the young man eagerly.

Sir Daniel paused and looked askance at him. “McManus, eh? Not from Glasgow by any chance, are you, sir?”

“No, sir, I was born and bred in the town of Blackwater, just one stop along the Railway,” said the reporter.

“Good, good: my father had no time for the people of Glasgow. Well, no matter.” Sir Daniel continued: “One of my father’s overseas concerns was in Canada - Nova Scotia to be exact. Been to Nova Scotia, McManus?”

“Never, sir,” confessed the youth, who had never been beyond Inverness to the east and Lochinver to the west.

“You should, one day - apart from its many indisputable natural beauties, there is the lasting memorial to my father’s ingenuity and engineering excellence, the Chignecto Marine Transport Railway.”

“Chignecto,” said McManus, scribbling furiously. “Nova Scotia.”

“Bay of Fundy, Chignecto Bay, St Lawrence River,” added Sir Daniel, rattling off the names confusingly. The reporter scribbled them all down, certain that, on his return to his mother’s house that night, he would be able to sit down with the *Scottish Universal Layman’s Knowledge Series* atlas, and work out what was what.

“Of course, everyone remembers,” continued Sir Daniel blithely, waving his glass towards the fire, “that that hopeless man Ketchum had tried this once before, and failed.”

“Ketchum?” asked McManus tentatively.

“Mr. Henry George Cloppum Ketchum,” elaborated Sir Daniel. “Director of the first attempt to open up a land-bridge for ships between the Bay of Fundy and the Gulf of St Lawrence. The plan was sound enough - raise the ships from the water at one end of the isthmus, load them on to a train, drive the train the seventeen miles to the other end, unload them back into the water. Thereby saving a dangerous sea-voyage of some 500 miles around the treacherous coast of Nova Scotia, and so permitting a busy shipping route to be opened up between the interior of Canada and the eastern seaboard of the United States.”

McManus busily flipped page after page of his notebook, wishing one more time that he had mastered shorthand. He would start in on that correspondence course again, just as soon as he had filed this story, his most important one to date, an interview with the son of the brilliant railway engineer, Sir Alexander Auchmuty Seth Kininmonth. In the meantime -

“But of course, no sooner had Ketchum embarked on this grand scheme - remarkably similar, I would add, to my father’s own scheme for transporting the fishing fleet from Dingwall to Ullapool, which, as you will know, came into operation in 1913 - no sooner, I say, had Ketchum embarked on this scheme in 1888, and started to build the docks, the rail-bed and the track, than his backers declared bankruptcy in 1890 - some small matter of Baring Brothers Bank in London and a

crisis of liquidity caused by events in South America - and the whole thing had to be cancelled. It broke Ketchum's heart, I believe: he died shortly afterwards. My father, however, seeing in Ketchum's story an echo of what might have happened to his own schemes had he not been made of sterner stuff, acquired such plans as had survived the years, studied them carefully, rectified some schoolboy design errors, and put in a bid with the Government of the Dominion of Canada, to complete the scheme."

"Remarkable," breathed McManus, his hand already cramping with the effort of having to write so much detail.

"Did you know," asked Sir Daniel, after a moment's reflection, during which he distractedly poured himself another large whisky and, observing that the reporter had not yet touched his own dram, omitted to offer him any more, "that Sir John Fowler had a hand in Ketchum's original scheme? Yes, that very same Sir John Fowler, in whose home we now sit, my father having bought the estate - lock, stock and barrel - after the sad demise of that entire family. Ah, the Fowlers - where are they now?" he asked rhetorically. "All gone in the Stock Market crash of 1900. Lady Fowler - but no matter, where was I?"

"Sir Alexander acquired the plans -" offered McManus, reading the last lines he had scribbled.

"Ah yes, Ketchum's plans - and put in a bid, which was accepted, to complete the project and so bring economic prosperity to the region. Much as his Great Benefactory Railway Company did for this part of the world, you will understand. Of course, it was not simply a question of unrolling the plans and finishing the job - oh, no."

"No?" asked McManus naively, partly sensing that this was precisely what he was supposed to ask at this juncture. The question was drawn from him, as it might be by a Hypnotist or Spirit-Magnetist on the programme of the Popular Variety Show at the Dingwall Mission Theatre on any Saturday night.

"Oh no," repeated Sir Daniel comfortably. "Such a supposition would be foolish in the extreme. No, no, sir - not that." He wagged an admonitory finger at the hapless McManus. "Chignecto, you are probably not aware, was the word used by the natives of those parts, for a Great Swamp. The Micmacs, I believe they were called, the natives."

"Ah, like our navvies - the MacMicks?" asked McManus, ill-advisedly attempting a piece of humour.

Sir Daniel fixed his gaze upon the young man for several long seconds, saying nothing. McManus lowered his eyes, flushed and muttered an apology. Sir Daniel then looked at the massive grandfather clock which ticked slowly and profoundly in the corner. McManus felt his whole career slipping away from him - all of his hopes one day to become Chief Reporter - perhaps Editor - of *The Ross-Shire Metropolitan Recorder and Morning Star*. All because of one ill-considered witticism. His mother had warned him - his tongue would be his downfall.

Sir Daniel Kininmonth made a mental note to have a word with Mr. Hardie, the editor-in-chief of the newspaper, when next he encountered him upon the links at Inverlael: it might be better if this young man was given another desk at the paper - book reviews, boxing-matches, petty crime, something less likely to cause offence to Good Society.

At last, observing the young man's utter confusion and his own victory, he continued. "A great swamp it was indeed. It was said that at one point, on a boggy stretch more than a mile long, Ketchum had had to put down rock to a depth of sixty feet, to provide a solid foundation for the railway. But my father had had the

experience from the building of the Ullapool Railway, and was a master of his craft. To him, a swamp, however great, was but a bog - and he had conquered bog of every conceivable quality. Such swampy sections as still existed, he bridged with pontoons; he repaired such depredations as had been made upon the docks by the wind, the rain, the tides - remarkable tides, McManus: read about the tides on the Bay of Fundy one day - it will sober you up - and the men of Nova Scotia - he repaired and strengthened those docks, and introduced the very latest hydraulic lifting machinery there, so that even the largest ships could readily be raised and lowered. And in one year only, the great year of 1917, he revolutionised the lives of the Nova Scotians."

Sir Daniel considered the vast portrait of his father, which hung over the fireplace. It depicted Sir Alexander, gazing firmly from Braemore Height down the glen to Loch Broom and the ocean beyond. In the middle distance, two express trains could be seen spouting smoke and steam as they passed each other on the shores of the loch, one racing for Ullapool, the other for London. Under the great engineer's left hand could be seen the headworks of the mighty hydraulic lift which brought the trains up and down the steep mountain of Braemore. In his right hand, the plans for the recently-completed airship terminus at Lochinver. Finally, in the far distance, the smoke of the many manufactories in Ullapool could be seen, and the ships which hourly touched there from across the North Atlantic Ocean. In silent appreciation, Sir Daniel raised his empty glass to Sir Alexander, then topped it up again from the decanter.

"Thus was born the Chignecto Marine Transport Railway - a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Great Benefactory Railway Company, which strove always to better the lives of all the peoples of the world. That was," he said pointedly, lest McManus make some further foolish *faux pas*, "before I brought the Company back into the private ownership of the family, in order to improve cash-flow and so on and so forth. Chignecto was sold off, of course, in 1937, after the Canadian Liberation War conducted against Greenland: when the naval hostilities ceased in that region, it was likely to run at a loss."

He glanced again at the grandfather clock. Time for a game of cards with his dear wife, before dinner. Perhaps there would be venison tonight? He looked at the young reporter sternly: "Have you any questions, McManus?"

McManus hurriedly scanned all the scribbled notes he had made, trying desperately to determine whether Sir Daniel wanted a positive or negative answer. But before he could reach any kind of conclusion on this ticklish matter, Sir Daniel was on his feet and rubbing his hands. "I'll have MacIvor show you out," he said and strode towards the study-door and threw it open, bellowing for the servant. Gathering up his belongings as best he could, McManus followed him and was soon driven out into the sleet and wind of a September afternoon, wondering how to spell 'Micmacs' correctly.