The Duel

D.W. Higgins

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"Honor pricks me on. Yea, but how if honor prick me off when I come on? How then? Call honor set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. What is honor? A word. What is that word, honor? Air. Therefore I'll none of it." Shakespeare.

EARLY on the 19th day of July, in the year 1858, in company with some twelve hundred other adventurous spirits who had left California to try their luck in the Fraser River gold fields, which were then attracting the attention of the world, I landed from a rowboat on the waterfront of Esquimalt town. We had followed in the wake of some 20,000 other gold−seekers. The old steamer Sierra Nevada, in which we voyaged, was overladen with freight and passengers, and it seemed a miracle that she survived the heavy winds and waves that beset her path. We were nine days on the way the voyage is now made with ease by moderately fast vessels in two and a half days. The discomfort was great. Hundreds of the passengers men, women and children unable to secure berths or sleeping accommodations of any kind, lay about on the decks and in the saloons in the abandon of despair and hopelessness. Only a few escaped an attack of seasickness. I was among the fortunate ones; having voyaged much in earlier life I was seasoned to all conditions of weather.

I had a stateroom in which there were three berths. One of these was occupied by G.B. Wright, who afterwards rose to eminence on the Mainland as a pioneer merchant and road builder. He was a bright, energetic man at that time, young and chock full of enterprise and ability. The remaining room−mate was a young Englishman who said his name was Geo. Sloane. He was very intelligent, and having lately left college in England, was fond of quoting Latin and Greek phrases and reciting poetry, which he did very well. In the next room was an American named Johns, whom I had known at San Francisco; another American named Crickmer, also a San Francisco acquaintance, and a third young man who called himself John Liverpool. This last person was English, he said. He was of a jovial disposition, smoked a good deal and drank brandy from an earthen gallon jug. He could tell a good story, and Wright and I the others being prostrated with seasickness used to lean over the rail and listen to his fund of anecdote and adventure. Sometimes he would make us laugh immoderately, and at others our hearts would be stirred with pity as he related some pathetic story of his early life.

About the fifth day out a passenger a woman died, and on the evening of the same day she was buried at sea, Captain Blethen reading the funeral service as the corpse, sewed in canvas and weighted with iron, was shot over the side. I have often wondered how any of us escaped with our lives. The condition of the ship was abominable; the water was bad, there was no attempt at sanitation, and the stench from the hold was unbearable. The food was wretched, and so the brandy in Mr. Liverpool's jug was at the ebb−tide mark long before we sigs. The condition of the ship was abominable; the water was bad, there was no attempt at sanitation, and the stench from the hold was unbearable. The food was wretched, and so the brandy in Mr. Liverpool's jug was at the ebb−tide mark long before we sighted Cape Flattery.

On the sixth night the head wind stiffened to a fierce gale, and in spite of all we could do to reassure the wretched people on board, many resigned themselves to their fate and few expected to see land again. That night two men, who had come aboard healthy and strong, succumbed and were buried at sea the next morning. The afternoon of the seventh day was bright and warm. The wind died away, the sea calmed down and the steamer began to make fairly good time. The sick people gradually crawled from their hiding places, looking wan and wretched enough, but loud in the expression of their thanks that they had come through the tempest with their

lives. Seated on a steamer chair I presently observed a young woman of eighteen or twenty years, who had struggled from below. She was pale and thin, and bore on her face a look of wretchedness and misery. I got the impression that when in health she must be very pretty, and I recall that she had a wealth of dark brown hair, a pair of glorious hazel eyes and regular features. She sat watching the gulls as they rode on the crests of the billows, and I thought I had never seen a prettier picture. I was tempted to speak to her, but as I was on the point of advancing a burly figure pushed by me and, addressing the girl, engaged her in conversation. Their tone was low, but they seemed to be acquainted. Mr. Liverpool, for it was he who had put my amatory "nose out of joint," hung about her till bedtime. When Liverpool passed me on the way to his stateroom, I rallied him as to his pretty acquaintance.

"Yes," said he, "she is pretty. Her name is Bradford—Miss Bradford. She is very unfortunate. Her mother was the lady who died and was buried the other day, and she is alone in the world. I knew them in San Francisco. The mother kept a boarding−house on Powell Street. They were on their way to open a boarding−house in Victoria, but of course that is all over now and she will have to go back."

The next morning I was early on deck and there sat the pretty girl with the hazel eyes again watching the gulls as they skimmed over the surface of the waves. The morning was warm and pleasant, the land was in sight, and the assurance of the Captain that next day we should be at Esquimalt brought the color to many pallid cheeks and the lustre to many dull eyes. At this moment Sloane, advancing with difficulty along the crowded deck, reached the girl. He held in one hand a cup of tea and in the other a plate on which were an orange and some biscuits. As he was about to hand the articles to the girl, Liverpool, who was standing near, took the cup and plate and himself handed them to Miss Bradford. The girl never looked at Liverpool, but she flashed her beautiful orbs full in Sloane's face, and thanked him in a low, sweet voice. Sloane, who seemed somewhat disconcerted at Liverpool's interference, hesitated a moment and then walked to where Wright and I were watching events.

"You seem," said I, "to be making progress in that direction."

"Well, you see," he replied, "I was up at dawn, and you know the saying about the early bird, etc. I have had a long talk with her. Since her mother is dead she has no friends left except a brother at San Francisco, and she intends to go back by this very boat. She has no money either. It was all in her mother's purse, and when she died money and purse disappeared—stolen by some miscreant. She is very intelligent, very sweet, and, oh! of such a grateful and confiding nature. She told me everything about herself and I know all about her and her belongings."

"Have a care," said Wright. "My experience of steamboat acquaintances is rather unfavorable."

"My dear fellow," rejoined Sloane, "there are acquaintances and acquaintances. This girl is as good as gold. What do you say? Let's start a subscription for her. I'll give twenty dollars."

The idea was adopted, and in about ten minutes Sloane was on his way back to the girl with a considerable sum—I think about one hundred dollars. I accompanied him. Liverpool stood behind the girl's chair, conversing with her in a low tone.

"Miss Bradford," began Sloane, speaking very slowly and very low, blushing like a schoolboy the while, "I have brought you a small sum as a loan from a few of your fellow−passengers. You can repay it at your leisure."

He was about to place the coin in the girl's out−stretched hand when Liverpool wrenched the money from his grasp and tossed it overboard.

"Look here!" he exclaimed, "this girl is not a beggar, and if she stands in need of money I have enough for both."

Sloane was speechless with indignation. His eyes blazed with anger. "You d——d cad," he began, and then recollecting himself he paused and bit his lip.

"Go on," said Liverpool; "I'm listening."

"Miss Bradford," said Sloane, ignoring Liverpool, "do you countenance—do you approve of this man's conduct?"

I looked at the young woman. Her face had assumed an ashen hue; her lips were colorless and her beautiful eyes were filled with tears. She half rose and then sank back and seemed about to faint.

Sloane still held the reins of his passion and refused to let it get away with him, but he was livid with repressed rage.

"Do you," he at last managed to say to Miss Bradford, "do you approve of this man's beastly conduct? Has he any right to control your movements, or to say what you shall or shall not do? Please answer me, and if he has a

claim upon you I will go away and trouble you no more."

The girl rose from the chair and was about to reply when Liverpool's right arm shot out and his fist struck Sloane full in the face between the eyes. Sloane staggered, but he did not fall. In an instant he recovered his balance, and, quicker than it takes to tell it, he seized Liverpool by the throat with one hand while with the other he delivered about a dozen smashing blows in rapid succession upon his antagonist's face and body. It was all over in half a minute, and Liverpool, his face streaming with blood and half dead from the choking and pounding, dropped into the chair which the girl had vacated as she fled from the scene. I took Sloane away and got a piece of raw meat from the steward to bind over his eyes, which were both blackened.

The next morning the passengers landed at Esquimalt from the steamer in small boats (there were no wharves), and having seen nothing of Liverpool and Miss Bradford since the affray I began to hope that we had heard the last of them—not because I was not deeply interested in the fair creature (for I may as well confess that I was), but I feared if the two men came together again there would be a tragic outcome. We walked to Victoria in the afternoon and found the town crowded with gold−seekers. Houses were few and the whole town−site was covered with miners' tents. There must have been 10,000 people there at the time of which I write. Every country on the face of the earth was represented. The streets and fields were alive with people. Fort and Yates Streets, from Cook nearly to Quadra, and from the present line of Fort to Johnson Street, was a big swamp where pond lilies and cat−tails flourished. At Cook Street on the East, and James Bay on the south, where the Government Buildings now stand, there were dense forests of oak, cedar and fir. The Hillside estate was thickly covered with standing timber and grouse and deer in large numbers and an occasional bear could be bagged within a few minutes' walk of the Finlayson homestead.

Crickmer, Johns and I had brought a tent and a good supply of food. We pitched, as nearly as I can remember, in an open space near where the Dominion Hotel stands. Sloane we invited to camp with us. Although he was a casual acquaintance we liked him from the start, and his plucky display of science when he beat John Liverpool endeared him to us. The first night we slept on a bed of fir boughs. In the morning we built a fire, and Crickmer, who was a good cook and had been accustomed to camping out, began to prepare the morning meal. Presently he came inside and lowering the flap of the tent said: "Boys, who do you think are our next door neighbors? Guess."

We all gave it up, and he exclaimed, "Liverpool and Miss Bradford occupy the next tent."

Sloane sprang to his feet with a furious oath, exclaiming, "If he has wronged that girl I'll kill him."

"Nonsense," said I; "when you've been on the Coast a little longer you will not make such a fuss about people you chance to meet when travelling. What is she to you, anyway?"

Crickmer and Johns took the same view, and we extracted from Sloane a solemn promise that he would not speak to Miss Bradford if he met her and that he would not notice Liverpool under any circumstances.

As we concluded our conversation the flap of the tent was raised and a broad, good−natured face appeared at the opening.

"Boys," the face said, "I've been here a month. I know all about everybody. I live next tent on the north, and anything I can do to help you, ask me. I want to warn you. I saw a bad San Francisco man pass here a moment ago. He disappeared in one of the tents. Keep a close watch to−night."

Little did we think at the time that the bad man was Sloane's steamboat antagonist.

We ate our meal in silence, and then walked to Government Street to enjoy the sights and sounds that are inseparable from a mining boom. About the noon hour we ate luncheon at the Bayley Hotel, where the Pritchard house now stands. The luncheon cost each man a dollar, and for a glass of water with which to wash down the food each paid John C. Keenan, who kept bar at the Bayley, fifteen cents. Water was scarce and just as dear as Hudson's Bay rum; and as for baths—well, there was the harbor. A bath of fresh water at that time would have been as costly as the champagne bath at Winnipeg in 1882, which a man took to commemorate a big real estate deal, at $5 a bottle!

We returned to the tent about five o'clock in the evening and set about preparing our dinner of bacon and beans and flapjacks. Presently, Liverpool and Miss Bradford appeared. The girl seemed ashamed and hurrying into their tent did not appear again.

Johns and I had arranged to meet Wright at seven o'clock and attend a minstrel show at the Star and Garter Hotel, which stood on Government Street upon the site now occupied by the old Masonic Temple. So we sauntered down the road to keep the appointment. What happened after we left the tent was told us by Crickmer

amid tears and sobs, for his was a very nervous and emotional temperament. He said that as he and Sloane sat about the camp fire smoking their pipes after we had gone Liverpool came out of his tent. His face bore the marks of his severe punishment. Sloane's eyes were also black. Liverpool, who was accompanied by three or four evil−looking men, his voice quivering with passion, said to Sloane:

"I demand satisfaction for the injury you have done me."

Sloane rose slowly to his feet and, keeping his eyes full on the other's face, replied, "I have done you no injury."

"You have," said Liverpool, passionately. "You insulted my wife by offering her money, and you beat me like a dog when I refused to let her take it."

"I did not know she was your wife," said Sloane.

"She wasn't then, but she is now. I married her this morning," returned Liverpool.

"What do you want me to do?" asked Sloane.

"I want you to fight me—now—here—this minute. Get your pistol."

"I have done you no wrong, and I won't fight you; besides, I have no pistol," said Sloane.

"Then I'll brand you as a liar and coward, and will kill you, too."

"Take care, Liverpool," said Sloane. "Don't go too far."

"Go too far! Why, man, if anything I can do or say will make you fight I'll say and do it. Take that," and the ruffian spat full in the other's face.

"Give me a revolver!" exclaimed Sloane, enraged beyond control. "I'll fight you; but it must be with the understanding that after we have fought I shall be troubled no more."

"Yes," said Liverpool, his every word seeming to carry a hiss, "after you have fought me you will be troubled no more."

The awful significance of this remark was realized later on.

Crickmer said he clung to Sloane and implored him not to fight. But the Englishman's blood was up, and he struggled like a wounded tiger. Two of Liverpool's companions dragged Crickmer, who was little and frail, aside and threatened to shoot him if he interfered further.

A crowd of miners had been attracted to the spot by the loud talking, and one of them unbuckled his waist strap and handed Sloane a six−shooter.

"It's a good one and never misses," the miner said. "Do you want a second?"

"Yes; will you act?" asked Sloane.

The miner consented. Liverpool chose one of the evil−looking men as his second, and the principals and seconds, followed by a gang of several hundred campers, repaired quickly to an open space where Rae Street now runs, and beneath the very shadow of the English Colonial Church ten paces were stepped off and the men took their places. Liverpool, winning the choice of position, stood with his back to the sun, a manifest advantage. As for Sloane, the glory of the departing sun shone full on his face. The music of birds was in his ears. Sweet wild flowers bloomed about him. He took all these in with a sweeping glance, and for a moment turned and gazed at the old church. Perhaps a vision of his childhood days, when a fond mother directed his footsteps to the House of Prayer, swept across his mind. The next instant he faced his adversary, dauntless and cool.

"Gentlemen, are you ready?" asked one of the seconds.

"Ready," both responded.

"Then—fire!"

There were two reports, but only one bullet found its billet. With a loud cry of agony Sloane fell forward. He had been shot through the heart.

The sun sank behind the Metchosin Mountains, and the chill evening breeze swept across Church Hill and sighed a requiem through the branches of the tall pines. The midsummer moon rose in all its splendor over the tops of the trees, and its soft rays fell upon Something lying there still and cold—Something that a short while before was an animated human being, full of hope and promise and chivalry; now, alas! dead to all things earthly. The scene was deserted by every living thing, and the dew of heaven, like angels' tears, had fallen on the stricken youth's form and bathed his face and hair ere the police appeared and bore the body to town.

As Johns, Wright and I came out of the show place, two hours later, we saw a stream of excited men and women passing along. "A man has been shot dead," said one of the passers−by. We followed the crowd to the

corner, and with some difficulty elbowed our way into a deserted building. Our feelings may well be imagined when we saw our late steamer acquaintance and tent mate, whom we had left a short time before, lying dead on the floor. An inquest was held and a verdict of "wilful murder" was returned. But the surviving principal, the seconds and Miss Bradford were gone, and no man could be found who would acknowledge that he saw the duel. All who had not run off were struck suddenly blind, deaf. and dumb.

When we came to prepare the poor youth for the grave, the man who had given us the warning as to the presence of a bad character helped. We had asked a Presbyterian minister to read the service, but we found a gold medallion of the Holy Virgin and the Child suspended by a chain about the neck of the corpse, so the Bishop of the Catholic mission read the funeral service of his Church over the remains. Nothing was found in the dead man's travelling bag to indicate who he was. We only knew that he was a brave young English gentleman who had been done to death by a bloodthirsty ruffian through a mistaken idea of what constitutes honor.

And John Liverpool and Miss Bradford, did you ever hear of them again? you ask. Yes; John Liverpool was in reality "Liverpool Jack," a noted California outlaw, who immediately on his return to San Francisco murdered the mate of a British ship and was executed with neatness and despatch by the authorities there. Crickmer, whose terrible experience while here prompted him to take the next boat for home, wrote me some years later that he often saw the girl with the wealth of hair and glorious eyes flitting along the pavements at night like an evil spirit.

And so ends the story of British Columbia's first and only duel.