

**MEMOIRS OF RALPH
VANSITTART: A MEMBER
OF THE PARLIAMENT
OF CANADA, 1861-1867**

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Memoirs of Ralph Vansittart: A Member of the Parliament of Canada, 1861-1867 by Edward Robert Cameron

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..OF...

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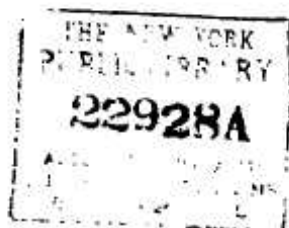
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RALPH VANSITTART, M. P.

CHAPTER I.

MY ANTECEDENTS.

It was the month of May, 1861. Spring in all her beauty was upon us. And where is spring more charming than in Canada? A week of rain had been followed by a week of southerly winds and cloudless skies, and now the trees and fields were decked in their richest livery of green. The vulgar dandelion dotted the meadows, as if some fairy over-night had passed along with bounteous hand, and sewn the fields with golden guineas. The maple woods back of the farm were all aglow with red and white trilliums, with the delicate and graceful claytonia, and the heptica and violet, earliest of all the woodland flowers, while here and there, in some low-lying and secret recess, the careful seeker after nature's jewels, might find a clump of orchids—the lady's slipper, and all her family.

Our story opens on a farm of some 500 good acres of arable land and woodland, sloping on its front down to the broad valley of the River Thames, some ten miles or thereabouts from the city of London, in the then Province of Upper Canada. The old homestead had

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been built by my grandfather a third of a century earlier, was made of good limestone blocks, roughly hewn; was square in shape, with a broad piazza along its front, from which one could see the cars of the Great Western Railway flitting by on the far side of the river, and still farther away the northern slope of the valley, about two miles distant. I had returned home about a month previous, from a year's travel in Europe, which my father thought a necessary complement to the degree of Bachelor of Arts that I had received from our provincial university. Whatever stirrings of ambition I had were turned towards the department of learning which I had pursued in Toronto University, and a professor's chair seemed the goal most congenial with my tastes and habits.

My father, however, had different views, and although he had not pressed his wishes upon me to any extent since my return, I knew his ambition was to see me seated in my country's legislative halls. To-day, however, he broached the matter to me with great earnestness, and showed me a letter he had just received from the Attorney General West—the Honourable John A. Macdonald—expressing his warm approval of my candidature, of which my father had written him without my knowledge. Our family had always been Tories of the old-fashioned type, and although, as you will find, my views became much modified in later years, at this time I was firmly of the opinion, that although, perhaps a Reformer, or Grit as he was sometimes called, might be a loyal subject of Her Majesty, and a good citizen, yet the chances were strongly against it, and the safer course was to assume he was not until the contrary had been proven. My grandfather had obtained his farm about 1822, at a time when good King George the Fourth thought it well for the Empire, that such of the retired officers of his army as could be induced to do so, should settle in

Canada, and by their numbers and influence help to make the colony a loyal dependency of the Crown. My grandfather, with a number of other officers, took advantage of this opportunity, and settled on farms in this fine township of Walpole. My father had taken part, under Sir Allan McNab, in stamping out the embers of rebellion which were smouldering in our neighbourhood during the troubles of 1837, and never since could look upon a Reformer as other than a rebel if the skin were scratched.

Living near us was my uncle, Colonel Ralph Vansittart, for whom I was named. He was a bachelor of about 50 years of age, and had been induced, through his affection for my father, to purchase the adjoining farm, when he retired from the army after the Crimean war. When a young man, and before entering the army, he had an old-fashioned tutor, passionately fond of botany, who found in my uncle an apt pupil, and even before entering at Woolwich had made of him a fair field botanist, familiar with all the common English flowers, and, indeed, the flora generally of his neighbourhood. His army life for a long period put an end to his favorite pursuit, but once he settled down upon a Canadian farm, his old pastime was taken up with renewed avidity. No sooner had the warm spring rains and south winds driven off the winter frosts and snow, than my uncle, in an old suit of corduroy, could be seen, with knapsack on shoulder, trudging over the fields and through the woods after the first floweret that pushed its gentle head above the ground.

Upon the conclusion of the interview with my father, above mentioned, I set out for my uncle's place to discuss this new development in my affairs, and found him gloating over a plant he had found that morning, which he declared was hitherto unknown in Canada—a species of tropical yam, which he called

Dioscorea Villosa—and the seed of which must have been brought from the Southern States by one of our migratory birds. Had he not seen a thoughtful expression upon my face, he would, as usual, have made some sport of my ignorance of the practical side of a science in which I was supposed to be an adept, but he permitted me to unburden my mind, and I soon found my father and he were of one opinion. "In this world," he said, "we have a duty to perform, as well as the right to the pursuit of happiness which our American neighbors have considered important enough to embalm in their Declaration of Independence, although the cannon that so lately roared at Fort Sumter do not indicate they have taken the most direct course to their goal. I know you have planned for yourself a quiet studious career, but I doubt very much if you are adapted for it, and would not find a life devoid of excitement pall on you in a short time. Besides, you have an opportunity of doing something for your country if you have the desire. We are entering, I fear, upon troublous times. The agitation for increased representation in the legislature by the people of this part of the province, is bound to lead to a disruption of the union between the two provinces, unless something is done to allay the dissatisfaction. But, in my mind, more serious by far is this unholy conflict upon which they have entered across the line. Seward, (the Secretary of State), has all along had his eyes upon Canada as a mouthful which might satisfy the ravenous jaws of those who are urging on the war. He evidently thinks if he can induce the South to unite with the North in a raid on Canada, he may divert the storm clouds settling over his own land. And even if this should not come about at once, can there be any doubt, as soon as the war is over, and half a million northern soldiers have nothing else to do, some excuse will not be found, or some grounds discovered, for

picking a quarrel, so that Canada may be the unfortunate lamb which the wolf shall claim has fouled the water he wished to drink. We are living in troublous times. Times when Canadians who are loyal to England, and loyal to their own country, are required in the legislative halls. We want gentlemen to whom the sordid greed for wealth and office has no attractions, but who will be actuated only by a desire for the good of their country, and the welfare of the British Crown." This conversation, added to my father's wishes, very soon convinced me of the propriety of the course which they had decided upon for me, and I at once began to consider the questions at issue in the country, and to make preparation for the election, which was no doubt soon to be upon us. In the first place, my proposed constituency was generally looked upon as a safe Tory seat. Most of the townships have been settled by the late Colonel Talbot, who never, if he knew it, allowed a homestead to be taken up by any other than a loyal supporter of the English rule, and, therefore, a Tory. There was, however, in one or two of the back townships, a considerable element of Scotch Presbyterians, Quakers and Yankees, who had received grants from the Canadian Government direct, and not through Colonel Talbot, and the opposition vote was generally pretty strong in their locality. I had, however, I thought, a strong card in my hand, in that my mother's sister was married to one Duncan McGregor, one of the most intelligent merchants in the village of Glammis, the chief place in this radical section. I shall have to refer to my mother's family later on, and this, perhaps, is as good a place as any to describe my mother's father, Col. John Axford. Uncle John, as he was familiarly called, was a type of the best this Canada of ours can produce of physical and moral excellence, unimproved by the adventitious aids of education, culture and refinement,