

Master

Ivan Doig

**DANCING AT THE
RASCAL FAIR**

ATHENEUM

MASTER SET
APR 20 1987
Doig
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Date: March 27, 1987

Trim size: 6 1/8" x 9 1/4"
Margins: 3/4" gutter 5/8" head
Type page: 26 x 44.3 incl RH
Lines on full: 40
Lines on opening: vary
Paragraph indent: 1 EM, opener: fl l
Text: 10 1/2/13 x 26
Figures: lining

(702-3252)

RHs & Folios: Text size, Scotch #2 italic all caps centered, 3 pt. letterspaced, ¹⁹16 pts. base to base of 1st line of text. Left & Right: DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR. Drop folios Scotch #2 italic centered, 16 pts base to base from last line of text. *Flush bottom x47pica S*
~~CT:~~ CT: New left or right. Sinks 7 picas, 9 1/2 pt. Scotch #2 spelled out caps centered (Foundry spacing). ~~10 pts b/b to CT, all caps centered.~~ 13 pts base to base to 1/2 pt. rule x 6 picas centered on measure.

C.O. Initial: 30 pt. stickup initial fl left, run in with text. First 2 words in small caps.

5/26 → Poetry: ~~No specs given yet.~~ ital 10 1/2/13, CT ON TEXT ON LONG LINE, +1R# above + below
Letter extract: No specs given yet.

Epigraph: 10/12 Scotch #2 italic x 18 picas justified, centered on text measure. 13 pts. visual # above to CT rule. Minimum 2 lines # below. # below to vary. Minimum 2 lines of text below.

NOTES & QUERIES

1. EPIGRAPH: # above epigraph 13 pts visual below CT rule. We have centered epigraph on text width. OK? First epigraph encountered had bold lead-in. Phone conversation with Susan Lu changed this to roman lead-in. Note that not all epigraphs have this lead-in. Will minimum of 2 lines text below be enough, considering the stickup initial?
2. We have not shown Letter Extract, Poetry, or space breaks as specs were not given as yet. Re: space break, we will need to know min. # of lines below # break if it falls at bottom of page; if it falls at top, hold # with 3 asterisks or other ornament, or flush copy
5/26 → at top of page? min 2l text above or below; retain # @ head or foot w/ hair rule x 4 1/2 pi ctd in #
3. ADDITIONAL REMARKS: Some bold is indicated throughout duplicate ms. There is no bold in Scotch # 2. These will need to be re-spec'd, OK?
see pp. 51, 71, 162, 168, 193, 302, + 398
4. Other elements noted in manuscript but not shown: special effect requested by author, p. 74; table on page 135.

all possible page spreads may run 1 line long or short.
(depending on your cast off.)

~~Bonus?~~ Bonus
5/26

420 JOB 4326F-0002-02 DANCING 34

REV:04-17 EXP:04-17 BB SIZ: 50

*DANCING AT THE
RASCAL FAIR*

Ivan Doig

STAMP COVER.

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419 JOB 4326F-0001-02 DANCING 34
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Pages
Date: APR 20 1987
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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

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BOOKS BY IVAN DOIG

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR 1987

ENGLISH CREEK 1984

THE SEA RUNNERS 1982

WINTER BROTHERS 1980

THIS HOUSE OF SKY 1978

*DANCING AT THE
RASCAL FAIR*

Ivan Doig

Atheneum Publishers

New York 1987

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iii

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HE#

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sketch #2
ital + 20 max
for each line

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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FOR VERNON CARSTENSEN

who saw the patterns on the land

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Scotchmen and coyotes was the only ones
that could live in the Basin,
and pretty damn soon the coyotes starved out.

—CHARLES CAMPBELL DOIG (1901-71)

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SCOTLAND AND HELENA

Harbour Mishap at Greenock. Yesterday morning, while a horse and cart were conveying a thousand-weight of sugar on the quay at Albert Harbour, one of the cartwheels caught a mooring stanchion, which caused the laden conveyance and its draft animal to fall over into the water. The poor creature made desperate efforts to free itself and was successful in casting off all the harness except the collar, which, being attached to the shafts of the sunken cart, held its head under water until it was drowned. The dead animal and the cart were raised during the forenoon by the Greenock harbour diver.

—GLASGOW CALEDONIAN, OCTOBER 23, 1889

VIII

TO SAY the truth, it was not how I expected—stepping off toward America past a drowned horse.

You would remember too well, Rob, that I already was of more than one mind about the Atlantic Ocean. And here we were, not even within eyeshot of the big water, not even out onto the slow-flowing River Clyde yet, and here this heap of creature that would make, what, four times the sum total of Rob Barclay and Angus McCaskill, here on the Greenock dock it lay gawping up at us with a wild dead eye. Strider of the earth not an hour ago, wet rack of carcass now. An affidavit such as that says a lot to a man who cannot swim. Or at least who never has.

But depend on you, Rob. In those times you could make light of whatever. There was that red shine on you, your cheeks and jawline always as ruddy and smooth as if you had just put down the shaving razor, and on this largest day of our young lives you were aglow like a hot coal. *A stance like a lord and a hue like a lady.* You cocked your head in that way of yours and came right out with:

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"See now, McAngus. So long as we don't let them hitch a cart to us we'll be safe as saints."

"A good enough theory," I had to agree, "as far as it goes."

Then came commotion, the grieved sugar carter bursting out, "Oh Ginger dear, why did ye have to tumble?" and dockmen shouting around him and a blinkered team of horses being driven up at full clatter to drag their dead ilk away. Hastily some whiskered geezer from the Cumbrae Steamship Line was waving the rest of us along: "Dead's dead, people, and standing looking at it has never been known to help. Now then, whoever of you are for the *James Watt*, straight on to the queue there, New York at its other end, step to it please, thank you." And so we let ourselves be shoed from the sight of poor old horsemeat Ginger and went and stepped onto line with our fellow steerage ticketholders beside the bulk of the steamship. Our fellow Scotland-leavers, half a thousand at once, each and every of us now staring sidelong at this black iron island that was to carry us to America. One of the creels which had held the sugar was bobbing against the ship's side, while over our heads deckhands were going through the motions of some groaning chore I couldn't begin to figure.

"Now if this was fresh water, like," sang out one above the dirge of their task, "I'd wager ye a guinea this harbor'd right now taste sweet as treacle."

"But it's not, ye bleedin' daftie. The bleedin' Clyde is tide salt from the Tail of the Bank the full way up to bleedin' Glasgow, now en't it? And what to hell kind of concoction are ye going to get when ye mix sugar and salt?"

"Ask our bedamned cook," put in a third. "All the time he must be doing it, else why's our mess taste like what the China dog walked away from?" As emphasis he spat a throat gob over the side into the harbor water, and my stomach joined my other constituent parts in trepidation about this world-crossing journey of ours. A week and a half of the Atlantic and dubious food besides?

That steerage queue seemed eternal. Seagulls mocked the line of us with sharp cries. A mist verging on rain dimmed out the Renfrewshire hills beyond Greenock's uncountable roofs. Even you appeared a least little bit ill at ease with this wait, Rob, squinting now and again at the steamship as if calculating how it was that so much metal was able to float. And then the cocked head once more, as if pleased with your result. I started to say aloud that if Noah had

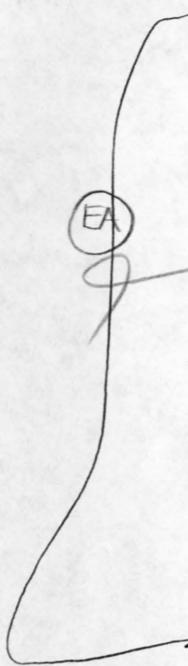
DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

taken this much time to load the ark, only the giraffes would have lasted through the deluge, but that was remindful of the waiting water and its fate for cart horses and others not amphibious.

Awful, what a person lets himself do to himself. There I stood on that Greenock dock, wanting more than anything else in this life not to put foot aboard that iron ship; and wanting just as desperately to do so and do it that instant. Oh, I knew what was wrestling in me. We had a book—*Crofutt's Trans-Atlantic Emigrants' Guide*—and my malady was right there in it, page one. Crofutt performed as our tutor, teaching that a shilling was worth 24 American cents, and how much postal stamps cost there in the big country, and that when it came midnight in old Scotland the clocks of Montana were striking just five of the afternoon. Crofutt told this, too, I can recite it yet today: *Do not emigrate in a fever, but consider the question in each and every aspect. The mother country must be left behind, the family ties, all old associations, broken. Be sure that you look at the dark side of the picture: the broad Atlantic, the dusty ride to the great West of America, the scorching sun, the cold winter—coldest ever you experienced!—and the hard work of the homestead. But if you finally, with your eyes open, decide to emigrate, do it nobly. Do it with no divided heart.*

Right advice, to keep your heart in one pure piece. But easier seen than followed.

I knew I oughtn't, but I turned and looked up the river, east up the great broad trough of the Clyde. East into yesterday. For it had been only the day before when the pair of us were hurled almost all the way across Scotland by train from Nethermuir into clamorsome Glasgow. A further train across the Clyde bridge and westward alongside mile upon brown mile of the river's tideflats and their smell. Then here came Greenock to us, Watt's city of steam, all its shipyards and docks, the chimney stalks of its sugar refineries, its sharp church spires and high, high above all its municipal tower of crisp new stone the color of pie crust. A more going town than our old Nethermuir could be in ten centuries, it took just that first look to tell us of Greenock. For night we bedded where the emigration agent had advised, the Model Lodging House, which may have been a model of something but lodging wasn't it; when morning at last came, off we set to ask our way to the Cumbrae Line's moorage, to the *James Watt*, and to be told in a Clydeside gabble it took the both of us to understand:



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"The *Jemmy*, lads? Ye wan' tae gi doon tae the fit of Pa'rick." And there at the foot of Patrick Street was the Albert Harbor, there was the green-funneled steam swimmer to America, there were the two of us.

For I can't but think of you then, Rob. The Rob you were. In all that we said to each other, before and thereafter, this step from our old land to our new was flat fact with you. The Atlantic Ocean and the continent America all the way across to Montana stood as but the width of a cottage threshold, so far as you ever let on. No second guess, never a might-have-done-instead out of you, none. A silence too total, I realize at last. You had family and a trade to scan back at and I had none of either, yet I was the one tossing puppy looks up the Clyde to yesterday. Man, man, what I would give to know. Under the stream of words by which you talked the two of us into our long step to America, what were your deep reasons? I am late about asking, yes. Years and years and years late. But when was such asking ever not? And by the time I learned, there was so much within you that I did not know and you were learning the same of me, we had greater questions for each other.

A soft push on my shoulder. When I turned to your touch you were smiling hard, that Barclay special mix of entertainment and estimation. We had reached the head of the queue, another whiskery geezer in Cumrae green uniform was trumpeting at us to find Steerage Number One, go forward toward the bow, descend those stairs the full way down, mind our footing and our heads . . .

You stayed where you stood, though, facing me instead of the steamship. You still had the smile on, but your voice was as serious as I ever had heard it.

"Truth now, Angus. Are we both for it?"

Standing looking at it has never been known to help. I filled myself with breath, the last I intended to draw of the air of the pinched old earth called Scotland. *With no divided heart.*

"Both," I made myself say. And up the *Jemmy's* gangplank we started.

Robert Burns Barclay, single man, apprentice wheelwright, of Nethermuir, Forfarshire. That was Rob on the passenger list of the *James Watt*, 22nd of October of the year 1889. Angus Alexander McCaskill, single man, wheelworks clerk, of Nethermuir, For-

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farshire, myself. Both of us nineteen and green as the cheese of the moon and trying our double damnedest not to show it.

Not that we were alone in tint. Our steerage compartment within the *Jemmy* proved to be the forward one for single men—immediately the report went around that the single women were quartered farthest aft, and between them and us stood the married couples and a terrific populace of children—and while not everyone was young, our shipmates were all as new as we to voyaging. Berths loomed in unfamiliar tiers with a passageway not a yard wide between them, and the twenty of us bumped and backed and swirled like a herd of colts trying to establish ourselves.

I am tall, and the inside of the ship was not. Twice in those first minutes of steerage life I cracked myself.

"You'll be hammered down to my size by the time we reach the other shore," Rob came out with, and those around us hoo-hawed. I grinned the matter away but I did not like it, either the prospect of a hunched journey to America or the public comment about my altitude. But that was Rob for you.

Less did I like the location of Steerage Number One. So far below the open deck, down steep stair after stair into the iron gut of the ship. When you thought about it, and I did, this was like being a kitten in the bottom of a rainbarrel.

"Here I am, mates," recited a fresh voice, that of the steward. "Your shepherd while at sea. First business is three shillings from you each. That's for mattress to keep you company and tin to eat with and the finest saltwater soap you've ever scraped yourself with." Ocean soap and straw bed Rob and I had to buy along with everyone else, but on Crofutt's advice we'd brought our own trustworthy tinware. "Meals are served at midship next deck up, toilets you'll find in the deckhouses, and that's the circle of life at sea, mates," the steward rattled at us, and then he was gone.

As to our compartment companions, a bit of listening told that some were of a fifty embarking to settle in Manitoba, others of a fifty fixed upon Alberta for a future. The two heavenly climes were argued back and forth by their factions, with recitations of rainfall and crop yields and salubrious health effects and imminence of railroads, but no minds were changed, these being Scottish minds.

Eventually someone deigned to ask us neutral pair what our destination might be.

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"Montana," Rob enlightened them as if it was Eden's best neighborhood. "I've an uncle there these seven years."

"What does the man do there," sang out an Alberta adherent, "besides boast of you as a nephew? Montana is nothing but mountains, like the name of it."

"He's the owner of a mine," Rob reported with casual grandness, and this drew us new looks from the compartment citizenry. Rob, though, was not one to quit just because he was ahead. "A silver mine at Helena, called the Great Maybe."

All of steerage except the two of us thought that deserved the biggest laugh there was, and for the next days we were known as the Maybe Miners. Well, they could laugh like parrots at a bag-piper. It was worth that and more, to have Lucas Barclay there in Montana ahead of us.

"Up?" offered Rob to me now, with a sympathetic toss of his head. Back to deck we climbed, to see how the *Jemmy's* departure was done.

As I look on it from now, I suppose the others aboard cannot but have wondered about the larky companion beside me at the deck rail, dispensing his presiding smile around the ship as if he had invented oceangoing. The bearing of a bank heir, but in a flat cap and rough clothes? A mien of careless independence, but with those workworn wheelwright's hands at the ends of his young arms? And ever, ever, that unmatched even-toothed smile, as though he was about to say something bright even when he wasn't; Rob could hold that smile effortlessly the way a horse holds the bit between his teeth. You could be fooled in a hurry about Rob, though. It maybe can be said my mind lacks clench. Rob had a fist there in his head. The smile gave way to it here when he spotted a full family, tykes to grandfolks, among us America-goers.

"They all ought've come, Angus. By damn, but they ought've. Am I right?" He meant all the rest of his own family, his father and mother and three older brothers and young sister; and he meant it hotly. Rob had argued for America until the air of the Barclay household was blue with it, but there are times when not even a Barclay can budge Barclays. Just thinking about it still made him tense as a harp. "They ought've let the damned 'wright shop go, let old Nethermuir doze itself to death. They can never say I didn't tell them. You heard."

"I heard."

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"Lucas is the only one of the bunch who's ever looked ahead beyond his nose. See now, Angus, I almost wish we'd been in America as long as Lucas. Think of all he must've seen and done, these years."

"You'd have toddled off there when you were the age of Adair, would you?" Adair was Rob's sister, just twelve or so, and a little replica of Rob or at least close enough; tease her as I did by greeting her in gruff hard-man style *Hello you, Dair Barclay*, and she always gave me right back, snappy as beans, *Hello yourself, old Angus McCaskill*.

"Adair's the one in the bunch who most ought've come," Rob persisted. "Just look around you, this ship is thick with children not a minute older than Adair." He had a point there. "She'd positively be thriving here. And she'd be on her way to the kind of life she deserves instead of that"—Rob pointed his chin up the Clyde, to the horizon we had come from—"back there. I tried for her."

"Your parents would be the first to say so."

"Parents are the world's strangest commodity, haven't you ever noticed—Angus, forgive that. My tongue got ahead of itself."

"It went right past my ears. What about a walk around deck, shall we?"

At high tide on the Clyde, when the steam tug arrived to tow this behemoth ship of ours to deep water at the Tail of the Bank, Rob turned to me and lifted his cap in mock congratulation.

"We're halfway there," he assured me.

"Only the wet part left, you're telling me."

He gave my shoulder a push. "McAngus, about this old water. You'll grow used to it, man. Half of Scotland has made this voyage by now."

I started to retort that I seemed to belong to the half without webfeet, but I was touched by this, Rob's concern for me, even though I'd hoped I was keeping my Atlantic apprehensions within me. The way they resounded around in there—*Are we both for it? Both*—I suppose it was a wonder the entire ship wasn't hearing them like the thump of a drum.

We watched Greenock vanish behind the turn of the Firth. "Poor old River Carrou," from Rob now. "This Clyde makes it look like a piddle, doesn't it?"

Littler than that, actually. We from an inland eastern town such as Nethermuir with its sea-seeking stream Carrou were born think-

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ing that the fishing ports of our counties of Fife and Forfar and Kincardine and Aberdeen must be the rightful entrances to the ocean, so Rob and I came with the natural attitude that these emigration steamships of Greenock and Glasgow pittered out the back door of Scotland. The Firth of Clyde was showing us otherwise. Everywhere around us the water was wider than wide, arms of it delving constantly between the hills of the shore, abundant islands were stood here and there on the great gray breadth as casually as haycocks. Out and out the *Jemmy* steamed, past the last of the beetle-busy packet boats, and still the Clyde went on carving hilly shores. Ayr. Argyll. Arran. This west of Scotland perhaps all sounded like gargle, but it was as handsome a coast as could be fashioned. Moor and cliff and one entire ragged horizon of the Highlands mountains for emphasis, shore-tucked villages and the green exactness of fields for trim.

And each last inch of it everlastingly owned by those higher than Angus McCaskill and Rob Barclay, I reminded myself. Those whose names began with Lord. Those who had the banks and mills. Those whitehanded men of money. Those who watched from their fat fields as the emigrant ships steamed past with us.

Daylight lingered along with the shore. Rain came and went at edges of the Firth. You saw a far summit, its rock brows, and then didn't.

"Just damp underfoot, try to think of the old ocean as," Rob put in on me.

"I *am* trying, man. And I'd still just as soon walk to America."

"Or we could ride on each other's shoulders, what if?" Rob swept on. "No, McAngus, this steam yacht is the way to travel." Like the duke of dukes, he patted the deck rail of the *Jemmy* and proclaimed: "See now, this is proper style for going to America and Montana."

America. Montana. Those words with their ends open. Those words that were ever in the four corners of my mind, and I am sure Rob's, too, all the minutes since we had left Nethermuir. I hear that set of words yet, through all the time since, the pronouncement Rob gave them that day. America and Montana echoed and echoed in us, right through my mistrust of journeying on water, past Rob's breeze of manner, into the tunnels of our bones. For with the *Jemmy* underway out the Firth of Clyde we were threading our lives into the open beckon of those words. Like Lucas Barclay before us, now we were on our way to be Americans. To be—what did people call

themselves in that far place Montana? Montanese? Montanians? Montaniards? Whatever that denomination was, now the two of us were going to be its next members, with full feathers on.

My first night in steerage I learned that I was not born to sleep on water. The berth was both too short and too narrow for me, so that I had to kink myself radically; curl up and wedge in at the same time. Try that if you ever want to be cruel to yourself. Too, steerage air was thick and unpleasant, like breathing through dirty flannel. Meanwhile Rob, who could snooze through the thunders of Judgment Day, was composing a nose song below me. But discomfort and bad air and snores were the least of my wakefulness, for in that first grief of a night—oh yes, and the *Jemmy* letting forth an iron groan whenever its bow met the waves some certain way—my mind rang with everything I did not want to think of. Casting myself from Nethermuir. The drowned horse Ginger. Walls of this moaning ship, so close. The coffin confines of my bedamned berth. The ocean, the ocean on all sides, including abovehead. *Dark Neptune's labyrinthine lanes! Neath these savage liquid plains.* I rose in heart-rattling startlement once when I accidentally touched one hand against the other and felt wetness there. My own sweat.

I still maintain that if the Atlantic hadn't been made of water I could have gone to America at a steady trot. But it seems to be the case that fear can sniff the bothering places in us. Mine had been in McCaskills for some eighty years now. The bones of the story are this. With me on this voyage, into this unquiet night, came the fact that I was the first McCaskill since my father's grandfather to go upon the sea. That voyage of Alexander McCaskill was only a dozen miles, but the most famous dozen miles in Great Britain of the time, and he voyaged them over and over and over again. He was one of the stonemasons of Arbroath who worked with the great engineer Robert Stevenson to build the Bell Rock lighthouse. On the clearest of days I have seen that lighthouse from the Arbroath harbor and have heard the story of the years of workshops and cranes and winches and giant blocks of granite and sandstone, and to this moment I don't know how they could do what was done out there, build a hundred-foot tower of stone on a reef that vanished deep beneath every high tide. But there it winks at the world even today, the impossible Bell Rock, standing in the North Sea announcing the Firth of Forth and Edinburgh beyond, and my great-

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grandfather's toolmarks are on its stones. The generations of us, we who are not a sea people, dangle from that one man who went to perform stonework in the worst of the waters around Scotland. Ever since him, Alexander has been the first or second name of a McCaskill in each of those generations. Ever since him, we have possessed a saga to measure ourselves against. I lay there in the sea-plowing *Jemmy* trying to think myself back into that other manhood, to leave myself, damp sackful of apprehension that I was, and to feel from the skin inward what it would have been like to be Alexander McCaskill of the Bell Rock those eighty years ago. *A boat is a hole in the water*, began my family's one scrap of our historic man, the solitary story from our McCaskill past that my father would ever tell. In some rare furlough from his brooding, perhaps Christmas or Hogmanay and enough drinks of lubrication, that silence-locked man my father would suddenly unloose the words. *But there was a time your great-grandfather was more glad than anything to see a boat, I'm here to tell you. Out there on the Bell Rock they were cutting down into the reef for the lighthouse's foundation, the other stonemen and your great-grandfather, that day. When the tide began to come in they took up their tools and went across the reef to meet their boat. Stevenson was there ahead of them, as high as he could climb on the reef and standing looking out into the fog on the water. Your great-grandfather knew there was wrong as soon as he saw Stevenson. Stevenson the famous engineer of the Northern Lights, pale as the cat's milk. As he ought have been, for there was no boat on the reef and none in sight anywhere. The tide was coming fast, coming to cover all of the Bell Rock with water higher than this roof. Your great-grandfather saw Stevenson turn to speak to the men. "This I'll swear to, Alexander the Second," your great-grandfather always told me it just this way. "Mister Stevenson's mouth moved as if he was saying, but no words came out. The fear had dried his mouth so." Your great-grandfather and the men watched Stevenson go down on his knees and drink water like a dog from a pool in the rock. When he stood up to try to speak this time, somebody shouted out, "A boat! There, a boat!" The pilot boat, it was, bringing the week's mail to the workshop. Your great-grandfather always ended saying, "I almost ran out onto the water to hail that boat, you can believe."*

"You ask was I afraid, Alexander the Second?" My father's voice became a strange, sad thunder when he told of my great-grandfather's reply to him. "Every hour of those three Bell Rock years, and

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most of the minutes, drowning was on my mind. I was afraid enough, yes. But the job was there at the Bell Rock. It was to be done, afraid or no afraid."

The past. The past past, so to speak, back there beyond myself. What can we ever truly know of it, how can we account for what it passes to us, what it withholds? Employ my imagination to its utmost, I could not see myself doing what Alexander McCaskill did in his Bell Rock years, travel an extent of untrustable water each day to set Abroath stone onto reef stone. Feed me first to the flaming hounds of Hell. Yet for all I knew, my ocean-defying great-grandfather was afraid of the dark or whimpered at the sight of a spider but any such perturbances were whited out by time. Only his brave Bell Rock accomplishment was left to sight. And here I lay, sweating steerage sweat, with a dread of water that had no logic newer than eighty years, no personal beginning, and evidently no end. It simply was in me, like life's underground river of blood. Ahead there, I hoped far ahead, when I myself became the past—would the weak places in me become hidden, too? Say I ever did become husband, father, eventual great-grandfather of Montana McCaskills. What were they going to comprehend of me as their firstcomer? Not this sweated night here in my midnight cage of steerage, not my mental staggers. No, for what solace it was, eventually all that could be known of Angus Alexander McCaskill was that I did manage to cross the Atlantic Ocean.

If I managed to cross it.

Through the night and most of the next day, the *Jemmy* steamed its way along the coast of Ireland to Queenstown, where our Irish came aboard. To say the truth, I was monumentally aware of Queenstown as the final chance to me to be *not* aboard; the outmost limb-end where I could still turn to Rob and utter, *no, I am sorry, I have tried but water and I do not go together*. So far I had managed not to let my tongue say that. It bolstered me that Rob and I had been up from Steerage Number One for hours, on deck to see whatever there was, blinking now against the sun and its sparkle on the blue Queenstown harbor. And so we saw the boats come. A fleet of small ones, each catching the wind with a gray old lugsail. They were steering direct to us and as the fleet neared we could make out that there was one man in each boat. No. One woman in each boat.

"Who are these, then?" I called to a deckhand sashaying past.

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

"Bumboats," he flung over his shoulder. "The Irish navy. Ye'll learn some words now."

Two dozen of the boats nudged against the steamship like piglets against a sow, and the deckhand and others began tossing down ropes. The women came climbing up like sailors—when you think of it, that is what they were—and with them arrived baskets, boxes, creels, buckets, shawls. In three winks the invaders had the shawls spread and their wares displayed on them. Tobacco, apples, soap. Pickled meat. Pinafores. Butter, hardbread, cheese. Pots of shamrock. Small mirrors. Legs of mutton. Then began the chants of these Irishwomen singing their wares, the slander back and forth between our deckhands and the women hawkers, the eruptions of haggling as passengers swarmed around the deck market. The great deck of the steamship all but bubbled over with people.

As we gaped at the stir of business Rob broke out in delight, "Do you see what this is like, Angus?" And answered himself by whistling the tune of it. I laughed along with every note, for the old verse thrummed as clear to me as an anthem.

*Dancing at the rascal fair,
devils and angels all were there,
heel and toe, pair by pair,
dancing at the rascal fair.*

From the time we could walk Rob and I had never missed a rascal fair together—that day of fest when Nethermuir farmers and farm workers met to bargain out each season's wages and terms and put themselves around a drink or so in the process. The broad cobbled market square of our twisty town, as abrupt as a field in a stone forest, on that one day of magic filled and took on color and laughter. Peddlers, traveling musicians, the Highland dancer known as Fergus the Dervish, whose cry of *hiyyuhh!* could be heard a mile, onlooking townfolk, hubbub and gossip and banter, and the two of us like minnows in that sea of faircomers, aswim in the sounds of the ritual of hard bargaining versus hard-to-bargain.

I see you wear the green sprig in your hat. Are you looking for the right work, laddie?

Aye, I am.

And would you like to come to me? I've a place not a mile from here, as fine a field as ever you'll see to harvest.

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Maybe so, maybe no. I'll be paid for home-going day, will I?

Maybe so, maybe no. That locution of the rascal fair, up there with Shakespeare's best. I have wondered, trying to think back on how Rob and I grew up side by side, how the McCaskills and the Barclays began to be braided together in the generation before us, how all has happened between us since, whether those bargaining words are always in the air around us, just beyond our hearing and our saying, beyond our knowing how to come to terms with them. But that is a thought of now, not then. Then I knew of no maybes, for Rob was right as right could be when he whistled of the rascal fair there on the *Jemmy's* deck; with these knots of dickering and spontaneous commotion and general air of mischief-about-to-be, this shipboard bazaar did seem more than anything like that mix of holiday and sharp practice we'd rambled through in old Nethermuir.

Remembered joy is twice sweet. Rob's face definitely said so, for he had that bright unbeatable look on him. In a mood like this he'd have called out "fire!" in a gunshop just to see what might happen. The two of us surged along the deck with everybody else of the *Jemmy*, soaking in as much of the surprise jubilee as we could.

"Have your coins grown to your pockets there in Scotland?" demanded the stout woman selling pinafores, and she drew laughing hoots from us all.

"But mother," Rob gave her back, "would any of those fit me?"

"I'd mother you, my milktooth boy. I'd mother you, you'd not forget it."

"Apples and more apples and more apples than that!" boasted the next vendor.

"Madam, you're asking twice the price of apples ashore!" expostulated a father with his wife and eager-eyed children in a covey around him.

"But more cheap, mister man, than the ocean's price of them."

"I tell ye," a deckhand adjudged to another, "I still fancy the lass there with the big cheeses—"

The other deckhand guffawed. "Cheese, do ye call those?"

"—and ye know I en't one that fancies just anyoldbody."

"No, just anybody born of woman."

"Muuuht'n, muuht'n," bleated the sheep-leg seller as we jostled past.

"Green of the sod of Ireland!" the shamrock merchant advertised to us.

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

So this was what the world was like. I'd had no idea.

Then we were by a woman who was calling out nothing. She simply stood silent, both hands in front of her, a green ball displayed in each.

Rob passed on with the others of our throng, I suppose assuming as I first did that she was offering the balls as playthings. But children were rampant among this deck crowd and neither they nor their parents were stopping by the silent woman either.

Curiosity is never out of season with me. I turned and went back for a close look. Her green offerings were not balls, they were limes.

Even with me there in front of her, the woman said nothing. I had to ask. "Your produce doesn't need words, missus?"

"I'm not to name the ill they're for, young mister, else I can't come onto your fine ship."

Any schoolboy knew the old tale of why Royal Navy sailors came to be called limies, and so I grinned, but I had to let Madam Irish know I was not so easily gulled. "It takes a somewhat longer voyage than this to come down with scurvy, missus."

"Tisn't the scurvy."

"What, then?"

"Your mouth can ask your stomach when the two of them meet, out there on the herring pond."

Seasickness. Among my Atlantic thoughts was whether the crossing would turn me as green as the rind of these limes. "How can this fruit of yours ward off that, then?"

"Not ward it off, no. There's no warding to that. You only get it, like death. These fruit are for after. They clean your mouth, young mister. Scour the sick away."

"Truth?"

She nodded. But then, what marketeer wouldn't.

It must have been the Irish sun. I fished for my coins. "How much for a pocketful?"

Doubtful transaction done, I made my way along the deck to where Rob was. He and the majority of the other single men from our compartment had ended up here around the two youngest Irish-women, plainly sisters, who were selling ribbons and small mirrors. The flirting seemed to be for free.

The sight of the saucy sisters elevated my mood some more, too, and so I stepped close behind Rob and caroled appropriately in his ear:

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

*Dancing at the rascal fair,
show an ankle, show a pair,
show what'll make the lasses stare,
dancing at the rascal fair."*

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"Shush, you'll be heard," he chided, and glanced around to see whether I had been. Rob had that prim side, and I felt it my duty every so often to tweak him on it.

"Confess," I urged him. "You'd give your ears for a smile from either of these lovelies."

Before he could answer me on that, the boatswain's whistle shrilled. The deck market dissolved, and over the side the women went like cats. In a minute their lugsails were fanned against the sparkling water of Queenstown harbor, and the *Jemmy* was underway once more.

After Queenstown and with only ocean ahead for a week and a day, my second seagoing night had even less sleep in it than my first. Resolutely telling myself there was no back door to this ship now, I lay crammed into that stifling berth trying to put my mind anywhere—multiplication, verse, Irish sisters—other than Steerage Number One.

What I found I could spend longest thoughts on, between periodic groans from the *Jemmy* that required me to worry whether its iron was holding, was Nethermuir. Rascal fair town Nethermuir. Old grayrock town Nethermuir, with its High Street wandering down the hill the way a drowsy cow would, to come to the River Carrou. Be what it may, a fence, a house, a street, the accusing spire of a church, Nethermuir fashioned it of stone, and from below along River Street the town looked as though it had been chiseled out complete rather than erected. Each of the thousand mornings that I did my route to open the wheelwright shop, Nethermuir was as asleep as its stones. In the dark—out went the streetlights at midnight; a Scottish town sees no need to illumine its empty hours—in the dark before each dawn I walked up River Street from our narrow-windowed tenements past the clock tower of the linen mill and the silent frontages of the dye works and the paper mill and other shrines of toil. Was that the same me back there, trudging on stone past stone beneath stone until my hand at last found the oaken door of the 'wright shop? Climbing the stair to the office in

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the nail loft and coaxing a fire in the small stove and opening the ledger, pen between my teeth to have both hands free, to begin on the accounts? Hearing the workmen say their day-starting greetings, those with farthest to come arriving first, for wasn't that always the way? Was that truly me, identical with this steerage creature listening to a steamship moan out greetings to disaster? The same set of bones called Angus McCaskill, anyway. The same McCaskill species that the Barclays and their wheelwright shop were accustomed to harboring.

To see you here is to lay eyes on your father again, Angus, Rob's father Vare Barclay told me at least once a week. A natural pleasantry, but Vare Barclay and I equally knew it was nowhere near true. When you saw my father there over his forge in an earlier time, you were viewing the keenest of wheelsmiths; the master in that part of Scotland at making ninety pounds of tire-iron snugly band itself onto a wagon wheel and become its invincible rim. Skill will ask its price, though. The years of anvil din took nearly all of my father's hearing, and to attract his attention as he stood there working a piece of iron you would have had to toss a wood chip against his shirt. Do that and up he would glance from his iron, little less distant when he was aware of you than when he wasn't. Never did I make that toss of contact with him, when sent by my mother on errand to the 'wright shop, without wondering what it would take to mend his life. For my father had gone deaf deeper than his ears.

I am from a house of storm. My parents Alex and Kate McCaskill by the middle of their marriage had become baffled and wounded combatants. I was their child who lived. Of four. Christie, Jack and Frank, who was already apprenticing with my father at the Barclay 'wright shop—in a single week the three of them died of cholera. I only barely remember them, for I was several years the youngest—like Rob's sister Adair in the Barclay family, an "afterthought" child; I have contemplated since whether parents in those times instinctively would have a late last child as a kind of insurance—but I recall in all clarity my mother taking me to the farm cottage of a widow friend of hers when the killing illness began to find Nethermuir. When my mother came for me six weeks later she had aged twice that many years, and our family had become a husk the epidemic left behind. From then on my father lived—how best to say this?—he lived alongside my mother and me rather than with us. Sealed into himself, like someone of another country who happened

to be traveling beside us. Sealed into his notion, as I grew, that the one thing for me was to follow into his smithy trade. *I'm here to tell you, it's what life there is for us and ours. A McCaskill at least can have an honest pair of hands.* Oh, there was war in the house about that. My father could not see why I ought to do anything but apprentice myself into hammer work in the Barclay wheelshop as he had, as my brother Frank had; my mother was equally as set that I should do anything but. His deafness made their arguments over me a roaring time. The teacups rattled when they went at it. The school-leaving age was thirteen, so I don't know how things would have gone had not my father died when I was twelve. My mother at once took work as a spinner in the linen mill and enrolled me with the 'venture schoolteacher Adam Willox. Then when I was sixteen, my mother followed my father into death. She was surprised by it, going the same way he had; a stroke that toppled her in the evening and took her in the early morning. With both of them gone, work was all the family I had. Rob's father put me on as clerk in the 'wright shop in the mornings, Adam Willox made me his pupil-teacher in the afternoons. Two half-occupations, two slim wages, and I was glad enough to have them, anything. Vare Barclay promised me full clerkwork whenever the times found their way from bad to good again, Adam Willox promised I could come in with him as a schoolkeeper whenever pupils grew ample enough again. But promises never filled the oatmeal bowl. So when Rob caught America fever, I saw all too readily the truth in what he said about every tomorrow of our Nethermuir lives looking the same. About the great American land pantry in such places as his uncle's Montana, where homesteads were given—given!—in exchange for only a few years of earnest effort. The power of that notion of homesteading in America, of land and lives that would be all our own. We never had known anything like it in our young selves. *America. Montana.* This ship to them. This black iron groaner of a ship that—

I was noticing something I devoutly did not want to. The *Jemmy* seemed to be groaning more often.

I held myself dead still to be sure.

Yes, oh sweet Christ and every dimpled disciple, yes: my berth was starting to sway and dive.

A boat is a hole in the water/ And a ship is a bigger boat.

I heard Rob wake with a sleepy "What?" just before full tumult set in. The *Jemmy* stumbled now against every wave, conked its

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

iron beak onto the ocean, rose to tumble again. The least minute of this behavior was more than enough storm for a soul in steerage, but the ruckus kept on and on. Oftener and oftener the ship's entire iron carcass shuddered as the propellor chewed air. Sick creatures shudder before they die, don't they. I felt each and every of these shakings as a private earthquake, fear finding a way to tremble not merely me but every particle of existence. Nineteen did not seem many years to have lived. *What if the old Bell Rock had drowned me?* my father remembered being asked in boyhood by Alexander McCaskill at the end of that floodtide tale. *Where would you be then, Alexander the Second?* What if, still the question.

Even yet this is a shame on me to have to say, but fear brought a more immediate question, too, insistent in the gut of me and below. I had to lay there concentrating desperately not to soil myself.

Amid it all a Highlands voice bleated out from a distant bunk, "Who'd ever think she could jig like this without a piper?" Oh, yes, you major fool, the ranting music of bagpipes was the only trouble we lacked just now. The Atlantic had its own tune, wild and endless. I tried to wipe away my sweat but couldn't keep up with it. I desperately wanted to be up out of Steerage Number One and onto deck, to see for myself the white knuckles of the storm ocean. Or did I. Again the ship shook; rather, was shaken. What was out there? My blood sped as I tried to imagine the boiling oceanic weather which could turn a steamship into an iron cask. Cloudcaps darker than night itself. High lumpy waves, foaming as they came. Wind straining to lift the sea into the air with it, and rain a downward flood determined to drown the wind.

The storm stayed ardent. Barrels, trunks, tins, whatever was movable flew from side to side, and we poor human things clung in our berths to keep from flying, too. No bright remarks about jigs and pipes now. The steerage bunks were stacked boxes of silence now. Alberta, Manitoba, Montana were more distant than the moon. I knew Rob was clamped solidly below me, those broad wheelwright hands of his holding to whatever they had met. The worst was to keep myself steady there in the bunk while all else roved and reeled. Yet in an awful way the storm came to my help; its violence tranced a person. From stem to stern the *Jemmy* was 113 of my strides; I spent time on the impossibility of anything that length not being broken across canyons of

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waves. The ship weighed more than two thousand tons; I occupied myself with the knowledge that nothing weighing a ton of tons could remain afloat. I thought of the Greenock dock where I ought to have turned back, saw in my closed eyes the drowned cart horse Ginger I was trying every way I knew not to see, retraced in my mind every stairstep from deck down into Steerage Number One; which was to say down into the basement of the titanic Atlantic, down into the country where horses and humans are hash for fish.

Now the *Jemmy* dropped into a pause where we did not teeter-totter so violently. We were havened between crags of the sea. I took the opportunity to gasp air into myself, on the off chance that I'd ever need any again. Rob's face swung up into view and he began, "See now, McAngus, that all could have been worse. A ship's like a wagon, as long as it creaks it holds, and—" The steamship shuddered sideways and tipped ponderously at the same time, and Rob's face snapped back into his berth.

Now the ship was grunting and creaking constantly, new and worse noises—you could positively feel the *Jemmy* exerting to drag itself through this maelstrom—and these grindstone sounds of its effort drew screams from women and children in the midship compartments, and yes, from more than a few men as well, whenever the vessel rolled far over. Someone among the officers had a voice the size of a cannon shot and even all the way down where we were could be heard his blasts of "BOS'N!" and "ALL HANDS!" Those did not improve a nonswimmer's frame of mind, either.

The *Jemmy* drove on. Shuddering. Groaning. Both. It's tremors ran through my body. Every pore of me wanted to be out of that berth, free from water. But nothing to do but hold onto the side of the berth, hold myself as level as possible on a crooked ocean.

Nothing, that is, until somebody made the first retching sound.

Instantly that alarm reached all our gullets. I knew by heart what Crofutt advised. *Any internal discomfort whilst aboard ship is best ameliorated by the fresh air of deck. Face the world of air; you will be new again.* If I'd had the strength I'd have hurled Crofutt up onto that crashing deck. As it was, I lay as still as possible and strove not think of what was en route from my stomach to mouth.

Steerage Number One's vomiting was phenomenal. I heaved up, Rob heaved up, every steerage soul heaved up. Meals from a month ago were trying to come out of us.

Our pitiful gut emptyings chorused with the steamship's groans.

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Our poor storm-bounced guts strained, strained, strained some more. Awful, the spew we have in us at our worst. The stench of it all and the foulness of my mouth kept making me sicker yet. Until I managed to remember the limes.

I fumbled them out and took desperate sucks of one. Another I thrust down to the bunk below. "Rob, here. Try this."

His hand found mine and the round rind in it.

"Eat at a time like now? Angus, you're—"

"Suck it. For the taste." I could see white faces in the two bunks across from us and tossed a lime apiece over there as well. The *Jemmy* rose and fell, rose and fell, and stomachs began to be heard from again in all precincts of the compartment. Except ours.

Bless you, Madam Irish. Maybe it was that the limes put their stern taste in place of the putrid. Maybe that they puckered our mouths as if with drawstrings. Maybe only that any remedy seemed better than none. Whatever effect it may have been, Rob and I and the other lime-juiced pair managed to abstain from the rest of the general gagging and spewing. I knew something new now. That simply being afraid was nowhere near so bad as being afraid and retching your socks up at the same time.

Toward dawn the Atlantic got the last of the commotion out of its system. The *Jemmy* ploughed calmly along as if it had never been out for an evening gallop at all. Even I conceded that we possibly were going to live, now.

"Mates, what's all this muss?" The steward put in his appearance and chivied us into sluicing and scrubbing the compartment and sprinkling chloride of lime against the smell, not that the air of Steerage Number One could ever be remedied much. For breakfast Rob and I put shaky cups of tea into ourselves and I had another lime, just for luck. Then Rob returned to his berth, claiming there was lost sleep to be found there, and I headed up for deck, anywhere not to be in that ship bottom.

I knew I still was giddy from the night of storm. But as I began to walk my first lap of the deck, the scene that gathered into my eyes made me all the more woolheaded.

By now the weather was clement, so that was no longer the foremost matter in me. And I knew, the drybrain way you know a map fact, that the night's steaming progress must have carried us out of

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

sight of land on all sides. But the ocean. The ocean I was not prepared for nor ever could be.

Anywhere my eyes went, water bent away over the curve of the world. Yet at the same time the *Jemmy* and I were in a vast wash-basin, the rims of the Atlantic perfectly evident out there over us. Slow calm waves wherever I faced, only an occasional far one bothering to flash into foam like a white swimmer appearing and disappearing. No savage liquid plains these. This was the lyric sea, absently humming in the sameness of the gray and green play of its waves, in its pattern of water always wrinkling, moving, yet other water instantly filling the place. All this, and a week of water extending yet ahead.

I felt like a child who had only been around things small, suddenly seeing there is such a thing as big. Suddenly feeling the crawling fear I had known the past two nights in my berth change itself into a standing fact: if the *Jemmy* wrecked, I would sink like a statue, but nobody could outswim the old Atlantic anyway, so why nettle myself over it? Suddenly knowing that for this, the spectacle of the water planet around me, I could put up with sleepless nights and all else; when you are nineteen and going to America, I learned from myself in that moment, you can plunder yourself as much as is needed. Maybe I was going to see the Atlantic each dawn through scared red eyes. But by the holy, see it I would.

I made my start that very morning. Ocean cadence seemed to be more deliberate, calmer, than time elsewhere, and I felt the draw of it. Hour by slow hour I walked that deck and watched and watched for the secret of how this ocean called Atlantic could endlessly go on. Always more wrinkling water, fresh motion, were all that made themselves discernible to me, but I kept walking and kept watching.

"How many voyages do you suppose this tea has made?"

"Definitely enough for pension."

"Mahogany horse at dinner, Aberdeen cutlet at supper." Which was to say, dried beef and smoked haddock. "You wouldn't get such food just any old where."

"You're not wrong about that."

"The potatoes aren't so bad, though."

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

"Man, potatoes are never so bad. That's the principle of potatoes"

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"These ocean nights are dark as the inside of a cow, aren't they."

"At least, at least."

"We can navigate by the sparks." The Jemmy's funnel threw constant specks of fire against the night. "A few more times around the deck will do us good. Are we both for it?"

"All right, all right, both. Angus, you're getting your wish, back there on the Clyde."

"What's that, now."

"You're walking us to America."

"Listen to old Crofutt here, will you. *We find, from our experience, that the midpoint of the journey is its lowest mark, mentally speaking. If doubt should afflict you thereabout, remonstrate with yourself that of the halves of your great voyage, the emigration part has been passed through, the immigration portion has now begun. Somewhere there on the Atlantic rests a line, invisible but valid, like Greenwich's meridian or the equator. East of there, you were a leaver of a place, on your way FROM a life. West across that division, older by maybe a minute, know yourself to be heading TO a life.*"

"Suppose we're Papists yet?" Sunday, and the priest's words were carrying to us from the Irish congregation thick as bees on the deck's promenade.

"I maybe am. There's no hope whatsoever for you."

"This ~~line~~ in Montana that old Crofutt goes on about, Angus. What is that exactly?"

"It's like, say, the roof peak of America. The rivers on this side of it flow here to the Atlantic, on the other they go to the Pacific."

"Are you telling me we're already on water from Montana, out here?"

"So to say."

"Angus, Angus. Learning teaches a man some impossible things, is what I say."

"Too bad they're not bumboats. I could eat up one side of a leg of mutton and down the other about now." Autumn it may have been

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Continental Divide

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

back in Scotland, but there off Newfoundland the wind was hinting winter, and Rob and I put on most of the clothes we possessed to stay up and watch the fishing fleets of the Newfoundland coastal banks.

"And an Irish smile, Rob, what about. Those sisters you were eyeing at Queenstown, they'd be one apiece for us if my arithmetic is near right."

"Angus, I don't know what I'm going to do with you. I only hope for your sake that they have women in America, too."

"There's a chance, do you think?"

"Shore can't be all so far now."

"No, but you'll see a change in the color of the ocean first. New York harbor will be cider instead of water, do you know, and it'll start to show up out here."

Then came the day.

"Mates," the steward pronounced, "we're about to pass old Sandy Hook. New York will step right out and meet us now. I know you've grown attached to them, but the time is come to part with your mattresses. If you'll kindly all make a chain here, like, and pass them along one to the next to the stairway . . ." Up to deck and overboard our straw beds proceeded, to float off behind us like a flotilla of rafts. A person would think that mine ought to have stood out freshest among them, so little of the sleep in it had been used.

New York was the portal to confusion, and Castle Garden was its keyhole. The entire world of us seemed to be trying to squeeze into America through there. Volleys of questions were asked of us, our health and morals were appraised, our pounds and shillings slid through the money exchange wicket to come back out as dollars and cents. I suppose our experience of New York's hustle and bustle was every America-comer's: thrilling, and we never wanted to do it again. Yet in its way, that first hectic experience of America was simply like one of the hotting-up days back in the 'wrightshop, when the bands of tire iron were furnaced to a red heat and then made to encircle the newly crafted wagon wheels. Ultimately after the sweating and straining and hammering, after every kind of commotion, there was the moment as the big iron circle was cooling and

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

clasping itself ever tighter around the wheel when you would hear a click, like a sharp snap of fingers. Then another, and another—the sound of the wheelspokes going the last fraction of distance into their holes in the hub and the rim, fitting themselves home. And if you listened with a bit of care, the last click of all came when the done wheel first touched the ground, as if the result was making a little cluck of surprise at its new self. Had you been somewhere in the throng around Rob and me as we stepped out of Castle Garden's workshop of immigration into our first American day, to begin finding our way through a city that was twenty of Glasgow, you might have heard similar sounds of readiness.

Then the railroad and the westward journey, oceanic again in its own way, with islands of towns and farms across the American prairie. Colors on a map in no way convey the distances of this earth. What would the place Montana be like? Alp after alp after alp, as the Alberta adherent aboard ship assured us? *The Territory of Montana, Crofutt defined, stands as a tremendous land as yet virtually untapped. Already planetarily famous for its wealth of ores, Montana proffers further potentialities as a savannah for graziers and their herds, and where the hoofed kingdom does not obtain, the land may well become the last great grain garden of the world. Elbow room for all aspirants will never be a problem, for Montana is fully five times the size of all of Scotland.* How was it going to be to live within such distances? To become pioneers in filling such emptiness? At least we can be our own men there, Rob and I had told each other repeatedly. And now we would find out what kind of men that meant.

America seemed to go on and on outside the train windows, and our keenness for Montana and Lucas Barclay gained with every mile.

"He'll see himself in you," I said out of nowhere to Rob. I meant his uncle; and I meant what I was saying, too. For I was remembering that Lucas Barclay had that same burnish that glowed on Rob. The face and force to go with it, for that matter. These Barclays were a family ensemble, they all had a memorable glimmer. Years and years back, some afterschool hour Rob and I were playing fox-chase in the woodyard of the wheelwright shop, and in search of him I popped around a stack of planks into my father and Lucas and Rob's father Vare, eyeing out oak for spokes. I startled both myself and them by whirling into the midst of their deliberation that

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

way, and I remember as clear as now the pair of bright Barclay faces and my father's pale one, and then Lucas swooping on me with a laugh to tickle his thick thumb into my ribs, *I met a man from Kingdom Come, he had daggers and I had none, but I fell on him with my thumb, and daggered and daggerd 'um!* Was that the final time I'd seen Lucas before his leaving of Scotland, that instant of rosy smile at a flummoxed boy and then the tickling recital? The lasting one, at least.

"I hope Lucas doesn't inspect too close, then," Rob tossed off. "Else we may get the door of the Great Maybe slammed in our faces."

"Man," I decided to tease, "who could ever slam a door to you? Shut with firmness and barricade it to keep you from their wives, daughters and maiden aunts, maybe, but—"

Rob gave my shoulder a push. "I can't wait to see the surprise on Lucas," he said, laughing. "Seven years. I can't wait."

"I wonder just what his life is like, there."

"Wonder away, until sometime tomorrow. Then you can see the man himself and know."

In truth, we knew little more than the least about Lucas Barclay in these Montana years of his. Rob said there had been only a brief letter from Lucas to Nethermuir the first few Christmases after he emigrated, telling that he had made his way to the city of Helena and of his mining endeavor there; and not incidentally enclosing as his token of the holiday a fine fresh green American banknote of one hundred dollars. You can be sure as Rob's family was that more than a greeting was being said there, that Lucas was showing the stay-at-homes the fruit of his adventure; Lucas's decision against the wheelwright shop and for America had been the early version of Rob's: too many Barclays and not enough wagon wheels any more. Even after his letters quit—nobody who knew Lucas expected him to spend time over paper and pen—that hundred dollars arrived alone in an envelope, Christmas after Christmas, *The Montana money*, Rob's family took to calling it. *Lucas is still Lucas*, they said with affection and rue for this strayed one of the clan; *as freehanded a man as God ever set loose.*

I won't bother to deny that in making our minds up for America Rob and I found it persuasive that money was sent as Christmas cards from there. But the true trove over across in Montana, we considered, was Lucas himself. Can I make you know what it meant

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to us to have this uncle of his as our forerunner? As our American edition of *Croftutt*, waiting and willing to instruct? Put yourself where we were, young and stepping off to a new world in search of its glorious packets of land called homesteads, and now tell me whether or not you want to have a Lucas Barclay ahead, with a generous side that made us know we could walk in on him and be instantly welcome; a Lucas who would know where the best land for homesteading beckoned, what a fair price was for anything, whether they did so-and-so in Montana just as we were accustomed to in Scotland, whether they ever did thus-and-such at all. Bold is one thing and reckless is another, yes? I thought at the time and I'll defend it yet, the steamship ticket could only take us to America and the railroad ticket could only deliver us across it—Rob and I held our true ticket to the Montana life we sought, to freedom and all else, in Lucas Barclay.

Helena had three times the people of Nethermuir in forty times the area. Helena looked as if it had been plopped into place last week and might be moved around again next week. Helena was not Hellenic.

A newcomer had to stand and goggle. The castellated edge of the city, high new mansions with sharp-towered roofs, processioned right up onto the start of the mountains around. Earth-old grit side by side with fresh posh. Then grew down a shambles of every kind of structure, daft blurts of shack and manor, with gaping spots between which evidently would be filled when new fashions of habitation had been thought up. Lastly, down the middle of it all was slashed a raw earthquakelike gash of gulch, in which nested block after block of aspiring red-brick storefronts.

"Quite the place," I said.

"So it is," said Rob.

Say for Helena, gangly capital city of the Territory of Montana and peculiar presbytery of our future with Lucas, it started us off with luck. After the Model Lodging House of Greenock, we knew well not to take the first roost we saw, and weary as we were, Rob and I trudged the hilly streets until we found a comparatively clean room at Mrs. Billington's, a few blocks away from Last Chance Gulch. Mrs. Billington observed to us at once, "You'll be wanting to wash the travel off, won't you," which was more than true.

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Those tubbings in glorious hot water were the first time since Nethermuir that we had a chance to shed our clothes.

"Old Barclay? Oh hell yeah," the most veteran boarder at Mrs. Billington's table aided us. "He works down at the depot. Watch sharp or you'll trip right over him there."

Here was news, Lucas in a railroad career, and our jauntiness was tinged with speculation as to how that could have come about. Down the steep streets of Helena Rob wore the success of our journey as if it was a helmet. And when we came into sight of the depot, his triumphant face could not have announced us more if he'd had a trumpet in front of it. I was proud enough myself.

Until we stepped into the depot, asked a white-haired shrimp of a fellow in spectacles where we might find the railway clerk named Barclay, and got: "I'm him. Elmer W. Barclay. Who might you be?"

Elmer W. was nothing at all like Lucas, but he definitely was the Barclay everyone in Helena seemed to know about, in our next few hours of asking and asking. We found as well the owner of the Great Maybe mine, but he was not Lucas either. Nor were any of the three previous disgusted owners we managed to track down. In fact, Lucas's name was six back in the record of ownership the Second Deputy Clerk and Recorder of Lewis and Clark County grudgingly dug out for us, and there had been that many before Lucas. It grew clear to Rob and me that had the Great Maybe been a silver coin instead of a silver mine, by now it would be worn smooth from being passed around.

By that first night, Rob was thoughtful. "What do you suppose, Lucas made as much money from the Great Maybe as he thought was there and moved on to another mine? Or didn't make money and just gave the mine up?"

"Either way, he did move on," I pointed out.

"Funny, though," Rob deliberated, "that none of these other miners can bring Lucas to mind."

That point had suggested itself to me too, but I decided to chide it on its way. "Rob, how to hell could they all remember each other? Miners in Montana are like hair on a dog."

"Still," he persisted, "if Lucas these days is anything like the Lucas he was back in Nethermuir, somebody is bound to remember him. Am I right?"

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"Right enough. We just need to find that somebody."

"Or Lucas. Whichever happens first."

"Whichever. Tomorrow we scour this Helena and make Lucas happen, one way or the other."

But the next day Helena provided us not Lucas, but history. Rob and I met our first Montana frost that November morning when we set out, and saw our breath all the way to the post office, where we asked without luck about Lucas. We had just stepped from there, into sunshine now, to go and try at the assay office when I saw the fellow and his flag on a rooftop across the street.

"Stay"-something, he shouted down into the street to us, "stay"-something, "stay"-something, and ran the American flag with 41 stars on it up a tall pole.

Cheers whooped from others in the street gaping up with us, and that in turn brought people to windows and out from stores. Abruptly civilization seemed to be tearing loose in Helena as the crowd flocked in a tizzy to the flag-flying edifice, the *Herald* newspaper building.

"What is this, war with somebody?" Rob asked, as flabbergasted

as I
"Statehood!" called out a red-bearded man scurrying past. "It took goddamn near forever, but Montana's a state at last! Follow me, I'm buying!"

And so that eighth day of November arose off the calendar and grabbed Rob and me and every other Helena Montanian by the elbow, the one that can lever liquid up to the lips. Innocents us, statehood was a mysterious notion. However, we took it to mean that Montana had advanced out of being governed from afar, as Scotland was by the parliament in London, into running its own affairs. Look around Helena and you could wonder if this indeed constituted an improvement. But the principle was there, and Rob and I had to drink to it along with everyone else, repeatedly.

"Angus, we must've seen half the faces in Helena today," Rob estimated after we made our woozy way back to the lodging house. "And Lucas's wasn't among them."

"Then we know just where he is," I found to say. "The other half."

The day after that and the next several, we did try the assay office. The land office. The register of voters. The offices of the

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newspapers. The Caledonian Club. The Association of Pioneers. The jail. Stores. Hotels.

Saloons, endless saloons. The Grand Central or the Arcade or the Iroquois or the Cricket, the IXL or the Exchange or the Atlantic, it all ran the same:

"Do you know a man Lucas Barclay? He owned the Gre—a mine."

"Sometimes names change, son. What does he look like?"

"More than a bit like me. He's my uncle."

"Is he now. Didn't know miners had relatives." Wipe, wipe, wipe of the bartender's towel on the bar while he thought. "You do look kind of familiar. But huh-uh. If I ever did see your face on somebody else it was a time ago. Sorry."

Boarding houses.

"Good day, missus. We're trying to find the uncle of my friend here. Lucas Barclay is his name. Do you happen to know of him?"

"Barkler? No, never heard of him."

"Barclay, missus. B-A-R-C-L-A-Y."

"Never heard of him, either."

Finally, the Greenwood cemetery.

"You boys are good and sure, are you?" asked the caretaker from beside the year-old gravestone he had led us to.

We stood facing the stark chiseled name. "We're sure," said Rob.

The caretaker eyed us regretfully.

"Well, then," he declared, abandoning hope for this stone that read LEWIS BERKELEY PASSED FROM LIFE 1888, "that's about as close as I can come to it for you. Sorry."

"See now, we can't but think it would need to be a this year's burial," Rob specified to the caretaker, "because there's every evidence he was alive at last Christmas." He meant by this that the Montana money from Lucas had arrived as always to Nethermuir.

"B-A-R-C-L-A-Y, eh?" the caretaker spelled for the sixth time. "You're sure that's the way of it?" Rob assured him for the sixth time he was. The caretaker shook his head. "Nobody by that name among the fresh ones. Unless he'd be there." He nodded to the low edge of the graveyard, down near where the railroad right-of-way crossed the Fort Benton road. The grave mounds there had no markers.

The president just signed it!

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Realization arrived to Rob and me at the same instant. The paupers' field.

Past a section of lofty monuments where chiseled folds of drape and tassels were in style, we followed the caretaker down to the poorfield.

"Who are these, then?" asked Rob.

"Some are loners, drifters, hoboes. Others we just don't know who the hell they are. Find them dead of booze some cold morning up there in the Gulch. Or a mine timber falls on them and nobody knows any name for them except Dutchy or Frenchy or Scotty." I saw Rob swallow at that. The caretaker studied among a dozen bare graves. "Say, last month I buried a teamster who'd got crushed when his wagon went over on him. His partner said the gent called himself Brown, but a lot of folks color themselves different when they come west. Maybe he'd be yours?"

It did not seem likely to either Rob or me that Lucas would spurn a life of wagons in Nethermuir and adopt one here. Indeed, the more we thought, the less likely it seemed that Lucas could be down among the nameless dead. People always noticed a Barclay.

Discouragement. Perplexity. Worry. All those we found abundantly that first week in Helena but no Lucas.

Not one least little bit did Rob let go of the notion of finding him, though. By week's end he was this minute angry at the pair of us for not being bright enough to think where Lucas might be, the next at Lucas for not being anywhere. Then along came consternation—"Tell me truth, Angus, do you think he can be alive?"—and then around again to bafflement and irk: "Why to hell is that man so hard to find?"

"We'll find him," I said steadily to all this. "I can be stubborn and you're greatly worse than that. If the man exists in this Montana, we'll find him."

Yet we still did not.

We had to tell ourselves that we'd worn out all investigation for a Helena version of Lucas, so we had better think instead of other possible whereabouts. The start of our second week of search, we went by train to try Butte. That mining city seemed to be a factory for turning the planet inside out. Slag was making new mountains, while the mountains around stood with dying timber on their slopes.

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The very air was raw with smelter fumes and smoke. No further Butte, thank you, for either Rob or me, and we came away somehow convinced it was not the place Lucas Barclay would choose either.

Back at Helena we questioned stagecoach drivers, asking if they had heard of Lucas at their destination towns, White Sulphur Springs and Boulder and Elkhorn and Diamond City. No and no and no and no. Meanwhile, we were hearing almost daily of some new silver El Dorado where a miner might have been drawn to. Castle. Glendale. Granite. Philipsburg. Neihart. We began to see that tracking Lucas to a Montana mine, if indeed he was still in that business of Great Maybes, would be like trying to find out where a gypsy had taken up residence.

That week of search ended as empty as our first.

Sunday morning, our second Sabbath as dwellers of Helena, I woke before the day did, and my getting out of bed roused Rob. "Where're you off to?" he asked as I dressed.

"A walk. Up to see how the day looks."

He yawned mightily. "McAngus, the wheelwright shop is all the way back in Scotland and you're still getting out of bed to open it." More yawn. "Wait. I'll come along. Just let me figure which end my shoes fit on."

We walked up by the firebell tower above Last Chance Gulch. Except for the steady swimming flight of an occasional magpie, we were up before the birds. Mountains stretched high everywhere around, up in the morning light which had not yet found Helena. The business streets below were in sleeping gray. Over us and to the rim of the eastern horizon stretched long, long feathers of cloud, half a skyful streaked extravagantly with colors between gold and pink, and with purple dabs of heavier cloud down on the tops of the Big Belt Mountains. A vast sky tree of glow and its royal harvest beneath.

"So this is the way they bring morning into Montana," observed Rob. "They know their business."

"Now that I've got you up, you may as well be thoroughly up, what about." I indicated the firebell tower, a small open observation cabin like the top of a lighthouse but perched atop an open spraddle of supports.

Rob paused as we climbed past the big firebell and declared, "I'd

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like to ring the old thing and bring them all out into the streets. Maybe we would find Lucas then."

Atop the tower, we met more of dawn. The land was drawing color out of the sky. Shadows of trees came out up near the summit of Mt. Helena, and in another minute there were shawls of shadow off the backs of knolls. Below us the raw sides of Last Chance Gulch now stood forth, as if shoveled out during the night for the next batch of Helena's downtown to be sown in.

Rob pondered into the hundred streets below, out to the wide grassy valley beyond. Nineteen thousand people down there and so far not a one of them Lucas Barclay. A breeze lazed down the gulch and up the back of our necks. "Where to hell can he be, Angus? A man can't vanish like smoke, can he?"

Not unless he wants to, I thought to myself. But aloud: "Rob, we've looked all we can. There's no knowing until Christmas if Lucas is even alive. If your family gets the Montana money from him again, there'll be proof. But if that doesn't happen, we have to figure he's—" Rob knew the rest of that. Neither of us had been able to banish that Lewis Berkeley tombstone entirely from mind. I went on to what I had been mulling. "It's not all that far to Christmas now. But until then, we'd better get on with ourselves a bit. Keep asking after Lucas, yes. But get on with ourselves at the same time."

Rob stirred. He had that cocked look of his from when we stepped past the drowned horse on the Greenock dock, the look that said out to the world *surely you're fooling?* But face it, this lack of trace of Lucas had us fooled, fully. "Get on with ourselves, is it. You sound like Crofutt."

"And who better?" I swept an arm out over the tower railing to take in Helena and the rest of Montana. As full sunrise neared, the low clouds on the Big Belts were turning into gold coals. On such a morning it could be believed there was a paunch of ore on every Montana mountain. By the holy, this was a country to be up and around in. "Look at you here, five thousand miles from Scotland and your feet are dry, your color is bright, and you have no divided herat. Crofutt and McCaskill, we've seen you through and will again, lad. But the time has arrived to think of income instead of outgo. Are we both for that?"

He had to smile. "All right, all right, both. But tell me this, early riser. Where is it you'd see us to next, if you had your way?"

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We talked there on the bell hill until past breakfast and received the scolding of our lives from Mrs. Billington. Which was far short of fair, for she gained profit for some time to come from that fire tower discussion of ours. What Rob and I chose that early morning, in large part because we did not see what else to decide, was to stay on in Helena until Christmas sent its verdict from Nethermuir.

Of course we needed to earn while we tried to learn Montana, and if we didn't have the guidance of Lucas Barclay we at least had an honest pair of hands apiece. I took myself down to a storefront noticed during our trekking around town, Cariston's Mercantile. An Aberdeen man and thus a bit of a conniver, Hugh Cariston; but just then it made no matter to me whether he was the devil's half-brother. He fixed a hard look on me and in that Aberdonian drone demanded:

"Can ye handle sums?"
"Aye." I could, too.

I am sure as anything that old Cariston then and there hired me on as a clerk and bookkeeper just so he could have a decent Scots burr to hear. There are worse qualifications.

In just as ready a fashion, Rob found work at Weisenhorn's wagon shop. "Thin stuff," he shook his head about American wheels, but at least they made a job.

So there is the sum we were, Rob, as our Scotland-leaving year of 1889 drew to a cold close in new Montana. Emigrants changed by the penstrokes of the Cumbrae Steamship Line and Castle Garden into immigrants. Survivors of the Atlantic's rites of water, pilgrims to Helena. Persons we had been all our lives and persons becoming new to ourselves. How are past and present able to live in the same instant, and together pass into the future?

You were the one who hatched the fortunate notion of commemorating ourselves by having our likenesses taken on that Hogmanay, New Year's Eve, as they tamely say it here in America. "Angus, man, it'll be a Hogmanay gift such as they've never had in Nethermuir," you proclaimed, which was certainly so. "Let them in old Scotland see what Montanians are." We had to hustle to get to Ball's Photographic Studio before it closed.

That picture is here on my wall, I have never taken it down. Lord of mercy, Rob. Whatever made us believe our new mut-

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tonchop sidewhiskers became us? Particularly when I think how red mine were then, and the way yours bristled. We sit there in the photograph looking as if the stuffing is coming out of our heads. Once past those sidewhiskers, the faces on us were not that bad, I will say. Maybe an opera house couldn't be filled on the basis of them, but still. Your wide smile to match the wide Barclay chin, your confident eyes. Your hair black as it was and more than bountiful, the part in it going far back on the right side, almost back even with your ear. It always gave you that look of being unveiled before a crowd, a curtain tugged aside and the pronouncement: *Here, people, is Robert Burns Barclay*. Then, odd—I know this is only tintype history, catching a moment with the head-rod in place on the back of the neck—but there is a face-width gap between us as we pose, Rob, as if the absence of Lucas fit there. And then myself, young as you. As for my own front of the head, there beside you I show more expanse of upper lip than I wish was so, but there is not much to be done about that except what I later did, the mustache. The mouth could be worse, the nose could be better, but they are what I was given from the bin. The jaw pushes forward a little, as if I was inspecting into the camera's lens tunnel. My eyes—my eyes in our photograph are watching, not proclaiming as yours are. Even then, that far ago, watching to see what will become of us.

GROS VENTRE

We dislike to speak ill of any civic neighbor, yet it must be said that the community of Gros Ventre is gaining a reputation as Hell with a roof on it. Their notion of endeavor up there is to dream of the day when whiskey will flow in the plumbing. It is unsurprising that every cardsharp and hardcase in northern Montana looks fondly upon Gros Ventre as a second home. We urge the town fathers, if indeed the parentage of that singular municipality can be ascertained, to invite Gros Ventre's rough element to take up residence elsewhere.

—CHOTEAU QUILL, APRIL 30, 1890

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WORD FROM Scotland reached us in early February, and it was yes and then some. As regular as Christmas itself, the Montana money from Lucas had again wafted to Nethermuir; and together with it this:

Gros Ventre, Mont., 23 Dec. 1889

*My dear brother Vare and family,
You may wonder at not hearing from me this long while. Some day it will be explained. I am in health and have purchased a business. This place Gros Ventre is a coming town. I remain your loving brother,*

Lucas Barclay

"The man himself, Angus! See now, here at the bottom! Written by our Lucas himself, and he's—"

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"Rob, man, did I ever give up on a Barclay? It takes you people some time to find the ink, but—"

We whooped and crowed in this fashion until Mrs. Billington announced in through our door that she would put us out into the winter streets if we didn't sober up. That quelled our eruption, but our spirits went right on playing trumpets and tambourines. Weeks of wondering and hesitation were waved away by the sheet of paper flying in Rob's hand: Lucas Barclay definitely alive, unmistakably here in Montana, irrevocably broken out in penmanship—I managed to reach the magical letter from Rob for another look.

When Lucas finally put his mind to it, he wrote a bold hand. Bold scarcely says it, in fact. Each and every word was a fat coil of loops and flourishes, so outsize that the few sentences commanded the entire face of the paper. I thought I had seen among Adam Willox's pupils of the 'venture school all possible performances of pen, but here stood script that looked meant to post on a palace wall.

I said as much to Rob, but he only averred, "That would be like Lucas," and proceeded to read us the letter's contents aloud for the third time. "This place Graws Ventree. Ever hear of it, did you?"

Neither of us had word one of French, and the town name had never passed my ears before. "We can ask them at the post office where it is," I suggested. "A letter got from the place all the way to Scotland, after all."

He already was putting on his coat and cap and I mine. To see our haste, you'd have thought we had only to rush across the snowy street to be in Gros Ventre.

"Grove On," the postal clerk pronounced Lucas's town, which was instructive. So, in its way, was what he told us next. "It's quite a ways toward Canada, up in that Two Medicine country. Not a whole hell of a lot up there but Indians and coyotes. Here, see for yourselves."

What we saw on the map of post routes of Montana was that our first leg of travel needed to be by train north along the Missouri River to Craig, easy as pie. Then from Craig to Augusta by stagecoach, nothing daunting either. But from Augusta to the

map dot Gros Ventre, no indication of railroad or stage route. No postal road. No anything.

The clerk did not wait for us to ask how the blank space was to be found across. "You'll need to hitch a ride on a spine pounder."

Rob and I were blanker than the map gap.

"A freight wagon," the clerk elaborated. "They start freighting into that country whenever spring comes."

And so we waited for spring to have its say. In Montana, that is most likely to be a stutter. By the time snow and mud departed and then abruptly came back, went off a second time and decided to recur again, I thought I might have to bridle Rob. He maybe thought the same about me. But the day at last did happen when we stepped off the train at Craig, wandered along the banks of the Missouri River flowing swift and high with first runoff, and presented ourselves at the stagecoach station. There we were looked over with substantial curiosity by the agent. Rob and I were topped off with Stetson hats now, but I suppose their newness, and ours, could be seen from a mile off.

At five minutes before scheduled departure and no sign of anyone but us and the spectating agent, Rob asked restlessly: "How late will the stage be?"

"Who said anything about late?" the agent responded. "Here's the fellow now who handles the ribbons." In strode a rangy young man, tall as myself, who nodded briskly to the agent and reached behind the counter to hoist out a mail sack. Likely the newcomer wasn't much older than Rob or I, but he seemed to have been through a lot more of life.

"Yessir, Ben," the agent greeted him. "Some distinguished passengers for you today, all both of them."

The stage driver gave us his brisk nod. "Let's get your warbags on board."

We followed him outside to the stagecoach. "Step a little wide of those wheelers," he gestured toward the rear team of the four stagecoach horses. "They're a green pair. I'm running them in there to take the rough spots off of them."

Rob and I looked at each other. *And how did you journey from Craig to Augusta, Mr. McCaskill and Mr. Barclay? Oh, we were*

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dragged along behind wild horses. There was nothing else for it, so we thrust our bedrolls and bags up top to the driver. When he had lashed them down, he pulled out a watch and peered at it. "Augusta where you gents are aiming for?"

"No," I enlightened him, "we're going on to Gros Ventre." Meanwhile Rob was scrutinizing the wheels of the stagecoach and I was devoutly hoping they looked hale.

The driver nodded decisively again. "You'll see some country, up there." He conferred with his pocket watch once more, then put it away. "It's time to let the wheels chase the horses. All aboard, gents."

No two conveyances can be more different, but that stagecoach day was our voyage on the *Jemmy* out the Firth of Clyde over again. It has taken me this long to see so, among all else that I have needed to think through and through. But my meaning here is that just as the Clyde was our exit from cramped Scotland to the Atlantic and America, now Rob and I were leaving one Montana for another. The Montana of steel rails and mineshafts and politics for the Montana of—what? Expanse, definitely. There was enough untouched land between Craig and Augusta to empty Edinburgh into and spread it thin indeed. Flatten the country out and you could butter Glasgow onto it as well. So, the widebrimmed Montana, this was. The Montana of plain arising to foothills ascending to mountains, the continent going through its restless change of mood right exactly here. And the Montana of grass and grass and grass and grass. Not the new grass of spring yet—only the south slopes of coulees showed a green hint—but I swear I looked out on that tawny land and could feel the growth ready to burst up through the earth. The Montana that fledged itself new with the seasons.

The Montana, most of all to us that wheel-voyaging day, of the world's Rob Barclays and Angus McCaskills. We had come for homestead land, had we? For elbow room our ambitions could poke about in? For a 160-acre berth in the future? Here began the Montana that shouted all this and then let the echoes say, come have it. If you dare, come have it.

The stagecoach ride was a continuing session of rattle and bounce, but we had no runaway and no breakdown and pulled into

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Augusta punctual to the minute, and so Rob and I climbed down chipper as larks. Even putting up for the night at what Augusta called a hotel didn't dim us, cheered as we were by word that a freight wagon was expected the next day. The freighter had passed with supplies for a sheep ranch west of town and would need to come back through to resume the trail northward. "Better keep your eyes skinned for him," our stage driver advised. "Might be a couple weeks before another one comes through."

Toward noon of the next day, not only were our eyes still skinned but our nerves were starting to peel.

"He must've gone through in the night," Rob declared, not for the first time. "Else where to hell is he?"

"If he's driving a wagon through this country at night, we don't want to be with him anyway," I suggested. "The roads are thin enough in daylight."

"Angus, you're certain sure it was light enough to see when you first stepped out here?"

"Rob. A wagon as long as a house, and four horses, and a man driving them, and you're asking if they got past me? Now maybe they tunneled, but—"

"All right, all right, you don't have to jump on me with tackety boots. I'm only saying, where to hell—"

What sounded like a gunshot interrupted him. Both of us jumped like crickets. Then we caught the distant wagon rumble which defined the first noise as a whipcrack.

Rob clapped me on the shoulder and we stepped out into the road to await our freight wagon.

The freighter proved to be a burly figure with a big low jaw which his neck sloped up into, in a way that reminded me of a pelican. He rubbed that jaw assiduously while hearing Rob, then granted in a croaky voice that he could maybe stand some company, not to mention the commerce. We introduced ourselves to him, and he in turn provided: "Name's Herbert."

Rob gave him the patented Rob smile. "Would that be a first name, now? Or a last?"

The freighter eyed him up and down as if about to disinvite us. Then rasped: "Either way, Herbert's plenty. Hop on if you're coming."

We hopped. But while stowing our bags and bedrolls I took the

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chance to inventory the wagon freight. You don't work in a store such as Cariston's without hearing tales about wagonloads of blasting powder that went to unintended destinations.

Boxes of axle grease, sacks of beans, bacon, flour, coffee. Some bundles of sheep pelts, fresh enough that they must have come from the ranch where the freighter had just been. Last, a trio of barrels with no marking on them. Herbert saw me perusing these.

"Lightning syrup," he explained.

"Which?"

"Whiskey. Maybe they've heard of it even where you men come from?"

The first hours of that journey, Rob and I said very little. Partly that was because we weren't sure whether Herbert the freighter tolerated conversation except with his horses. Partly it was because nothing really needed speaking. Now that we were on our last lap to Lucas's town, Rob all but glittered with satisfaction. But also, we were simply absorbed in the sights of the land. A geography of motion, of endless ridges and knob hills and swales the wagon track threaded through. And instead of mountains equally all around as in Helena, here tiers of them were stacked colossally on a single horizon, the western. Palisades of rock, constant canyons. Peaks with winter still on them. As far ahead north as we could see, the crags and cliffs formed that vast tumbled wall.

I at last had to ask. "How far do these mountains go on like this?"

"Damn if I know," responded Herbert. "They're in Canada this same way, and that's a hundred fifty miles or so."

On and on the country of swales and small ridges rolled. Here was land that never looked just the same, yet always looked much alike. I knew Rob and I would be as lost out here as if we had been put on a scrap of board in the middle of the sea, and I was thanking our stars that we were in the guidance of someone as veteran to this trail as Herbert Whomever or Whoever Herbert.

Just to put some words into the air to celebrate our good fortune, I leaned around Rob and inquired of our shepherd: "How many times have you traveled this trail by now?"

"This'll make once."

The glance that shot between Rob and me must have had some left over for the freighter, because eventually he went on: "Oh, I've

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drove this general country a lot. The Whoop-up Trail runs along to the east of here, from Fort Benton on up there into Canada. I've done that more times than you can notch a stick. This trail meets up with that one, somewhere after this Gros Ventre place. All we got to do, men, is follow these here tracks."

Rob and I peered at the wheel marks ahead like two threads on the prairie. This time Rob did the asking.

"What, ah, what if it snows?"

"That," Herbert conceded, "might make them a little harder to follow."

After we stopped for the night and put supper in us, Herbert grew fidgety. Twice he got up from beside the campfire and prowled to the freight wagon and back, and then a third time. Maybe this was only his body trying itself out after the day of sitting lumplike on the wagon seat, but somehow I didn't think so.

Finally he peered across the fire, first at Rob, then at me.

"Men, you look like kind of a trustable pair."

"We like to think we're honest enough," vouched Rob. I thought I had better tack on, "What brings the matter up?"

Herbert cleared his throat, which was a lot to clear. "That whiskey in the wagon there," he confessed. "If you two're interested as I am, we might could evaporate a little of her for ourselves."

I was puzzling on "evaporate" and I don't know what Rob was studying, when Herbert elaborated: "It ain't no difference to the saloonkeeper getting those barrels, if that's what you're stuck on. He's just gonna water them up fuller than they ever was, you can bet your bottom dollar. So if there's gonna end up being more in those barrels than I started out with anyhow, no reason not to borrow ourselves a sip apiece, now is there? That's if you men think about this the way I do."

If Rob and I had formed a philosophy since stepping foot into Montana, it was to try to do as Montanians did, within reason. This seemed within.

Herbert grabbed the lantern and led as we clambered into the freight wagon. Rummaging beneath the seat, he came up with a set of harness awls and a hammer. Carefully, almost tenderly, he began tapping upward on the top hoop of the nearest whiskey barrel. When the barrel hoop unseated itself to an inch or so above its

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normal latitude, Herbert placed the point of a small awl there in a seam between staves and began zestfully to drill.

"That's a thing I can do," Rob offered as soon as the freighter stopped to rest fingers. Rob had hands quick enough to shoe a unicorn, and now he moved in and had the drilling done almost before he started.

This impressed even Herbert. "This ain't your profession, is it?"

"Not quite yet. Angus, have you found the one with the tune?"

A straw to siphon with was my mission, and from a fistful off the floor of the wagon I'd been busily puffing until I found a sturdy one that blew through nicely. "Here's one you could pipe the Missouri River through." Rob drew his awl from the hole and delicately injected my straw in its place. Herbert had his cup waiting beneath when the first drops of whiskey began dripping out. "She's kind of slow, men. But so's the way to heaven."

When each of our cups was about two inches moist and the barrel hole plugged with a match stick and the hoop tapped back into place to hide it, Herbert was of new manufacture. As we sat at the campfire and sipped, even his voice sounded better when he asked intently: "How's the calico situation in Helena these days?"

I had a moment of wondering what was so vital to him about that specific item of dry goods. Then it dawned on me what he meant. Women. And from there it took no acrobatics of logic to figure out what sort of women.

Rob raised his cup in a mock toast and left the question to me. Well, there was rough justice in that, you could say. I had been the first to investigate the scarlet district of Helena, with promptitude after I'd begun earning wages at the mercantile. Not that Rob was six counties behind me, for it had been the next time I said I was setting off up the gulch that he fidgeted, scratched an ear, cleared something major from his throat, then blurted: "You can stand company, can't you?" That too had been new of America, transit from the allure of the Nethermuir mill girls with the boldest tongues to those Helena brothel excursions of ours winterlong. Without ever saying so to each other—it was the side of life Rob did not like to be noticed in—we both well knew that among the deepest of the Nethermuir traps we were escaping from was one of those accident marriages. A wedding beside the cradle, as was said. It happened to so many we knew and it had been just as likely to happen to either

of us sooner or later, by the nature of things probably sooner. So, yes, America, Montana, Helena had been new open terms of possibility in more ways than one.

"Worst thing about being a freighter," Herbert was proclaiming after my tepid report on Helena, "is how far she is between calico. Makes the need rise in a man. Some of these mornings, I swear to gosh I wake up and my blanket looks like a tepee."

From Herbert the rest of that evening, we heard of the calico situation at the Canadian forts he freighted to. (Bad.) The calico situation in New Orleans, where he'd been posted as a soldier in the Union army. (Astounding.) The calico situation at Butte as compared with anywhere else in Montana. (A thousand times better.) The calico situation among the Mormons, the Chinese, the Blackfeet, the Nez Perce, and the Sioux.

When we had to tell him no, we hadn't been to London to find out the English calico situation, he looked regretful, tipped the last of his cup of whiskey into himself, and announced he was turning in for the night. "Men, there's no hotel like a wagon. Warm nights your room is on the wagon, stormy nights it's under it." Herbert sniffed the air and peered upward into the dark. "I believe tonight mine's going to be under."

Herbert's nose knew its business. In the morning, the world was white.

I came out of my bedroll scared and stayed that way despite the freighter's assessment that "this is just a April skift, maybe." From Rob's blinking appearance, he, too, could have done without a fresh white surprise this morn. After Helena's elongated winter of snow flinging down from the Continental Divide, how was a person supposed to look at so much as a white flake without thinking the word *blizzard*? Nor was there any checking on the weathermaking intentions of the Divide mountains now, as they were totally gone from the west, that direction a curtain of whitish mist. Ridges and coulees nearest us still could be picked out, their tan grass tufting up from the thin blanket of fresh fall. But our wagon trail, those thin twin wheel tracks—as far as could be told from the blank and silent expanse all around us, Herbert and Rob and I and the freight wagon and four horses had dropped here out of the sky along with the night's storm.

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The snow had stopped falling, which was the sole hope I saw anywhere around. But was the sky empty by now? Or was more winter teetering where this plopped from?

Rob put his head back and addressed firmly upward into the murk: "Can't you get the stove going up there?" But he still looked as discomfited as I must have.

"She sure beats everything, Montana weather," Herbert acknowledged. "Men, I got to ask you to do a thing."

Rob and I took turns at it, one walking ahead of the wagon and scuffing aside the snow to find the trail ruts while the other rode the seat beside Herbert and tried to wish the weather into improvement.

"When do you suppose spring comes to this country?" Rob muttered as he passed me during one of our walking-riding swaps.

"Maybe by the end of summer," I muttered back.

Later: "You remember what the old spinster in the story said, when somebody asked her why she'd never wed?"

"Tell me, I'm panting to know."

"I wouldn't have the walkers, and the riders went by.' Out here, she'd have her choice of us."

"She'd need to negotiate past Herbert first."

Later again: "Am I imagining or is Montana snow colder than snow ever was in Scotland?"

"If you're going to imagine, try for some sunshine"

Still later: "Herbert says this could have been worse, there could have been a wind with this snow."

"Herbert is a fund of happy news."

It was morning's end before Herbert informed us, "Men, I'm beginning to think we're going to get the better of this."

He no more than said so when the mist along the west began to wash away and mountains shouldered back into place here and there along that horizon. The light of this ghostly day became like no other I had ever seen, a silver clarity that made the stone spines of ridges and an occasional few cottonwood trees stand out like en-

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gravings in book pages. Any outline that showed itself looked strangely singular, as if it existed only right then, never before. I seemed to be existing differently myself. Again as it had happened on that first full Atlantic morning of mine when I watched and watched the ocean, I could feel a slowing of the day; a shadowless truce while light speaks to time.

At last the sun burned through, the snow began melting into patches, the wheel tracks emerged ahead of us like new dark paint. Out baptism by Montana spring apparently over, Rob and I sat in grateful tired silence on the freight wagon.

We were wagoners for the rest of that day and the next, crossing the Teton River and observing some distant landmark buttes which Herbert said were near a settlement called Choteau. Then at supper on the third night Herbert reported, "Tomorrow ought to about get us there." In celebration, we evaporated the final whiskey barrel to the level of the two previous nights', congratulating ourselves on careful workmanship, and Herbert told us a number of chapters about the calico situation when he was freighting into Deadwood during the Dakota gold rush.

Not an hour after we were underway the next morning, the trail dropped us into a maze of benchlands with steep sides. Here even the tallest mountains hid under the horizon, there was no evidence the world knew such a thing as a tree, and Herbert pointed out to us alkali bogs which he said would sink the wagon faster than we could think about it. A wind so steady it seemed solid made us hang onto our hats. Even the path of wagon tracks lost patience here; the bench hills were too abrupt to be climbed straight up, and rather than circle around endlessly among the congregation of geography, the twin cuts of track attacked up the slopes in gradual sidling patterns.

Herbert halted the wagon at the base of the first long ruts angling up and around a benchland. "I don't think this outfit'll roll herself over, up there. But I thought wrong a time or two before. Men, it's up to you whether you want to ride her out or give your feet some work."

If Herbert regarded these slopes as more treacherous than the cockeyed inclines he had been letting us stay aboard for . . . Down I climbed, Rob prompt behind me.

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We let the wagon have some distance ahead of us, to be out of its way in case of tumbling calamity, then began our own slog up the twin tracks. *And how did you journey from Augusta to Gros Ventre, Mr. McCaskill and Mr. Barclay? We went by freight wagon, which is to say we walked.* The tilted wagon crept along the slope while we watched, Herbert standing precariously on the lazyboard, ready to jump.

"Any ideas, if?"

"We're trudging now, I suppose we'd keep on. Our town can't be that far."

"This is Montana, remember. You could put all of Scotland in the watch pocket of this place."

"True enough. Still, Gros Ventre has to be somewhere near by now. Even Herbert thinks so."

"Herbert thinks he won't tip the wagon over and kill himself, too. Let's see how right he is about that, first."

The benchlands set us a routine much as the snow had done: trudge up each slope with the wind in our teeth, hop onto the freight wagon to ride across and down the far side, off to trudge some more. The first hour or so, we told ourselves it was good for the muscles. The rest of the hours, we saved our breath.

"Kind of slaunchwise country, ain't she?" remarked Herbert when we paused for noon. Rob and I didn't dare study each other. If Gros Ventre was amid this boxed-in skewed landscape; if this windblown bleakness was where we had plucked ourselves up across the world to find Lucas Barclay . . .

Mid-afternoon, though, brought a long gradual slope which the wagon could travel straight up in no peril, and we were able to be steady passengers again. By now Rob and I were weary, and wary as well, expecting the top of each new ridgeline to deliver us back into the prairie infantry. But another gradual slope and widened benchland appeared ahead, and a next after that. And then the trail took the wagon up to a shallow pass between two long flat ridges.

There in the gap, Herbert whoaed the horses.

What had halted him, and us, was a change of earth as abrupt as waking into the snow had been.

Ahead was where the planet greatedened.

To the west now, the entire horizon was a sky-marching procession of mountains, suddenly much nearer and clearer than they

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were before we entered our morning's maze of tilted hills. Peaks, cliffs, canyons, cite anything high or mighty and there it was up on that rough west brink of the world. Mountains with snow summits, mountains with jagged blue-gray faces. Mountains that were free-standing and separate as blades from the hundred crags around them; mountains that went among other mountains as flat palisades of stone miles long, like guardian reefs amid wild waves. The Rocky Mountains, simply and rightly named. Their double magnitude here startled and stunned a person, at least this one—how deep into the sky their motionless tumult reached, how far these Rockies columned across the earth.

The hem to the mountains was timbered foothills, dark bands of pine forest. And down from the foothills began prairie broader than any we had met yet, vast flat plateaus of tan grassland north and east as far as we could see. Benchland and tableland/ countless times larger than the jumbled ridges behind us, elbow room for the spirit.

Finally, last in our looking, about a mile in front of us at the foot of the nearest of these low plateaus, a line of cottonwood trees along a creek made the graceful bottom seam across this tremendous land.

I just sat and let it all dazzle at me. Rob was equally stone-still at my side.

"Oh yeah, I see where we are now," contributed Herbert. "There's old Chief." He pointed out to us Chief Mountain, farthest north on the mountain horizon and a step separate, independent, from the rest of the crags. "She's Canada up beyond that. Between her and here, though, comes the Two Medicine River. Can't see that from where we're at, but this whole jography is called the Two Medicine country."

I so wish Rob and I right then had performed what we ought to: politely request Herbert to close his eyes and cover his ears, step off the wagon together, face ourselves to this Two Medicine country, and then leap high and click our heels in the air loud enough to be heard in Nethermuir. For every soul that has ever followed a notion bigger than itself, we ought to have performed that. To send our echo into the canyons of time: *here is Montana, here is America, here is all yet to come.*

Now Herbert was finding for us the Sweetgrass Hills, a cluster of bumps on the plains far northeast of us. "Men, unless I'm more

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wrong than usual, those're about seventy-five miles from where we're at." Montana distances made your head swim. "Then this kind of a tit over here, Heart Butte." A dark breastlike cone that rose northwest near the rougher Rockies. Much closer to us, west along the line of creek trees, stood a smaller promontory like the long aft sail of a windship, with a tree-dark top. "Don't know what that butte is, she's a new one on me," Herbert confessed as our wagon began to jostle down toward the creek's biggest stand of cottonwood trees. In this landscape of expanse the local butte did not stand particularly high, it was not monumentally shaped, yet it managed to speak prominence, separateness, managed somehow to preside. A territory of landmarks as clear as towers was this Two Medicine country. Already I felt able to find my way in this clean-lined land.

Rob and I interrupted our gaping to trade mighty grins. All we needed now was Lucas Barclay and his coming metropolis.

Herbert cleared his gallon of throat and gestured toward the cottonwood grove ahead. When he didn't comprehend, he said:

"Here she is, I guess."

Gros Ventre took some guessing, right enough.

Ahead of us under the trees waited a thin scatter of buildings, the way there can be when the edge of town dwindles to countryside. None of the buildings qualified as much more than an eyesore, and beyond them on the far bank of the creek were arrayed several picketed horses and a cook wagon and three or four tents of ancient gray canvas, as if wooden walls and roofs hadn't quite been figured out over there yet.

From the wagon seat Rob and I scanned around for more town, but no. This raggle-taggle fringe of structures was the community entire.

Rather, this was Gros Ventre thus far in history. Across the far end of the single street, near the creek and the loftiest of the cottonwoods, stood a two-story framework. Just that, framework, empty and forlorn. Yellow lumber saying, more like pleading, that it had the aspiration of sizable enterprise and lacked only hundreds of boards and thousands of nails to be so.

Trying to brighten the picture for Rob, I observed: "They, ah, at least they have big plans."

Rob made no answer. But then, what could he have?

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"Wonder where it is they keep the calico at," issued from Herbert. He pondered Gros Ventre a moment further. "Wonder if they got any calico."

Our wagon rolled to a halt in front of what I took to be a log barn and which proved to be the livery stable. Rob and I climbed down and were handed our luggage by Herbert. As we shook hands with him he croaked out companionably, "Might see you around town. Kind of hard to miss anybody in a burg this size."

Rob drew in a major breath and looked at me. I tried to give him a grin of encouragement, which doubtless fell short of either. He turned and went over to the hostler who had stepped out to welcome this upsurge of traffic. "Good afternoon. We're looking for a man Lucas Barclay."

"Who? Luke? Ain't he over there in the Medicine Lodge? He always is."

Our eyes followed the direction the stableman jerked his head. At the far end of the empty dirt street near the bright skeleton of whatever was being built, stood a building with words painted across the top third of its square front in sky blue, startling as a tattoo on a forehead:

MEDICINE LODGE

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I saw Rob open his mouth to ask definition of a medicine lodge, think better of it, and instead bid the hostler a civil, "Thank you the utmost."

Gathering ourselves, bedrolls and bags, off we set along the main and only street of this place Gros Ventre. I was wrong about the street being empty; it in fact abounded with cow pies, horse apples, and other animal products.

"Angus," Rob asked low, as we drew nearer to the skelter of tents and picketed horses across the creek, "what, do they have gypsies in this country?"

"I wish I knew just what it is they have here." The door into the Medicine Lodge whatever it was waited before us. "Now we find out."

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Like Vikings into Egypt, we stepped in.

And found it to be a saloon. Along the bar were a half dozen partakers, three or four others occupied chairs around a greentop table where they were playing cards.

"Aces chase faces, Deaf Smith," said one of the cardsters as he spread down his hand.

"Goddamn you and the horse you rode in on, Perry," responded his opponent mildly, and gathered the cards to shuffle.

Of course Rob and I had seen cowboys before, in Helena. Or what we thought were. But these of Gros Ventre were a used variety, in soiled crimped hats and thick clothing and worn-down boots.

The first of the Medicine Lodge clientele to be aware of us was a stocky tan-faced man, evidently part Indian. He said something too soft for us to hear to the person beside him, who revolved slowly to examine us over a brownish longhorn mustache. I wish I could say that the mustached one showed any sign we were worth turning around to look at.

Had someone been counting our blinks—the Indian-looking witness maybe was—they'd have determined that Rob and I were simultaneous in spying the saloonkeeper.

He stood alone near one end of the bar, intently leaning down, busy with some task beneath there. When he glanced up and intoned deep, "Step right over, lads, this bunch isn't a fraction as bad as they look," there was the remembered brightness of his Barclay cheeks, there was the brand of voice we had not heard since leaving Nethermuir.

Lucas possessed a black beard now with gray in it like streaks of ash. The beard thickly followed his jaw and chin, with his face carefully shaved above that. Above the face Lucas had gone babe-bald, but the dearth of hair only emphasized the features of power dispersed below in that frame of coaly whiskers: sharp gray eyes under heavy dark eyebrows, substantial nose, wide mouth to match the chin, and that stropped ruddiness identical to Rob's.

Rob let out a breath of relief that must have been heard all the way to Helena. Then he smiled a mile and strode to the bar with his hand out as far as it could go:

"Mister Lucas Barclay, I've come an awful distance to shake your hand."

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Did I see it happen? Hear it? Or sheerly feel it? Whichever the sense, I abruptly knew that now the attention of everyone in the saloon weighed on Rob and me. Every head had pivoted to us, every eye gauged us. The half-breed or whatever he was seemed to be memorizing us in case there was a bounty on fools.

The saloonkeeper himself stared up at us thunderous. If faces could kill, Rob and I would have died right then.

The two of us stared stunned as he glowered at Rob. At me. At Rob again. Now the saloonkeeper's back straightened as if an iron rod had been put in his spine, but he kept his forearms deliberately out of sight below the bar. My mind flashed full of Helena tales of bartenders pulling out shotguns to moderate their unruly customers. By the holy, though, could anyone with eyes think Rob and I were anything like unruly right then?

Finally the saloonkeeper emitted low and fierce to Rob what his face was already raging out: "Are you demented? Who to hell are you anyway, to come spouting that?"

"Rob!" from Rob the bewildered. "Lucas, man, I know you like myself in the mirror! I'm Rob, your nephew."

The saloonkeeper still stared at him, but in a new way. Then:

"By Jesus, you are. Chapter and verse. By Jesus, you're Vare's lad Robbie, grown some."

The fury was gone from Lucas Barclay's face, but what passed into its place was no less unsettling. All emotion became unknown there now; right then that face of Lucas Barclay could have taught stoniness to a rock.

Still as baffled as I was, Rob blurted next: "Lucas, what is the matter here? Aren't we welcome?"

At last Lucas let out a breath. As if that had started him living again, he said as calm as cream to Rob: "Of course you're welcome. It's pure wonderful that you're here, lad. You've come late, though, to do any handshaking with me."

Lucas raised his forearms from beneath the bar and laid on the dark polished wood the two stumps of amputation where his hands had been.

I tell you true, I did not know whether to stare or look away, to stay or turn tail, to weep or to wail. There was no known right-

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ness of behavior, just as there was no rightness about what had happened to Lucas. Like the clubs of bone and flesh he was exhibiting to us, any justice in life seemed ripped, lopped off. To this day the account of Lucas Barclay's mining accident causes my own hands to open and close, clench their fingernails hard against their palms, thankful they are whole. It happened after the Great Maybe and Helena, when Lucas had moved on to a silver claim called the Fanalulu in the outcropping country between Wolf Creek and Augusta. *My partner on that was an old Colorado miner Johnny Dorgan. This day we were going to blast. I was doing the tamping in, Johnny was behind me ready with the fuse. What made this worse was that I had miner's religion, I always made sure to use a wooden tamp on the powder so there'd be no chance of spark. But this once, the blasting powder somehow did go off. Dorgan had turned to reach for his chewing tobacco in the coat behind him and was knocked sprawling, with quartz splinters up and down his back. He scrambled on all fours to where Lucas had been flung, a burned and bloody mass. The worst was what was left—what was gone—at the ends of Lucas's arms. Dorgan tied a tourniquet on each, then took Lucas, a wagonload of pain, to the Army post hospital at Fort Shaw. Johnny thought he was delivering a corpse, I suppose. He very near was. The surgeon there saved what he could of Lucas, starting at the wrists. Did I want to die, at first? By Jesus, I wanted worse than that. I wanted the world dead. I hated everything above snake-high. For months, Lucas was tended by the Fort Shaw surgeon. I was his pas-time, his pet. He made me learn to handle a fork and a glass with these stubs. He said if a man can do that, he can make himself a life.*

There in the Medicine Lodge, Lucas's maiming on show in front of him, Rob's case of stupefaction was even worse than mine. He brought his hand back to his side as if burned and stammered, "Lucas . . . I . . . we never—"

"Put it past, Robbie," his uncle directed. "Have a look at these to get used to them. Christ knows, I've had to."

While Rob's eyes still were out like organ stops, Lucas's powerful face turned toward me. "And who's this long one?"

Would you believe, I stupidly started to put my hand out for a shake, just as Rob had. Catching myself, I swallowed and got out: "Lucas, I'm Angus McCaskill. You knew my father, back—"

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"You're old Alex's lad? By Jesus, they must have watered you. You've grown and then some." His gaze was locked with mine. "Is your father still the best wheelsmith in the east of Scotland?"

"No. He's, he's dead."

Lucas's head moved in a small wince of regret. "I'm sorry to hear so. Death is as thorough on the good as the bad." His arm stumps vanished briefly beneath the bar again and came up delivering a whiskey bottle clutched between. "Down here among the living we'd better drink to health, ay?"

Lucas turned from us to the line of glasses along the back bar shelf, grasped one between his stumps, set it in place in front of me, turned and did the same with one for Rob, a third time with a glass for himself. Next he clasped the whiskey bottle the same way and poured an exactly even amount in each glass. It was all done as neatly as you or I could.

"Sedge, Toussaint, you others," Lucas addressed the rest of the clientele, "line your glasses up here. You're not to get the wild idea I'm going to make a habit of free drinks. But it's not just any old day when a Barclay arrives to Gros Ventre."

Lucas poured around, lifted a glass of his own as you would if you had to do it only with your wrists, and gave the toast:

"Broth to the ill, stilts to the lame."

Our drink to health became two, then Lucas informed Rob and me he was taking us to home and supper and that he may as well show us the town while we were out and about. The half-breed, Toussaint, assured us, "This Gros Ventre, there never was one like it," and chuckled. The mustached man, called Sedge, stepped behind the bar to preside there, and Lucas led Rob and me out on tour.

Gros Ventre could be taken in with two quick glimpses, one in each direction along the street, yet it registered on me in a slow woozy way, like a dream of being show somewhere at the far end of the world. Or maybe a dream of myself dreaming this, reality a phase or two away from where I was. At any rate, my mind was stuck on Lucas and his maiming and he was energetically intent only on showing us Montana's Athens-to-be. Rob and I did much nodding and tried to mm-hmm properly as Lucas tramped us past such sights as Fain's blacksmith shop, encircled by odds and ends of

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scrap iron. Kuuvus's mercantile, a long, low log building which sagged tiredly in the middle of its roofbeam. A sizable boarding house with a sign above its door proclaiming that it was operated by C.E. Sedgwick—which was to say, the mustachioed Sedge—and his wife Lila. Near the creek in a grove of cottonwoods, a tiny Catholic church with the bell on an iron stanchion out front. (A circuit-riding priest circulated through "every month or so," Lucas noted favorably.) Dantley's livery stable where Herbert the freighter had disembarked us. Next to it Gros Ventre's second saloon, Wingo's: a twin to the Medicine Lodge except it was fronted with slabs instead of boards. To our surprise—we now knew Herbert hadn't materialized at the Medicine Lodge—we were informed in an undervoice by Lucas that the town did have a calico supply, ensconced here in Wingo's. "Two of them," Lucas reported with a disapproving shake of his head. "Wingo calls them his nieces."

We also became enlightened about the tents and picketed horses. "That's the Floweree outfit, from down on the Sun River," Lucas told us. "Trailing a herd of steers north. These cattle outfits all come right through on their way up to borrow grass. I tell you, lads, this town is situated—"

"Borrow?" echoed Rob.

"From the Indians. Blackfeet. Their reservation is north there"—Lucas gestured beyond the creek with one of his stubs; would I ever get used to the sight of them?—"fifteen miles or so, and it goes all the way to Canada. Cattle everywhere on it, every summer."

And how did the municipality of Gros Ventre strike you, Mr. McCaskill and Mr. Barclay? We found the main enterprise to be theft of grass, and our host had no hands.

Be fair, though. The fledgling town was not without graces. It proffered two. First and finest was its trees, cottonwoods like a towering lattice above the little collection of roofs. When their buds became leaf, Gros Ventre would wear a green crown, true enough. And the other distinction stood beside the Sedgwick boarding house: a tall slender flagpole, far and away the most soaring construction in Gros Ventre, with its somewhat faded 41-star American flag energetically flapping at the top. When Rob or I managed to remark on this public-spirited display, Lucas glanced upward and said there was a story to that, all right, but he marched us across to what he

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plainly considered the centerpiece of Gros Ventre, the building skeleton at the end of the street.

"Sedge's hotel," Lucas identified this assemblage of lumber and air for us. "I've put a bit of money into it too, to help him along. The Northern, he's going to call it."

Rob and I must have looked less comprehending than we already were, for Lucas impatiently pointed out that the hotel site was at the north end of town. "You'll see the difference this hotel will make," he asserted. "Sedge and Lila will have room for dozens here."

Thinking of what it had taken for Rob and me to reach this speck on the map, I did wonder how dozens at once were going to coincide here.

Lucas faced the pair of us as if he'd heard that. He thrust his stubs into his coat pockets and looked whole and hale again, a bearded prophet of civic tomorrows.

"Robbie, Angus. I know Gros Ventre must look like a gypsy camp to you. But by Jesus, you ought've seen what a skimpy place it was when I came three years ago. You had to look twice to see whether anybody lived here but jackrabbits. The Sedgwicks and Wingo, Kuuvus and his wife and Fain and his, they've all come in since then. And they're just the start. This'll be a true town before you know it."

Evidently we did not manage to appear convinced. Lucas started anew.

"Lads, you have eyes in your heads. If you used them at all on your way here, you saw that there's land and more land and then more of more, just for the taking here in Montana. And by Jesus, people will take it. That's the history of the race, in so many words. They'll flock in here, one day, and that day not long from now. The railroad is being built, do you know, up north of the Two Medicine River. That's what'll bring them, lads. Steam and steel is the next gospel. And when people come, they'll need everything a town can furnish them," concluded the lord of the Medicine Lodge.

There was a brief silence, reverent on Lucas's part, dazed on ours. Then he did some more dream-building for us, in a confiding way:

"My belief is we'll see a railroad of our own here. After all, they talk of building one to that piddle spot beside the road, called

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Choteau. A squeak of a place like Choteau gets a railroad, we ought to get a dozen, ay?"

Lucas gazed out the solitary street to the straight-topped benchland south of us, then past the flagpole to the jagged tumble of mountains along the west. Up came an armstub that thoughtfully smoothed the black-and-gray beard as he contemplated. "This is rare country," he murmured. "Just give our Gros Ventre a little time and it'll be a pure grand town."

"Whom never a town surpasses," issued from me, "for honest men and bonny lasses." I suppose I was thinking out loud. For the long moment Lucas contemplated me, I much wished I'd kept the words in me.

"Is that old Burns," he asked at last, "as in the middle of our Robbie's name?"

"The same," I admitted.

"Angus is a lad of parts," Rob roused himself to put in, "he can recite the rhyming stuff by the yard. See now, he was pupil teacher for Adam Willox."

"I knew Adam," recalled Lucas. "He had a head on his shoulders." Lucas eyed me again, as if hoping to see the start of one growing on me, then declared the next of Gros Ventre's matchless attractions was supper.

Past the rear of his saloon and across a wide weedy yard he led us toward a two-story frame house. The house needed paint—this entire town needed that—but it sat comfortably between two fat gray cottonwood trees, like a mantle clock between pewter candlesticks. Lucas related to us that the house had come with the Medicine Lodge, he'd bought both from the founder of Gros Ventre, named DeSalis. It seemed DeSalis had decided the begetting of Gros Ventre was not a sufficient source of support in life, and had gone back to Missouri. But we had the luck, Lucas pointed out, that DeSalis first sired five children here and so provided ample guest space for us.

As we reached the front porch, Lucas stopped as if he had suddenly butted up against a new fact.

"Now you'll meet Nancy," he said.

"Nancy?" I could see that Rob was buoyed by the sight of the considerable house, and now this news that Lucas at least had been fortunate enough to attain a mate in life. "The Mrs.! And doesn't

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that make her my aunt, I ask you? Lucas, man, why didn't you tell—"

Lucas's face underwent another change to stone. "Did you hear me say one goddamned thing about being married? Nancy is my—housekeeper."

Rob reddened until he looked like he might ignite. "Lead on, Lucas," I inserted in a hurry. "We're anxious to meet Nancy."

He manipulated the doorknob with his stubs and led us into the front parlor. "Nancy! We have people here."

From the kitchen doorway at the far end of the parlor stepped a young woman. Her dress was ordinary, but that made the only thing. Hair black as a crow's back. A figure tidily compact yet liberally curvaceous. A squarish face, the nose and cheekbones a bit broad; the upper lip surprisingly rising a bit in the very middle, revealing the first teeth in a way that seemed steadily but calmly questioning. None of this Nancy-the-housekeeper was lovely in any usual way but her each feature was more attractive on second notice, and even more so on a third. Remarkable dark, dark eyes, perhaps black, too. And her skin was brown as a chestnut, several shades darker than that of the half-Indian or whatever he was in the Medicine Lodge, Toussaint.

Rob was trying not to be frog-eyed, and failing. I suppose I was similar. Lucas now seemed to be enjoying himself.

Deciding the situation could stand some gallantry, I stepped toward the woman of the inquisitive lip and began, "How do you do, Miss—"

Lucas snorted a laugh, then called to me: "Buffalo Calf Speaks." "Excuse me?"

"Buffalo Calf Speaks," Lucas repeated, more entertained than ever. "She's Blackfeet. Her Indian name is Buffalo Calf Speaks. So if you're going to call her Miss, that's what Miss she is."

"Yes, well." Strange sensation it is, to want to strangle a grinning handless man. I put myself around to the woman again and tried anew: "Nancy, hello. My name is Angus McCaskill." I forced a grin of my own. "I'm from a tribe called Scotchmen."

"Yes," she answered, but her eyes rapidly left me to look at Rob, his shining resemblance to Lucas. Lucas told her, "This is my brother's son. His name is Rob."

"Rob?" Her intonation asked how that word could be a name.

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"Like Bob Wingo," Lucas instructed, "except Scotchmen say it Rob. They never do anything the way ordinary people do, right, lads?"

"Rob," Nancy repeated. "From Scot Land."

"That's him, Nancy. Rob and Angus are going to be with us for a while. Now we need supper." The woman's dark eyes regarded us a moment more, then Lucas, and she went back through the kitchen doorway.

So that was Nancy. Or at least the start of her.

"Don't stand there like the awkward squad," Lucas chafed us. "Come sit down and tell me news of Nethermuir. If the old place has managed to have any, that is."

That supper, and that evening, were like no other.

I am all too sure that neither Rob nor I managed to learn, at least on the first many tries, how to keep a face under control when a meat platter or a spud dish was passed to it between those bony stubs at the ends of Lucas's sleeves. What we did learn was that a person without hands needed to have his meat cut for him—Nancy sat beside Lucas and did the knifework before ever touching her own plate—but he then could manipulate a fork the way a clever bear might take it between its paws, and he could spoon sugar into his coffee without a spill and stir it efficiently. We learned by Lucas's telling of it that he could dress himself except for the buttoning; "I'd like to have my knee on the throat of the man who invented buttons." That he could wind his pocket watch by holding it against his thigh with one stub and rolling the stem with the other. That, what I had wondered most about, he had taught himself to write again by sitting down night after night, a pen between his stubs, and copying out of an old book of epitaphs. "*Stone Stories*, the title of it was. It fit my mood. I made myself work at a line a night, until I could do it first try. Then two lines a night, and four, on up to a page of them at a time. Not only did I learn writing again, lads, the epitaphs were a bit of entertainment for me. The Lillisleaf steeplejack's one: *Stop, traveler, as you go by/I too once had life and breath/but I fell through life from steeple high/and quickly passed by death*. Angus, what would your man Burns think of that one, ay? Or the favorite of mine. *In the green bed 'tis a long sleep/Alone with your past, mounded deep*. By Jesus, that's entirely what I was, alone,

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after the accident to my hands. At least"—he indicated Nancy, buttering bread for him—"I'm over that now." We learned by Lucas's ironic telling that he had earned good money from the Fanalulu mine before the accident—"the great secret to silver mining, lads, is to quit in time; otherwise, the saying is that you need a gold mine to keep your silver mine going"—and we inferred from this house and its costly furnishings those were not the last dollars to find their way to Lucas. Where did this man get the sheer strength to wrestle the earth for its silver and then, when that struggle had done its worst to him, to wrestle a pen for the months of learning to write again?

We learned as much as he could bring himself to tell us about that letter that found its way to us in Helena. "Why did I write it, after these years?" Lucas lifted his coffee cup between his stubs and drank strong. "Matters pile up in a person. They can surprise you, how they want out. I must have wanted to say to old nose-in-the-air Nethermuir that I'm still living a life of my own. Even so, I couldn't bring myself yet to tell about the accident, about my—condition. How do you say to people, 'I'm a bit different these days than you remember, my hands are gone'?" Lucas gave us a gaze across the table, and Nancy added her dark one to it. A jury of two, waiting for no answer we could give.

After a moment, Lucas resumed: "And now that you lads are here, I know it'll get told without me. That's a relief. Why I don't know, but someday that's a relief."

Back in the saloon, when Lucas went to close up for the night and decided we needed one more drink to health and that happened to lead to another, we learned about Nancy.

"She came with, when I bought the Medicine Lodge and the house," Lucas imparted. "Lads, you're trying not to look shocked, but that's the fact of it. Nancy was living with the DeSalises—this all goes back a few years, understand—when I bought out old Tom. You met Toussaint Rennie, the half-breed or whatever arithmetic he is, in here when you came. Toussaint is married to Nancy's mother's sister, and that's all the family she has. The others died, up on the reservation in the winter of '83. The Starvation Winter, these Blackfeet call that, and by Jesus they did starve, poor bastards them, by the hundreds. Pure gruesome, what they went through. The last of the buffalo petered out that year, and the

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winter rations the Blackfeet were supposed to get went into some Indian agent's pocket, and on top of it all, smallpox. They say maybe a third of the whole tribe was dead by spring. Nancy was just a girl then, twelve or so, and Toussaint and his wife took her to raise. Then the winter of '86 came, a heavier winter than '83 ever thought of being, and Toussaint didn't know whether he was going to keep his own family alive up there on the Two Medicine River, let alone an extra. So he brought Nancy in here and gave her to the DeSalises. There's that shocked look again, lads." Himself, Lucas somehow appeared to be both grim and amused. "They say when Toussaint rode into town with her, the two of them wrapped in buffalo robes, they had so much snow on them they looked like white bears. When I came up here and bought the saloon and the house and DeSalis pulled out with his family for Missouri, Nancy stayed on with me. She can be a hard one to figure, Nancy can. By now she's part us and part them"—Lucas's nod north signified the reservation and its Blackfeet—"and you never quite know which side is to the front, when. But Nancy has always soldiered for me. By Jesus, she's done that. I need some things done, like these damn buttons and shaving and all little nuisances like that. She needs some place to be. So you see, it's an arrangement that fits us both." Lucas shrugged into his coat, thrust his arm ends into its pockets and instantly looked like a builder of Jerusalems again. "This isn't old Scotland, lads. Life goes differently here."

Differently, said the man. In the bedroom that night, I felt as if the day had turned me upside down and shaken me out. Lucas without hands. This end-of-nowhere place Gros Ventre. The saga of Nancy.

Rob looked as if he'd received double of whatever I had. "Christ of mercy, Angus. What've we gotten ourselves into here?"

It helped nothing to have the wind out of Rob's sails, too. I tried to put a little back in by pointing out: "We did find Lucas, you have to say that for us."

"Not anything like the one I expected. Not a—" He didn't finish that.

"The man didn't lose those hands on purpose, Rob."

"I never meant that. It's a shock to see, is all. How could something like that happen?"

"Lucas told. Tamping the blasting powder and someway—"

"Not that, Angus. What I mean, how could it happen to *him*?" To a Barclay, he really meant. My own weary guess was that fate being what it is, it keeps a special eye for lives the size of Lucas's. A pin doesn't draw down lightning. But how say so to Rob this unearthly night and make any sense. He was rattling at top speed now: "Lucas always was so good with his hands. He was Crack Jack at anything he tried—and now look at him. I tell you, Angus, I just—and Nancy Buffalo-whatever. There's a situation, now. Housekeeper, he calls her. She must even have to help him take a piddle."

"That's as maybe, but look at all Angus does manage to do."

"Yes, if it hadn't been for that damned letter he managed to write—" Rob shook his head and didn't finish that either.

Well, I told myself, here is interesting. A Barclay not knowing what to make of another Barclay. The history of the world is not done yet.

From our bedroom window I could see the rear of the Medicine Lodge and the patch of dirt street between the saloon and the forlorn hotel framework. Another whisper from Burns came to mind: *Your poor narrow footpath of a street/where two wheelbarrows tremble when they meet.* Those lines I had the sense to keep to myself and said instead: "Anyway, here is where we are. Maybe Gros Ventre will look more grand after a night's sleep."

Rob flopped onto his side of the bed but his eyes stayed open wide. All he said more was, "Maybe so, maybe no."

And do you know, Gros Ventre did improve itself overnight, at least in the way that any place has more to it than a first glimpse can gather. In the fresh weather of dawn—Montana's crystal mornings made it seem we'd been living in a bowl of milk all those years in Scotland—I went out and around, and in that opening hour of the day the high cottonwoods seemed to stand even taller over the street and its little scatter of buildings. Grave old nurses for a foundling town. Or at least there in the daybreak a person had hope that nurture was what was happening.

Early as the hour was, the flag already was tossing atop the Sedgwick flagpole. Beyond, the mountains were washed a lovely clean blue and gray in the first sunlight. The peaks and their snow stood

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so clear I felt I could reach out and run a finger along that chill rough edge. At the cow camp across the creek the cook was at his fire and a few of the cowboys, or riders, as Lucas referred to them, were taking down the tents. I heard one of the picketed horses whinny, then the rush of the creek where the water bumped busily across a bed of rocks.

"Angus, you are early," came a voice behind me. "Are you seeing if the sun knows how to find Gros Ventre?"

I turned around, to Toussaint Rennie. Lucas had said Toussaint was doing carpenter work for Sedge on the famous hotel. *Toussaint does a little of everything and not too much of anything. He's not Black-foot himself—it is not just entirely clear what he is—but he has a front finger in whatever happens in this country. Has had for years, and it's not even clear how many years. A bit like a coyote, our Toussaint. Here and there but always in on a good chance. He comes down from the Two Medicine, works at a little something for a while, goes home long enough to father another child, comes down to work at whatever presents itself next.* And came once in a blizzard to deposit his wife's niece to the house I had just stepped from.

Was this person everywhere, every time? I managed to respond to Toussaint, "The day goes downhill after dawn, they say."

"I think that, too," he vouched. The strange lilting rhythm in his voice, whatever its origins; as if warming up to sing. "You live good at dawn." Toussaint nodded toward the flagpole and its flapping banner. "You ought to have been here then."

"Then?"

"That statehood. Sedge put up the flagpole in honor. Lila had the idea, fly the flag the first of anyone. We did, do you know. The first flag in Montana the state, it was ours. Here in Gros Ventre."

I thought of the flag unfurling atop the *Herald* building in Helena that November morning, of the other flags breaking out all over the city, of the roaring celebration Rob and I had enlisted in. "How are you so sure this one was the first?"

"We got up early enough," testified Toussaint. "Way before dawn. Sedge woke up me, I woke up Dantley, we woke up everybody. Wingo and his nieces, the Kuuvuses, the Fains, Luke and"—Toussaint glanced around to be sure we were alone—"that Blackfeet of his. Out to the flagpole, everybody. It was still dark as cats, but Dantley had a lantern. Lila says, 'This is the day of statehood. This

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is Montana's new day.' Sedge puts up the new flag, there it was. Every morning since, he puts it up." Toussaint chuckled. "That flag. The wind has a good time with it. Sedge will need a lot of flags, if he keeps on."

The morning was young yet when Fain of the blacksmith shop came to ask if Rob might help him with a few days of wheelwork. Rob backed and filled a bit but then concluded he supposed he could, and I was glad, knowing he was privately pleased to be sought out and knowing, too, that a chance to use his skill would help his mood. The two of us had decided we'd give our situation a few days and conclude then whether to go or stay. I say decided; the fact that we had to wait anyway for another freight wagon or some other conveyance out of Gros Ventre was the major voice in the vote.

When Rob went off with Fain, I offered to Lucas to lend a hand—just in time I caught myself from putting it that way—in the saloon.

The notion amused Lucas. "Adam Willox taught you how to swamp, did he?"

I said I didn't know about that, but people had been known to learn a thing if they tried.

"I've heard of that myself," Lucas answered drily. "You at least don't lack attitude. Come along if you want, we'll show you what it's like to operate a thirst parlor."

Swamping was sloshing buckets of water across the floor and then sweeping the flood out the door, I learned promptly, and when the saloon had been broomed out, there were glasses to wash and dry, empty bottles to haul out and dump, beer kegs to be wrestled, poker tables and chairs to be straightened, spittoons to be contended with. Lucas meanwhile polished the bar from end to end, first one foreshortened arm and then the other moving a towel in caressing circles on the wood. I am not happy to have to say this, but as happened the evening before when he was showing off Gros Ventre to us, the person that Lucas was to me depended on whether his stubs were in the open or out of sight as they now were in the towel. Part of the time I could forget entirely that Lucas was maimed as he was. Part of the time there was nothing I was more

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aware of. I wondered what kind of courage it took to go on with life in public after damage such as Lucas's.

Eventually Lucas called a pause in our mutual neatening tasks. "Do you feel any thirst?" he asked. I did. He nodded and stated: "We can't have people thinking we sit around in here and drink. So we'll take a standing one, ay?"

I watched astounded as Lucas wrestled forth a small crock and poured us each a beerglass of buttermilk.

"Buttermilk until well into the afternoon, Angus," he preached. "The saloonman doesn't live who can toss liquor into himself all day long and still operate the place."

As we sipped the cow stuff and Lucas told me another installment of Gros Ventre's imminent eminence, my gaze kept slipping to his stubs. I needed to know, and since there was no good time to ask this it may as well be now as any.

"Lucas, would you mind much if I ask you a thing?"

He regarded me in the presiding way of Rob aboard the steamship. "About my hands, you mean. The ones I haven't got. It's pure wonderful how interesting they are to people. Everyone asks something eventually. All but Nancy. All the others—'But how do you tie your shoes,'" he mimicked. "But how do you get your dohickey out to take a piddle.' Well? Bang away, Angus lad."

I gulped, not just on the taste of buttermilk. "Do they—does it ever still hurt, there?"

Lucas looked at me a very long moment, and then around the Medicine Lodge as if to be sure there were no listening ghosts in its corners. "Angus, it does. Sometimes it hurts like two toothaches at once. Those are the times when it feels as if I still have the hands but they're on fire. But I don't have them, do I, so where does that pain come from?" The asking of that was not to me, however, and Lucas went on: "There, then. That's one. Next question?"

"That one was all, Lucas."

After Lucas began to see that I could do saloon tasks almost half as well with two hands as he could with none, he made strong use of me. Indeed, by the second day I was hearing from him: "Angus, I've some matters at the house. You can preside here till I get back, ay?" And there was my promotion into being in charge of the Medicine Lodge during the buttermilk hours of the day.

"How do, Red."

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The taller of the pair who were bowlegging their way to the bar gave me the greeting, while the short wiry one beside him chirped, "Pour us somthin' that'll cheer us up, professor."

In that order of presentation, Perry Fox and Deaf Smith Mitchell these were. Riders for the Seven Block cattle ranch, out near the Blackfeet reservation. Progeny of Texas who, to hear them tell it, had strayed north from that paradisiacal prairie and hadn't yet found their way back. The one called Deaf Smith was no more hard of hearing than you or I, but simply came from a Texas locality of that name. Not easy to grasp logically, was Texas.

In not much more time than it would have taken Lucas to serve an entire saloonful, I managed to produce a bottle and pour my pair of customers a drink.

They lifted a glass to each other and did honor to the contents, then Perry faced me squarely. "Red, we got somethin' to ask you."

This put me a bit wary, but I said: "I'm here listening."

"It's kind of like this. Luke's been tellin' us there's these Scotch soldiers of yours that put a dress on when they go off to war. Is he pullin' our leg, or is that the God's truth?"

"Well, the Highlanders, yes, they have a history of wearing kilts into battle. But Lucas and Rob and I come from the Lowlands, we're not—"

"Pay me," Perry drawled to Deaf Smith. "Told you I could spot when Luke is funnin' and when he ain't."

Deaf Smith grudgingly slid a silver dollar along the bar to Perry. To me, he aimed: "Just tell us another thing now, how the hell do you guys make that work, fightin' in dresses? What's the other side do, die of laughin'?"

The dilemma of the Lowlander. To venture or not into the Highlands thicket of kilts, bagpipes, the Clearances, clan quarrels, and all else, the while making plain that I myself didn't number among those who feuded for forty generations over a patch of heather. The voice of my schoolmaster Adam Willox despairing over the history of the Highlands clans swam to mind: *If it wasn't for the Irish, the Highlands Scotch would be the most pixied people on earth.* But Lucas's voice floated there in my head, too: *Conversation is the whetstone of thirst, Angus. These Montanians in their big country aren't just dry for the whiskey, they're dry for talk.*

"Gents, let's look at this from another way." Before going on, I nodded inquiringly toward the bottle. Perry and Deaf Smith auto-

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matically nodded in turn. Pouring them another and myself a buttermilk, I made change from Perry's fresh dollar and began: "As I hear it, this geezer Custer was more fully dressed than the Indians at the Little Big Horn. Am I right so far?"

"How do you suppose Lucas spends his afternoons?" Rob asked near the end of our arrival week in Gros Ventre, no freight wagon having reappeared nor news of any. We were waiting for Lucas to show himself and take over bar duty from me, so that we could go around to the house for our turn at supper.

"With Nancy on hand, how would you spend yours?" I asked back reasonably.

Rob looked at me with reproach and was about to say further when Lucas materialized, striding through the Medicine Lodge doorway as if entering his favorite castle. "Lads, sorry I'm late. Affairs of business take scrupulous tending, you know how it is. Carry yourselves over to the house now, Nancy has your feast waiting."

"She does put him in a good frame of mind," Rob mused as we went to the house.

"Man, that's not just a frame of mind, there are other compartments involved, too."

"You can spare me that inventory," he retorted with a bit of an edge, and in we went to eat. But I was impressed from then on with Rob's change of attitude about Nancy and her benefit to Lucas. Indeed, at supper he began the kind of shiny talk to her that for the first time since we landed in Gros Ventre sounded to me like the characteristic Rob.

The rumor is being bruited that a hotel, possibly of more than one story, is under construction in Gros Ventre. The notion of anyone actually desiring to stay overnight in that singular community: this, dear readers, is the definition of optimism.

Some such salvo was in each of the past issues of the Choteau newspaper I was reading through to pass time in the Medicine Lodge. But I thought little of them until the slow afternoon I came across the one:

Gros Ventre recently had another instance of the remarkably high mortality rate in that locale. Heart failure was the diagnosis. Lead will do that to a heart.

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I blinked and read again. The saloon was empty, and in the street outside nothing was moving except Sedge's and Toussaint's hammers sporadically banging the hotel toward creation. Gros Ventre this day seemed so peaceful you would have to work for hours to start a dogfight. Even so, as soon as Lucas came in I pressed him about the *Quill* item.

"People die everywhere, Angus."

"As far as I know, that's so. But the *Quill* seems to say they have help here in Gros Ventre."

"You know how newspapers are."

"The question still seems to be how Gros Ventre is."

"Angus, you are your father's son, no mistake. Stubborn as strap iron and twice as hard to argue with. All right, then. A man or two died before his time here, the past year or so. But—"

"A man or two?"

"Three, if you must count. But what I'm saying if you'll listen, two of those would have gone to their reward wherever they were. Cattle thieves. Not a race known for living to old age, lad."

"What happened with them?"

Lucas stroked his beard with a forearm. "That is not just entirely clear. Williamson out at the Double W might know, or Thad Wainwright—owners of big cattle ranches north of town, I had heard. "Or maybe even Ninian Duff." Evidently another lord of cattle, though this one I hadn't heard of before.

"And man three?"

"What would you say to a glass of buttermilk?" Lucas busily began to pour himself one. "It's good for all known ailments, and—"

"Lucas, I'm swimming in the stuff. The particular ailment we're talking about is man number three's."

"That one, now." A major gulp of buttermilk went down him. "That one, I do have to say was ill luck."

When nothing further seemed forthcoming from Lucas except continued attention to his buttermilk, I persisted: "Dying generally is ill luck, we can agree on that. But I still haven't heard the man's ailment."

"He was shot in an argument over cards."

"What, in here?"

"Don't be pure ridiculous, lad. In Wingo's, of course." Lucas looked at me with extreme reproach, but I held gaze with him. After a bit he glanced away. "Well, you may have a point. It would

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have happened in here if it hadn't been the gambler's week there instead. But after that, Wingo and I talked it over and we've given gamblers the bye. Pleasant games among local folk, now. A coming town like this has its good name to think of, you know."

Was it in spite of Gros Ventre's fresh reputation for excitement that the two of us the very next day let pass the chance to go on a freight wagon retracing our route toward Augusta and Helena? Or in hope of it? Either case, the notion grew on me now that maybe I might as well go ahead and try a bit of land-looking between intervals of helping Lucas in the saloon, just to be sure we weren't missing some undisclosed reason for hope here in Gros Ventre's neighborhood.

This supposition met no objection from Rob. He was staying in demand with Fain for as much wheelwork and other repair as any pair of hands could do, so there was sound sense in him earning while I scouted about. "It could be you'll find a Great Maybe for us," he said, though not within Lucas's hearing. "Have at it, McAngus, why not. I'll keep Gros Ventre in tune while you're out and around."

Lucas of course was several thousand percent in favor of my intention. "By Jesus, Angus, now you're talking. The best part of the world is right out there waiting for you and Robbie. Tell you what, I'll even make a contribution to your exploring. Follow me." I tracked after him to the shed room behind the saloon.

"There now," he plucked the peg from the door hasp with his stubs and grandly pushed the door open, "choose your choice."

Saddles were piled on other saddles, and the walls were hung with bridles as if it was raining leather. Seeing my puzzlement, Lucas spelled the matter out:

"Collateral. These cattle outfits seem to specialize in hiring men who are thirstier than they have money for. I'm not running the Medicine Lodge as a charity, and so my borrowers put up these, ay? Go ahead, have your pick."

Several of the saddles were larger than the others, large enough that they looked as if they would house a horse from his withers to his hips. "What're these big ones?"

"Lad, do you even need to ask? Those are Texas saddles."

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Since Nethermuir, the progression had been train, steamship, stagecoach, freight wagon, and shoe leather, and to it I now added the plump little pinto mare named Patch, rented to me by the half-day by Dantley and saddled maximally with my new Texican saddle. The pony's gaily splotched colors made me feel as if I was riding forth into the country around Gros Ventre in warpaint, but I suppose the actuality is that I sallied out looking as purely green as I was.

The earth was mine to joggle over aboard Patch, at least until each midday. (Lucas was strict that he wanted me to continue my saloonkeeping afternoons so he could take care of what he termed "business at the house.") Now the question was the homestead-seeker's eternal one, where best to seek?

Whatever compass is in me said south first. Not south as a general direction of hope, for as Rob and I tramped through those steep treeless benchlands in the wake of Herbert's freight wagon ten days before, we had plenty of time to agree that living there would be like dwelling on top of a table. But south a mile or so from Gros Ventre, to the pass where Herbert had halted the wagon to give us our unforgettable first glimpse into the Two Medicine country, was where I felt I needed to start, up for a deeper look at it all.

Everything was in place. The continent's flange of mountain range along the west. The dark far butte called Heart and the nearer slow-sloping one like an aft sail. The grass plateaus beyond Gros Ventre and its cottonwood creek. The soft rumple of plains toward the Sweetgrass Hills and where the sun came from. Enough country that a century of Robs and Anguses would never fill it. As I sat a while on Patch, above to my right a hawk hung on the wind, correcting, correcting. I let myself wish that I had that higher view, that skill to soar to wherever I ought to be. Then I reined Patch east, the hawk's direction.

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Three mornings in a row I rode different tracts eastward of Gros Ventre, following along the creek and its fringe of willow and cottonwood until the land opened into leveler prairie, flattening and fanning into an even horizon which Lucas's maps showed were incised by the big rivers, the Marias, the Milk, and ul-

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timately the Missouri. This prairie before the rivers, though, had no habitation nor showed much sign it wanted any. In that trio of mornings I met only one other human being, a rider named Andy Cratt who was another of the Seven Block ranch's Texans or Texicans or whatever they called themselves. He was suspiciously interested in the origin of my saddle until I invoked Lucas. When Cratt and I parted, it took the next half hour for his moving horseback figure to entirely dwindle from my over-the-shoulder looks. Noble enough country, this eastward prairie—Toussaint told me it had been thick with buffalo when he first came—but so broad, so open, so exposed, that I felt like a field mouse under the eye of the hawk out there.

North needed only a single morning. North was red cattle on buff hills, north was ranch after ranch already built along a twisty stream called Noon Creek—Thad Wainwright's large Rocking T, Pat Egan's sizable Circle Dot, three or four smaller enterprises upstream toward the mountains, and most of all, Warren Williamson's huge Double W, which held fully half of that Noon Creek country. General opinion I had overheard in the Medicine Lodge was that you could rake Hell from corner to corner and not find a nastier item than Warren Williamson. Or, as was supposedly replied to a traveler who innocently wondered what the cattle brand WW stood for, Wampus Cat Williamson. I'd only glimpsed Williamson when he stepped into the Medicine Lodge to summon a couple of his riders, a thickset impatient man several shades paler than his weather-browned cowboys. Evidently those white-handed men of money were here as in Scotland, those whose gilt family crests properly translated would read something like, *Formerly robbers, now thieves*. There where the road ran along the benchland between Gros Ventre and Noon Creek, I gazed down at the fortlike cluster of Double W ranch buildings and wondered whether Rob and I would ever possess a fraction as much roof over us.

"You're becoming a regular jockey," Rob tossed cheerily as he came out from dinner and I rode up to grab a bite before spelling Lucas at the saloon.

"You're missing all the thrill of exploration," I replied as I climbed off Patch and stiffly tottered toward the house.

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That evening in the Medicine Lodge I mentioned to Lucas that I thought I might ride west the next day by following the creek up from town toward the area that lay nestled under the mountains.

Lucas had not remarked much on my land-looking, maybe on the basis that he figured I ought to see plenty before making my mind up. But now he said:

"That'll be worth doing. That North Fork is pure handsome prospect. Plan to spend the full day at it, there are a lot of miles in that country up there." To my surprised look, Lucas cleared his throat and allowed: "Business at the house can rest for an afternoon."

"That's more than generous of you," I said with what I hoped was a straight face.

"Angus, here's a pregnant thought for you. While you're about it tomorrow, pay a visit to Ninian Duff. His is the first place up the North Fork, just there after the creek divides."

Here was a name Lucas had mentioned in connection with the vanishment of cattle rustlers. When I reminded him so, Lucas gave me one of his long perusals and instructed, "You'll remember, lad, I only said maybe. But you might do well to stay away from the man's cows."

Lucas paused, then added: "Don't particularly tell Ninian you're working here in the saloon with me. He and I are not each other's favorite, in that regard."

I thought that over. "If I'm to meet the man, I could stand to know something more about that, Lucas."

"Angus, you're one who'd want to know which way the rain falls from. I've nothing against Ninian Duff. It's just that he and his are more churchly folk."

Orthodox, orthodox/who believe in John Knox./Their sighing canting grace-proud faces/their three-mile prayers and half-mile graces. I knew the breed. Maybe I would pay a visit to some old holy howler and maybe I wouldn't, too.

Wind was my guide west, early the next morning. It met me face-first as soon as I rode around the creek bend where the big cottonwoods sheltered Gros Ventre. The stiff breeze required me to clamp my hat down tight and crinkle my eyes, but no cloud showed itself anywhere there in the Rockies where the wind was flowing from,

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and the first sunshine made a promise of comfort on my back. Who knew, maybe this was simply how a Two Medicine day whistled.

The road today wasn't honestly one, just twin prints of wheel marks such as those Herbert's freight wagon had tracked to Gros Ventre. Yet this was peopled land along the main creek, homesteads inserted into each of the best four or five meadows of wild hay. Here was handsome, with the steady line of grassed benchland backing the creek and the convenient hedge of willows and sturdy trees giving shelter all along the water. The long-sloped promontory butte with its timber top poked companionably just into sight over the far end of this valley of homesteaders, but beyond that butte where the tiers of mountains and forest began to show, it looked like tangled country. This was the best land I'd yet seen: any one of these established homesteads down here I would gladly own. Were Rob and I already latecomers?

The mare Patch of course decided to drink when we came to a crossing of the creek, and as usual in those first days of my horsemanship I of course forgot to climb off and have myself one before she waded in and muddied the water. Today, though, the streambed was thoroughly gravel, several-colored and bright under the swift clean flow as a spill of marbles, so Patch didn't roil the drinking site. I rode her on across before getting down and drinking the fresh brisk water from my hands.

Now that I was on that side of the crossing I could see past the willows to another creekline, coiling its way as if climbing leisurely, between the benchland I had followed all the distance from town and a knobby little pine ridge directly in front of me. Here I was, wherever I was: by Lucas's description that other water had to be the North Fork, this the South. To me the natural thing was to point Patch toward the top of the knob, for a scan around. Patch did not necessarily agree, but plodded us up the slope anyway.

You would imagine, as I did, that this climb to see the new country would bring anticipation, curiosity. And there you'd be as wrong as I was. For what I began to feel was a growing sense of familiarity. Of something known, making itself recognized. The cause of the feeling, though, I kept trying to place but couldn't. The wind, yes, that. Smell of new grass, which I had been among for several days of riding by now. A glimpse of a few grazing cattle below near that north creek branch, like stray red specks from the Double W's

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cow hundreds. Cold whiff from where a snowbank lay hidden in some north-facing coulee. All those but something more.

At the knob top, I saw. The earth's restless alteration of itself here. The quickening swells of plains into foothills and then the abrupt upward spill of the mountains. While Rob and I were aboard the stagecoach between Craig and Augusta we had watched this, the entire interior of America soaring through its change of mood. That same radical mood of terrain I was feeling here—the climb of the continent to its divide, higher, greater, more sudden than seemed possible; like a running leap of the land.

Here was magnificent. And here, just below me, one single calm green wrinkle amid the surrounding rumpus of surging buttes and tall timbered ridges and stone cliff skyline, lay the valley of the North Fork.

To say the truth, it was the water winding its way through that still valley—its heartstream, so to speak—that captured me then and there. When the summitline up along these mountains, the Continental Divide, halved the moisture of America's sky, the share beyond went west to the Pacific Ocean while that of this slope was destined to the Atlantic. *Are you telling me, Rob shipboard, we're already on water from Montana, out here?* Aye, yes and yea, Rob. This supple little creek below me, this North Fork, was the start of that water which eventually touched into the Atlantic. This was the first flowing root of that pattern of waves I watched and watched from the deck of the emigrant ship. But greatly more than that, too, this quiet creek. Here at last was water in its proper dose for me. Plentiful fluid fuel for grass and hay, according to the browsing cows and the green pockets of meadow between the creek's twists. Shelter from the wind and whatever rode it in winter stood in thick evidence, creekbank growth of big willows and frequent groves of quaking ash. The occasional ponds behind beaver dams meant trout, a gospel according to Lucas. And by its thin glitter down there and the glassy shallowness of the main creek back where the mare and I crossed, not any of this North Fork ran deep enough to drown more of me than my knees.

I sat transfixed in the saddle and slowly tutored myself about the join of this tremendous western attic to the rest of the Two Medicine country. No human sign was anywhere around, except for the tiny pair of homesteads just above the mouth of the North Fork,

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one of them undoubtedly that of the old Bible-banger Whoo-jamadinger whom Lucas mentioned to me. Other than those, wherever I looked was pure planet. There from the knob I could see eastward down the creek to where Gros Ventre was tucked away; for that matter, I could see all the way to the Sweetgrass Hills, what, more than eighty miles distant, that Herbert had pointed out to Rob and me. By the holy, this was as if stepping up onto the hill above the Greenock dock and being magically able to gaze across all of Scotland to Edinburgh. My eyes reluctant to leave one direction for the next, nonetheless I twisted to scan each of them over and over: north, the broad patient benchland and the landmark butte that lifted itself to meet it; southward, the throng of big dry-grass ridges shouldering between this creek branch and the South Fork . . .

West. West, the mountains as steady as a sea wall. The most eminent of them in fact was one of the gray-rock palisades that lay like reefs in the surge of the Rockies, a straight up-and-down cliff perhaps the majority of a mile high and, what, three or more miles long. A stone partition between ground and sky, even-rimmed as though it had been built by hand, countless weathers ago. That rimming mountain stood nearest over the valley of the North Fork. A loftier darkly timbered peak loomed behind the northernmost end of the cliff rim, and between the pair a smaller mountain topped with an odd cockscomb rock formation fitted itself in. Close as I was now to these promontories, which was still far, for the first time since Rob and I came to Gros Ventre these seemed to me local mountains. They were my guide now, even the wind fell from mind in their favor. Seeing them carving their canyons of stone into the sky edge, scarps and peaks deep up into the blue, a person could have no doubt where he was. The poor old rest of the earth could hold to whatever habit of axis it wished, but this Two Medicine country answered to a West Pole, its own magnetic world top here along its wildest horizon.

Someway in the midst of all my gawking I began to feel watched myself. Maybe by someone at either of the homesteads along the creek, but no one was in view. By the cows then? No, they seemed all to have their noses down in their daydream fashion of eating. Nothing else, nobody, anywhere that I could find.

As much as I tried to dismiss the feeling, though, the touch of

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eyes would not leave me. Who knew, probably these seven-league mountains were capable of gazing back at me. Nonetheless I cast a glance behind me for surety's sake.

On a blood bay horse not much farther away than a strong spit sat a colossally bearded figure.

He was loose-made—tall, thin, mostly legs and elbows, a stick man. And that beard was a dark-brown feedbag of whiskers halfway down his chest. He also had one of those alarming foreheads you sometimes see on the most Scottish of Scots, a kind of sheer stark cliff from the eyes up. As if the skull was making itself known under there.

All of this was regarding me in a blinkless way. I gaped back at the whiskers and forehead, only gradually noticing that the horse-man's hands were either side of his saddle horn, holding another lengthy stick of some sort across there and pointing it mostly towards me. Then I realized that stick was a rifle.

"You have business here, do you?" this apparition asked.

"I hope to," I answered, more carefully than I had ever said anything before. From the looks of him, the lightest wrong word and I was a gone geezer. "I'm, I'm looking for homestead land to take up."

"Ay, every man who can walk, crawl or ride is looking for that. But not many of them find here."

"That's their loss, I would say. This country"—I nodded my head cautiously to the North Fork and the butte—"is the picture of what I'd hoped for."

"Pictures are hard to eat," he gave me for that. Maybe I was hoping too much, but I thought his stare had softened a bit as he heard more of my voice. At least the rifle hadn't turned any farther in my direction. Any mercy there was to this situation, I would devoutly accept. He levied his next words: "You are new to here?"

"As the dew," I admitted, and told him in general but quick about Rob and myself and our homesteading intention, and that if we needed any vouching it could be obtained in full at the Medicine Lodge saloon from none other than Lucas Barc—

By the time I caught up with what my tongue was saying, His Whiskerness made up his mind about me. "Lucas Barclay has had a misfortunate life," he announced. "He can answer to God for it. Or knowing Lucas, more likely argue with Him about it until the cows

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come home to Canaan. But so far as I can see, you are not Lucas." He slid the rifle into its scabbard. "My name is Duff."

So. I could well believe that this personage and Lucas came keen against each other, as iron sharpens iron.

I introduced myself and we had a handshake, more or less. Ninian Duff immediately turned to inquisition:

"You are from?"

"Nethermuir, in Forfar."

"Ay, I know of your town. Flora and I are East Neuk of Fife folk. As are Donald and Jen Erskine, next along the creek here. We made the journey together, three years since." People were leaving even the fat farms of Fife, were they? Old Scotland was becoming a bare cupboard.

As if he had run through his supply of words for this hour, Ninian Duff was now gazing the length of the valley to where the far shoulder of the butte angled down to the North Fork. I kept a sideway eye on him as much as I dared. Ninian Biblical Rifleman Duff, scarecrow on a glorious horse. Was there no one in this Two Medicine country as normal as me? He sat silently studying the calm swale of green beneath us as if making certain every blade of grass was in place, as if tallying the logs in the two lonely homestead houses. Abruptly:

"You are not afraid of work?"

"None that I've met yet."

The whiskers of Ninian Duff twitched a bit at that. "Homesteading has brands of it the rest of the world never heard of. But that is a thing you will need to learn for yourself. Were I you"—a hypothesis I wasn't particularly comfortable with—"I'd have a look at the patch of land there aneath Breed Butte, along the top of the creek. Then you can dinner with us and we will talk." Ninian Duff started his powerful red-brown horse down off the knob. "We eat at noon," he declared over his shoulder in a way that told me he did not mean the first minute beyond twelve o'clock.

When I rode back into Gros Ventre it was nearly suppertime. I was vastly saddle-tired—cowboys must have a spare pair of legs they put on for riding, I was learning—but could feel the North Fork, the future, like music under my skin. Could bring back into my eyes that valley I rode up after encountering Ninian Duff, the

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long green pocket of creekside meadow, the immense ridges that were timber where they weren't grass and grass where they weren't timber, the Montana earth's giant sawline of mountains against the sky beyond, the nearer gentler soar of the timber-topped prominence called Breed Butte. Could hear echo all of what Ninian told me at dinner: *I have found that cattle do well enough, but the better animal hereabout may be sheep. A person can graze five or six of them on the same ground it takes for one cow. Ay, these ridges and foothills, the mountains themselves, there is room up here for thousands and thousands of sheep. The Lord was the shepherd of us, so we have His example of extreme patience to go by, too. But nothing born with wool on its back can be as troublesome as we who weave it before wearing, I believe you will agree . . . Don't come thinking a homestead is free land. Its price is serious sweat, and year after year of it . . . But were I you, the one place I'd want to homestead is here along the North Fork while there is still the pick of the land . . .*

Too thrilled yet to settle into a chair, I decided instead I'd relieve Lucas in the saloon, let him have a long supper in preparation for a Medicine Lodge Saturday night. Then Rob and I could go together for our own meal and talk of our homesteads. By the holy, the two of us would be owners of Montana yet.

Stopping by the house to tell Nancy this calendar, I swung off the pinto horse like a boy who has been to the top of the world. The kitchen door was closest for my moment's errand. With my mind full of the day's discovery, in I sailed.

In on Rob and Nancy.

She was at the stove. He was half-perched, arms leisurely crossed, at the woodbox beside the stove. True, there was distance between them. But not quite enough. And they were too still. Too alike in the caught look each cast me.

All this might have been mistakable. It is no long jump to the nearest conclusion, ever. There was something more, though. The air in the room seemed to have been broken by me. I had crashed into the mood here as if it was a door of glass.

Rob recovered first. "McAngus, is there a fire?" he called out swift and smooth. "You're traveling like there's one in your hip pocket."

"The prospect of supper will do that to me." I almost added *You're in here amply early yourself*, but held it. "Nancy, I just came

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to say I'll go to the saloon for Lucas, then eat after he does, if you please."

Her dark eyes gave away nothing. "Yes," she acknowledged.

I turned to Rob again. "Get your eyes ready for tomorrow, so I can show you heaven."

"The homesteads? You've found a place?"

"I have, if you like the land there an inch as much as I do. Lord of Mercy, Rob, I just wish you'd been with me today to see it all. It's up the North Fork, good grass and water with trout in it and timber to build with and the mountains standing over it and—"

"I'll hope it doesn't blind me, all that glory," Rob broke in. "So tomorrow I need to hoist myself onto a horse, do I?"

"You do. Rob, you'll fall head over heels for this land as quick as you see it."

"I'd bet that I will." He came across the kitchen with a smile and clapped me on the shoulder. "Angus, you've done a rare job of work, finding us land already."

My riding muscles did not feel like already, but I let that pass. "Right now I'd better find Lucas for supper. Come along, can't you? I'll even serve you the first drink and keep the majority of my thumb out of it."

"This North Fork must be a place, it's sending you that giddy," Rob said back, still smiling in his radiating way. "But I'll stay on here to keep Lucas company for supper. You'll owe me that drink later."

Well, I thought as I crossed the space to the saloon, it's time to stir the blood around in our man Rob, and soonest best.

That evening in the Medicine Lodge I managed to put a few extra drinks into myself, and Rob followed without really noticing. As matters progressed, Lucas sent us a couple of looks but evidently decided we deserved to celebrate my discovery of our homesteads-to-be. He moved us down to the quiet end of the bar he called the weaning corner, set a bottle in front of us and went to tend some parched Double W riders who had just stormed in. After a bit, I proposed:

"Let's go see about the calico situation, why don't we. Those calico nieces of Wingo's down the street."

Rob looked surprised, and when he hesitated with an answer, I pressed:

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"Man, haven't you noticed, the bedcovers on my side look like a tepee these mornings?"

He laughed loud and long over that. I was sober enough to notice, though, that he didn't make the logical joke in return about our bedding resembling a two-pole tent.

But he went with me, and the bottle came along, too.

On our way back from Wingo's belles, I was feeling exceptionally clever about having invented this mind-clearing evening for Rob, and we were both feeling improved for the other reason, so we halted ourselves in front of the hotel framework for nocturnal contemplation and a further drink or so. Not that we could hold many more without tamping them in.

A quarter moon lent its slight light into the Montana darkness. I commemorated dreamily, "It is the moon, I know her horn."

"This Montana even has its own moon," declared Rob in wonder, lurching against me as he peered upward. "You don't find a place like this Montana just any old where."

I chortled at how wise Rob was. Right then I couldn't see how life could be any better.

Rob tugged at my sleeve and directed my attention down the lonely single street of Gros Ventre. "See now, Angus. This is what a coming town looks like by night."

"Dark," I observed.

"But its day will dawn, am I right?" He made his voice so much like Lucas's it startled me. Now Rob straightened himself with extreme care and peered like a prophet along the dim street. "You'll see the day soon, lad, when the Caledonian Railway"—the line of our journey from Nethermuir to Greenock—"will run through the middle of this town Gros Ventre. By Jesus, I think I can hear it now! *Whoot-toot-toot! Whoot-toot-toot!*"

"The train will stop exactly here"—I made a somewhat crooked X in the dirt with my foot—"and Queen Victoria and the Pope of Rome will climb off and step into the Medicine Lodge for a drink with us."

"And I'll own all the land that way"—Rob pointed dramatically north—"and you'll own all the other"—now pointing south—"and we'll have rivers of red cattle we'll ship to Chicago on our train."

"And we'll have Texas cowboys," I threw in. "Thirteen dozen of them apiece."

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Rob was laughing so hard I thought he would topple both of us into the dirt of the street. "Angus, Angus, Angus. I tell you, man, it'll be a life."

"It will," I seconded. And we lurched home to the house of Lucas and Nancy.

As clear as today, I remember how that next morning went. The weather was finer than ever and even had the wind tethered somewhere, the mountains stood great and near, and as Rob and I rode past my knob of yesterday onto Breed Butte to see straight down into the heart of the valley, I thought the North Fork looked even more resplendent than I had seen it the day before. We sat un-speaking for a while, in that supreme silence that makes the ears ring. Where the bevels of the valley met, the creek ran in ripples and rested in beaver ponds. A curlew made deft evasive flight across the slope below us as if revealing curlicues in the air. Everything fit everything else this day.

Rob too said how picture-pretty a patch of the earth this truly was. Then he started in with it.

"I don't just know, though. Maybe we ought to wait, Angus."

"Wait? Isn't that the thing that breaks wagons?" I tossed off, although I was stung. Wait for what, Eden to reopen? "Man, I've seen this country from here to there, these past days, and there's none better than this valley. It decides itself, as far as I'm concerned. This North Fork is head and shoulders over anything else we could choose. But if you want to ride with me around to where I've been and see for yourself, tomorrow we can—"

"Angus, I mean wait with this whole idea of homesteading."

I thought my ears were wrong. Then I hoped they were. But the careful look on Rob told me I'd heard what I'd heard.

"Rob, what's this about? We came half across the world to find this land."

"Homesteading would be a hard go," he maintained. "We'd better do some thinking on it before we rush in. See now, we're too late in the year to buy cattle and have calves to sell this fall. As to sheep, we'd need to bring sheep from Christ knows where and we don't have the money for that. Two houses to build, fences, everything to be done from the ground up—it'd be main sweat, all the way." As if our lives so far have been made of silk, do you mean,

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Rob? But I was so dumbstruck that the words didn't find their way out of me. Rob gazed down at the North Fork and shook his head once as if telling it, sorry, but no.

And then he had a matter to tell me. "Angus, I'm thinking strong of going in with Fain. There's plenty of work for two in his shop. Everything in Montana with a wheel on it can stand repair. Fain's offered to me already, and it'd be a steady earn. And a chance to stay on in Gros Ventre, for a time at least." He glanced off at the North Fork again, this time not even bothering to dismiss it with a headshake. "I'd be nearer to Lucas that way."

"Lucas? Man, Lucas is managing in this life at least as well as either of us. He has—" It hit me before her name fell off my tongue. "Nancy." The mood I broke when I walked in on the two of them the evening before. The way Rob outshined himself at every meal. The change from his first night's distaste for Lucas's domestic arrangement. I almost somersaulted off my horse just thinking of how much more there was to this than I'd noticed. This was no routine rise of the male wand, this was a genuine case of Rob and Nancy, and maybe what would be greatly worse, of Nancy and Rob. Whoever the saint of sanity is, where are you when we need you?

"Angus, think it over," Rob was going on. "There's always a job for a schooled man like yourself in a growing town. When we see how things stand after we get some true money together there in Gros Ventre, well, then can be the time to decide about homesteading. Am I right?"

I answered only, "I'll need to think, you're right that far." Then I touched the pinto into motion, down off the butte toward the North Fork and Gros Ventre, and Rob came after.

I thought of nothing else but Rob and Lucas and Nancy the rest of that day and most of the next. I hadn't been so low in mood since those first Atlantic nights in the pit of the *Jemmy's* stomach. Within my mind I looked again and again and again from one of these alarming people to the other to the third, as you would scan at the corners of a room you were afraid in.

Nancy seeing Rob as a younger Lucas. A Lucas fresh and two-handed. Nancy whose life had been to accept what came.

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Lucas in his infatuation with town-building not seeing at all that under his own roof, trouble was about to grow a new meaning.

Rob—Rob unseeing too, not letting himself see the catastrophe he was tipping himself and Lucas and Nancy toward. Rob who could make himself believe water wasn't wet. Of his sudden catalog of excuses against the North Fork, not a one came anywhere close to the deep reason of why he wanted to stay in Gros Ventre. But if I knew that, I also knew better than to try to bend Robert Burns Barclay from something he had newly talked himself into. Take and shake Rob until his teeth rattled and they'd still be castanets of his same tune.

Here the next of life was, then. A situation not only unforeseen from the stone streets of Nethermuir or the steerage berth in the *Jemmy* or the fire tower hill of Helena or the freight wagon seat from which Rob and I first saw Gros Ventre, it couldn't have been dreamed of by me in thousands of nights. Rob coveting—not another's wife in this case, but close enough. There was an entire commandment on that and you didn't have to be John Knox to figure out why. Particularly if the one coveted from was not mere neighbor but of one's own blood.

Dampness in my eyes, the conclusion to the floodtide of all this. Normally I am not one to bathe in tears. But it ought to make the sea weep itself dry, what people can do to people. I had undergone family storm in Nethermuir and that was enough. I had not come to Montana to watch the next persons closest to me, Rob and Lucas, tear each other apart; in the pitting of a Barclay against a Barclay no one could ever win unripped. Even the North Fork, grandeur though it was, wasn't worth taking sides in this. Nothing was. Search myself and the situation in every way, this I could see nothing to do but leave from.

I said as much—just the leaving; I didn't want to be the one to utter more than that—to Lucas as soon as he strode humming into the saloon near the end of that second afternoon.

"Up to the North Fork already? Aren't you getting ahead of yourself? You and Robbie will need to file your homestead claims at the land office in Lewistown first, you know."

"No, leaving is what I mean. Away from here."

Lucas broke a frown and studied me, puzzled. "Not away from this Two Medicine country, you don't mean."

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"Lucas, I do mean that. Away."

"Away where?" he erupted. "Angus, are you demented? You know there's no better country in all of Montana. And that's damn close to meaning all of the world. So where does leaving come in, sudden as this? Here, let's have some buttermilk and talk this over."

"Lucas, it's just that I've had—second thoughts."

"Your first ones were damn far better." Lucas had plunked down a glass of buttermilk apiece for us, instantly forgot them and now was violently polishing the bar I had just polished. "Leaving! By Jesus, lad, I don't know what can have gotten into you and Robbie. I have heard strange in my time, but you two take the prize. Now if the pair of you can just get enough of a brain together to think this through, you'll—"

"It's only me leaving. Rob intends to stay on with Fain."

"Robbie says that, after coming all the way from Nethermuir to get away from the wheel shop?" Lucas polished even more furiously. "Put a hammer in a Barclay's—" he stopped, then managed to go on—"a Barclay's hand and he doesn't know when to put it down, ay?"

I let silence answer that, and Lucas was immediately back at me: "Tell me this, now. If you're so set on leaving, what wonderful damn place is it you're going to?"

"I'll maybe go have another look at that Teton River country we came through on the freight wagon. Or around Choteau—"

"The Teton? Choteau?" I might as well have said the Styx and Hades to this man. "Angus, are you entirely sober?"

I assured him I was never more so. Lucas shook his head and tried: "Well, at least you can stay on for a bit, can't you?"

My turn to shake a head.

"Lad, what's your headlong hurry?" Lucas demanded, as peeved as one person could be. "Weary of my hospitality, are you?"

"Lucas"—I sought how to say enough without saying too much—"a welcome ought not be worn out, is all."

Lucas stopped wiping the bar and gazed at me. Abruptly his face had the same look of thunder as when Rob first stepped up to him asking for a handshake. What a thorough fool I was. Why had I said words with my real meaning behind them?

Lucas moved not at all, staring at me. Then with great care to say it soft, he said:

"I don't consider it's been worn out. Do you?"

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"No, no, nothing of the sort. I just think I'd better be on my way before—it might."

At last Lucas unlocked his gaze from me. "I ought to have seen. I ought to have, ay."

He stared down at his stubs on the bar towel, grimacing to the roots of his teeth as he did, and I knew I was watching as much pain as I ever would. Hell itself would try to douse such agony. I reached across the bar and gripped Lucas halfway up each forearm, holding him solid while he strained against the invisible fire inside his sleeves.

Gradually Lucas's breath expelled in a slow half-grunt. At last he swallowed deep and managed: "Any sense I ever had must've gone with my hands."

I let go my grasp of the stubbed arms. "Lucas, listen to me. There's nothing happened yet, I swear it. I—"

He shook his head, swallowed trouble one more time, and began randomly swiping the bar with the relentless towel again even though each motion made him wince. "Not with you, no. You I can believe, Angus. You're in here telling me, and that's a truth in itself."

So I had said all, and he had heard all, without the names of Rob and Nancy ever being spoken. More than ever, now, I felt the need to be gone from Gros Ventre. I wished I already was, and far.

Lucas swabbed like a man possessed until he reached the two glasses of buttermilk, glowered at them and tossed their contents into the swill pail. In an instant he had replaced them with glasses of whisky and shunted mine along the bar to me with his forearm.

"Here's to a better time than this," he snapped out, and we drank needfully.

Still abrupt, he queried: "Have you told our Robbie you're leaving?"

"Not yet, but I'm about to, when he comes off work."

"Hold back until tonight, why not." Lucas gazed out across the empty Medicine Lodge as if daring it to tell him why not. "I'll get Sedge to take the saloon for a while and the three of us at least can have a final supper together. We may as well hold peace in the family until then, don't you think?"

I thought, peace is nowhere in the outlook I see among the Bar-clays. But aloud I agreed.

When Lucas and Rob and I went around to the house that evening, supper already waited on the table, covered with dish towels. Three places were set, with the plates turned down.

"We're on our own for a bit," Lucas announced. "Nancy has gone home with Toussaint, up to the reservation to visit her aunt. So tonight, lads, it's a cold bite but plenty of it." He sat down regally, reached his right stub to the far edge of his plate and nudged the dish toward him until it lipped over the edge of the table; that lip he grasped with both stubs and flipped the plate over exactly in place. "*Turn up your plates and let's begin/Eat the meat and spit the skin,*" he recited tunefully. "Most likely *not* old Burns, ay, Angus?"

Dismay and concern and suspicion had flashed across Rob's face rapidly as a shuffle of cards and now he was back to customary confidence again. I could see him wanting to ask how long an absence "a bit" amounted to, but he held that in and said instead, "Angus and I can be bachelors with the best of them. We've been practicing at it all our lives. Here, I can do the carving," and he reached over to cut Lucas's cold beef for him.

My meal might as well have been still on the cow, I had so little enthusiasm for it. Rob jabbed and chewed with remarkable concentration. Lucas fed himself some bites in his bearlike way. Then he began out of nowhere:

"I've been thinking how to keep you two out of mischief."

My heart climbed up my throat, for I thought he meant what the two on my mind, Rob and Nancy, were heading headlong into. This would teach me to keep my long tongue at home.

But Lucas sailed on: "When you lads take up your land, I mean."

I gave him an idiot's stare. Had he forgotten every word I said in the Medicine Lodge this afternoon?

"It can be a hard go at first, homesteading," Lucas imparted as if from God's mountaintop. I caught a didn't-I-say-so glance from Rob, but we both stayed quiet, to find out whatever this was on Lucas's mind. "Hard," repeated Lucas as if teaching us the notion. "Nobody ever has enough money to start with, and there's work to be done in all directions at once, and then there's the deciding of what to raise. The North Fork there, that's sinfully fine country but it'd be too high to grow much of anything but hay, do you think?"

I recited yes, that was what I thought. Rob offered nothing.

"So the ticket up there will need to be livestock, ay?" Ay and amen, Lucas. "Cattle, though, you're late to start with this year, with calving already done. You'd be paying for both the cows and their calves and that's a pure dear price. And horses, this country is

swimming in horses, the Indians have them and Dantley deals in them and there's this new man Reese with them on Noon Creek. No sense in horses. But I'll tell you lads what may be the thing, and that's sheep. This Two Medicine country maybe was made for sheep. As sure as the pair of you are sitting here with your faces hanging out, sheep are worth some thinking about. Say you had some yearling ewes right now. You'd have the wool money this summer, and both lambs and wool next year. Two revenues are better than one," he informed us. "It's more than interesting, Angus, Ninian Duff saying to you that he's thinking of selling his cattle for sheep. Ninian is a man with an eye for a dollar." Tell us too, Lucas, does a fish swim and will a rock sink and can a bird fly? Why be trotting out this parade of homestead wisdom, when Rob wants none and I've already told you I'm leaving?

Sermon done, we finished eating, or in my case gave up on the task. Lucas swung his head to me and requested: "Angus, would you mind? My chimney."

I fetched his clay pipe, tobaccoed it, and held it to him as he took it with his mouth. After I lit it and he puffed sufficiently, he used a forearm to push it to the accustomed corner of his mouth, then quizzed: "What do you lads think of the sheep notion?"

Rob looked at me but I determinedly kept my mouth clamped. He was the one bending the future to awkward angles, let him be the one to describe its design to Lucas.

Instead, Rob bought himself another minute by jesting, "Sheep sound like the exact thing to have. Now if we only had sheep."

Lucas deployed a pipe cloud at us, and with it said:

"I'll go with you on them."

Neither Rob nor I took his meaning.

"The sheep!" Lucas spelled out impatiently. "I'll partner the two of you in getting sheep. A band of yearling ewes, to start you off with."

Rob sat straight up. Probably I rose some myself. Lucas puffed some more and went right on: "I can back you a bit on the homestead expenses, too. Not endlessly, mind you; don't get the wild idea I'm made of money. But to help you get underway. You pair are going to need to dive right to work, Montana winters come before you know it. I'd say tomorrow isn't too soon for starting. But spend the rest of spring and summer up there at it, and the North Fork will have to make room for you two."

"Lucas, man," Rob burst out, "that's beyond generous." Hesitation was gone from him. This again was the Rob I had come from Nethermuir and Helena with.

"You're for it, Robbie, are you?" Lucas made sure.

"Who wouldn't be? A chance like this?" Somewhere in his mind Rob had to adjust about Nancy. But with her absent to Toussaint's household and Lucas's offer laying like money to be picked up, you could all but hear Rob click with adjustment.

I knew Lucas had one more piece to put into place, and it came, it came.

"There's still one constituency to be heard from," he dispatched benignly around his pipe to me. "What do you say to the idea, Angus? Can I count on you both?"

Lucas Barclay, rascal that you knew how to be even without hands. Your bearded face and Rob's bare bright one waited across that supper table. Waited while my mind buzzed like a hive. *This isn't old Scotland, lads.* Waited for the one answer yet to come, the last answer of that evening and of the time that has ensued from it. *Life goes differently here.* The answer, Lucas, that you and I knew I could not now avoid saying, didn't we?

And say it I did.

"Both."

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SCOTCH HEAVEN

Prophetic indeed was the man who uttered, "You can fight armies or disease or trespass, but the settler never." Word comes of yet another settlement of homesteaders in this burgeoning province of ours. Who can ever doubt, with the influx which is peopling a childless land and planting schools by the side of sheep sheds and cattle corrals, that Choteau County is destined to be the most populous in Montana? Of this latest colony, situated into the foothills a dozen or so miles west of Gros Ventre, it is said so many of the arrivees originated in the land of the kilt and the bagpipe that Gros Ventrians call the elevated new neighborhood Scotch Heaven.

—CHOTEAU QUILL, JULY 3, 1890

"HOTTER'N NOT, said the Hottentot."

"And what else do you expect, man. Montana is up so high it's next door to the sun."

"Speaking of high, your lifting muscles are ready, are they?"

"As ready as they'll ever be." We each grasped an end of the next log.

"Then here it comes, house. Up she goes. Tenderly, now. Up a bit with your end. Up up up, that's the direction. A hair more. Almost there. There. Ready to drop?"

"Let's do."

With a sound like a big box lid closing, the log fell into place, its notched ends clasping into those of the cabin's side walls.

"Well?" demanded Rob the log hewer. "Does your end fit?" I squinted dramatically at the wink of space between the log

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we had just placed and the one below. "Snug enough. You'll barely be able to toss your cat through the crack."

That brought him in a rush. He eyed along the crevice—which would vanish easily enough when chinked—and lamented, "A tolerant tolerance, my father and Lucas would have called that in the wheelshop. See now, these Montana trees have more knots in them than a sailor's fingers."

"Lucky thing we're just practicing on this house of yours," I philosophized for him. "By the time we build mine, now—"

"Lucky thing for you I'm so much a saint I didn't hear that."

God proctored poor dim old Job about how the measures of the earth were laid. Had Job but been a homesteader, he could have readily answered that the government of the United States of America did it.

The vast public domain westward of the Mississippi River, as Crofutt put the matter for us when Rob and I were somewhere back there on his oceanic border from emigration to immigration, where the stalwart homesteader may obtain legal title to his land-claim by five years of living upon it and improving it with his building and husbandry labors, has been summed in an idea as simple as it is powerful: the land has been made into arithmetic. This is to say, surveyors have established governing lineations across the earth, the ones extending north and south known as principal meridians and those east-to-west as base lines. Having thus cast the main lines of the net of numeration across half a continent, so to speak, they further divided the area into an ever smaller mesh, first of Ranges measured westward from the meridians and then of townships measured from the base lines. Each township is six miles square, thus totaling thirty-six square miles, and—attend closely for just a few moments more—it is these townships, wherein the individual homesteader takes up his landholding, that the American penchant for systemization fully flowers. Each square mile, called a section, is numbered, in identical fashion throughout all townships, thusly:

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6	5	4	3	2	1
7	8	9	10	11	12
18	17	16	15	14	13
19	20	21	22	23	24
30	29	28	27	26	25
31	32	33	34	35	36

As can be seen, the continuousness of the numeration is reminiscent of the boustrophedon pattern a farmer makes as he plows back and forth the furrows of his field—or, indeed, of the alternate directions in which earliest Greek is written! Thus does the originality of the American experiment, the ready granting of land to those industrious enough to seek it, emulate old efficacious patterns!

Rob's remark at the time was that Crofutt himself verged to Greek here. But upon the land itself, there on the great earthen table of the American experiment, the survey system's lines of logic wrote themselves out so clearly they took your breath away. Why wasn't the rest of humankind's ledger this orderly? Filing our homestead claims of 160 acres apiece, the allowable amount one person could choose out of a square-mile section of 640 acres, amounted merely to finding section-line markers—Ninian Duff could stride blindfolded to every one of them in the North Fork valley—and making the journey to the land office at Lewistown and putting a finger on the registrar's map and saying, this quarter-section is the patch of earth that will be mine. The land has been made into arithmetic indeed. On the Declaration of Applicant there in front of me my land's numbers were registered as *SW ¼ Sec. 31, Tp. 28 N, Rge. 8 W*, on Rob's they were *NE ¼ Sec. 32, Tp. 28 N, Rge. 8 W*, and with our grins at each other we agreed that ink had never said anything better.

Here then is land. Just that, land, naked earthskin. And now the due sum: from this minute on, the next five years of your life, please, invested entirely into this chosen square of earth of yours.

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Put upon it house, outbuildings, fences, garden, a well, livestock, haystacks, performing every bit of this at once and irrespective of weather and wallet and whether you have ever laid hand to any of these tasks before. Build before you can plan, build in your sleep and through your mealtimes, but build, pilgrim, build, claimant of the earth, build, build, build. You are permitted to begin in the kind delusion that your utensils of homestead-making at least are the straightforward ones—axe, hammer, adze, pick, shovel, pitchfork. But your true tools are other. The nearest names that can be put to them are hope, muscle and time.

“Ay, Robert, you will eat your fill of wind up here,” Ninian Duff brought along as a verdict one forenoon when he rode up to inspect our house progress.

Rob's choice of land was lofty. His homestead claim lay high as it could across the south slope of Breed Butte itself, like a saddle blanket down a horse's side. Those early summer days when we were building his house—we bet the matter of whose to build first on which of a pair of magpies would leave their snag perch sooner, and would you not know, Rob's flew at once—those summer-starting days, all of the valley of the North Fork sat sunlit below Rob's site; and if you strolled a few hundred yards to the brow of the butte each dawn, as I did, you even saw the sun emerge out of the eastward expanse of plains all the way beyond the distant dunelike Sweetgrass Hills.

Rob found Ninian's decree worth a laugh. “Is there somewhere in this country that a man wouldn't have wind in his teeth?”

Even while we three stood gazing, the tall grass of the valley bottom was being ruffled. A dance of green down there, and the might of the mountains above, and the aprons of timber and grazing land between; this would always be a view to climb to, you had to give Rob that. Even Ninian looked softened by it all, his prophetic beard gently breeze-blown against his chest. I was struck enough to announce impromptu: “You did some real choosing when you found us the North Fork, Ninian.”

The beard moved back and forth across the chest. “None of us has bragging rights to this country yet.”

After Ninian had ridden away and Rob and I climbed up to resume with rafting, there still was some peeve in Rob. He aimed his chin down at the Duff and Erskine homesteads, one-two there beside the

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creek at the mouth of the valley. "By damn, I didn't come all the miles from one River Street to live down there on another."

"You can see almost into tomorrow from up here, I will say that," saying it against my own inclination in the matter. For, unlike me as it was to be in the same pulpit with Ninian, to my way of thinking, too, this scenery of Rob's had high cost. By choosing so far up onto the butte he was forfeiting the meadow of wild hay that meandered beside the North Fork the full length of the valley, hay that seemed to leap from the ground and play racing games with the wind as we went back to hammering together Rob's roof. And more serious than that, to my mind, he was spurning the creek itself, source for watering livestock. True, at the corner of his land nearest to mine a spring lay under a small brow of butte, like a weeping eye, and Rob gave me to know that I would see the day when he built a reservoir there. But we live in the meantime rather than the sometime and to me a nearness to the creek was the way to begin the world at the right end, in a land as dry as this Montana. Which was why my own homestead selection, southwest from Rob's and just out of view behind the dropping shoulder of Breed Butte, was down into the last of the North Fork valley before foothills and mountains took command of the geography. There at my homestead meadows of wild hay stood fat and green along both sides of the creek, and the bottomland was flat enough beside the clear little stream to work on my house-to-be and its outbuildings in level comfort; for all the open glory of Rob's site, you always were trudging up or down slope here.

But try telling any of this, as I had, to Rob, who assured me in that Barclay future-owning style: "In the eventual, a dab of hay or water more or less won't make the difference. What counts, see now, is that no one can build to the west of me here," and the timbered crest and long rocky shoulder of Breed Butte indeed made that an unlikelyhood. "Angus, this butte will be the high road into all the pasture there ever was and I'll be right here on it, am I right?"

There he had me. *Croftutt* notwithstanding, anyone with an eye in his head could see that the key to Scotch Heaven was not our homestead acreage, because no piece of land a half mile long and wide is nearly enough to pasture a band of a thousand sheep on. They'll eat their way across that while you're getting your socks on in the morning. No, it was the miles and miles of free range to the west, the infinity of grass in the foothills and on up into the mountains, that was going to be the larder for our flocks of fortune. Ninian Duff

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had seen so, and Rob and I, not to mention our treasurer Lucas, could at least puff ourselves that we glimpsed Ninian's vision.

"Our woolly darlings," Rob broke these thoughts now, "can you spot them up there?"

"Just barely. They're grazing up over the shoulder of the butte. One of us is going to have to, again. You know I'd gladly tell you it's my turn, except that it isn't."

Rob swore—sheep will cause that in a man, too—and went down the ladder, the fourth time that morning one or the other of us had to leave off roof work to ride around our zestful new band of yearling ewes and bring them back within safe view.

"Angus, I wish we had oakum to do the chinking with. Make nice dark seams against the logs instead of this clay."

"Toussaint told you how to darken it."

"Considering the cure, I'll accept the ill, thank you just the same." The Toussaint Rennie formula for darkening the chinking clay was: *You take horse manure. Mix it in nice with that clay.*

A buckboard was coming. Coming at speed along the road beside the North Fork, past Duffs' without slowing, past Erskines' just short of flying. It looked like a runaway, but at the trail which led up the butte to us, the light wagon turned as precisely as if running on a railroad track. Then Rob and I saw one of the two figures wave an arm. Arm only, no hand to be seen. Lucas. And Nancy was driving.

The rig, one of Dantley's hires, clattered to a stop just short of running over us and the house. The horses were sweat-wet and appeared astounded at what was happening to them. Behind their reins Nancy seemed as impervious as she did in the kitchen. Lucas was as merry as thick jam on thin bread.

"By Jesus, there's nothing like a buggy ride to stir the blood," he announced as the buckboard's fume of dust caught up with the contingent. "Air into the body, that's the ticket. Angus, lad, you're working yourself thin as a willow. Come to town for some butter-milk one of these evenings." Both arms cocked winglike for balance, Lucas bounded down from the wagon. "So this is your castle, Robbie. I've seen worse, somewhere, sometime."

"You're a fund of compliments," Rob said back, but lightly. "This will do me well enough until I have a house with long stairs."

"And a wife and seven sons and a red dog, ay? That reminds me,

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lads, Gros Ventre has progress to report," announced Lucas. His stubs were in his coat pockets now, he was wearing his proprietor-of-Montana demeanor. "A stagecoach line! Direct from up there where they're building the Great Northern railroad, to us. What do you say to that? I tell you, our town is coming up in the world so fast it'll knock you over."

There was more than a little I didn't know about stagecoaches, but I had a fair estimate of the population of Gros Ventre and its surroundings. Helena had more people on some of its street corners. "What, they're running a stage line just to Gros Ventre? Where's their profit in that?"

"Oh, the stage goes on to Choteau too," Lucas admitted, "but we'll soon have that place out of the picture."

"Up here we have news of our own," Rob confided happily in turn. "Ninian has had word of three families from the East Neuk of Fife on their way to here."

"Grand, grand," exulted Lucas. "The Scotch are wonderful at living anywhere but in Scotland. I suppose they'll all be Bible-swallowers like Ninian, but nobody's perfect." Lucas rotated himself until he stood gazing south, down the slope of Breed Butte to the North Fork and its clump of willows. Beyond, against the sky, stood the long rimrock wall we now knew was named Roman Reef, and then a more blunt contorted cliff called Grizzly Reef, and beyond Grizzly other mountains stood in rugged file into the Teton River region. "By Jesus, this is the country. Lads, we'll see the day when all this is ranches and farms. And Robbie, you're up in the place to watch it all." A whiff of breeze snatched at Lucas's hat and he clamped an arm stub onto the crown of it. "You'll eat some wind here, though."

Rebush to avoid double hyphen?

While we toured our visitors through the attractions of the homestead and Lucas dispensed Gros Ventre gossip—Sedge and Lila were very nearly ready to open the hotel but couldn't agree what sign to paint on it; Wingo had another new niece—I tried to watch Rob without showing that I was. He was an education, this first time he had been around Nancy since Lucas's bargain made homesteaders of us. So far as Rob showed, Nancy now did not exist. His eyes went past her as if she was not there, his every remark was exclusive to Lucas or to me or to the human race with the exception of one. It was like watching the invention of quarantine.

Nancy's reaction to this new Rob, so far as I could see, was per-

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fectly none. She seemed the exact same Nancy she had been at the first moment Rob and I laid eyes on her in the doorway of Lucas's kitchen, distinct but unreadable. That always unexpected flash of front teeth as she turned toward you, and then the steady dark gaze.

Meanwhile Lucas was as bold as the sun, asking questions, commenting. "Lads, you're a whole hell of a lot further along with all this than I expected you'd be. Do you even put your shadows to work?" Nearly so. Never have I seen a man achieve more labor than Rob did in those first homestead months of ours, and my elbow moved in tandem with his.

Rob gave a pleased smile and said only: "You're just seeing us start."

"I know this homesteading is an uphill effort. At least Montana is the prettiest place in the world to work yourself to death, ay?" Lucas paused at a rear corner of the long low house, to study the way Rob's axework made the logs notch together as snug as lovers holding hands. While Lucas examined, I remembered him in the woodyard in Nethermuir, choosing beech worthy for an axle, ash for shafts, heart of oak for the wagon frame. I could not help but wonder what lasts at the boundaries of such loss. At his empty arm ends, did Lucas yet have memory of the feel of each wood? Were the routes of his fingers still there, known paths held in the air like the flyways of birds?

"And the woollies," Lucas inquired as he and Nancy returned to the wagon. "How are the woollies?"

That was the pregnant question, right enough. The saying is that it takes three generations to make a herdsman, but in the considerable meantime between now and the adept grandson of one or the other of us, Rob and I were having to learn that trying to control a thousand sheep on new range was like trying to herd water. How were the woollies? Innocently thriving when last seen an hour ago, but who knew what they might have managed to do to themselves since.

Rob looked at me and I at him.

"There's nothing like sheep," I at last stated to Lucas.

Lucas and Nancy climbed into the buckboard, ready for the reversal of the whirlwind that brought them from Gros Ventre.

"Well, what's the verdict?" Rob asked in a joking way but meaning it. "Are we worth the investment?"

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Lucas looked down at him from the wagon seat.

"So far," he answered, "it seems to be paying off. Pound them on the tail, Nancy, and let's go home."

That first Montana summer of ours was determined to show us what heat was, and by an hour after breakfast each day Rob and I were wearing our salt rings of sweat, crusted into our shirts in three-quarter circles where our laboring arms met our laboring shoulders. Ours was not the only sweat dripping into the North Fork earth. In a single day the arrival of the contingent from Fife almost doubled our valley's population—the Findlater family of five, the young widower George Frew and his small daughter, and George's bachelor cousin Allan. Two weeks later, a quiet lone man named Tom Mortensen took up a claim over the ridge south from my place, and a week after that, a tumbleweed family of Missourians, the Spedersons, alit along the creek directly below Rob. As sudden as that, the valley of the North Fork went from almost empty to homesteaded.

"Who do you suppose invented this bramble?" Barbed wire, that was meant. Neither of us liked the stuff, nor for that matter the idea of corseting our homesteads in it. But the gospel according to Ninian Duff rang persuasive: *If you don't fence, you will one morning wake up and find yourself looking into the faces of five hundred Double W cows.*

"Never mind that, why didn't they invent ready-made postholes to go with it?"

Rob and I were at my homestead. We had bedded the sheep on the ridge and come on down to wrestle a few more postholes into my eternal west fenceline before dark. There were occasional consequences from nature for decreeing lines on the earth as if by giant's yardstick, and one of them was that the west boundary of my homestead claim went straight through a patch of rock that was next to impossible to dig in. Small enough price, I will still tell you all these grunted postholes later, to have the measures of the earth plainly laid for you; but at the time—

"Now, you know the answer to that. A homestead is only 160 acres and that's nowhere nearly enough room to pile up all the postholes it needs."

"Dig. Just dig."

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Can a person be happy while he's weary in every inch of himself? Right then, I was. I entirely liked my homestead site. Maybe you could see around the world and back again from Rob's place on Breed Butte, but mine was no blinkered location. Ridges, coulees, Roman Reef in the notch at the west end of the valley, the peak called Phantom Woman, the upmost trees on Breed Butte—all could be seen from my yard-to-be. The tops of things have always held interest for me. Rob's house was just out of view behind the shoulder of the ridge. Indeed, no other homesteads could be seen from mine, and for some reason I liked that, too.

"Digging holes into the night this way—back in Nethermuir they'd think we're a pair of prime fools."

"We're the right number for it, you have to admit."

Dusk slowly came, into this country so appropriate for dusk—the tan and gray of grass and ridge looking exactly right, the soft tones a day should end with. This time of evening the gullies blanked themselves into shadow, the ridgelines fired themselves red with the last sunset embers. But we were here to make homesteads, not watch sunsets. And by the holy, we were getting them made. Just as soon as Rob's house was done we began on our sheep shed, at the lower end of my homestead for handiness to the creek. The shed work we interrupted with the shearing crew for our sheep. We finished the wool work just in time to join with Ninian and Donald in putting up hay for the winter. Any moment free from haying, we were devoting to building fencelines. And someway amid it all we were hewing and laying the logs of my house, to abide by the spirit of the homestead law, even though I was going to share the first winter under Rob's roof; we were reasonably sure President Harrison wouldn't come riding over the ridge to check on my residency.

Full dark was not far from being on us but we wanted to finish my fenceline. Between bouts with shovel and crowbar and barbed wire, we began to hear horses' hooves, more than one set.

"Traffic this time of day?" Rob remarked as we listened. "Angus, what are you running here, an owl farm?"

We recognized the beanpole figure of Ninian Duff first among the four who rode out of the deep dusk, long before he called out: "Robert and Angus, good evening there. You're a pair who chases work into the night."

"It's always waiting to be chased," Rob said back. I ran a finger around the inside leather of my hat, wiping the sweat out. Besides

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Ninian the squadron proved to be Donald Erskine and the new man Archie Findlater and a settler from the South Fork, Willy Hahn. Every kind of calamity that could put men on saddle leather at the start of night was crossing my thoughts. Say for Ninian, you did not have to stand on one foot and then the other to learn what was on his mind.

"Angus, we've come to elect you."

I blinked at that for a bit, and saw Rob was doing the same. *What was I, or my generation, that I should get such exaltation?* "Elected, is it," I managed at last. "Do I get to know to what?"

"The school board, of course," Ninian stated. "There are enough families herearound that we need a proper school now, and we're going to build one."

"But—but I'm not a family man."

"Ay, but you were a teacher once, over across, and that will do. We want you for the third member of our school board."

"Together with—?"

"Myself," Ninian pronounced unabashedly, "and Willy here." Willy Hahn nodded and confirmed, "You are chust the man, Angus."

"The old lad of parts!" Rob exclaimed, and gave my shoulder a congratulatory shove. "He'll see to it that your youngsters recite the rhyming stuff before breakfast, this one."

"That fact of the matter is," Ninian announced further, "what we need done first, Angus, is to advertise for a teacher. Can you do us a letter of that? Do it, say, tomorrow?"

I said I could, yes, and in the gathering dark there at my west fenceline the school was talked into shape. Because of their few years' headstart in settlement, the South Fork families had a margin more children of schoolable age than did Scotch Heaven, and so it was agreed to build the schoolhouse on their branch of the creek.

"You here in Scotch Heafen will haff to try hard to catch up with uss," Willy Hahn joked.

"Some of us already are," came back Ninian Duff, aiming that at the bachelorhood of Rob and me.

"The rest of us are just saving up for when our turn comes," Rob contributed. That drew a long look from Ninian, before he and the other three rode away into the night.

It was morning of the third week of August, still a month of summer ahead on the calendar, when I came in from the outhouse with my shoes and the bottoms of my pantlegs damp.

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Yawning, Rob asked: "What, did you miss your aim?"

I almost wished I had, instead of the fact to be reported: "Frost on the grass."

That forehint of North Fork winter concentrated our minds mightily. In the next weeks we labored even harder on Rob's out-buildings and fences, and when not on those, on the schoolhouse or on my house; and when not any of those, we were with the sheep, keeping a weather eye on the cloudmaking horizon of the mountains. Soon enough—too soon—came the morning when the peaks showed new snow like white fur hung atop.

On the day when Donald Erskine's big wagon was to be borrowed for getting our winter's provisions in Gros Ventre, we bet magpies to see which of us would go. Mine flew first from the gate. "Man, you're sneaking out here and training them," Rob accused. But off he went to the sheep and I pointed my grin toward Gros Ventre.

The Medicine Lodge was empty but for Lucas. "Young Lochinvar is come out of the west," he greeted me, and produced an instant glass between his stubs and then a bottle.

"What's doing?" I inquired.

"Not all that much. People are scarce this time of year, busy with themselves. We'll soon have snowflakes on our heads, do you know, Angus."

"We will and I do," I answered, and drank.

"You and Robbie are ready for old winter, are you?"

"Ready as we'll ever be, we think."

"Winter can be thoroughly wicked in this country. I've seen it snow so that you couldn't make out Sedge's flagpole across there. And my winters here haven't been the worst ones by far. Stories they tell of the '86 winter would curl your dohickey."

"I'll try not hear them, then."

"You and Robbie have worked wonders on those homesteads of yours, I have to say. Of course I could tell from the moment the pair of you walked in here that you were going to be a credit to the community."

"Credit. Do you know, Lucas, there's the word I was going to bring up with you."

"Angus, Angus, rascal you." Shaking his head gravely, Lucas poured a drink for himself and another for me. His toast, odd, was the old one of Scottish sailors: "Wives and sweethearts."



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After our tippie, Lucas resumed: "What do you and Robbie do, sit up midnights creating ways to spend my money? What's the tariff this time?"

"Pennies for porridge. We need groceries enough to get us through the winter, is all."

"All, you say. You forget I've seen you two eat."

"Well, we just thought if you maybe were to mortgage the Medicine Lodge and your second shirt—"

"All, right, all right, tell Kuuvus to put your groceries on my account. By Jesus, you and Robbie would have to line up with the coyote pups for supper on the hind tit if I didn't watch over you."

"We might yet, if half of what you and Ninian keep saying about winter comes true."

"Put me in the same camp with Ninian, do you. There's a first time. How is old Jehovah Duff? Still preaching and breeding?"

"In point of fact, Flora does have a loaf in the oven. As does Jen Erskine. As does Grace Findlater. If our neighbors are any example to the sheep, we're going to have a famous lamb crop come spring."

"Lambs and lasses and lads," Lucas recited with enthusiasm. "By Jesus, we'll build this country into something before it knows it." I raised an eyebrow at his paternal "we" there. Lucas raised it a good deal higher for me by declaring next: "Angus, I believe you need to think of a woman."

"I do, do I." Truth known, on my mind right then was the visit I was going to make to Wingo's niecery as soon as I was finished with other provisioning. "Along any particular lines, do you recommend?"

"I'm talking now about a wife. All right, all right, you can give me that look saying I'm hardly the one to talk. But the situation of Nancy and myself is—well, not usual." That was certainly so. "You're young and hale and not as ugly as you could be," he swept on, "and so what's against finding a wife for yourself, ay? I tell you, if I were you now—"

"Just half a moment, before you get to being me too strenuously. What brings this on?" It wasn't like Lucas to suddenly speak up for womanhood at large. "Is this what you're prescribing today for all your customers?"

"Just the redheaded ones." My eyebrow found a new direction

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

to cock itself. Why was I the subject of this sermon instead of Rob? He was the one Lucas had needed to negotiate away from Nancy.

"Oh, I know what you're thinking," and as usual, he did. "But that's another case entirely, our Robbie. The first bright mare who decides to twitch her tail at Robbie, she'll have him. He's my own nephew, but that lad is sufficiently in love with himself that it won't much matter who he marries. Whoever she is, she'll never replace him in his own affections. You though, Angus. You're not so much a world unto yourself. You, I'd say, need the right partner in this old life."

I hoped the Lucas Barclay Matrimonial Bureau was about to close for the day. "I'm already in partnership with a pair of Barclays," I pointed out, "which seems to keep me occupied twenty-five hours a day eight days a week."

"Mend your tongue," Lucas answered lightly, but with a glance that seemed to wonder whether I'd heard any word he'd been saying. "Robbie and I'll have you so prosperous you can take your pick of womanhood. But who's that going to be, ay? It wouldn't hurt you a bit to start thinking in that direction."

"And was Lucas in fettle?" asked Rob as we unloaded the wagon of groceries.

"Lucas was Lucas," I attested, "and then some."

Was it a long winter Rob and I put in together, that first homestead one? Yes, ungodly so. And no, nothing of the sort. How time can be a commodity that lets both of those be equally true, I have never understood.

November and December only snowed often enough to get our attention, but the North Fork had ice as thick as a fist and we were chopping a water hole for the sheep and our workhorses each morning. Of course that was the time of the year the bucks were put with the ewes to breed spring lambs, and so at least there was warm behavior in the pastures, so to speak.

"See now, McAngus, don't you just wish it was spring? To watch those lambs come—man, it'll be like picking up money along the road."

"That's what it had better be like, or we're going to be in debt to Lucas down to our shoe soles."

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