

Dancing at the Rascal Fair

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SCOTLAND AND HELENA

Harbour Mishap at Greenock. Yesterday morning, while a horse and cart were conveying a thousandweight 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

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:

"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 shooed from the sight of poor old horsemeat Ginger and went and stepped onto line with our fellow steerage ticket-holders 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 bedammed 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 worldcrossing 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 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 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, may as well say. 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; then Greenock true to reputation awoke into rain, but the majority of Scotsmen have seen rain before and so 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:

"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 Cumbrae 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} ~~23rd~~ of October of the year 1889. Angus Alexander McCaskill, single man, wheelworks clerk, of Nethermuir, Forfarshire,

myself. Both of us nineteen and green as the cheese of the moon and trying our double dammedest 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 hoohawed. I grinned the matter away but I did not much 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 to us and 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 espousing 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 ~~we~~^{us} neutral pair what our destination might be.

"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 bagpiper. 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."

"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?"

Little than that, actually. We from an inland eastern town such as Nethermuir with its sea-seeking stream Carrou were born thinking 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 grey 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. Heath 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 bedammed 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 eleven miles, but the most famous eleven miles in Great Britain of the time and he voyaged them over and over and over again. He was one of the stone masons 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 workships 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, impossible Bell Rock, standing in the North Sea announcing the Firth of Forth and Edinburgh beyond, and my great-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 ~~ocean~~^{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 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 Bell Rock they were cutting down into the reef for the lighthouse 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 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 ~~lightskip~~^{workship}. 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 most of the minutes, drowning was on my mind. I was
afraid enough, yes. But the job was there at 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 Arbroath stone onto reef stone. Feed me first to
 the flaming hounds of Hell. Yet for all I knew, my ocean-defying
 great-grandfather was also 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} ~~would come~~ aboard. To say the truth, I was monumentally aware of Queenstown as the final chance for 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.

"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 hiyuhh! 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. --Maybe so, maybe no. I'll be paid for home-going day, will I? Maybe so, maybe no. That soliloquy 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 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."

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

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

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 plentiful 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 somewhat longer than a voyage of nine days 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 Irishwomen, 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,
show an ankle, show a pair,
show what'll make the lasses stare,
dancing at the rascal fair."

"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 maidens. I'm only here to see how romance is done."

Before he could answer me on that, the boatswain's whistle shrilled. The deck market dissolved, 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. But it was water that was solidly on my mind, under my mind, all around, the water named Atlantic. And what night journey of thoughts could ever cope with that?

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, we Scots fashioned it of stone, and from below along River Street Nethermuir as a 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 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 daystarting 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 in exchange for only a few years of earnest effort. The power of that notion of homesteading in America, of land, 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 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, ~~instead of water.~~ 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 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; in an awful way 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 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. Its 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 my 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. 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 limejuiced 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 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 chivvied 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 sight of land on all sides. But the ocean. There my senses stood themselves on end. 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 washbasin, 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 the round ocean and the living air, the blue sky and the mind of man in the assured sameness of the gray and green play of its waves, in its profound pattern of water always wrinkling, moving, yet other water instantly filling the place. All this, and a week of water extending yet ahead.

Up on the deck of the Jemmy that morning with the world turned into purely satin-like water and open sky, 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 dried haddock. "You wouldn't get such food just any old where."

"You're not wrong about that."

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

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

"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

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. What about that, do you see our line anywhere out there yet?"

"Not unless it's the color of water."

"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 Continental Divide 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 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."

"And in America all the geese are swans, are they?"

"And American hens sing opera."

"And the streets blaze with diamonds as big as chestnuts, do they?"

"Twenty-four hours a day, because America is a country so big it takes the sun all night to go down."

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} ~~and came~~ 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 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 be 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 foxchase 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 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 daggered '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? Most probably. The lasting one, at least. Odd, the baggage of the mind, what it chooses to bring along from place to place through life.

"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 maidens, 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 as 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 to us to have this uncle of his as our forerunner? As our American edition of Crofutt, 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. 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. 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, triumphant his 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?"

"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."

That tomorrow, though, Helena had distinctly other plans for us. I have not been through enough such times to know: do historic days customarily begin crisp and cool, thawing significantly as they go? 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."

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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 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.

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 poor field.

"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 theirselves 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. His absence was with us our every waking moment, a hole beside us where a presence was expected to be. ¶ 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. 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.

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. ~~Angus,~~ ^{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 a few barn swallows dodging back and forth in the air, 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 skyfull 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 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 backs 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 and then some. "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, you have no divided heart.

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?"

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 muttonchop 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 facewidth 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

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--"

"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 and then some, 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, but I said I thought the locution might be more like Grow Vaunt, and no, the town name had never passed my ears before. "We can ask them at the post office where it is. A letter got from the place all the way to Scotland, after all."

"Grows Vaunt, Grows Vaunt," enunciated Rob as if trying it for taste. 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, gandered at 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 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, 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 departing 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 wheelvoyaging 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 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 six 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 chance to inventory the wagon freight. You don't work in a store like Cariston's without hearing tales ~~of~~^{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

wagontrack 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 hunderd 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 Atlantic, 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 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} ~~count~~ on 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 wheelmarks 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 ~~trader~~ ^{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 normal latitude, Herbert placed the point of ^{a small} ~~an~~ 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, 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 freshfall. But our wagon trail, those thin twin wheeltracks--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 eight horses had dropped here out of the sky along with the night's storm.

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 up there 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.

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Later: "You remember what the old spinster of Ecclefechan 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 engravings 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 wheeltracks emerged ahead of us like new dark paint. Our 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 two forks of 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.

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 in the uphill corner of the wagon box, 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 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 freestanding 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 broadness broader than any we had met yet, vast flat plateaus of tan grassland north and east as far as we could see. Benchland and tablelands 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, five bumps on the plains ~~far~~², far northeast of us. "Men, unless I'm more 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 breast-like 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 cleanlined 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 we 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 raggletaggle 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 wide 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?

"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 hostler 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



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."

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. And 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 ~~blue~~^{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."

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 thundrous. If faces could kill, Rob and I would have been never born. ~~¶~~ 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 ~~saying~~^{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 rightness 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 a lead. 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 pastime, 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." ⁴While 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--"

"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 armstumps 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 backbar 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.

I have been drunk and I have been sober, and the experience of being guided around that raw patch of a town by a handless man held the worst parts of each.

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 shown 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 mmhmm properly as Lucas tramped us past such sights as Fain's blacksmith shop, encircled by odds and ends of 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 why 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 ^{all} outfits 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 the 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 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 us 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, ~~lads~~. 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:

"I'll tell you another thing while I'm at it." Rob and I hadn't a doubt he would. "My belief is we'll see a railroad of our own here," he confided. "After all, they talk of building one to that piddle spot beside the road, called 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 and 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-storey frame house. The house needed paint--this entire town needed that--but it sat comfortably between two fat gray cottonwood trees, like a hearth 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 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 that make her my aunt, now 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.

"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, 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 that those were not the last dollars to find their way to Lucas. 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 someway 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 looked 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 halfbreed 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 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 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."

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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--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 fancier 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 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--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 it 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 Blackfeet 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, everytime? 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 is Montana's new day.' Sedge puts up the 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 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, like the wise cow of Ecclefechan 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 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." 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 somethin' that'll cheer us up, professor." In that order of presentation, Perry Fox and Deaf Smith Mitchell these were. Riders for one of the Noon Creek cattle ranches up 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 automatically 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 storey, 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 Chateau 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.

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