

revised  
March '86 ✓

SCOTCH HEAVEN

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

---Choteau Quill, July 2, 1891

"Hotter'n not, said the Hottentot."

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

"Speaking of high, ~~are you ready to lift?~~ your lifting muscles are ready, are they?"  
they'll

"As ready as I'll ever be."

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

"Let's do."

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

walls.

"Well?" demanded Rob the log hewer. "Does your end fit?"

I squinted dramatically at the wink of space between the log we had just placed and the one below. "Snug enough. You'll barely be able to toss your cat through the crack."

That brought him in a rush. He eyed along the crevice--  
~~which~~ actually ~~it~~ would vanish easily <sup>enough</sup> when chinked--and lamented, "A tolerant tolerance, my father and Lucas would have called that in the wheelshop. These Montana trees have more knots in them than a sailor's fingers."

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

"Lucky thing for you <sup>I'm so much a saint I didn't hear</sup> ~~I didn't bother to hear that.~~"

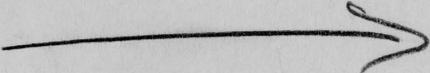
God proctored poor dim old Job about how the measures of the earth were laid. Had Job but been a homesteader, he could have readily answered that the government of the United States of America did it.

The vast public domain westward of the Mississippi River, as Crofutt put the matter for us when Rob and I were somewhere back there on his oceanic border from emigration to immigration,

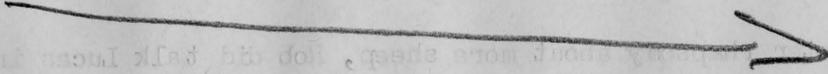
where the stalwart homesteader may obtain <sup>legal</sup> title to his land-claim

by three years of living upon it and improving it with his building

and husbandry labors,



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of the usual talk about more speed, for the talk later.  has been

summed in an idea as simple as it is powerful: the land has been  
made into arithmetic. This is to say, surveyors have established  
governing lineations across the earth, the ones extending north and  
south known as principal meridians and those east-to-west as base  
lines. Having thus cast the main lines of the net of numeration  
across half a continent, so to speak, they further divided the area  
into an ever smaller mesh, first of Ranges measured westward from  
the meridians and then of townships measured from the base lines.  
Each township is six miles square, thus totaling thirty-six square  
miles, and--attend closely for just a few moments more--it is these



True to his winter rhapsody about more sheep, Rob did talk Lucas into backing him for another thousand head, but I stayed out of that picture.

Rob argued to his considerable utmost that I was missing the chance of a lifetime

townships, wherein the individual homesteader takes up his  
landholding, that the American penchant for systemization fully  
flowers. Each square mile, called a section, is numbered, in  
identical fashion throughout all townships, thusly:

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

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

Rob's remark at the time was that Crofutt himself verged to Greek  
 here. But ~~there~~<sup>upon</sup> on the land itself, there on the great earthen table  
 of the American experiment, the survey system's lines of logic worked  
 so well they took your breath away. 

the system by which we filed our homestead claims of 160 acres  
 apiece ~~did~~ amount<sup>ed</sup> merely to finding section markers--Ninian Duff  
 could stride blindfolded to every one of them in the North Fork  
 valley--and making the journey to the land office at Fort Benton and  
 saying to the registrar, and his map of Montana this quarter-section is the square of earth  
 that will be mine. ~~And after three years of living upon it and~~

~~unofficial  
 declaration~~

On the Declaration of ~~ink~~ Applicant there in front of me my land's  
 numbers were registered as SW $\frac{1}{4}$  Sec. 31, Tp. 28 N, Rge 8 W, on Rob's  
 they were NE $\frac{1}{4}$  Sec. 32, Tp. 28 N, Rge 8 W, and with our grins at each  
 other we agreed that ink had never said anything more splendid.

✓  
improvement  
7000  
corn  
magnified

Rob's choice of land was lofty. His homestead claim lay high as it could across the south slope of Breed Butte itself, like a saddle blanket down a horse's side. Those early summer days when we were building his house,

--he won the coin toss for whose would be first--

all of the valley of the North Fork sat sunlit below Rob's site; and if you strolled a few hundred yards to the brow of the butte each dawn, as I did, you saw the sun emerge out of the eastward expanse of plains all the way beyond the far, far Sweetgrass Hills.

"Ay, you'll eat your fill of wind up here," Ninian Duff brought along as a decree one forenoon when he rode up to inspect our house progress.

Rob found that worth a laugh. "Is there somewhere in this country that a man wouldn't have wind in his teeth?"

Even while we three stood gazing, the tall grass of the valley bottom was being ruffled. A dance of green down there, and the might of the mountains above, and the aprons of timber and grazing land between ~~3~~ this would always be a view to climb to, you had to give Rob that. Even Ninian looked softened by it all, his prophetic



beard calm against his chest. I was struck enough to say: "You did some real choosing when you found us the North Fork, Ninian."

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

After Ninian had ridden away, there still was some peeve in Rob. He aimed his chin down at the Duff and Erskine homesteads, one-two there beside the creek at the mouth of the valley. "I didn't come all the miles from one River Street to live down there on another."

"You can see almost into tomorrow from up here, I will say that," saying it against my own inclination in the matter. For, unlike me as it was to be in the same choir with Ninian, to my way of thinking too Rob's scenery had high cost. By choosing so far up onto the butte he was forfeiting the meadow of wild hay that meandered beside the North Fork the full length of the valley, hay that seemed to leap from the ground and play racing games with the wind as we went back to hammering together Rob's roof. And more serious than that, to my mind, he was spurning the creek itself, source for watering livestock.)

spring

True, at the corner of his land nearest to mine a spring lay under a small brow of the butte, like a weeping eye, and Rob gave me to know that I would see the day when he built a reservoir there. But we live in the meantime rather than the sometime and to me a nearness to the creek was a necessary pleasure, which was why my own homestead selection, southwest from Rob's and just out of view behind the dropping shoulder of Breed Butte, was down into the

last of the North Fork valley before the foothills and mountains took  
command of the geography. → There at my homestead

meadows of wild hay stood along both sides of the creek, and the  
bottomland was flat enough to build on in comfort ~~for~~ for all the open  
glory of Rob's site, you always were trudging up or down slope here.

"In the eventual, a dab of hay or water more or less won't make  
the difference," <sup>Rob had</sup> he assured me in that Barclay future-owning style.

"What counts, see now, is that no one can build to the west of me  
here" ~~of~~ the timbered crest and long rocky shoulder of Breed Butte  
indeed making that an unlikelihood. "Angus, this butte will be the  
high road into all the pasture there ever was and I'll be right here  
on it."

shut down

been writing letters to the newspaper in Fife

Never more true than in those first few years of my homestead, when  
tasks seemed to hurry at each other's heels. Look up from putting  
the last bunch of ewes and their ~~new~~ <sup>fresh</sup> lambs on new pasture and the  
garden needed to be put in; do that, and fence needed to be built;  
build that, and it was shearing time; shear the beloved woollies, and  
it was haying time; and then shipp

There he had me. Crofutt to the contrary notwithstanding, anyone with an eye in his head could see that the key to ~~Scotch Heaven~~ <sup>our future as livestockmen</sup> was not our homestead acreage, because ~~a~~ <sup>no</sup> piece of land a quarter of a mile long and wide is ~~not~~ nearly enough to pasture a band of a thousand sheep on. They'll eat their way across that while you're getting your sock ~~on~~ <sup>s</sup> in the morning. No, it was the miles and miles of free range, <sup>to our west</sup> the infinity of grass in the foothills ~~to our west~~ and on up into the mountains, that was going to be the larder for ~~our livestock~~ <sup>the flocks of fortune</sup>. Ninian Duff had seen so, and Rob and I, not to mention our treasurer Lucas, could at least puff ourselves that we glimpsed Ninian's vision.

"Our woolly darlings," Rob broke these thoughts now, "can you <sup>spot</sup> ~~see~~ them up there?"

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

Rob swore--sheep will cause that in a man <sup>, too</sup> ~~and~~ and went down the ladder, the fourth time that morning one or the other of us had to leave off roofwork to ride around the band and bring them back <sup>safe</sup> within view.



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

for it

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

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"Angus, I wish we had oakum to do the chinking with. Make nice

9c

dark seams against the logs instead of this clay."

"Toussaint told you how to darken it."

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

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

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

"By Jesus, there's nothing like a buggy ride to stir the blood," he announced as the buckboard's fume of dust caught up with the contingent. "Air into the body, that's the ticket. Angus, lad, you're working yourself thin as a willow. Come to town for some

buttermilk one of these evenings." Both arms cocked winglike for balance, Lucas bounded down from the wagon. "So this is your castle, Robbie. I've seen worse, somewhere, sometime."

"You're a fund of compliments," Rob said back, but lightly.

"This will do me well enough until I have a house with long stairs."

"And a wife and seven sons and a red dog, ay? That reminds me, Gros Ventre has progress of its own to report, lads," announced Lucas. His stubs were in his coat pockets now, he was wearing his proprietor-of-Montana demeanor. "A stagecoach line. Direct from the Great Northern railroad to us. I tell you, our town is coming up in the world fast."

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

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

"Up here we have news of our own," Rob reported in turn.

"Ninian has had word ~~from his old neighbors in Fife~~, three families <sup>from Fife</sup> ~~of them~~ are on their way to here."

"Grand, grand. The Scotch are wonderful at living anywhere but Scotland. I suppose they'll all be Bible-swallowers like Ninian, but nobody's perfect." Lucas rotated himself until he stood gazing south, down the slope of Breed Butte to the North Fork and its clumps of willows. Beyond against the sky were the rimrock walls of Roman Reef and then of Grizzly Reef, and beyond Grizzly other

mountains stood in rugged file into the Teton River region. "By Jesus, this is the country. Lads, we'll see the day when all this is farms and ranches. And Robbie, you're up in the place to watch it all." A whiff of breeze snatched at Lucas's hat and he clamped an arm stub onto the crown of it. "You'll eat some wind here, though."

While we toured our visitors through the attractions of the homestead and Lucas dispensed Gros Ventre gossip--Sedge and Lila were ready to open the hotel but couldn't agree what sign to paint on it; Wingo had another new "niece"--I tried to watch Rob without showing that I was. And in turn Rob was trying not to look at Nancy. Meanwhile Lucas was as bold as the sun, asking questions, commenting. Evidently he felt he had taken care of the Nancy situation by getting Rob from under his roof, and so far as I could see, he had.

Lucas paused at a rear corner of the house, to study the way Rob's axwork made the logs notch together as snug as lovers holding hands. While Lucas examined, I remembered him in the woodyard in Nethemuir, choosing beech worthy for an axle, ash for shafts, heart of oak for the wagon frame. I could not help but wonder what lasts at the boundaries of such loss. At his empty arm ends, did Lucas yet have memory of the feel of each wood? Were the routes of his fingers still there, known paths held in the air like the flyways of birds? When he looked enough at Rob's logcraft, Lucas nodded and said nothing, which was purest praise.

"And the woolies," Lucas inquired as he and Nancy returned to

*more  
dialogue*

the wagon. "How are the woolies?"

That was the pregnant question, right enough. The saying is that it takes three generations to make a herdsman, but in the considerable meantime between now and the adept grandson of one or the other of us, Rob and I were having to learn that

trying to control a thousand sheep on new range was like trying to herd water. How were the woolies? <sup>Innocently</sup> Thriving when last seen an hour ago, but who knew what they might have managed to do to themselves since.

~~Try then to optimistically sum up the status of sheep.~~ Rob looked at me and I at him.

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

Lucas and Nancy climbed into the buckboard, ready for the reversal of the whirlwind that brought them from Gros Ventre. "Well, what's the verdict?" Rob asked in a joking way but meaning it. "Are we worth the investment?"

Lucas looked down at him from the wagon seat.

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