Dancing at the Rascal Fair

by Ivan Doig

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

--a Nethermuir traditional air
Harbour Mishap at Greenock. Yesterday morning, while a horse and cart were conveying 6 creels of sugar on the quay at Albert Harbour, one of the wheels of the cart caught a mooring stanchion, which caused horse and cart to fall over into the water. The poor animal made desperate efforts to free itself, and was successful in casting off all the harness except the collar, which, being attached to the laden 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 McGaskil, 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'd just put down the shaving razor, and on this largest day of our lives you were aglow like a hot coal. You cocked your head in that way of yours and came right out with:

"See now, Angus. 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: "You're for the James Watt? Straight on, the queue there, New York at its other end, step to it please, thank you." Less calamitous prospect than poor old horsemeat Ginger's watery example, at least, and so we 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. Over our heads deckhands were going through the motions of some groaning chore I couldn't begin to figure.
"Now if this was fresh water, like," sang out one above the dirge of their task, "I'd wager ye a guinea this harbor'd right now taste sweet as treacle."

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

"Ask our bedamned cook," put in a third. "All the time he must be doing it, else why's our mess taste like what the China dog walked away from?" As emphasis he spat a throat gob over the side into the harbor water, and my stomach joined my heart 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. 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 again of the waiting water and Ginger's final experience with it.

Awful, what a person lets himself do to himself. There I stood on that Greenock dock, wanting more than anything else in this world
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 Pa'rick Straight."

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 guessing, never a might-have-done-instead out of you. 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 puppypuppy looks up the Clyde to yesterday. Man, man, what I would give
to know. Under the stream of words with which we talked each other 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 Ombrae 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?"

With your eyes open. With no divided heart. I filled myself with breath, the last I intended to draw of the air of the pinched old earth called Scotland.

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

Robert Burns Barclay, single man, apprentice wheelwright, of Nethermuir, Forfarshire. That was Rob on the passenger list of the

James Watt, 22nd of October of the year 1889. Angus Alexander McCaskill, single man, wheelworks clerk, of Nethermuir, 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 hooahed. 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 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 a mine owner at Helena," 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, 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. 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 saw 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 family, his father and mother and three older brothers and younger sister, and even his two married sisters; 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 '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 small sister, his favorite in the family but just a child yet, so much younger than the rest of the Barclay brood that they fondly teased her for being an afterthought.

"Now there's another thing to wish: I still think at least she ought've come with us. Just look around you, this ship is thick with children no older than Adair. She'd positively be thriving here."

He had a point there. Something about the Barclays was that they all behaved as if whatever was on their minds made the agenda for the world, and I could just see Adair promptly governing these other children into a deck game of hopscotch. She was 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, Angus McCaskill**. But still. "As your mother pointed out, Rob, the pair of us would be strange parents for a twelve-year-old girl."

"All parents are a strange 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. "Angus, about this old water. You'll grow used to it, man. Half of Scotland has made this voyage by now."

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

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

Littler than that, actually. We from an eastern town such as Nethemuir with its sea-seeking stream Carrou were born thinking that the fishing ports of our counties of Fife and Forfar and Kincardine and Aberdeen were 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, Angus, this steam yacht is the way to travel." Like the duke of dukes, he patted the 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 can 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 now were threading our lives into the open beckon of those words. Like Lucas Barclay before us, we were on our way to be Americans. To be—what did they call themselves in that far place Montana? Montanese? Montanians? Montaniards? Whatever that denomination was, the two of us were going to be its next members, with full feathers on.

My first night in steerage I learned that I was not born to sleep on water. The berth was both too short and too narrow for me, so that I had to kink myself radically; curl up and wedge in at the same time. Try that if you ever want to be cruel to yourself. Too, steerage air was thick and unpleasant, like breathing through dirty flannel. Meanwhile Rob, who could snooze through the thunders of Judgment Day, was composing a nose song below me. But discomfort and bad air and snores were the least of my wakefulness, for in that first grief of a night—oh yes, and the Jemmy letting forth an iron groan whenever its bow met the waves some certain way—my mind rang with everything I did not want to think of. Casting myself from Nethermuir. The drowned horse Ginger. Walls of this moaning ship, so close. The coffin confines of my bedamned berth. The ocean, the ocean on all sides including abovehead. *Dark Neptune's labyrinthine*
lanes/'Neath these savage liquid plains. I rose in heart-rattling
startlement once when I accidentally touched one hand against the
other and felt moisture 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
great-grandfather to go upon the sea. His voyage 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 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. My family's one scrap of our historic man was his ticket of freedom from the press gangs which otherwise would have swept him into the navy to fight Napoleon, and I had it with me here now, pasted carefully inside the back cover of Crofutt: Alexander Angus McCaskill, seaman in the service of the Honourable Commissioners of Northern Lighthouses, aged 26 years, 6 feet high, red of hair, light complexion, marked with the smallpox. (signed) Robert Stevenson, Engineer for Northern Lights, 7 August 1807. That height and hair and complexion I have, although thankfully not the pocked face. The same set of names, too, just swapped about. But employ my imagination to its utmost, I could not see myself doing what Alexander Angus McCaskill did in his Bell Rock years, live shipboard for months at a time, travel an extent of untrustable water each day to set Arbroath stone onto reef stone. Feed me first to the flaming hounds of Hell. The one family story my father would ever tell, and it took brooding and drink to unloose even that one, was of when Alexander McCaskill and the other stonemen had just begun to excavate the foundation for the lighthouse. As the tide began to seep in, they concluded work, gathered their tools and sauntered
across the reef to meet their boats. Stevenson, superintending from
the reef's highest ledge, stood peering across the hazed water. I
knew there was wrong as soon as I saw Mr. Stevenson, my
great-grandfather's words. He was pale as the cat's milk. One of
the boats from the attending ship had been for some reason delayed,
washed nowhere in sight. On Bell Rock just then were thirty-two men;
boats enough to crowd aboard only twenty-four and that would be
crowding highly dangerous at best. The coming flood tide would bury
Bell Rock beneath twelve feet of water. Stevenson the great
dlands engineer of the Northern Lights was going to need to calculate
something miraculous. Meantime, other calculation was occurring.
The pickmen—they were a rough lot anyway—flocked right around one
of the boats, their implements casually and dangerously at hand.
The forgemen silently counted their own number, the stonemen
theirs. Nothing was said, but every man on Bell Rock steadfastly
watched Stevenson prowl on his lookout ledge. The wind freshened,
helping the tide to rise. The stone mason Alexander McCaskill saw
Robert Stevenson turn to speak to the men. This I'll swear to, his
mouth moved just as if he was saying, but no words came out.
Stevenson dropped to a rockpool, cupped his hands to bring moisture
to his fear-dried mouth. As he lapped, there was a shout. A boat!
There, a boat! Out of the haze emerged a pilot boat bringing the
week's mail, and rescue. 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 his grandfather's reply to him. Every hour of those three years, and most of the minutes.

I saw Jimmy Scott drown, when the boat next to ours went over. He was eighteen years old. 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? For all I knew, my 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 immediate logic, no personal beginning, and evidently no end. It simply was in me, like life's underground river of blood. How does it happen that we can come to this earth with unchosen hazards already in us? The medaled soldier cried, here's battle's truth/Fear ached in me like a rotten tooth. Ahead there, I hoped far ahead, when I myself became the past—would the weak places in me become hidden too? There was a universe of things I wanted to do before any marriage; if indeed there ever was any marriage for me, for there was also in my McCaskill past a surplus of reasons against that. But say I did become husband, father, all else, 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 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 work 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."

A 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. Peddlers, traveling musicians, the Highland dancer known as Fergus the Dervish whose cry of _hiiyuh!_ 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? Rob had it as right as a dexterous widow; 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 Je11y, 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."

"Muuuht' n, muuuht' 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, poetry—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. 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 past the clock tower of the linen mill and the silent frontages of the dye works and the paper mill and other shrines of work. 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 groan out greetings to disaster? The same set of bones called Angus McCaskill, anyway. And not coincidentally the second McCaskill set the Barclays and their wheelwright shop had harbored. To see you here is to lay eyes on your father again, Angus, Rob's father John Barclay told me at least once a week. A natural pleasantry, but John 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. 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 were 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. 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 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 John Barclay put me on as clerk in the ‘wright shop in the mornings, Adam Willox made me his pupil–teacher in the afternoons. Two occupations, two slim wages, and I was glad enough to have them, anything. Then came America fever, Rob and I catching it from each other when every tomorrow of our Nethermuir lives began to look the same to us. 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.

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. A minute or so of this behavior was more than enough storm for us in steerage, but the ruckus kept on and on. 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. 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.

In an awful way, the storm tranced a person. At least thirty times in three minutes I retraced in my mind every staiirstep from deck down into Steerage Number One; which was to say down into the basement of the titanic Atlantic, down into the country where humans are hash for fish.

What if old Bell Rock had drowned me? my father remembered being asked in boyhood by old Alexander McCaskill at the end of the Bell Rock 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.

Now the Jemmy dropped into a pause where we did not teeter-totter so violently. We were havened between crags of the sea. Rob's face swung up into view and he began, "See now, Angus, 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—you could positively feel the Jemmy exerting to flee 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.

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.

That alarm instantly reached all our gullets. I knew 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. Meals from a month ago were trying to come out of us.

I heaved up, Rob heaved up, every steerage soul heaved up. Our poor storm-bounced guts strained, strained, strained some more. 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 *Jenny* 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 retching and spewing. We could never be mistaken for hale beings, but we were not heaving our socks up.

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

    "Mates, what's all this muss?" The steward put in his appearance and 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
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 John, 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 frehanded 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, 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, just as surely as I had pasted my great-grandfather's affidavit freeing him for Bell Rock work inside the back cover of Crofutt we, Rob and I, held our own ticket of freedom 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 sat block after block of aspiring red brick storefronts.

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.

But in the greater matter of presenting ourselves to Lucas

Barclay, we now began to have the other side of luck.

"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. 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 startled as I.

"Statehood!" called out a bearded man scurrying past.

"Montana's a state at last! Follow me, I'm buying!"

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

"Angus, we must've seen half the faces in Helena today," Rob estimated after we made our woozy way back to the lodging house.

"And Lucas's wasn't among them."

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

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


"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 LOUIS 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 poorfield.

"Who are these, then?" asked Rob.

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

Discouragement. Perplexity. Worry. All those we found abundantly that first week in Helena but no Lucas. Not one least little bit did Rob let go of the notion of finding him, though. By week's end he was this minute angry at the pair of us for not being bright enough to think where Lucas might be, the next at Lucas for not being anywhere. Then along came consternation—"Tell me truth, Angus: do you think he can be alive?"—and then around again to bafflement and irk—"Why to hell is that man so hard to find?"

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

Yet we still did not.

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

"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. 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 Ball's 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 sidewiskers became us? Particularly when I think how red mine were then, and the way yours bristled. We sit there in the photograph looking like the stuffing is coming out of our heads. Once past those sidewiskers, 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.* As for my own front of the head, there beside you I show more expanse of upper lip than I wish I did, but there is not much to be done about that except what I later did, the mustache. 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.
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 come to Nethermuir; and together with it this:

Gros Ventre, Mont., 23 Dec. 1889

My dear brother John 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 him," 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 McCaikills. We had come to 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 eight 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 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 tumbled wall.

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

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

On and on the country of swales and small ridges rolled. Here was land that never looked just the same, yet always looked much alike. I knew Rob and I would be as lost out here as if we had been put on a scrap of board in the middle of the 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 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 prowléd 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 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 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 his hand. He moved in and quicker than quick completed the drilling.

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

"Not 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, after I'd begun earning wages at the mercantile. The next time I said I was setting off up the gulch, Rob fidgeted, then blurted: "You can stand company, can't you?" Those brothel excursions were not particularly a topic between us, any more than the allure of the Nethermuir mill girls with the boldest tongues had been, but I knew it was an area where Rob was not as proficient as he was in most others. As such matters go, both he and I knew about that side of life—somewhat; you never know nearly enough—but I happened to be a bit more inspired about its ramifications than he was.

"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." 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?

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

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

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

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

Later: "You remember what the old spinster 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 fast, 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 wagoneers for the rest of that day and the next, crossing the two forks of the Teton River and observing some 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 among the congregation of geography, the twin cuts of track attacked up the slopes in long sidling patterns.

Herbert halted the wagon at the base of the first 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 greatened. To the west now, the entire horizon was freestanding mountains, peaks, cliff faces; a jagged blue-gray wall with snow summits, like white fur hung atop. The hem to the stately mountains was timbered foothills, and down from them 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. About a mile in front of us, along the foot of the nearest of these low plateaus, the line of cottonwood trees along a creek made a graceful bottom seam across the tremendous land.
"Oh yeah, I see where we are now," contributed Herbert. "There's old Chief." As our wagon began to jostle down toward the creek's biggest stand of cottonwood trees, he pointed out to us Chief Mountain, farthest north on the horizon and a step separate from the rest of the crags. "She's Canada after that. Between her and here, though, comes the Two Medicine River. Can't see that from where we are, but this geography we're looking at is called the Two Medicine country." Then Herbert found the Sweetgrass Hills, five bumps on the plains 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 cone that stood near the mountains like a watchtower. Much nearer, west along the line of creek trees, rose 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. 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.

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 street, near the creek and the loftiest of the cottonwoods, stood a wide two-storey 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
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 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 John'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. 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
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: "Rest our dust."

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
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. And when they 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 were certain he would, too. "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."

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 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
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 squarish face, the nose and cheekbones a bit broad; not pretty in any usual way but not escaping a second notice, either, and then a third. 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 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 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.

Rob and I learned 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 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 that Lucas could dress himself except for the buttoning. That he could wind his pocket watch by holding it against his thigh with one stub and rolling the stem with the
other. That 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 titled _Stone Stories: Collected English Epitaphs_. "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 instructive. _Here lies John Jones, man of worth, repaying in full his borrowed earth._ Angus, what would your man Burns think of that one, ay? Or the favorite of mine. _Alone find his way, man must ease among/ the cold lunar beams/alone the sun arises, and alone/spring the great streams._ 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 hers 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."

We learned—at least I did, and from his uncharacteristic demeanor it looked as if Rob was too—the effort of trying to keep a face under control when a meat platter arrived between those bony stubs at the ends of Lucas's sleeves.

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. "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 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. Nancy was just a girl then, ten or eleven,
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."

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 wide open. He said only, "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 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 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 something for a while, goes home long enough to father another child, comes down to work at whatever interests him next. And came once in a blizzard to deposit his wife's sister 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. "You ought to have been here then." Toussaint nodded toward the flagpole and its flapping banner.

"Then?"

"The 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 said, 'This is the day of statehood. This is Montana's new day.' Sedge put up the flag, there it was. Every morning since, he puts it up." Toussaint chuckled. "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 said 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. Eventually he called a pause in our mutual tasks. "Do you feel any thirst?" he asked. I did. "We can't have people thinking we sit
around in here and drink," he said, "so like the wise cow of Ecclefechan we'll take a standing one."

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 regaled me in the presiding way of Rob aboard the steamship. "About my hands, you mean. The ones I haven't got. Everyone asks something eventually. All but Nancy. All the others—'How do you tie your shoes,'" he mimicked. "'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 like 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 Choteau
newspaper I was reading through to pass time in the Medicine Lodge.
But I thought little of them until the slow afternoon I came across
the one:

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

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

"People die everywhere, Angus."

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

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

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

"A man or two?"

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

"What happened with them?"

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

"And man three?"

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

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

"That one, now." A major gulp of buttermilk went down him. That one, I do have to say was ill luck. He was shot in an argument over cards."

"What, here?"

"No, in Wingo's." Lucas looked at me with extreme reproach, but I held gaze with him. After a bit he glanced away. "Well,
you have a point. It would have happened in here if it hadn't been the gambler's week there instead. But after that, Wingo and I talked it over and we've given gamblers the bye. Pleasant games among local folk, now. A coming town like this has its good name to think of, you know."

Rob was as startled as I by the news that we were in a sulphurous town. "Angus, this place isn't a penny whistle compared to what went on in Helena."

I have wondered more than once. Was it in spite of Gros Ventre's fresh reputation for excitement that the two of us the very next day let pass the chance to go on a freight wagon retracing our route toward Augusta and Helena? Or in hope of it?

Either case, my growing notion that I ought to go ahead and try some land-looking between intervals of helping Lucas in the saloon, just to be sure we weren't missing something undisclosed here in Gros Ventre's neighborhood, met no objection from Rob. He stayed in demand with Fain for as much wheelwork and other repair as a pair of hands could do, so there was sound sense in him earning while I scouted about. "It could be you'll find a Great Maybe for us," he said, though not within Lucas's hearing. "Have at it, I'll keep Gros Ventre in tune while you're out and around."
Lucas of course was several thousand percent in favor of my intention. "By Jesus, Angus, now you're talking. The best part of the world is right out there waiting for you and me. Tell you what, I'll even make a contribution to your exploring. Follow me." I tracked after him to the shed room behind the saloon.

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

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

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

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

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

Since Nethermuir the progression had been train, steamship, stagecoach, freight wagon, and shoe leather, and to it I now added the plump little pinto mare named Patch, rented to me by the Texican half-day by Dantley and saddled maximally with my new Texas saddle. The pony's gaily splotched colors made me feel as if I was riding forth into the country around Gros Ventre in warpaint, but I suppose the actuality is that I sallied out looking as purely green as I was.
The earth was mine to joggle over aboard Patch, at least until each midday. (Lucas was strict that he wanted me to continue my saloonkeeping afternoons, so that he could take care of what he termed "business at the house.") Now the question was the homestead-seeker's eternal one, where best to seek?

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

Everything was in place. The continent's flange of mountain range along the west. The far butte called Heart and the nearer slow-sloping one like an aft sail. The grass plateaus beyond Gros Ventre and its cottonwood creek. The soft rumple of plains toward the Sweetgrass Hills and where the sun came from. Enough country that a century of Robs and Anguses would never fill it. As I sat a while on Patch, above to my right a hawk hung on the wind, correcting, correcting. I let myself wish that I had that higher view, that skill to soar to wherever I ought to be. Then I reined Patch east, the hawk's direction.
Three mornings in a row I rode different tracts eastward of Gros Ventre, following along the creek and its fringe of willow and cottonwood until the land opened into leveler prairie, flattening and fanning into an even horizon which Lucas's maps showed were incised by the big rivers, the Marias, the Milk, and eventually the Missouri. Noble enough country—Toussaint told me it had been thick with buffalo when he first came—but so broad, so open, so exposed, that I felt like a fieldmouse under the eye of the hawk out there.

North took only a single morning. North was red cattle on buff hills, north was ranch after ranch already built along a twisty stream called Noon Creek, Walter Williamson's huge Double W, Thad Wainwright's Rocking T, three or four smaller enterprises upstream toward the mountains. Where the road ran along the benchland between Gros Ventre and Noon Creek, I gazed down at the fort-like cluster of Double W ranch buildings and wondered whether Rob and I would ever possess a fraction as much roof over us.
"You're becoming a regular jockey," Rob tossed cheerily as he came out from dinner and I rode up to grab a bite before spelling Lucas at the saloon.

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

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

Lucas had not remarked much on my land-looking, maybe on the basis that he figured I ought to see plenty before making my mind up. But now he ratified: "That'll be worth doing. Plan to spend the full day at it, why not. There is a surplus of miles in that country up there." To my surprised look, Lucas cleared his throat and allowed: "Business at the house can rest for an afternoon."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wind was my guide west, early the next morning. It met me facefirst as soon as I rode around the creek bend where the big cottonwoods sheltered Gros Ventre. The stiff breeze required me to clamp my hat down tight and crinkle my eyes, but no cloud showed itself anywhere there in the Rockies where the wind was flowing from, and the first sunshine made a promise of comfort on my back. Who knew, maybe this was simply how a Two Medicine day whistled.
The road today wasn't honestly one, just twin prints of wheelmarks such as those Herbert's freight wagon had tracked to Gros Ventre. Yet this was peopled land along this main creek, homesteads inserted into each of the best four or five meadows of wild hay. Here was handsome, with the steady line of grassed benchland backing the creek and the convenient hedge of willows and trees giving shelter all along the water. The long-sloped promontory butte with its timber top poked companionably just into sight over the far end of this valley of homesteaders, but beyond that butte where the tiers of mountains and forest began to show, it looked like tangled country. Any one of these established homesteads down here, I would gladly own. Were Rob and I already latecomers?

The mare Patch of course decided to drink when we came to a crossing of the creek, and as usual in those first days of my horsemanship I of course forgot to climb off and have myself one before she waded in. Today, though, the streambed was thoroughly gravel, several-colored and bright under the swift clean flow as a spill of marbles, so Patch didn't roil the drinking site. I rode her on across before getting down and drinking the fresh brisk water from my hands. Now that I was on that side of the crossing I could see past the willows to another creekline, coiling its way as if climbing leisurely, between the benchland I had followed all the distance from town and a knobby little pine ridge directly in front of me. Here I was, wherever I was: by Lucas's description that other water had to be the North Fork, this the South.
To me the natural thing was to point Patch toward the top of the knob, for a scan around. Patch did not necessarily agree, but plodded us up the slope anyway.

You would imagine, as I did, that this climb to see the new country would bring anticipation, curiosity. And there you'd be as wrong as I was. For what I began to feel was a growing sense of familiarity. Of something known, making itself recognized. The cause of the feeling, though, I kept trying to place but couldn't. The wind, yes, that. Smell of new grass, which I had been among for several days of riding by now. Cold whiff from where a snowbank lay hidden in some north-facing coulee. All those but something more.

At the knob top, I saw. The earth's restless alteration of itself here. The quickening swells of plains into foothills and then the abrupt upward spill of the mountains. The climb of the continent to its divide, higher, greater, more sudden than seemed possible; like a running leap of the land. I had been feeling this all happen in the same way that I watched it delineate itself while Rob and I were aboard the stagecoach between Craig and Augusta. The interior of America soared through its change of mood here as well. And here, just below me, one single calm green wrinkle amid the surrounding rumpus of surging buttes and tall timbered ridges and stonecliff skyline, lay the valley of the North Fork.

Once seen never forgotten, that new mood of land. I sat transfixed in the saddle and slowly tutored myself about the join of this western attic to the rest of the Two Medicine Country. No
human sign was anywhere around, except for the tiny pair of homesteads just above the mouth of the North Fork, one of them undoubtedly that of the old Bible-banger, Whoojamadinger whom Lucas mentioned to me. Other than those, wherever I looked was pure planet. There from the knob I could see eastward down the creek to where Gros Ventre was tucked away; for that matter, I could see all the way to the Sweetgrass Hills, what, more than eighty miles distant, that Herbert had pointed out to Rob and me. By the holy, this was as if stepping up onto the hill above the Greenock dock and being magically able to look across all of Scotland to Edinburgh. My eyes reluctant to leave one direction for the next, nonetheless I twisted to scan each of them over and over: north, the broad patient benchland and the landmark butte that lifted itself to meet it; southward, the throng of big drygrass ridges shouldering between this creek branch and the South Fork....

West. West, the mountains as steady as a sea wall. They were my guide now, even the wind fell from mind in their favor. Seeing them carving their canyons of stone into the sky edge, scarps and peaks deep up into the blue, a person could have no doubt where he was. The poor old rest of the earth could hold to whatever habit of axis it wished, but this Two Medicine country answered to a West Pole, its own magnetic worldtop here along its wildest horizon.

Someway, in the midst of all my gawking I began to feel watched myself. Maybe by someone at either of the homesteads along the creek, but no one was in view. Who knew, probably these seven-league mountains were capable of gazing back at me.
Nonetheless I cast a glance behind me for surety's sake.

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

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

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

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

"I hope to," I answered, more carefully than I had ever said anything before. "I'm looking for land to take up."

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

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

"Pictures are hard to eat," he gave me for that. Maybe I was hoping too much, but I thought his stare had softened a bit as he heard more of my voice. At least the rifle hadn't turned any farther in my direction. "You are new to here?" he now inquired.
"As the dew," I admitted, and told him in general but quick about Rob and myself and our homesteading intention, and that if we needed any vouching it could be obtained in at the Medicine Lodge saloon from none other than Lucas Barc—

By the time I caught up with what my tongue was saying, His Whiskerness made up his mind about me. "Lucas Barclay has had a misfortunate life," he announced. "He can answer to God for it. Or knowing Lucas, more likely argue with Him about it. But so far as I can see, you are not Lucas." He slid the rifle into its scabbard.

"My name is Duff."

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

I introduced myself and we had a handshake, more or less.

Ninian Duff immediately made inquisition:

"You are from?"

"Nethermuir, in Forfar."

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

As if he had run through his supply of words, Ninian Duff was gazing the length of the valley to where the far shoulder of the butte angled down to the North Fork. Abruptly:

"You are not afraid of work?"
"None that I've met yet."

The whiskers of Ninian Duff twitched a bit at that. "Homesteading has brands of it the rest of the world never heard of. But that is a thing you will need to learn for yourself. Were I you"—a hypothesis I wasn't particularly comfortable with—"I'd have a look there aneath Breed Butte, along the top of the creek. Ay, then you can dinner with us and we will talk." Ninian Duff started his horse down off the knob. "We eat at noon," he declared over his shoulder in a way that told me he did not mean the first minute beyond 12 o'clock.

When I rode back into Gros Ventre it was nearly suppertime. I was vastly saddle-tired—cowboys must have a spare pair of legs they put on for riding, I was learning—but could feel the North Fork, the future, like music under my skin. Could bring back into my eyes again and again the valley I rode up after encountering Ninian Duff, the long green pocket of creekside meadow, the immense ridges that were timber where they weren't grass and grass where they weren't timber, the Montana earth's giant sawline of mountains against the sky beyond, the nearer gentler soar of the timber-topped prominence called Breed Butte. Could hear echo and echo all of what Ninian told me at dinner: I have found that cattle do well enough, but the better animal here may be sheep. These ridges and foothills, the mountains themselves, there is room up here for thousands and thousands of sheep... Don't come thinking a homestead is free land.
Its price is serious sweat, and year after year of it....But were I you, the one place I'd want to homestead is here along the North Fork while there is still the pick of the land....

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

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

In on Rob and Nancy.

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

All this might have been mistakable. There was something more, though. The air in the room seemed to have been broken by me. I had crashed into the mood here as if it was a door of glass.

Rob recovered first. "Angus, is there a fire? You're traveling like there's one in your hip pocket."

"The prospect of supper will do that to me." I almost added You're in here amply early yourself, but held it. "Nancy, I just came to say I'll go to the saloon for Lucas, then eat after he does,
if you please." Her dark eyes gave away nothing. "Yes," she acknowledged.

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

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

"I have, if you like the land there an inch as much as I do. It's up the North Fork, good grass and water with fish in it and timber to build with and the mountains standing over it and—"

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

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

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

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

"This North Fork must be a place, it's sending you that giddy," Rob said back, still smiling in his radiating way. "But I'll stay on here to keep Lucas company for supper. You'll owe me that drink later."
Well, I thought as I crossed the space to the saloon, it's time to stir the blood around in our man Rob, and soonest best.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*"Dark,"* I observed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

As clear as today, I remember how the next morning went. The weather was finer than ever and even had the wind tethered somewhere, the mountains stood great and near, and as Rob and I rode onto Breed Butte to see straight down into the valley, I thought the North Fork looked even more resplendent than I had seen it the day before. A curlew made deft evasive flight across the slope below us. We sat unspeaking for a while, in that supreme silence that makes the ears ring. Everything fit everything else this day.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Homesteading would be a hard go," he maintained. "We'd better do some thinking on it before we rush in. See now, we're too late in the year to buy cattle and have calves to sell this fall. As to sheep, we'd need to bring sheep from Christ knows where and we don't have the money for that. Two houses to build, fences, everything to be done from the ground up--it'd be main sweat, all the way." As if our lives so far have been made of silk, do you mean, Rob? But I was so dumbstruck that the words didn't find their way out of me. Rob gazed down at the North Fork and shook his head once as if telling it, sorry, but no.

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

"Lucas? Man, Lucas is managing in this world at least as well as either of us. He has—" It hit me before her name fell off my tongue. "Nancy." The mood I broke when I walked in on the two of them the evening before. The way Rob outshined himself at every meal. The change from his first night's distaste for Lucas's domestic arrangement. I almost somersaulted off my horse just thinking about how much more there was to this than I'd noticed: Rob and Nancy, and maybe Nancy and Rob. Whoever the saint of sanity is, where are you when we need you?

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

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

I thought of nothing else but Rob and Lucas and Nancy the rest of that day and most of the next. I hadn't been so low in mood since those first Atlantic nights in the pit of the Jemmy's stomach. Within my mind I looked again and again and again from one to the other to the third, as you would scan at the corners of a room you were afraid in.
Nancy seeing Rob as a younger Lucas. A Lucas fresh and two-handed. Nancy whose life had been to accept what came.

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

Rob—Rob unseeing too, not letting himself see. Simply putting himself where it all could not help but happen. That helmeted mood of his, that trance into triumph. Of his catalogue of excuses against the North Fork, not a one came anywhere close to the deep reason of why he wanted to stay in Gros Ventre. But if I knew that, I also knew better than to try to bend Robert Burns Barclay from something he had newly talked himself into.

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

Who among us is not sin-stained? Every Scot is born knowing that, too. But knowing it and standing in the exact middle while it floods up around you are two different things.

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

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

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

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

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

"Lucas, I do mean that. Away."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My turn to shake a head.

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

"Lucas--" I sought how to say enough without saying too much--"a welcome ought not be worn out, is all."
Lucas stopped wiping the bar and gazed at me. Abruptly his face had the same look of thunder as when Rob first stepped up to him asking for a handshake. What a thorough fool I was. Why had I said words with my real meaning behind them?

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

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

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

At last Lucas unlocked his gaze from me. "I ought to have seen. I ought to have, ay." He stared down at his stubs on the bar towel, grimacing to the roots of his teeth as he did, and I knew I was seeing as much pain as I ever wanted to. Lucas's breath expelled in a slow half-grunt. At last he swallowed deep and managed: "Any sense I ever had must've gone with my hands."

"Lucas, listen to me. There's nothing happened yet, I swear it. I--"

He shook his head and began randomly swiping the bar with the relentless towel again. "Not with you, no. You I can believe, Angus. You're in here telling me, and that's a truth in itself."

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

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

"Here's to a better time than this," he snapped out, and we drank needfully. Still abrupt, he queried: "Have you told our Robbie you're leaving?"

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

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

I thought, peace is nowhere in the outlook I see among the Barclays, but aloud I agreed.

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

"We're on our own for a bit," Lucas announced. "Nancy has gone home with Toussaint, up to the Reservation to visit her sister. So tonight it's a cold bite but plenty of it." He sat down, reached his right stub to the far edge of his plate and nudged the dish toward him until it lipped over the edge of the table; that lip he grasped with both stubs and flipped the plate over exactly in place. "Turn up your plates and let's begin/ Eat the meat and spit the skin," he recited tunefully. "Most likely not old Burns, eh, Angus?"
Dismay and concern and suspicion had flashed across Rob's face rapidly as a shuffle of cards and now he was back to usual confidence again. I could see him wanting to ask how long an absence "a bit" amounted to, but he held that in and said instead, "Angus and I can be bachelors with the best of them. Here, I can do the carving," and he reached over to cut Lucas's cold beef for him.

Lucas fed himself some bites in his bearlike way. Then he began out of nowhere: "I've been thinking what you two might do."

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

But Lucas sailed on: "When you lads take up your land, I mean." I gave him an idiot's stare. Had he forgotten every word I said in the Medicine Lodge this afternoon? "It can be a hard go at first, homesteading," Lucas imparted as if from God's mountaintop. I caught a didn't-I-say-so glance from Rob, but we both stayed quiet, to find out whatever this was on Lucas's mind. "Hard," repeated Lucas as if teaching us the notion. "Nobody ever has enough money to start with, and there's work to be done in all directions at once, and then there's the deciding of what to raise. The North Fork there, that's sinfully fine country but it'd be too high to grow much of anything but hay, do you think?"

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

"So the ticket up there will have to be livestock, ay?" Ay and amen, Lucas. "Cattle, though, you're late to start with this year,
with calving already done. You'd be paying for both the cows and their calves and that's a dear price. And horses, this country is swimming in horses, the Indians have them and Dantley deals in them and there's this new man Reese with them on Noon Creek. No sense in horses. But I'll tell you lads what may be the thing, and that's sheep. With yearling ewes you'd have the wool money this summer, and both lambs and wool next year. Two revenues are better than one," he declared, as if this was news to the world. "It's more than interesting, Angus, Ninian Duff saying to you that he'll sell his cattle for sheep. Ninian is a man with an eye for a dollar."

Tell us too, Lucas, does a fish swim and will a rock sink and can a bird fly? Why be trotting out this parade of homestead wisdom, when Rob wants none and I've already told you I'm leaving?

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

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

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

Instead, Rob bought himself another minute by jesting, "Sheep sound like the exact thing to have. Now if we only had sheep."
Lucas deployed a pipe cloud at us, and with it said: "I'll go with you on them."

Neither Rob nor I took his meaning.

"The sheep," Lucas spelled out impatiently. "I'll partner you in getting sheep. A small band apiece, to start you off with."

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

"Lucas, man," Rob burst out, "that's beyond generous."

Hesitation was gone from him. This again was the Rob I had come from Nethermuir and Helena with.

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

"Who wouldn't be? A chance like that?" Somewhere in his mind Rob had to adjust about Nancy, that there'd need to be some delay in that matter now; but with her absent to Toussaint's household, there already was a delay and in the meantime Lucas's offer lay like money to be picked up. You could all but hear Rob click with adjustment.

I knew Lucas had one more piece to put into place, and it came, it came.
"There's still one country here to be heard from," he said benignly around his pipe to me. "What do you say to the idea, Angus? Can I count on you both?"

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

And say it I did.

"Both."