Rae Ellen--

The manuscript rubber-banded to this is the second chapter, "Gros Ventre"--please title it "Gros" in the word processor, and do this material on a separate disk from the ch. 1 "Scotland" material.

If you can manage it, I'd much like to have both chapters done by the time we get home, about July 10. Don't break your neck to do it, though.

Also, once you get a complete printout of each chapter, please duplicate each disk and put the duplicates on my desk--I'll stash them somewhere out of the house when I get back.

The Wang service numbers are on the first W card in the index file beside the phone on my desk. All their Wang material is in the closet to the right of where you've been working; the latest box of stuff, on the floor, has a few more ribbons in it, if need be. Just rummage through it all as you need to; and if you come up short of anything, disks or whatever, please buy them and I'll repay you and reimburse you for your time.

The phone numbers attached to this are where we'll be at nights, mostly. Call if you find anything wrong with the house, have any questions about the manuscript, etc.

No word yet from Alaskan friends about using the place, but please leave the key in its usual place each time you go home, just in case. As far as we know, the only people likely to be around occasionally are Jean Roden, who's taking care of my garden (and feel free to help yourself to strawberries, if they ever come), and Frank Muller, Carol's dad. A light in the living room will be on an automatic timer.

see you in July.

Ivan

P.S. I made the minor typographical error corrections on the 1st 6 pp. of ch. 1, for a printout I had to take with me — so ignore the ~~margin~~ marks in the margins of those pp.

Rae Ellen

Doig whereabouts, 18 June-10 July:

18-19 June, Quality Inn, Pullman, Washington

20-29 June, phone (406)933-5319; c/o Bill Lang, Box 15, Clancy MT 59634

30 June-2 July, phone (406)994-4145 (Michael P. Malone residence, Bozeman MT)

3-5 July, phone (406)727-2041 (Wayne Arnst residence, Great Falls MT)

6-10 July, phone (406)472-3212 (Tom Chadwick residence,Dupuyer MT)

~~Chapter Two~~ Rae Ellen- put this on a new disk, please.

~~1890~~ 1

Gros Ventre

We dislike to speak ill of any civic neighbor, yet it must be said that the community of Gros Ventre is gaining a reputation as Hell with a roof ~~on~~ it. Their notion of endeavor up there is to dream of the day when whiskey will flow in the plumbing. It is unsurprising that every ~~tough~~ cardsharp bunco man and ~~tough~~ 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, ~~May~~ April 13, 1890 →1

Word from Scotland reached us by 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 ~~along~~ together with it this, which Rob's sister Adair enclosed to us ~~along~~ together with fresh questions about coyotes and cayuses and how Hogmanay was celebrated in Montana:

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, 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 ~~noise~~ eruption, but our spirits went right on playing trumpets and tambourines. ~~The months of~~ Weeks of wondering and hesitation were waved away by the sheet of paper flying in Rob's hand: ~~these months~~, Lucas Barclay definitely alive, unmistakably here in Montana, irrevocably having broken out in penmanship--I managed to reach the magical letter from Rob for another look.

"When he finally puts his mind to it," I ~~said~~ remarked, "Lucas writes a bold hand."

~~I said.~~ Bold and then some, in fact. The written words were fat coils of loops and flourishes, so outsize that the few sentences covered the entire face of the paper. I thought I had seen among Adam Willox's pupils of the Ventura school all possible performances of pen, but here was script that

looked meant to ~~stick up~~ post on a ~~public~~ palace wall.

"So he does," agreed Rob. "That would be like him." He was more ~~interested in~~ intent on the letter's contents. "This place Graws Ventree--ever hear of it, did you?"

Neither of us had word one of French, but I said I thought it might be more like Grow Vaunt, and no, the name had never passed my ears before. "We ~~'ll~~ 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," said Rob as if trying it for taste. He already was putting on his coat and cap and I mine; to see our haste, ~~after these Helena months~~, you'd have thought we had only to rush across the street to be in Gros Ventre. For the first time since Nethermuir, neither of us felt we had to ask the other if we were both for it.

#

"Grove On," the postal clerk pronounced the town, which was instructive. So, in its way, was what he said next: "It's ~~north~~ a ways toward Canada, up in the Two Medicine country. Nothing much up there but Indians and coyotes." Have a look 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, ~~smooth enough~~ easy as pie. Then from Craig to Augusta by stagecoach, ~~smooth again~~ not so bad either. But from Augusta to 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 ~~got~~ found across. "Freight wagon, whenever spring comes. If it comes."

#

And so we waited for Montana spring to have its say. By the time February went, and March, and enough of April that it seemed Montana might become something other than snow and mud again, I thought I might have to bridle Rob. He maybe thought the same about me. But the day did come when we stepped off the train at Craig and presented ourselves at the stagecoach office. The agent looked us over with substantial curiosity. Rob and I had Stetson hats now, but I suppose their newness--and ours--could be seen from a mile off.

In strode a tall rangy man with some papers he handed to the agent. 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 nodded briskly to us. "Let's get your warbags on board." We followed him outside to the stagecoach. "Step wide of that wheel team," he gestured toward the rear pair 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," Rob told him, "Gros Ventre." Meanwhile he was scrutinizing the wheels of the stagecoach and I was hoping devoutly they looked hale.

The driver nodded decisively again. "There're worse places. Or so I hear." He conferred with his pocket watch once more, put it away. "It's time to travel. 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 ~~clarify. But what I mean~~ 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 onto it ~~empty~~ Glasgow ~~there~~ as well. So, the widebrimmed Montana, this was. And the Montana of grass and grass and grass. Not the new grass of spring ~~green~~ 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.

butter

The Montana, too, of the world's Rob Barclays and Angus McCaskills. We had come for land, had we? For elbow-room our ambitions could poke about in? For a 160-acre berth in the future? Here was the Montana that ~~mentioned~~ shouted all ~~the~~ this and ~~said~~ then, come have it. If you dare, come have it.

each time you climbed on one of it

#

**FICTION** *Out of the West, a simple and straightforward yet vivid and fanciful style of storytelling*

# Still more of Ivan Doig's special Montana voice

**English Creek**
By Ivan Doig. Atheneum. $16.95.

By George Harmon

It's hard to say enough good things about what Ivan Doig does when he sets words down on a page. His prose is at once simple and direct, yet rich and fanciful.

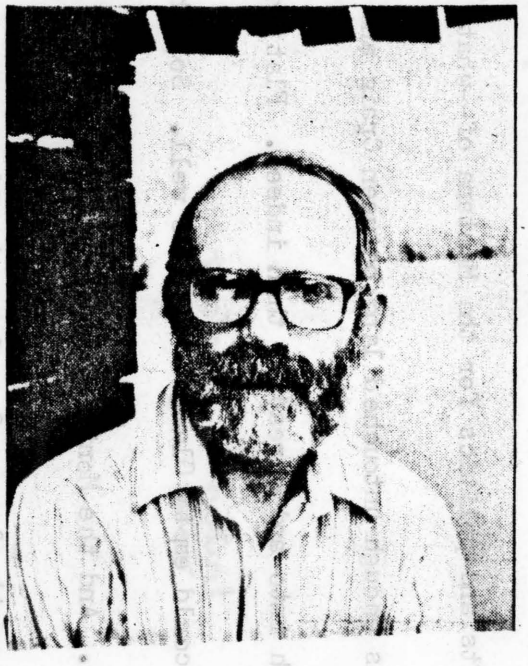
If he keeps on going this way, he is going to become widely recognized as one of the nation's premier Western writers. *English Creek*, his latest novel, is a Montana story set in 1939. It serves as a fine companion to his reminiscence, *This House of Sky*, which is about the Montana where Doig grew up.

What Doig does best is to pull the reader into a foreign world, bit by bit and yarn after yarn, until the eye races through the story. He did this in his last novel, *The Sea Runners*, too. The voice of his narrator is so binding that the audience is propelled into the lives of the characters. After a while they seem like family.

The narrator in *English Creek* is Jick McCaskill, and he rattles on in this fashion: "Here in my own instance, some mornings I will catch myself with a full cup of coffee yet in my hand, gone cold while I have sat here stewing about whether my threescore years would be pretty much as they are by now had I happened into existence in, say, China or California instead of northern Montana."

It's a narrative voice that takes some time to get accustomed to. One can't escape the feeling at the beginning that the writer, who obviously can write better than this old sheep rancher of a narrator, ought to be telling the story instead. But one comes to enjoy Jick as narrator, and out of that special Montana voice comes a tale that only should be told in that fashion.

It is the story of Jick McCaskill's 14th summer. He is the son of a federal ranger in the fictional Two Medicine national forest. The time is the end of the Depression and the eve of World War II, but those events have nothing to do with the Two Medicine. It is a universe to itself, a country still high and wild.



Jick is a little boy fast turning into a man. We know that there will be no long adolescence in the Two Medicine; he'll never be a 25-year-old trying to "find himself" before he becomes a Yuppie. And we learn at the end that Jick turned out exactly as we expected, a combat veteran who married a strong woman and became a rancher.

His 14th summer is a blend of experiences: trout fishing, a rodeo, mountain camping, a forest fire, a tender but touchy relationship with his mother and father. Doig, himself a former ranch hand, researched Montana history meticulously to create these scenes. He builds such rich detail into each scene that the reader seems to be at the rodeo or leading the pack horse.

Characters jump to life: "Dode was a compact rugged-faced guy whose listening grin featured a gap where the sharp tooth just to the left of his front teeth was missing, knocked out in some adventure or another."

And: "This was the cue for Wisdom to pull out his own sack of Bull Durham, pat his shirt pocket, then say to Perry or Bud, 'You got a Bible on you?' One or the other would loan him the packet of cigarette papers and he'd roll himself one. Strange how he could always have tobacco but perpetually be out of papers, which were the half of smoking that cost almost nothing. But that was Wisdom for you."

For a story of the relationships in a Western family, I have to go to Alan Le May's *The Searchers* to find the equal of *English Creek*. And there aren't many fictional boys we can remember with clarity. Beyond Tom Sawyer, Holden Caulfield and Studs Lonigan, the list trickles off.

Jick has a chance to get on some of those literary lists. Doig is promising that his newest novel is the first part of a trilogy on the McCaskill family. This reader can't wait for the sequels.

*George Harmon is an associate professor at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism.*

continuing session

The stagecoach ride was a ~~case~~ of rattle and bounce, but we had no ~~the~~ runaway and no breakdown and so Rob and I climbed down at Augusta chipper as ~~chickadees~~ larks.

improve

not

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. ~~The~~ Our stage driver advised us to keep our eyes skinned for the freight wagon in the morning, as it might be a week before another went 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 said, 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 ~~came~~ stepped out here?"

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

"All right, all right, you don't have to jump on me with tackety boots. I'm ~~just~~ 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 ~~street~~ road to await the freight wagon.

The freighter was a burly ~~man~~ 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 while hearing Rob, then granted that he could maybe stand some company, not to mention the commerce. We introduced ourselves to him and he in turn provided: "~~The~~ 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 said: "Herbert's enough. Climb on if you're coming."

I inventoried the wagon freight while stowing our bags and bedrolls. Boxes of axle grease, sacks of beans, bacon, flour, coffee.

Some stacks of sheep pelts, fresh enough that they must have ~~been~~ come from the ranch ~~the~~ where the freighter had just ~~come from~~ been. 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. But also, we were absorbed in the sights of the land. Instead of mountains all around as in Helena, here they were stacked on the western horizon. Every mountain in America seemed to be there. Palisades of rock, constant canyons. As far north as we could see, the ~~mountains~~ 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 hunderd fifty miles or so."

On and on the country of swales and small ridges rolled. ~~It~~ Here was land that never looked just the same, yet ~~it~~ always looked much alike. I knew Rob and I would be as lost ~~here~~ out as if we ~~were~~ had been put on a scrap of board in the Atlantic and I was thanking our stars that we were in the guidance of someone as veteran to this trail as Herbert. Just to put some words into the air to celebrate our good fortune, I leaned around Rob and asked the freighter: "How many times have you ~~driven~~ traveled this trail by now?"

"This'll be once."

The look that ~~passed~~ shot between Rob and me must have had some left over for ~~Herbert~~ the freighter, because eventually he went on: "Oh, I've ~~driven~~ drove this general country a lot. The ~~GO~~ Whoop-up Trail runs along to the east of here, from Fort Benton ~~up to GO~~ on 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 ~~of yours~~ place. All we got to do is follow these tracks."

Rob and I peered at the ~~twin~~ wheelmarks ahead ~~[illegible]~~ like two threads on the prairie. This time Rob did the asking.

snow squalls along mtns?

"What, ah, what if it snows?"

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

#

After we stopped for the night and put supper in us, Herbert seemed restless. Maybe it was only his body trying itself out after the day of sitting on the wagon seat like a stone, but I didn't think so.

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

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

"We think we're honest enough," vouched Rob. I tacked 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 it for yourselves."

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'll just water them back up. So if there's gonna be more in those barrels than I started out with anyway, no reason not to borrow ourselves a sip apiece[illegible] 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 a whiskey barrel. When he had unseated the barrel hoop about an inch above its normal place, he put an awl there in a seam between staves and began drilling.

"That's a thing I can do," Rob offered as soon as Herbert stopped to rest his hand. He moved in and completed the drilling.

~~Herbert watched with the first admiration he had shown us so far.~~

"This ain't your profession, is it?"

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

The straw was my assignment, and from the fistful I'd been busily puffing until I found a sturdy one that could be blown through nicely. Rob drew the awl from the hole and delicately injected the straw in its place. Herbert had his cup waiting beneath when the first drops of whiskey began dripping out. "It's kind of slow, men. But so is the river 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 a new make. As we sat at the campfire and sipped, he asked intently: "How's the calico situation in Helena these days?"

I had a moment of wondering why he was so interested in one specific item of dry goods, then it dawned on me he meant women. 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, I suppose. 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 toward 00 up the hill to 00 Street, Rob fidgeted, then blurted: "I'll go along." 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. Put it this way. Rob and I knew about life--somewhat--but didn't feel we had to go around announcing it, even to each other.

"Worst thing about being a freighter," Herbert was announcing, after my tepid report on Helena, "is how far it 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."

the rest of that evening,

From Herbert we heard of the calico situation at the Canadian forts he freighted to. (Bad.) The calico situation in New Orleans, long ago where he'd been posted ~~Briefly~~ as a soldier in the Union army. (~~Interesting.~~ Incredible) The calico situation at Butte as compared with ~~Bisbee~~ 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 ~~respectfully~~ that no, we hadn't been to London to find out the English calico situation, Herbert looked regretful, tipped the last of his cup of whiskey into himself, and said 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 ~~the~~ my bedroll scared and stayed that way despite the freighter's ~~report~~ assessment that "this is just an April skift, I think."

The mountains were totally gone from the west, the sky there a curtain of whitish mist. Ridges and coulees still could be ~~pi~~ picked out, the tan grass tufting up from the thin blanket of snow. But our wagon trail, those thin twin wheeltracks--as far as could be told from the ~~unmarked~~ blank and silent expanse all around us, Herbert and Rob and I and the freight wagon and six horses had dropped here out of the sky along with the ~~April~~ night's storm.

The snow had stopped falling, which was the only hope I saw anywhere around. But was the sky empty ~~now~~ dry? Or was ~~there~~ more snow tearing up there where this came from?

"It sure beats everything, Montana weather," Herbert acknowledged. "Men, I got to ask you to do ~~some~~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.

PORTLAND OREGONIAN, Nov. 11, 1984

—NORTHWEST Literary Arts

# Words That Dance to a Mountain Tune

**ENGLISH CREEK.** By Ivan Doig (Atheneum, $15.95).

**By Paul Pintarich**

Ivan Doig's fictional "English Creek" lies on the east side of the Rocky Mountains, where the streams flow toward the Mississippi and the lives of his characters take their own sweet time moving through a pastoral part of Montana's recent history.

Here, surrounding Two Medicine National Forest, between the small town of Gros Ventre and the mountains, lives a gathering of sheepherders, ranchers and farmers weary of struggling with the Great Depression, which has tightened their existence to the belly-scraping limits of survival.

Though the friends and neighbors along English Creek are unaware of it, World War II's saving prosperity is just around the corner, and this particular summer, the summer of Jick McCaskill's 14th year, is expected to be a good one. "That month of June swam into the Two Medicine country. In my life until then I had never seen the sidehills come so green, the coulees stay so spongy with runoff. A right amount of wet evidently could sweeten the universe."

Anyone who has read Doig's masterful first book, "This House of Sky," an autobiography of his own growing up in this same country, will be familiar with the temptation to quote profusely this Montana *emigre*, who now lives in Seattle. "This House of Sky" went on to become a nominee for the National Book Award. Doig also received well-deserved accolades for his first novel, "The Sea Runners," an historical tale of Swedes escaping from 19th-century Russian Alaska.

Now, safe on his home turf again, Doig has brought forth the first in a trilogy of novels that ultimately will profile his fictional landscape from pioneer days to the present, giving readers a genealogy of the McCaskill clan as well. Doig, in fact, recently returned from Scotland, where he researched 19th-century Scottish migrations, and he explains that the English Creek novel was purposely out of sequence — perhaps as a reflection of more recent hard times. Beautiful in its simplicity and warmth, the story conveys a folksiness the author pulls off skillfully, without being too maudlin or Disneyesque. At the risk of sounding corny: This is the kind of novel you didn't think they wrote anymore.

Doig has taken a "rites of passage" story and honed it to what surely will be an epic, a kind of Montana "Honey in the Horn." The days of Jick McCaskill's adolescent summer are reflective and revealing. Not only does the boy watch his youth dissipate, but he also witnesses the end of a drowsy era inhabited by real homesteaders, real ranchers and real cowboys — a period when life's values were real as well.



*Ivan Doig*

Jick's father, Varick McCaskill, the descendant of Scottish immigrants, is the ranger in charge of Two Medicine National Forest. Jick's mother, Beth, a former schoolteacher, is half-Scottish, half-Danish; his brother Alec, four years older, is half-horse, half-alligator, a romantic youth who wants to make a career of being a cowboy on the Double W ranch. The drama infused into this otherwise restful novel comes from Alec's conflict with his parents over his desire to marry Leona, an act that would keep him in the saddle and perhaps out of college in the fall.

A mysterious loner, Stanley Meixell, is a wrangler and packstring operator who was Two Medicine's first ranger back when the Forest Service was formed. Combining Jick's seeking of clues and Meixell's enigmatic persona with a major forest fire, Doig has written a tightly told tale, as harmoniously humorous and macho as a John Ford movie. Imagining Maureen O'Hara and the late John Wayne playing Jick's parents is easy.

The assorted denizens of the nearby countryside would require a cast of scores of character actors. These characters perform in a historical museum of the late 1930s, in accounts of sheepherding, of haying with horses, of Fourth of July picnics and of dusty back-yard rodeos lubricated with washtubs full of iced-down beer.

Like any quality writer, Doig makes readers hungry with the food and follows Hemingway's important advice: "Don't forget the weather." The weather is catalyst for life along English Creek in Two Medicine country. When he observes fluffy white clouds floating overhead, an oldtimer comments, "Those are empties coming over from Seattle."

The language of the times — the profuse homilies and aphorisms, the parables and epitaphs preserved from frontier Montana and held in Doig's mind — conveys the personality of people whose innate wit and indigenous wisdom colored dull, dusty, workaday lives. Wonderful expressions — "Tidy as spats on a rooster"; "He's so tight he wouldn't spend a dime to see Christ ride backwards on a bicycle"; the description of a post-rodeo crowd in the Medicine Lodge Saloon: " . . . it sounded like hell changing shifts in there." — show that Doig has lived and worked in this country. He knows his people well.

Doig underscores his chapters with real news items from local papers of the times, and he lets it be known that he was a sensitive, romantic youth (he's now 45) with an ear for the dialogue of his elders.

The novel's highlight is a grand Fourth of July square dance that incorporates and enhances the sense of timelessness and enduring melancholy for the past that is the fabric of the trilogy. Here, also, is some of Doig's best writing: "Can it be that all kinds of music speak to one another? For what I always end up thinking of in this dancing respect is a hymn. To me it is the one hymn that has ever seemed to make much sense:

*"Dance, dance, wherever you may be,*
*I am the Lord of the dance," said he,*
*"And I'll lead you all, wherever you may be,*
*And I'll lead you all in the dance," said he.*

"I almost wish I had never come across those words and their tune, for they make one of those chants that slip into your mind every time you meet up with the circumstances they suggest. It was so then, even as Ray nudged me to point out the Busby brothers going through a fancy twirl with each other instead of with their wives and I joined Ray and everybody else in laughing, and it is so now. Within all else those musical words, a kind of beautiful haunting. But I suppose that is what musical words, and for that matter dances and dancers, are for." NW

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

"Sometime after this day of April," I muttered back.

#

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

"If you're going to imagine, try get some heat into the notion."

#

Still later:

"Herbert ~~xxxx~~ says it could have been worse, there could have been a wind with this snow."

"Herbert is a fund of happy news."

#

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

→

~~It was late morning when Herbert informed us, "I think maybe we're going to get the better of this."~~

He had no more than said so when the mist along the west began to wisp away and mountains were in place here and there along that horizon. Before long, the sun came through, the snow was melting fast, the wheeltracks emerged ahead of us like new dark paint.

Our baptism by Montana ~~spring~~ April apparently over, Rob and I sat in grateful silence on the freight wagon.

We were wagoneers for the rest of that day and the next, then at supper on the third night Herbert said, "Tomorrow ought to get us there." In celebration, we evaporated the final whiskey barrel to the level of the two previous ~~nights~~ nights', congratulaing ourselves on careful workmanship, and Herbert told us a number of chapters about the calico situation when he was freighting into Deadwood, South Dakota, during the gold rush of 00.

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 ~~were~~ hid under the horizon, there was no evidence the world ~~had~~ 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 seemed to lose patience here; the bench hills were too abrupt to be climbed straight up, and rather than ~~wind~~ circle around among the congregation of geography, the twin cuts of track ~~went~~ fled up the slopes in long sidling patterns.

Herbert halted the wagon at the base of the first ruts angling up and around a bench. "I don't think this outfit'll ~~tip~~ roll itself over, up there. But I've 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 the 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 walking 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."

"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."

improve

As the snow had done, ~~the morning before,~~ the benchlands set us a routine: 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 it?" remarked Herbert when we paused for noon. Rob and I didn't dare look at each other. If Gros Ventre was amid this boxed-in slanted windblown landscape; if this bleakness was where we ~~were going~~ had come across the world to find Lucas Barclay...

home only to wind

Mid-afternoon brought a long gradual slope which the wagon could travel straight up, and we were able to be steady passengers again. 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 was ahead, and a next after that. And then the trail took the wagon up to a shallow pass between two broad flat ridges.

Herbert halted the horses there. What had halted him, and us, was a change of earth as sudden as awaking into the snow had been.

Ahead was where the planet greatened. To the west now, the entire

# 'English Creek' is tapestry of state scenes

Great Falls Tribune Dec. 2, '84

**By J.M. SWANSON**
**For The Tribune**

"If you have been brought up in Montana you close a gate behind you," explains Jick McCaskill, the boy hero of "English Creek."

Montanans should be glad that Ivan Doig has opened the gate wide to inspire yet another poignant flood of memories and history that began for readers with his first book, a 1978 memoir of growing up in Montana, "This House of Sky."

In his first piece of fiction set in his native Montana, Doig has frozen "that summer," as Jick's mother called it later, along the Rocky Mountain Front in 1939.

"Life and people were a kind of flood around me that summer," says Doig's 14-year-old protaganist, as he begins a journey that will turn him into a man.

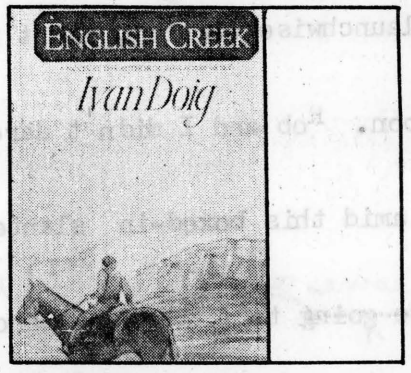
The young Jick is suddenly thrust into the limelight as the eldest of the family after his parents quarrel with his older cowboying brother.

In trying to understand the relationship of family, Jick takes a trip into the mountains with his father that teaches him more than he could have imagined.

Doig portrays not the sleek, self-pitying world of today but tougher times when satisfaction and hard work went hand in hand.

The characters of his family, community and state shine brightly in post-Depression Montana, and the book manages at times to be heartfelt yet humorous with a genuine western feel for language and dialect.

The story takes place in the fictional Two Medicine country of northern Montana and, although the




real town of Dupuyer is on the site of Gros Ventre, there the similarities end, according to Doig.

For those who do not know Montana as well as the rest of us, the explanations of the dust clouds from Montana, harrow rakes, the Dempsey-Gibbons fight or other historical markers are entertaining and educational.

"English Creek" is a tapestry of scenes, past and present, interwoven with the generations of Montanans who live on the edge of weather and land.

"These firstborn always will live in a straddle between the ancestral paths of life and the route of a new land," says Jick of his father, who is forced to regard the land as a federal employee, a forest ranger.

The tension builds with a memorable Fourth of July that aches with humor and nostalgia and ends with a forest fire. All this occurs unwittingly before the storm of World War II, which would change the lives of several generations, as narrator Jick relates years later in the final chapter of the book.

Doig's subject matter, incidentally, is not untouched in Montana.

There are echoes of Pulitzer-Prize winning A.B. Guthrie's older account of the opening of the West and of Mildred Walker's book about a forest fire "Unless the Wind Turns," along with the ruefulness of Great Falls author Dan Cushman's "The Grand and the Glorious" about a Fourth of July celebration and his latest "Rusty Irons," about a similar situation between brothers.

If the book has a fault, it might the exhaustive catalogue of even and places and memories. A blow-by-blow account of the town of Gros Ventre may not be totally necessary for fiction, only for history.

Yet, at the same time, it is Doig's ear and eye for historical detail that creates the strong atmosphere of the densely written 333 pages.

This well-researched book is the cornerstone of a promised trilogy from Doig that will include an earlier and a later book.

Reviewers for "The Washington Post" and "U.S.A. Today" have been highly favorable.

U.S.A. Today said, "Like Mark Twain, he captures the essence of a faded heritage in the voices of the people who lived it; for its language alone, 'English Creek' is simply a national treasure." The Washington Post compared the book to "Kidnapped" and Doig to Robert Louis Stevenson.

Montanans and Americans will happily await Doig's next book in three years.

The only good aspect about this is that it will leave plenty of time for the re-reading of "English Creek" And it deserves as much.

horizon was mountains, peaks, cliff faces; a jagged blue-gray wall with snow summits, like white fur tossed atop. The hem to the mountains was timbered foothills, and down from them began prairie broadness, vast flat benches 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 trees along a creek made a graceful bottom seam across the tremendous land.

"Oh yeah, I see where we are now," Herbert contributed. "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. "It's Canada after that." Then Herbert found the five bumps on the plains Sweetgrass Hills, northeast of us. "Men, unless I'm wrong, those're about seventy-five miles from where we're at." I tried to imagine going up onto one of the hills above the Greenock dock and being able to see to Edinburgh. "Then this over here, Heart Butte." A dark cone that stood near the mountains like a watchtower. Nearer, west along

the line of creek trees, rose a smaller promontory with a tree-dark top. "Don't know what that one is. Another butte of some sort."

Rob and I interrupted our gaping to trade huge grins. All we needed now was Lucas Barclay and his town.

Herbert cleared his throat and gestured toward the cottonwood grove ahead. When we didn't comprehend, he said: "There 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 a 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 several picketed horses and a cook wagon and three or four tents of ancient gray canvas, as if walls and roofs hadn't quite been figured out over there yet.

Rob and I scanned around for more town, but no. This raggletaggle fringe of structures was it 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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gathering ourselves, bedrolls and bags, off we set along the main and only ~~single~~ street of this place Gros Ventre. "Angus," Rob asked low, drew nearer to as we ~~passed~~ the tents and picketed horses, "do they have gypsies in this country?"

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

→

We stepped in and found it to be a saloon. A half dozen partakers were along the bar, three or four others were at a table playing cards. Rob and I had seen cowboys before, in Helena. Or what we thought were. These of Gros Ventre were a used variety, in soiled crimped hats and thick clothing and worn-down boots.

The first of the Medicine Lodge clientele to be aware of us was a stocky, tan-faced man, evidently part Indian. He said something too soft for us to hear to the person beside him, who turned to examine us over a brownish longhorn mustache.

If someone had been counting our blinks--the Indian-looking witness maybe was--they'd have determined that Rob and I were simultaneous in seeing the saloonkeeper. He was alone near one end of the bar, intently leaning down, busy with some chore there beneath the bar. When he glanced up and called, "Step right over, lads, this bunch isn't as bad as they look," there was the Barclay brightness of his cheeks, there was the kind of voice we had not heard since leaving Nethermuir. Lucas had a black beard now with gray in it like streaks of ash. The beard followed his jaw and chin, with his face carefully shaved above

that. And above the face, Lucas had gone bald but the dearth of hair only emphasized the power that was below in that frame of coaly whiskers: blue eyes under heavy dark eyebrows, substantial nose, set mouth, that stropped ruddiness of a Barclay.

Rob let out a breath of relief. Then he grinned a mile and strode to the bar with his hand extended:

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

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

The saloonkeeper himself looked thundrous. That face of might glowered at Rob. At me. At Rob again. The saloonkeeper's back straightened as if an iron rod had been put in his spine, but he kept his forearms out of sight below the bar. Helena tales of bartenders pulling out shotguns to moderate their unruly customers flashed to my mind. But could anyone with eyes think Rob and I were anything like unruly right then?

Finally the saloonkeeper said low and fierce to Rob: "Who to hell are you, to come saying that?"

"Rob. Lucas, man, I'm Rob. Your nephew." bewildered

The ~~knurt~~ saloonkeeper stared at him in a new way. Then: "By Jesus, you are. John's lad ~~Rob~~ Robbie, grown some." The ~~thunder~~ fury was gone from Lucas Barclay's face, but what had happened in its place was no less unsettling. Emotion was unknown ~~to that face~~ there now; ~~it~~ right then that face could have taught stoniness to a rock. compare?

At last Lucas let out a breath. As if that had started ~~his~~ him living ~~life~~ again, ~~knnnn~~ he said calmly to Rob: "You've come late, though, to do any handshaking with me." ~~Then~~ Now Lucas raised his forearms from beneath the bar and laid on the polished wood the two stumps of amputation where his hands had been.

#

I did not know whether to stare or look away, stay or turn tail. There was no known rightness of behavior, just as there was no rightness to whatever had happened to Lucas. Like the clubs of bone and flesh he was exhibiting to us, any justice in life seemed lopped off. Ripped away. A thing this terrible could not have happened. Yet it had.

To this day, the account of Lucas Barclay's mining accident causes my own hands to open and close, open and close, thankful they are whole. It happened to him after the Great Maybe and Helena, when Lucas had moved on to a silver claim called the Fanalulu, east from Augusta. "My partner on that was an old Colorado miner, Johnny Dorgan. This day we were going to blast a lead. I was doing the tamping in, Johnny was behind me ready with the fuse. What made this worse was that I had miner's religion, I always made sure to use a wooden tamp on the powder so there'd be no chance of spark." But this once, the blasting powder somehow did go off. Dorgan had turned to reach for his chewing tobacco in the coat behind him and was knocked sprawling, with quartz splinters in his back. He scrambled to where Lucas had been flung, a burned and bloody mass. The worst was what was left--what was gone--at the ends of Lucas's arms. Dorgan tied a tourniquet on each, then took Lucas by wagon to the Army surgeon at Fort Shaw. "Johnny thought he was delivering a corpse, I suppose. He very near was." Lucas was tended by the Fort Shaw surgeon for months. "I was his pastime, his pet. He made me learn to handle a fork and a glass with these stubs. He said if a man can do that, he can live."

There in the Medicine Lodge, Lucas's maiming on show in front of him, Rob's case of stupefaction was even worse than mine. He brought his hand back to his side and stammered: "Lucas...I...we didn't--"

"Put it past, Rob," his uncle said. "Have a look at these to get used to them. Christ knows, I've had to." Lucas's powerful face turned toward me. "And who's this one?"

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

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

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

Lucas's head moved in a small wince of regret. "I'm sorry to hear so. Down here among the living, we'd better drink to health." Lucas turned from us to the line of glasses along the backbar shelf, grasped one between his stumps, set it in place in front of me, turned and did the same with a glass for a Rob, a third time with a glass for himself. Next he clasped a whiskey bottle the same way and poured an

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. Don't get the idea I'm going to make a habit of free drinks. But it's not just any day when a Barclay arrives to Gros Ventre."

#

Our drink to health became two, then Lucas informed Rob and me he was taking us to home and supper and that he might as well show us the town while we were out and about. The half-breed named Toussaint, assured us, "This Gros Ventre, there never was one like it," and chuckled. The mustached man, who was called Sedge, stepped behind the bar to preside there and Lucas led us 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 odd. Or maybe a dream of myself dreaming this. At any rate, my mind was stuck on Lucas and his maiming, while he was energetically intent on showing us Montana's Athens-to-be. Rob and I did much nodding and tried to mm-humm properly as Lucas tramped us past such sights as Tribble's mercantile, a long low log building. Fain's blacksmith shop. ~~Dantley's livery stable~~ A sizable boarding house operated by C.E. Sedgwick--which was to say, the mustachioed Sedge--and his wife Lila. Near the creek in a grove of cottonwoods, a tiny Catholic church with the bell on an iron stanchion out front. (A circuit-riding priest came through once a month, Lucas noted favorably.) Dantley's livery stable where Herbert the freighter has disembarked us. Next to it the other saloon, Rango's, a twin to the Medicine Lodge except it was fronted with slabs instead of boards. (To our surprise--we hoped Herbert had received the news--we were informed in a low voice by Lucas that the town did have a calico supply and it was here in Rango's. "Two of them," Lucas said with a disapproving shake of his head. "Rango calls them his nieces.")

We also became enlightened about the tents and picketed horses. "That's the Floweree outfit, from down on the Sun River," Lucas told us. "They're ~~taking~~ trailing some steers north. A lot of cattle outfits come through, on their way up to borrow grass ~~for the summer~~."

"Borrow?" echoed Rob.

"From the Blackfeet. The Reservation is out there"--Lucas gestured beyond the creek with one of his stubs; would I ever get used to the

sight of them?--"ten miles or so, and it goes all the way to Canada. Cattle everywhere on it, every summer."

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

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

"Sedgeis hotel," Lucas identified this assembly of lumber and air

for us. "I've put a bit of money into it too, to help him along. The Northern, he's going to call it." Rob and I must have looked blanker than we already were, for Lucas impatiently pointed out that the hotel site was at the north end of town. "You'll see the difference this hotel will make," he asserted. "Sedge and Lila will have room for dozens here."

Thinking of what it had taken for us to reach this speck on the map, I did wonder how dozens at once were going to coincide here. Lucas faced the pair of us as if he'd heard that.

did wonder?

He thrust his stubs into his coat pockets and looked whole and hale again, a bearded prophet of civic tomorrows.

"Rob, Angus. I know Gros Ventre looks like a gypsy camp to you lads. But by Jesus, you ought've seen what a skimpy place it was when I came here three years ago. The Sedgwicks and Rango, the Tibbles and the Fains, they've all settled here since then. If you used your eyes at all on your way here, you saw that there's land and more land, just for the taking. And people will take it. They'll flock in here, one day, and that

more?

day not long from now. The railroad is being built, up north of the Two Medicine River. My belief is we'll see a railroad here, too."

Lucas gazed along the street to the benchland south of us, then past the flagpole to the mountains along the west. "This is rare country," he said. "Just give our Gros Ventre a little time and it'll be a grand town."

"Whom never a town surpasses," came from me, "for honest men and bonnie 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, "as in the middle of our Rob's name?"

"The same," I admitted.

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

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

He led us past the rear of the saloon and across a wide weedy yard toward a two-storey frame house. The house needed paint--this entire town needed that--but it sat comfortably between two fat gray cottonwood trees, like a hearth clock between pewter candlesticks. Lucas told us the house had come with the saloon, he'd bought both from the founder of Gros Ventre, named DeSalis. DeSalis, it seemed, had decided the begetting of Gros Ventre was not a sufficient ~~livelihood~~ source of support and ~~went~~ gone back to Missouri. But we had the luck, Lucas pointed out, that DeSalis also sired five children here and so provided guest space for us.

Lucas stopped at the front porch as if he had suddenly come up against a new fact. "Now you'll meet Nancy," he said.

"Nancy?" I could see that Rob was buoyed by the sight of the ~~handsome~~ considerable house, and now this news that Lucas at least had been fortunate enough to attain a mate in life. "The Mrs.! And doesn't that make her my aunt, now I ask you? Lucas, man, why didn't you ~~say~~ tell--"

Lucas's face went through another change. "Did you hear me say one goddamned thing about being married? Nancy is my--housekeeper."

Rob reddened until he looked like he might ignite. "Lead on,

Lucas," I said in a hurry. "We're anxious to meet Nancy."

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

From the kitchen doorway at the far end of the parlor stepped a young woman. Her dress was ordinary, but that was the only thing. Hair black as a crow's back. A roundish face, the nose a bit broad; not pretty in the usual way but not escaping a second notice, either, and then a third. Dark, dark eyes, perhaps black too. And her skin was ~~[illegible]~~ 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 ~~pop~~ 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 ~~her~~ 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. Nancy, hello. My name is Angus McCaskill." I

forced a grin. "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 Rango," Lucas instructed, "except the 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. Now we need supper. 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. "Don't stand there like the awkward squad," Lucas told us. "Come sit down and tell me news of Nethermuir. If it's managed to have any, that is."

more? Nancy?

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 ~~him~~ Lucas and did the knifework for him before ever touching her own plate--but he could manipulate a fork the way a bear might take it between its paws, and he could spoon sugar ~~[illegible]~~ 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 a book titled Wrinkles and Notions for Every Household, at first one sentence a night and then a paragraph and at last a page at a time. "Not only did I learn Hints for Health, lads--Never lean the back against anything that is cold. Never begin a journey till breakfast has been eaten.--I made myself do that letter that ~~reached~~ found its way to you. Why did I, after these years? To say to Nethermuir that I'm still living a life of my own, I suppose."

We learned that he had earned good money from the Fanalulu mine before the accident, and we knew by this house and its costly furnishings that those were not the last dollars to find their way to Lucas. We learned--at least I did, and it looked like Rob was too--the effort of trying to keep a face under control when a ~~dinner dish was passed~~ meat platter arrived between those bony stubs at the ends of Lucas's sleeves.



~~control when these bony stubs flashed at the ends of Lucas's sleeves.~~

Back in the saloon, after Lucas closed up for the night and decided we needed one more drink to health, we learned about Nancy.

"She came with, when I bought the Medicine Lodge and the house," Lucas stated. "You're trying not to look shocked, but that's the fact of it. Nancy was living with the DeSalises--this all ~~goes~~ goes back a few years--when I bought out old Tom. You met Toussaint Rennie, the halfbreed or whatever arithmetic he is, in here when you came. He's 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 poor bastards them, Blackfeet call that, and by Jesus they did starve, 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 ~~worse~~ 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. They say when ~~the two of~~ he with her, the two of them ~~them~~ rode into town, wrapped in buffalo robes, they had so much snow on them they looked like white bears. When I came up here and ~~That next summer when I~~ bought

the saloon and the house and DeSalis pulled out with his family for Missouri, Nancy--stayed on with me. I need some things done, like these damn buttons and shaving. She needs some place to be. So you see, it's an arrangement that fits us both. 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 town. 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?"

"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 a thing that bad happen?"

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

"Not that, Angus. What I mean, how could it happen to him? Lucas always was 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. Housekeeper, he calls her. She must even have to help him take a pee."

"That's as maybe, but look at all he 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 ~~pick~~ finish that either.

Well, I ~~thought~~ 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 ~~of~~ 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 the bed but his eyes stayed wide open. He said only, "Maybe so, maybe no."

#

And do you know, it did, in the way that any place has more to it than a first look can gather. I went out and around at dawn, and in that opening hour of the day the cottonwoods seemed to stand even taller over ~~the town~~ Gros Ventre. Grave old nurses for a foundling ~~Gros Ventre~~ town. Or at least there in the daybreak, a person had hope that nurture was happening. Early as it was, the flag already was tossing atop



the Sedgwick flagpole. Beyond, the mountains were washed 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 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. 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 something else. And came once in a blizzard to deliver his wife's sister to the house I had just stepped from.

I want to think I would do better with the moment if I had it over again, but all I managed to respond to Toussaint was: "The day goes downhill after dawn, they say."

"I think that, too," replied Toussaint. "You ~~should~~ ought to have been here then." He 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 that morning. We did, do you know. The first flag in Montana the state, it was ours. Here in Gros Ventre."

I thought of the roaring celebration Rob and I ~~had joined~~ had enlisted in in Helena. "How are you so sure this one was the first?"

"We got up early enough. Way before dawn. Sedge woke up me, I woke up Dantley, we woke up everybody. Rango, ~~OO, OO, the OOs,~~ the Tibbles, the Fains, ~~Lucas~~ 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, ~~the same~~ 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 day or so of wheelwork. Rob backed and filled a bit but then said he supposed so, and I was glad, knowing a chance to use his skill would help his mood.

He and I 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 ~~Bentley~~ 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 ~~said~~ answered drily. "Come along, we'll show you what it's like to operate a thirst parlor."

#

Swamping was sweeping, I learned promptly, and when the Medicine Lodge had been broomed out there were glasses to wash, empty bottles to be hauled ~~out~~ away, beer kegs to be wrestled. After Lucas began to see that I could do saloon tasks ~~almost~~ at least half as well with two hands as he could with none, he made strong use of me. Indeed, ~~he left the~~ by the second day I heard from him: "Angus, I've some matters at the bad house. You can preside here till I get back." And that ~~assignment~~ was my elevation into being in charge of the saloon during the quiet hours.

#

MORE

#

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 people, is the definition of optimism.

Some such sally 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 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 banging toward the hotel ~~into~~ 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 ~~asked~~ pressed him about the Quill item.

"People ~~Men~~ 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, two of those would have gone to their reward wherever they were. Cattle thieves. Not a race known for living to old age."

"What happened with them?"

"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, thought I hadn't heard of him yet.

"And man three?"

"That one, now, I do have to say was ill luck. He was shot in an argument over cards."

"What, here?"

"No, in Rango's." Lucas looked at me reproachfully, but I held gaze for gaze with him. After a bit he glanced away. "Well, you're right. It would have happened here if it hadn't been the gambler's week there instead. But after that, Rango and I talked it over and we've given gamblers the bye. Pleasant games among local folk, now."

more?

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 reputation that the two of us then decided to stay a few more weeks? Or in hope of it?

The proposal that I try some land-looking was Rob's. He was in demand with Fain for more wheelwork and with Sedge for the making of the hotel's windowsills and doorframes, so there was sound sense in him earning while I scouted about. "Maybe you'll find a Great Maybe for us," he said, though not within Lucas's hearing. And this is how I got my horseback introduction to the country around Gros Ventre.

Dantley provided me a pinto horse, which made me feel I was riding forth in warpaint, and out I went, for half a day at a time at first. South I did not bother with, for when Rob and I trekked through there in the wake of Herbert's freight wagon we agreed that to dwell amid those treeless benchlands would be like living on a table top.

East, along the creek and its hedge of willow and cottonwood, was more interesting. The land opened into leveler prairie, flattening and fanning into horizon which Lucas's maps showed were incised by rivers, the Marias, the Milk, eventually the Missouri.

Next was north, and red cattle on buff hills. Ranches were already built along a twisty stream called Noon Creek, Walter Williamson's 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 sat on the pinto for a while and gazed down at the Double W ranch buildings, wondering whether Rob and I would ever have a fraction as much roof over us.

(More description to come, of the country east and north of Gros Ventre as Angus looks at it.)

That evening in the Medicine Lodge I mentioned to Lucas that I thought I would ride west the next day, follow the creek from town toward the area under the mountains. Lucas had not said much about my land-looking, maybe on the basis that he thought I ought to see plenty of land before I chose, but now he remarked: "That'll be worth doing. Pay a visit to Ninian Duff while you're about it. His is the first place up the North Fork, there where 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 looks 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 him you're working here in the saloon with me. Ninian and I are not each other's favorite."

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

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

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

#— MORE

#—

Someway, in the midst of all my gawking I began to feel I was being watched. Maybe by someone at either of the homesteads along the creek, but no one was in view. ~~Then~~ I glanced behind me. On a roan horse not fifty feet from my own sat a bearded man. He was loose-made--tall, thin, mostly legs and elbows. And that beard; a ~~long~~ dark-brown ~~sack~~ feedbag of whiskers down to his chest. He also had one of those foreheads you sometimes see on ~~the Scotch people~~ the most Scottish of Scots, a kind of sheer cliff from the eyes up. As if the skull was making itself known under there.

He was regarding me in a blinkless way. I gaped back at the whiskers and forehead, only gradually noticing that his hands were either side of his saddle horn, holding a long stick of some sort across there. Then I realized the 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 all the way to my direction. "You're new to here?" he now inquired.

"As the dew," I admitted, and told him in general about Rob and myself and our homesteading intention. Mister Whiskers made up his mind about me while I was telling this, for when I was done he slid the rifle into its scabbard and announced: "My name is Duff."

So. I could well believe that this man and Lucas would strike sparks off each other, hard against hard.

I introduced myself and we had a more or less handshake, Ninian Duff immediately asked:

"You're from?"

"Nethermuir, in Forfar."

"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~~ 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're not afraid of work?"

"None that I've met yet."

The whiskers of Ninian Duff twitched a bit at that. "Homesteading has some brands of it the rest of the world never heard of. But you'll need to learn that for yourself. If I were you now"--a hypothesis I wasn't at all comfortable with--"I'd have a look there along the top of the creek. You can ~~come to the house for~~ dinner and we'll talk then."

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 ~~12:01.~~ a minute beyond 12 o'clock.

When I rode into Gros Ventre it was nearly suppertime. I felt saddle-tired--cowboys must have a spare pair of legs they put on for riding, I was learning--but 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 North Fork and the future, 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. That might have been accident. 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 mirror.

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 back 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, I think 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 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 go. "Right now I'd better find Lucas for supper. Come along, can't you? I'll even serve you the first drink and keep my thumb out of it."

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

Well, I thought ~~to myself~~ as I crossed the space to the saloon, it's time to stir the blood around in Rob.

That evening in the Medicine Lodge, I managed to put a few extra drinks into myself and Rob followed without really noticing. As matters went on, Lucas gave us a couple of looks, but evidently decided we deserved to celebrate my discovery of ours homesteads-to-be. He ~~put~~ set a bottle on the bar in front of us and went to tend some thirsty ~~Seven Block~~ Double W riders, who had just stormed in. After a bit, I proposed: "Let's go see about the calico situation. Those calico nieces of Rango's." Rob looked surprised, and when he hesitated with an answer, I ~~said~~ pressed: "Haven't you noticed, the bedcovers 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 a joke in return about ~~the~~ our bedding resembling a two-pole tent.

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

#

On our way back from Rango's belles, I was feeling clever about having invented this mind-clearing evening for Rob, and we were both feeling improved for the other reason, so we stopped in front of the hotel framework for contemplation and a further drink or so.

"See now, Angus. This is what a coming town looks like by night."

"Dark," I observed.

"But its day will dawn, 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 right 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 all."

"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 Texican cowboys," I threw in. "Thirteen dozen of them."

Rob was laughing so hard I thought he would topple both of us into the ~~creek~~ dirt of the street. "Angus, Angus, Angus. I tell you, ~~Angus~~ 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, the mountains stood great and near, and as Rob and I rode onto Breed Butte to see the valley, I thought the North Fork looked even more resplendent than I had seen it the day before. Rob too said how picture-pretty a patch of the earth ~~it~~ this truly was. Then he ~~said~~ began:

"I don't 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. But if you want to ride around with me, see for yourself--"

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

I thought my ears were wrong. Then I hoped they were. But the ~~seriousness~~ 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, "on no more money than we have to start with. We're too late in the year to get 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 ~~dumbfounded~~ 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.

"Angus, I'm ~~thinking~~ thinking strong of going in with Fain. There's work aplenty for two in his shop--everything in Montana with a wheel on it can stand repair. He's offered to me, and it'd be a steady earn. And a chance to stay on in Gros Ventre, for a time at least. I'd be nearer to Lucas that way."

"Lucas? Lucas is managing in ~~these~~ this world at least as well as either of us. He has--" It hit me before her name came off my tongue. "Nancy." The mood I broke when I walked in on the two of them the evening before. The way Rob shined at every meal. The change from his first night's distaste for Lucas's domestic arrangement. Rob and Nancy, and maybe Nancy and Rob. Whoever the saint of sanity is, where are you when we ~~really~~ 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, well, then can be the time

to decide about homesteading."

I answered only, "I'll need to think on it, all right." 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. In my mind I looked 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 not seeing at all that under his roof, trouble was about to receive a new meaning.

Rob--Rob unseeing too, not letting himself see; simply putting

himself where it all could not help but happen. 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, it couldn't have been dreamed of by me in thousands of nights. The 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 cuts loose around you are two different things. No one could ever win in the pitting of a Barclay against a Barclay. This I wanted none of. 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 that second afternoon.

"Up to the North Fork already? You and Rob 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."

"Away where? Angus, 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, ~~all of a~~ so sudden?"

"I've had--second thoughts."

"Your first ones were better." Lucas was polishing the bar I had just polished. "By Jesus, I don't know what can have gotten into you and Rob."

"It's only me that's leaving. Rob says he'll stay on with Fain for awhile."

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

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

"I'll maybe go have ~~another~~ another look at that Teton River country the freight wagon came through. 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 said: "Well, at least you can stay on for a bit, can't you?"

My turn to shake a head.

"What's your damned hurry?" Lucas demanded peevishly. "Tired of my hospitality, are you?"

"Lucas--" I sought how to say enough without saying too much--"a welcome shouldn't be worn out, is all."

Lucas stopped wiping the bar and gazed at me. 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, nothing of the sort. I just think I'd better be on my way before--it might."

At last he dropped his gaze. "Christ, I should've seen." He stared down at his stubs on the bar towel. "Any sense I ever had must've gone with my hands."

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

He was wiping the bar again. "I can believe you, 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 needed to be gone from Gros Ventre. I wished it already was.

"Have you told Rob you're leaving?" asked ~~Angus~~ Lucas.

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

"Hold back until tonight, if you would. I'll have Sedge take the saloon for a while and the three of us can have a final supper together. We may as well have peace in the family until then, do you think?"

I thought, peace is not 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 into place. "Turn up your plates and let's begin, Eat the meat and spit the skin," he recited tunefully. "Most likely not Burns, eh, Angus?"

I could see Rob wanting to ask how long an absence "a bit" would be. But he held that in, and cut Lucas's cold beef for him. Lucas fed himself some bites in his bearlike way. Then he began: "I've been thinking what you two might do."

My heart climbed into my throat, for I thought he meant what Rob and Nancy were heading toward. This would teach me to keep my long tongue at home. ~~great trap of a mouth closed~~. But then Lucas went on: "When you lads take up your land, I mean. It can be a hard go at first, homesteading." I caught a didn't-I-say-so look from Rob, but we both stayed quiet, to find out what was on Lucas's mind. "Nobody ever has enough money to start with, and then there's the deciding of what to raise. The North Fork there, that would be too high to grow much of anything but hay, do you think?"

I said yes, that was what I thought, and Rob said nothing.

"So it would have to be livestock there. Cattle, though, you're late to start with this year, with calving already done. Sheep may be the thing. With sheep 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, ~~"The tale I hear is that~~

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?

We finished eating, or in my case gave up on the job, and Lucas swung his head to me and asked: "Angus, would you mind? My pipe."

I fetched the pipe and put it in his mouth. After I lit it and he puffed sufficiently, he used a forearm to push it to the corner of his mouth, then said: "I'll go with you on them."

Neither Rob nor I took his meaning.

"The sheep," Lucas said 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 on: "I can back you a bit on the homestead expenses, too. You'd need to get right to work, Montana winters come before you know it. But spend the rest of spring and the summer up there at it, and the North Fork will have to make room for you."

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

"You're for it, 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.

I knew Lucas had one more sentence to put into place, and it came. "And what do you say to the idea, Angus?"

My mind buzzed like a hive with all this. I tried to sort what this offer meant, what it didn't, what it could or might or may. Lucas, rascal that you knew how to be: this was your way of easing us from your house, of removing Rob from Nancy's vicinity, was it not? Answer, a sure yes. You knew too that the homestead work would so absorb us that Nancy would pass from Rob's mind. Again, yes in high letters.

And would you ever have made your offer if I had not fumbled out the hint to you about your nephew and your woman? Answer, maybe and maybe not. Life goes differently, lads. But the one answer yet to come, the last answer of that evening and of the time that has ensued from it--that answer, Lucas, was what you and I both knew I could not avoid saying, did we not?

And say it I did.

"Yes."