PRIMER FOR BOOK V

WAR AND PEACE

The war of choice being waged by the North, specifically by Lincoln, against the South to preserve the Union, was tearing much of the eastern half of the continent apart. By the middle of 1863, though, active Civil War fighting in the West was finished. Despite the South's continual run of bloody victories under General Robert E. Lee, thrice within a hair's breadth of reaching the periphery of Washington, the battle, siege and later surrender at Vicksburg to Ulysses Grant forever cleaved the Confederacy apart. From that moment the western states and territories were far removed from the war so that, despite many Texans fighting in the east, the far West fell into relative peace with the Californian Indian tribes having been sufficiently subdued. But the larger West to the east of the Pacific slope was populated by many people with many vices and with many conflicting ideas and cultures. Peace there could not be so easily demanded. Ignoring the drunken feuding white men in the violent mining and cattle towns, peace was still years away in arriving to the remote territorial wildernesses of the continent where many Indian tribes were still trying to maintain a grip on their beleaguered land. For the moment, though, a few valleys in the middle of Idaho Territory, nestled in the high peaks of the Northern Rockies, had become havens with the sheer number of arriving whites being the catalyst to peaceful coexistence among some of the local tribes. But not all of them.

ROCKY SLOPE

The Rocky Mountain foothills in Idaho Territory stretched some 300 miles from Johnny Grant's Canadian home south to Colorado Territory, covering an area 50 miles wide or more. The rolling grassy hills finally flattening out to create the Northern Great Plains of eastern Idaho and Dakota Territory. From this land the source of the great Missouri winds its way relentlessly down from 9,000 feet in the mountains, cutting a stout path through rocky and sandy hills, thence going eastward through the canyons and badlands of the Missouri Breaks, until drawing in the Marias and Musselshell rivers and the churning Milk before meeting its greatest tributary, the Yellowstone. It then cuts a brown southern swath right through the middle of Sioux Indian lands until reaching northeastern Kansas and finally turning east toward St. Louis. For river travelers going west it was relentless graft against a current forever spilling into the Atlantic. Heading east on the Missouri was much easier than cutting out across the wide open, arid Dakota plains, especially with bands of Santee Sioux exacting vengeance against settlers, migrants and unprepared Union supply trains. For this reason, the long downward slope to the east was every bit as dangerous as the upward slope westward, where hostility between the white man and the Indian, and Indian against Indian, was fast becoming the inevitable and unrelenting reward for both traveling and arriving.

LE VOYAGEUR

Mountaineers were those hardy men who lived in the mountains for months and years on end trapping the high rivers for beaver and hunting for bear, elk and buffalo in the mountainous meadows and valleys for the big late-18th to early-19th century inland British and American fur companies. The men mostly worked in teams of twenty up to several hundred, scouring Indian lands, building small trading outposts and forts to trade with river travelers and emigrants, as well as Indians, les voyageurs and other mountaineers who would transport the pelts and hides overland on mule trains or use the great natural river system to St. Louis. Les Voyageurs were mostly tough French/ Scots/Canadians who came down the rivers in canoes to trade for pelts and buffalo hides from the Indians and purchase goods from the mountaineers. They would canoe down the tributaries of the great rivers, ending up many times in the wild North America mountainous territories. They could each pack considerable weights for any human and could canoe upstream for days on end at one powerful stroke per second. They were legendary for their physical prowess, and rightly so, as well as being proud pioneering masters of navigating the northern rivers in torrential spring floods and late summer droughts. Little that nature could wield would ever stop their traveling, so relentless were these groups of hardy voyageurs.

PRAIRIE WAR

When, in the summer of 1862, the agents in charge of the narrow strip of land alongside the Minnesota River, that was now the Sioux Reservation, failed to supply the relocated Santee with supplies, as was the agreement for removing them from their hunting grounds, they inadvertently instigated a prolonged Indian War that would make the Apache/Navajo/Kiowa conflict in the southwest look like a police action. Once the Santee Sioux became tired of the oppression by repeated unequal retaliation, and unleashed their long-aggrieved vengeance on quiet emigrant Scandinavian settlers with little experience in Indian fighting, there was but one possible outcome: the army was tasked with protecting the white settlers and ridding the state of yet another Indian Problem. That it was a problem of the white man's making was neither here nor there. The excuse was made and the army was going to use it. Which it did, after initial failure, with unsurprising alacrity; quickly chasing the Santee deep into Dakota Territory to the Missouri, almost into Idaho Territory, and sweeping up an assortment of other innocent Sioux in the process. It was the beginnings of a long bloody war. A war that would eventually severely embarrass a badly led U.S. Army near Rosebud Creek in a set-piece battle that shocked the world, and which was the precursor to an even greater Zulu victory at Isandlwana two and a half years later. Proving that European-led expeditionary armies were no longer invincible to native forces fighting en masse. The Sioux victory had been a long time in coming, however, indeed ever since the 1851 Laramie Treaty. Although to many Sioux and Northern Cheyenne it had begun long before even then.

SULLY'S COLUMN

While the North was engaged in a great Civil War to determine if the Union might live, it still had resources enough to fight on another front, indeed a larger front; that one where the Indian was trying to live. So while a war to maintain the Union and free negro slaves was being fought, another war was being waged to slaughter the Indian who were not slaves and were trying to remain free on their lands. The irony was lost on most people, including the politicians. Apart from the obvious irony, though, the fundamental fact that the North had resources aplenty to fight two wars should have been enough to persuade the people of the South that victory was impossible. The North was fighting this monumental Civil War with one hand behind its back, and could have called upon troops employed in this secondary campaign at any time. Sully's column, made up of volunteer regiments from Nebraska and Iowa, was specifically formed to fight the Indian. To chase the Indian from their longtime Midwest homes and hunting lands and to either kill them or starve them. The latter option always being better because it conveniently absolves personal and government responsibility through indirectness. It is also, often, the more effective. Especially if winter stores are destroyed just prior to winter, such as in September, when the sun becomes weaker, the ground colder, and the nights turn decidedly chilly. It was early September when Sully's Punitive Expedition finally arrived in the campaign area.

WHITESTONE

Many of the battles fought between Sioux Indians and the U.S. Army can be directly attributed to mindless escalations of hostilities by inexperienced subalterns and braid-seeking senior officers, often initially brought about by otherwise inconsequential settler complaints. The Grattan Affair, in 1854, is but one prime example. One that had consequences far beyond the initial escalation and later, inevitable, U.S. Army punishment (retaliation). The peace proposed by the Laramie Treaty, which was designed to protect the Oregon Trail, was always tenuous at best, and when a Mormon complained to the commanding officer at Fort Laramie that a Sioux Indian had stolen his cow, cultural cynicism was about to unleash bloody human misery on a scale not the least aligned to the value of that one lame beast. A beast that Chief Brave Bear unsuccessfully offered to reimburse to avoid any trouble. The result of pig-headed escalation, punishment, and then punitive retaliation, resulted in a typically one-sided battle a year later that killed five troopers and eighty-five Sioux. Many survivors of that battle left their lands to get away from the army's further demands and traveled to the Crow's prime hunting grounds on the Powder River, with obvious results. The Battle of Whitestone Hill nine years later was to have similar results, with 200 Indians killed at a cost of just 20 troopers, but with far worse to come as the war

escalated—as it was always intended. With the gross disparity in casualties it is a wonder that these were classified as battles at all. But perhaps that was to placate an eastern audience that would have asked too many questions if massacre had been the word too often used instead. Because such things are not pleasant to read in a broad sheet over one's morning toast and coffee.

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RED RIVER HUNTERS

Since the early 1800s large groups of Métis had travelled far south of their Canadian border to hunt buffalo twice a year; summer and fall. The buffalo in their own northern lands having been hunted to oblivion or become wise and moved further south into Minnesota and Dakota Territory. Almost the entire Métis village would participate in these well organized hunts, leaving only a few villagers behind to tend their crops. Anywhere from 600 to 1500 men, women and children would set up a well defended camp right in the middle of Sioux and Assiniboine country. The men went out daily to hunt hundreds of buffalo, which would either be cut and laid over stakes to dry into jerky, or ground and mixed with fat and made into bales of Pemmican. All that they didn't need was sold to the Hudson's Bay Company. Buffalo hides they would trade with the American Fur Company for sugar, tea, dry goods, and powder and balls for the next hunt. Little was ever wasted. Each year the hunt would get bigger, with the Métis bringing with them hundreds more of their two wheeled carts to transport the products. Such large hunts, on others' lands, naturally provoked animosity and attacks by Sioux became commonplace. One treaty after another between the groups, to determine hunting boundaries, were made and then broken, whence fighting would frequently break out. But the defensive nature of the Métis camps would often preclude any lasting solution for one side or the other until July 13th, 1851, when, at the Battle of Grand Coteau du Missouri, a Métis camp of 77 horsemen defeated a much larger army of Sioux, said to be 2,000 strong. However, even after Sibley's rout of the Sioux in 1863, skirmishes between Métis and Sioux continued as the once great buffalo herds quickly began to disappear forever, making finding winter provisions all the more difficult for all sides, even those unaffected by the Sioux/Métis conflicts.

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FORT ABERCROMBIE

Initially built in August 1858, on the lowland of an oxbow on the Red River by Lieutenant Colonel John J. Abercrombie, it was soon abandoned, either by threat of flooding or because of Southern secessionist influence in trying to gain access to the emigrant trails and western gold fields. But in 1860 it was reconstructed on higher ground west of the river, and soon became one of the preeminent forts in the nation, serving everyone whose intention was westward: including General Sibley's punitive expeditions, James L. Fisk's expeditionary wagon trains—at the behest of a Union government bent on populating the northwest—as well as a mass of hopeful miners, emigrants and navigators on the river. It was, for a time, the furthest westward fort north of the Platte, manned by militia volunteers protecting the most western settlers against marauding Santee Sioux. A tunnel built from the fort to the river enabled it to endure a six week siege by Sioux Indians as its soldiers protected scores of settlers who had abandoned their homes during the 1862 Uprising. However, initially, the fort was in name only, because it had no stockade or blockhouses, just barracks for enlisted men, quarters for the officers and a commissary, and was surrounded by brush that provided the attacking Sioux adequate cover. Only the accuracy of German trained artillerymen, using three mountain howitzers, saved the fort from being overrun, whence, after numerous casualties, the Sioux preferred, instead, to lay siege and snipe at its inhabitants, especially those going down to the river for water before the tunnel was finished. Further improvisations were called for when ammunition ran low, forcing them to use howitzer canister ammunition as balls for their rifles while waiting for reinforcements and resupply from St. Cloud. It was not until February 1863 that Abercrombie began to resemble a fort, when surrounding trees and brush were finally removed and three blockhouses and stockades built. It remained for another year or more the last semblance of civilization to the emigrants heading out onto the open prairie. Though by then the tracks of previous travelers were ingrained upon the land, ever deeper, heading ever westward.

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ROAD TO POMME DU TERRE

The great Chippewa lands stretching from inside British Canada, south into the northwestern United States and eastern Dakota Territory, were known to be of great worth ever since Major Samuel Woods had surveyed them while on an expedition to locate a fort on the northern Red River. Secretary of the Interior, Thomas Ewing, with approval of President Zachary Taylor, had ordered Woods to meet with the Indians to see if they would be willing to sell their land for white trade and settlement. Once it was made plain the Chippewa were not interested in ceding their land, the U.S. Government, in true colors, changed tack and, instead, attempted to dupe the Chippewa, through treaty, to allow only right of passage across their lands. Only later, in the 1860s, when the Sioux were rebelling, did the government manage to gain right of passage through the Chippewa lands of the Red River Valley. The presence of 300 Union cavalry troops, behind the multiple barrels of a Gatling gun, finally persuaded the Chippewa to grant access through their lands, thinking that was all the Treaty of Old Crossing (1863) demanded. But it was not so; the U.S. Government's long intention was to settle and homestead the land and install a railroad. Part of this deception required the army to barrack soldiers at Fort Abercrombie and farther north at Pembina, each base needing to be patrolled and sustained in equipment and supplies. Such was the purpose of Pomme du Terre in a long line of stations along the road from St. Cloud. It was a road built privately by the Burbank brothers of St. Cloud to gain government contracts, and which would soon to see four coaches a day traveling between St. Paul and Pembina. Yet still not enough to satisfy the demand for all the whites rushing to new gold fields on the Saskatchewan and to settle upon the fertile Chippewa lands.

DAMNED DESERTERS

Between 1861-1863, the Southern armies claimed more victories than the Union. This led to widespread despondency in the North and desertions on a massive scale. Among the three largest northern states alone, 85,000 men deserted. By Christmas 1863 the problem was no longer single desertions, but whole squads, often instigated by letters from home telling of hardship and starvation from having their menfolk away. Many Union men did not wish to kill their fellow man, especially those on their own Southern soil. They were devoutly religious and their priorities went first to God and then to their families, for whom they deserted to care for. Many deserters found were court-martialed and routinely executed to set an example. And yet a few newspapers were already querying the great cleavage of military justice being meted out to the lowly private soldier, with little recourse, to that of the prominent generals with friends in high places who often returned to their splendid homes as heroes, even after belaying orders and refusing to fight, always to the advantage of the enemy, and which is usually labeled as treasonous when accorded to a rank and file soldier with much less influence on the course of battle, and paltry little on the course of a war. While most deserters went home to care for their families a few banded together and became outlaws, living off the wages of lawlessness in desperation on an unforgiving land, unable any longer to perform in a civil society where the rich got steadily richer on the broken bloody backs of hundreds of thousands routinely getting slaughtered on poorly fought battlefields of attrition. Raw patriotism, maintained by the threat of execution for desertion, thrived only so well when soldiers became aware of the disparaging differences between those who presented themselves to fight, and those who never once saw a battlefield. And yet it was the hypocritical latter who were often the most critical of deserters, but rarely so of officers who refused to seek battle in defiance of orders, and who were often lauded for their cautious humanity once safely at home in the company of friends, despite such inaction having caused increased misery, often onto a civilian population, such as occurred in Tennessee at the hands of a rigidly cautious General Don Carlos Buell.

ST. CLOUD, MINNESOTA

Long before St. Cloud was ever named it was a main crossing point over the Mississippi on the Red River Trails used by Métis Red River Hunters as they took hides and furs south to St. Paul to trade for supplies. After Minnesota became a territory in 1849, the Winnebagos, having been moved from their ancestral lands once already and now placed between two warring tribes, the Dakota and Anishinaabe, and not happy about it, were easily persuaded to move again, ceding the area to the whites. Being the most northern part of the navigable Mississippi when in good water, steamboats regularly plied trade between St. Cloud and St. Paul and then south to St. Louis. For a time it was on the far west frontier, but businessmen were adamant to install all the services

WAR AND PEACE

A MANY OF OUR BODIES SHALL NO DOUBT
FIND NATIVE GRAVES; UPON THE WHICH, I TRUST,
SHALL WITNESS LIVE IN BRASS OF THIS DAY'S WORK:
AND THOSE THAT LEAVE THEIR VALIANT BONES IN FRANCE,
DYING LIKE MEN, THOUGH BURIED IN YOUR DUNGHILLS,
THEY SHALL BE FAMED; FOR THERE THE SUN SHALL GREET THEM,
AND DRAW THEIR HONOURS REEKING UP TO HEAVEN;
LEAVING THEIR EARTHLY PARTS TO CHOKE YOUR CLIME,
THE SMELL WHEREOF SHALL BREED A PLAGUE IN FRANCE.

– William Shakespeare, *Henry V*

AS BILL RESTED PEACEFULLY against a freshly budding pine on the edge of a quiet, secluded northern mountain valley, thousands upon thousands of bloated corpses still littered the bloody battlefields of two eastern towns, the names of which would be indelibly scribed to history for eternity; Gettysburg and Vicksburg. Decomposing in that torrid summer heat, the putrid remains of loggers, farmers, clerks, teachers and schoolboys—just briefly soldiers—seeped to fertilize the rich soil on which all efforts had been consecrated to destruction and war. Those thousands of men and boys had found their peace in brutal fashion; holed, ripped and burst asunder like never before by their fellow man's intrinsic ingenuity for weaponry. Now in death, long lines of rotting remains lingered, permeating the rolling grassy hills with a foul putridity on a scale rarely witnessed in all humanity.

Collectively these souls, on both sides, would be remembered. Individually, though, their names, their personalities, likes, dislikes, and their loves, would soon be forgotten. Remaining only as a name carved on a split piece of wood, thence onto granite or marble if a corpse was fortunate and could be gathered intact. A few forthright children might take time to remember their youthful grandfathers, but then all would be forgotten within a generation or two, except for those cold, lonely granite and marble memorials, and the desire of a people never to forget the struggle wrought so savagely among men desperate to maintain the unity of a nation and acquit the long endured hypocrisy that all men were created equal.

News of these great battles had quickly traversed the country by the transcontinental telegraph system. But to those still removed from this new wire, ignorance persisted. To those who did manage to grasp the news, however, especially in the more remote West, few could really comprehend the fullness of the gruesome brutality or well understand the strategic implications of the North's early summer victories against a previously invincible Robert E. Lee.

The war would, of course, go on, with Lee's beaten Army of Northern Virginia able to escape across the raging Potomac despite Lincoln's urging of General Meade to destroy it on the banks of that raging river in flood. Having crossed unmolested, Lee's recovered army would win for the South another victory only ten weeks later at Chickamauga. So again swung the bloody pendulum of war.

But after July 4th, 1863, the war was largely lost to the South thanks to the twin defeats at

Gettysburg and Vicksburg. The latter which split the Confederacy neatly into two, cleaving it apart at the country's great watery artery, the Mississippi. All that was left was to further mortgage the future of the country's youth in a desperate last-ditch effort to enkindle the flame of Southern military honor, in dire hope that elections in the North might yield a more amenable president. But with the South's battlefield successes devoid of any significant tactical decisiveness in exploiting those victories, it had deprived itself of any vital strategic advancement. For the South it had become fighting for fighting's sake, a great dance of death, with the blood of its youth the costly paymaster. For the colored in the North, though, soon to be added to the ranks of the army by tens of thousands, it was the fight for freedom and American citizenship, to be included at last, with respect from all peoples, into the human race. Whether born bastards to black slave mothers and white slave owners or born black without record, it was an historic era of hope, with the blooded soil fertilizing grassy fields the wax on which such hope was sealed. It wasn't the end, but it was a beginning.

Tourists soon arrived to the Gettysburg battlefield to view the great victory and found incomprehensible horror. Acres of the dead and soon dead were strewn like cordwood, many unidentifiable as to their allegiance except for the blood-soaked material remains of their uniforms; the South wore cotton, the North wool. Amputees leant against trees less countless hands, arms, feet and legs, which were piled six feet high next to numerous amputation tables. The screams of soldiers still evident on those tables as worn out doctors cut, sawed and attempted to stitch the remaining pieces of bodies back together to resemble human beings—but forever broken.

Tourists were routinely drafted to service preparing bandages and caring for those battered humans staring off into oblivion minus the physical tools anymore to farm or cut wood, or fingers to scribe words to a chalkboard, wondering why their nonexistent feet hurt or why an illusory hand was freezing cold even in the summer heat.

The stench of rotting flesh in the fields in that humid heat, the swarms of flies delivering a squirming cargo of maggots, the crows and other scavengers plucking at eyeballs, were an horrific sight to behold to those just arrived in elegant city carriages and inclined to be dressed more appropriately for a summer picnic. Lye was spread in such abundance around the fields as to be likened to fallen snow. And to prove to the living world how all men were now created so bloody equal, scores of African Americans were brought to the field to properly bury the discarded scattered remains of the dead, and exhume and rebury the hastily planted rotting battlefield corpses, all while trying to determine which carcass belonged to who and which side. Performed in such awful conditions that would make an ordinary person retch uncontrollably, and yet done with as much controlled dignity as could be afforded the dead in such conditions. Whether it was an honorable job was arguably another matter; depending, no doubt, if one was born into a colored skin and was loading scores of rotting human carcasses onto wagons all day, or in whiter skin looking on from afar, away from the great field of stink.

It took poorer farming families longer to arrive to see where their sons and fathers had fallen, many having been forced to walk. The sad mourning mothers, weeping torrents of tears at the sight of row upon row of roughly dug dirt-mounded graves, foisted the cost of such a terrible enterprise. Although individual families had lost loved ones, perhaps even a father and son in different battles, many of the small eastern towns had lost every single able bodied working man that they possessed, and some who were not so able bodied, or even yet men. All lost in one battle.

"Carnage does not well describe what happened here," a fresh-faced young girl was overheard to say while walking down the long dusty rows of graves, looking, but unable to find, a specific one and wondering whereupon lay her husband of a month. Her nose firmly embedded in a heavily scented white lace handkerchief to mask the stench of death that followed her every step. A stench that would make many of these richer visitors burn their clothes afterwards, lest the stink permeate their prissy homes and remind them of the dreadful deed so accomplished in this place in their name. Even so, the stinking airborne molecules coursed deep into the pores of a person's skin and no single bath would ever alleviate that dreadful reeking odor. In the sleepy towns around the great battlefield it was well known, by the personal stench alone, who had visited this field of destruction and who had not.

IN CONTRAST, ON ANOTHER FIELD FAR removed from battle, further northward where the full heat of summer had not yet arrived, where the grass remained green, late spring flowers were still blooming, and not scorched by cannon or thunder, or littered with the abominate excrement of eastern hostility, a tightly packed hopeful woman rode alone, keen to make amends for her mistaken appreciation of someone's character.

If Mrs. Katie had looked hard across the valley in that evening twilight she might just have spotted the flitting white socks of Bill's horse as he loped alongside the fluttering aspen tree line among the long grass, contouring a single dusty cattle track that ran north to south toward the divide. Equally, if Bill had taken the time to look behind him, he might also have seen the pristine ivory of a freshly laundered summer blouse flapping in the evening breeze. Its owner forcing a faster lope than he, eager to make amends for past failures in explaining herself to a man she barely knew. Mrs. Katie was excited at the prospect, however, and the horse beneath her could sense urgency in her journey. Its large brown eyes could also see another familiar horse across the valley as it passed between shadow and light, and was subtly trying to steer towards it, but the hard right tension on the steel bit in its mouth kept it in check, and its rider oblivious to the sense of her horse and a missed opportunity.

A mere five minutes separated the two riders. During the past six months each had thought of the other and wondered what a new meeting would be like. He, worried that his past actions would not be forgotten. She, worried that, because of her earlier reprove, he might assume his past actions a hindrance to any advancement, and that perhaps he was even beneath her standing. She, after all, was a prominent local businesswoman. For the past few months he had been but a saddle-worn cowboy.

In battle, Bill was stronger than she. In life, though, she was far braver than he could ever be. Yet he held no great fear heading into Indian Territory alone in order to see his son a thousand miles away. Whereas her sole fear in a life remote from battle was to be alone, especially once her looks faded, as they soon would, given the hard life of a woman on the frontier. That fear is what made her brave, and why she forced on her horse to find the fading, flickering light of a campfire. Her eyes straining to see a merest hint of flame, but becoming more concerned as the dark shadowy acres of ground passed beneath her horse's thundering hooves.

Before leaving, Bill had left Grant's big horse tethered near the cabin Roy was building for Cholena, his Indian wife. He had hoped to see Roy again there but the cabin was deserted and horses gone. No matter, though, Bill thought, Roy would return Grant's horse and Spencer rifle, and knew that Grant would understand, knowing that Bill was surely grateful but couldn't face

going into town. It was the man's way. But a way forever mysterious to most women, especially to Mrs. Katie, who thought leaving without a word was a rude and somewhat timid act.

Bill had, however, found some peaceful respite over the past few days. He'd finished his vendetta and was inclined to keep to himself for a while longer, stay away from people and emotion and any trouble the latter might cause him. He didn't want to face Mrs. Katie. Didn't know how he would react, indeed, how she would react, and certainly wasn't seeking any emotional hindrance prior to his journey east. His first priority now was to his son. He would then decide what to do, and whether a woman would be a part of anything he did subsequently. To Bill it wasn't cowardly at all, it was inherently practical given the task ahead of him.

Roy was not surprised to see Bill gone. He was also a little relieved since Bill would never now know about his indiscretion in mentioning Bill's whereabouts to the women in town, and would not have to explain himself to anyone. When Roy returned Grant's horse the following day, Grant understood. "Peut-être la meilleure chose. Bien! Is best, non?" He said, before riding off to check on his new herd of southwest cattle grazing the new bunch grasses above the river, something he'd done each morning for a month.

While the new cattle seemed to be thriving on the lofty valley grass, despite some late thick frosts, and regaining any weight lost during the long winter drive north, some of his other cattle were mysteriously losing condition and looking lethargic. A few had even died. Grant was not overly perturbed, however, since a few losses were expected. More so, though, in spring to early summer when the riper lower valley grasses were especially abundant, green and lush. But those die-downs were due mostly to bloat, easily spotted in a pained struggling bovine before turning its hooves to the sky. Grant's more recent losses were something else entirely. Perhaps even something wrong with the water, Grant thought, to which the southern cattle were obviously immune.

In the meantime Grant would watch and learn, take time from his business day to study his cattle, see where they drank, what they ate and try to determine, as best he could with limited resources, the cause of any further losses in what was his family's livelihood and his fortune. Grant had gambled much of his money on this herd. Better than at the tables perhaps, but with equal risk on occasion. The luck that Grant often failed to find at the gambling tables was fully reversed with his good fortune in having moved his herd of southern cattle during the winter. Although it would be a few years before anyone determined exactly why. Nevertheless, in this instance, Grant was well satisfied with his choice and financial risk had always been a part of his life. He was happy in his work.

Mrs. Katie, however, was in a sour mood this morning, and no soft, tactile sympathetic touch of her shoulder by Charlene, as she walked around pouring steaming hot coffee, was about to lessen her loathing of the common man. The unfortunate guests now seated at her breakfast table were involuntary witnesses to the wrath of her displeasure. There was no conversation, just a desperate desire to eat with haste and distance themselves from the sense of gloom, which inevitably just made the situation worse since the men were unusually uncomplimentary and appeared rude to her. Thus further compounding her anger and belief that the average man was just an ungrateful bastard.

Charlene had even urged little Freddie from the room, sending him on his way with a plateful of biscuits that he ate when back at the livery. "Mrs. Katie's in a bad mood this morning, Swede. Have never seen the likes before," Freddie said.

"Yes lad, best stay away for a while I imagine. I was here when she came back from riding

last night, saw the temper welling up in those blue eyes then and knew something was amiss. Kept to myself after that I did. Freddie, you don't ever want to get within spitting distance of a woman's venom," Swede explained.

"But she's usually so nice and friendly." Freddie said.

"Women have a heap more emotions than you or I. Not for us to question then is it? Surely can't be easy living with all that extra baggage. But she'll get over it, she's a tough sort is our Mrs. Katie."

"I hope so. Her biscuits are fine but I surely miss her gravy."

ROCKY SLOPE

THE INDIAN CHIEFS WERE ASKING THE IMPOSSIBLE. THE HALF OF A CONTINENT [THEY WANTED] COULD NOT BE KEPT AS A BUFFALO PASTURE AND HUNTING GROUND.

– Henry Morton Stanley

BILL HAD LONG AGO DECIDED NOT to travel east via the Missouri. He figured he'd do better with the freedom and protection of a stout horse beneath him rather than be captive on little more than a raft with a handful of unknowns, and with no transport and scant protection if the wooden Mackinaw foundered by having its flat bottom ripped out by flotsam during the spring flood. He'd heard stories of boats being stuck high and dry on a sandbank or holed by the branch of a sunken snag and its passengers being easy pickings for any marauding band of Sioux. Being stuck in a wilderness without a horse did not much appeal to him; for a good horse had saved his sorry hide more often than a rifle, and certainly more often than any damn boat.

The Missouri had been for years the conduit of travel from east to west, and now there were even steamboats powering upstream. But Bill could afford only the westward fare on one of those boats, along with his son on the way back, and would need his horse at the eastern leg of his journey anyway. Plus, he would have been likened to chattel on a cheaper Mackinaw, riding atop stinking buffalo hides and a few raggedy fur pelts that routinely stank something awful, much like a skunk. No, Bill thought, much better for him to be on a horse and choosing his company, rather than be captive to forced company. Besides, he'd heard about an army column under General Sibley that was patrolling the Missouri in western Dakota Territory, to look for the Santee Sioux who had been chased west after raiding Scandinavian settlers in middle Minnesota; killing most of the men and taking their women and children captive, to be used or traded as slaves further west.

Bill was able to follow the Yellowstone most of the way after cutting east across the Indians' common hunting ground on crossing the divide. There were small settlements springing up all across the territory and he rested his horse for a day or two and replenished his supplies when needed. One man riding alone, mostly in Crow territory, was little threat to anyone, and there was nothing gained in risking an attack on one man with few possessions, especially a man who so readily presented a fine new weapon that could fire multiple shots without reloading. The Indians had already heard of this new quick-fire Henry repeating rifle and were respectful of it, although soon they would have them, too.

Thanks to Henry, Bill was left unmolested. A few Indians tried to get close to him, appearing to want to trade, but Bill would have none of it, suspecting a trick, and would swing a wide path to avoid trouble, all the while the Henry on display. When in the company of other white men, however, he kept the Henry securely sheathed in an old piece of stained suede, making it appear like any ordinary rifle. His two Colts, though, one presented in his nice new Mexican holster, usually dissuaded any interest other than normal trading.

At least that's what Bill assumed. But folks tended to leave Bill well alone because of his forthright stance and demeanor. Without realizing, and even without his array of weaponry, he

was radiating an attitude of 'don't dare mess with me,' and his sharp eyes, always moving, with his tall, taut, tough looking build after months in the saddle, finished the impression; that this was no one to trouble, that here was a man who'd been around, seen a bit of life. One who was equally willing, eager even, to escalate an argument and steer it to a gruesome finality to resolve it—Hell, one way or another.

Such a distinct character shift had engulfed Bill after leaving his small Midwest farm all those months ago. Before then his softly spoken words were those of a typical farmer more worried about tilling land, harvesting crops and the health of his beasts. His words bore no hate, just hope that the weather would remain fine for the duration, and that it would rain only once he'd finished tilling and planting, but then not hard enough to flatten his crops and turn his pasture to mud. Being beholden to the weather was the greatest of his worries, but that which he could do nothing to alter. His main worry, apart of that for his family, had been the health of his only horse, and he tended her as if she was a gift from God. For without this fine brute now beneath him he would have been lost on his farm, unable to sufficiently till his land and with no transport into town to trade his crops for food. In every way a pedestrian.

His neighbors had thought him foolish to purchase the one big horse instead of buying two ordinary mules, but one sight of the big bay had sold him and he was now, once again, realizing the fortune of that earlier decision as he put a few miles of hard gallop past her hooves to remove himself from the vicinity of a band of youthful Sioux who had been taking far too much interest in this lone white man—prominent Henry or not. Or maybe it was because of the Henry. It would surely have been a prize for any brash young Sioux out counting coup and vying for instant status among his tribe.

Bill well understood that the youth in any culture can be the problem; he'd been young once too. But youthful Sioux had always owned a special desire to prove themselves to themselves and their elders. Bill had seen it in Minnesota and knew that a spark would ignite an all out war sooner or later. Now, by bad luck, he thought himself on the far western periphery of that fight. Far from being out of Crow country, and having not yet found the friendly Assiniboine, he thought he was being tailed by several well-traveled Sioux. Maybe even the same group that had earlier attacked Captain Stuart in the Bighorns back in early spring when Stuart had been out exploring for gold, killing several of Stuart's party before managing to retreat in all haste. Even wounding the very horse Bill was now astride. Bill sure didn't have to do much urging to keep her going, so maybe the beast had a bad memory of that night. Either way, her strength and speed had removed him from any danger once again. Proving that a good sturdy horse was often more valuable than a weapon, and certainly swifter than a couple of farmyard mules.

The Indians trailing Bill were not Sioux, however, they were Crow, and not out to harass. But from a distance he wasn't about to wager his life on it, given Stuart's recent costly experience.

THE SHOSHONE AND CROW had a somewhat strange and occasionally uneasy friendship with the trappers who'd encroached upon their lands, even before Jedediah Smith and the fur companies arrived to trap and trade with them in the '20s and '30s. While the Crow had no particular reluctance against stealing from these early white trappers, especially stock, they usually only stole to be later rewarded when returning the animals. Knowing there would be no point in harming the trappers if their intention was to seek reward for returning their stock to

them, almost as if a toll for use of their land, which they always considered to be far and away the best, and certainly the most valuable land on the whole continent. In that, they were probably right, because it encompassed the Yellowstone Caldera and periphery, making them very fortunate humans indeed.

Crow Indians were especially proud of their ability to steal the white man's stock; it was inherently cultural to them, much like the local Blackfoot and the southwestern Navajo, Kiowa and Apache. The Crow, however, would rarely kill the white man while stealing from him as they frequently would their Indian neighbors, Sioux and Blackfeet, because of the reward for the return of the animals and the fact that killing or harming the white man would also hinder the ability for further plunder. Neither did they need the packhorse type stock that whites preferred because they always stole smaller, swifter ponies from their neighboring tribe to the east, the Sioux, who they historically hated as much as did the Assiniboine.

The early white trappers had an appreciation for this behavior that later white emigrants did not, explaining that while often being frustrated by the incessant stealing of their stock, they felt that such occurrences were not enough to dissolve a much needed friendship with the Crow. And it was a friendship, albeit a strange and perhaps strained one at times, because many an injured trapper could count on the nursing care of a Crow Indian to save his life and trade stock and food during the long winters.

Another reason early trappers, the true pioneers of the West, especially enjoyed their proximity to the Crow was because Crow women especially enjoyed the company of white men, even though their own men were considered the cleaner of the two. The white men, being stuck in the mountains for months on end without sight of a two-legged female, weren't about to argue against such luck.

To the Crow, their land was better than any other part of the country. They had always been confused when white men appeared in such a wonderful land only to ask the best route west, where the people were considered "poor and dirty, paddled about in canoes and always ate fish," and were forever removing fishbones from their teeth. To the north, in the upper Missouri, the weather was too cold to raise stock and the rivers so muddy that "even their dogs wouldn't drink the water." Everything good about the world was in Crow country. "God had put it in just the right place." He had built the mountains that provided the rivers where beaver were abundant and greened the meadows for countless elk and buffalo. Wood was everywhere plentiful to be cut for habitation, heat and cooking. The Crow were immensely proud of their land as though they had built it themselves, and wanted to share the pleasure of such a land.

But the Sioux thought it a great shame and humiliation that the Crow would share the resources of such a great land with the white eyes. Although the Sioux, being buttressed up against a solid wall of swelling easterners, already had a long history and much experience with the white communities congregating around the Great Lakes. And also a potent motive because that mass of whites were pushing the Sioux forever westward into other tribes' territory by using a strong, recently formed Midwest militia, tasked with protecting the hordes of white emigrants arriving from the eastern states on the steamboats of the Missouri and along the new overland trails. Burgeoning routes that were becoming major thoroughfares, with forks spurring off to every westward direction like a myriad arterial tentacles reaching for hope. The Crow had not yet the experience of quite so many white men. If they had, they might not have been so welcoming and generous to the early pioneering trappers. Their experience, so far, was primarily

with these stalwart mountaineers, who arrived in small numbers, perhaps built a small protective fort, traded with them, providing something of value to both sides, and then floated away down the rivers with their pelts and hides.

However, long being a warring nation, surrounded by enemies on all sides after years of raiding their neighbors, the Crow needed allies, and what better allies than ones that arrived, but did not stay, and brought with them new tools of war to trade. Tools that always provided that edge needed to fight the tribes on its four magnificent borders. Then, when they eventually saw the full scope of the white eastern exodus coming across the plains like ants, and up the rivers on the big steam powered boats like escaping rats, it was too late to change allegiance after years fighting their neighbors.

Many of those poor, destitute, hopeful souls arriving west did not much care, nor wonder, which particular Indians were friendly and which not. To the emigrants they were all the same, and they had, themselves, just come from war torn states where white men were brutally butchering other white men, indeed, quite often their own kin. So they had little compassion left for anyone, let alone for those peoples their ignorance assumed to be nothing but savages.

Many of those traveling west had deserted that eastern war and were now on a mission for survival, and who could blame them; for generals on either side were resorting to human wave tactics against defensive positions with soldiers armed with modern rifles, some of them with new Henry repeating rifle, able to "load on Sunday and shoot all week."

Nothing was going to stop these emigrants from seeking what they knew to be theirs, in their country, on their land. Since that is what had been told them for two decades. Drilled into them ever since President Polk took office in 1845: Manifest Destiny. Indeed, Lincoln, while talking of emancipation in an effort to bolster public opinion over his war and the calamitous losses his northern armies were enduring, was also talking of releasing the western territories to homesteading and planning for a great emigrant road westward. So, to the thousands of soldiers now involved in the fighting, those having fought already, and those escaping from it, it was damnation to any longstanding Indian inhabitants who got in their way. After all, wasn't that what an army was for, to protect them? Wasn't this what they had struggled for: freedom and unionism; living freely in a country united from coast to coast?

Westward Expansion was like the incoming tide. The first few waves wreaked destruction quickly, violently and decisively on the indigenous population in the east before forcing survivors westward and before the much greater white-tipped waves following behind. Once the first wave of whites reached the Rockies, those remaining in the east began to feel sympathetic to the plight of the Indians they had slaughtered—especially with the arrival of the photograph and seeing the fascinating images of western Indians in newspapers as they ate breakfast. They, therefore, using typical white hypocrisy, expected the western people to treat their Indians differently than they had done. It was little coincidence, either, that most of those trading guns with the Indians were easterners, who soon retreated back east once their guns had been sold in such numbers as to give the Indians an advantage even over the U.S. Army of the time. It was a classic example of 'do as we say, not as we have done.' Even though it was those in the east who had forced the first waves of Indians westward, even well before the infamous Trail of Tears as a result of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which prescribed that the Five Civilized Tribes in the south be removed from their land, and which was the catalyst for the long Indian Wars that followed.

BILL REINED HIS HORSE to a steady lope once the rolling hills and distance hid the Indians from view. She was frothing freely at the mouth and Bill's face and chest were covered with the white-balled spittle of a horse's relentless effort. Sweat poured forth from her flanks as she fought for breath within the constraints of a tightly bound cinch and beneath the weight on her back. Bill's weaponry alone accounted for a full twenty-five pounds. His food, water, waterproof jacket and oil bedroll easily added another thirty, not to mention his heavy leather saddle and other accoutrements. That this horse of his could outrun a pack of lightly equipped Indian ponies was reason enough not to have taken a long cold boat trip down the Missouri with a tightly packed crowd of grizzled whiskey-breathing trappers. The freedom availed him by having a stout horse, alone, and in the fresh air, with the western sun warm on his back, was an advantage he would never witness on a boat.

There comes a moment when traveling east from the Rockies when the land opens up and a rider can seemingly see all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. No longer are there mountains to obscure the view, no sprawling carpets of fir and pine, just the subtle curvature of the earth as the endless plains come fully into view. The distinct horizon obscured only by a bluish gray dusty haze as it stretches as far as the eye can see from north to south.

On the last tall promontories people have long stood in awe at what they have traveled or what is yet to come. Small individual dead-end tracks sneak up to isolated high points where horses have stood to allow their seated riders to ponder and stare at the expanse of the mid-continent before them. When found on an early summer morning, with a crisp chill still in the air, a cup of steaming coffee to warm hands and invigorate the brittle innards, and with that vast orange orb barely broaching the lip of the world under a brockled sky, such long views of the breaks and draws of the northern plains are often found sorely lacking sufficient description and pure silence mostly endures.

"Damn!" Bill said. "I've seen it countless times up and down this country and am still amazed by it."

But while the beauty of the terrain was readily apparent in the early morning sunlight, Bill had no great desire to hurry into it. He was happy resting against a rock, sitting till the sun rose. Traveling east into the low blinding sun invited a trap and he wasn't about to risk riding into the midst of that party of Indians he'd seen the day before. So he ate on a dried biscuit while his horse reached the full length of its tether to nibble at a few blades of greener grass as the sun rose a few more inches above the horizon ahead of them.

A few miles east of this overlook marked the end of the slope. From then on it was flatness all the way to Minnesota. All the long way across Dakota, over several wide rivers, vast grasslands, across the low lying land of the Red River Valley and into the forested, bug-infested lake regions, where it seemed as if there was more water than dirt and more bugs than air. Once on his way, his horse was happy not to be climbing a slope or easing herself down a rocky incline. Her stride now steady and relaxed, almost sleepwalking as her hooves lifted little eddies of dust into the dry air.

The weather was perfect for traveling; not yet too hot and not chilly enough at night to warrant a large campfire that might attract unwanted attention. The grass was still fresh from the spring thaw and his horse dipped her head now and again to steal the sweet tops of the bunch grasses. The soft soil was easy on her feet and the fresh water of the creeks abundant as it meandered towards the great Yellowstone to the east, itself now heading north by east to merge

with the Missouri, a part of the continent's great arterial lifeblood.

On reaching the big yellow river he swung northward to head into Assiniboine country and eventually Fort Union, just below the Canadian border. Grant had advised him on such a direction soon after leaving new Mexico while being stuck together in a blizzard, explaining that being a Métis, Grant was historically aligned more closely with the Assiniboine than any of the closer tribes around his home in the Deer Lodge, closer even than his wives' tribes. They had all been part of the great Iron Confederacy along with the Cree. The tribes aligning together to fight their common enemies, mostly the Sioux, who the Assiniboine had separated from during the mid-17th century when they left Minnesota, the Sioux then calling them the Hohe, or rebels.

The term Iron Confederacy is said to have emerged from the metal tools, weapons, guns and cooking utensils that the whites of the Hudson's Bay Company traded with it for buffalo hides and beaver pelts. The Cree and Assiniboine together acted as middle-men, protecting their monopolistic trading rights with the whites against their other neighboring tribes: the Crow and especially the Blackfoot, who were more inclined to just knock on the head any white trapper rather than trade with them and entice more whites onto their lands. Lands on which buffalo were already becoming scarce due to the tribes being forever pushed westward and then all competing for the same herd and hindering the beasts emigration onto the great northern plains. Due to the decline of the buffalo, the Iron Confederacy was also passing its epoch, but for now it was still safer to be a white man in the Cree-Assiniboine lands than in that of the Blackfoot or Sioux. Grant's snowstorm advice had been well taken, and might just have saved Bill's life, because the Santee Sioux were being chased west by General Sibley's army and whites were being attacked at each opportunity. By following the natural more southern route east, Bill would have likely run smack into the Sioux on reaching the far bank of the Missouri.

As it was, once leaving the flatlands and heading north along the big yellow, he remained unmolested and safely reached a ferry crossing on the Missouri just west of the big bend and confluence of the Yellowstone by Fort Union, a major trading post built in 1828 by Kenneth McKenzie, leader of the Upper Missouri Outfit, a part of the famed American Fur Company set up to compete against the dominance of the British owned Hudson's Bay Company. Despite the demise of the American Fur Company in 1847, the fort was still doing business with the tribes aligned to the Iron Confederacy as well as the Lakota Sioux, including the Blackfeet, when Bill arrived.

Trading at the fort was mutually beneficial to the Indian tribes and its white owners and so peace was maintained. Its location, on the northern bank of the Missouri amongst friendly Indians, enabled it to gain peaceful and almost legendary trading prominence among the seven Upper Missouri tribes. For it was at this fort that Indians could find goods from all over the world; clothing, beads, cooking utensils and, of course, plentiful stocks of the all-important guns, powder and ammunition for hunting, warring and protection.

Outside of the tall timber walls of the fort proper, the myriad wickiups, tents and hovels of the Indians and trappers resembled a long disappeared Rendezvous of the early 19th century. Trading was quick and raucous among competing groups and once trade finished the card games and drinking commenced, with fights and tussles all part of an evening's testosterone charged festivities.

These were all strong powerful men, used to paddling heavily loaded canoes upstream for days and weeks on end, climbing over the rugged western mountains in snow, rain and blistering

heat, and before lumbering their valuable cargo back to a fort. A few years of such work could ruin an ordinary man's body. Old age often arrives quick in such occupations, and for the French voyageurs who came south, down from Canada, carrying vast weights and canoeing long distances over bone jarring rapids, a broken down, decrepit body was commonplace. Two ninety-pound bundles was the minimum weight to be a voyageur, many carried four, remarkably some six to eight. A brief moment of machismo could pop a hernia and in the wilderness that could kill a man. So after working hard they played hard; gambled, drank, and fornicated with any woman they could find and often returned home poorer and diseased for their effort.

The collision of cultures in one place and, for the most part, all getting along, was a complete mystery to Bill. While he bore no particular gripe against any man, he knew that many of these men most certainly had gripes against the others, including him just for being white and being there. So what force kept the uneasy peace? It certainly wasn't the whiskey, which, despite Kenneth McKenzie's long broken still, and the illegality of selling liquor to Indians, was still traveling up river in great quantity by the look of it.

Bill figured that short of fighting to gain weapons it was easier and safer for Indians to trade for them, and then unleash their anger once away from the confines of the fort with the guns just traded. The fort was, then, a necessary and very temporary middle ground of compromise between competing entities. The primary winners were clearly the owners of the American Fur Company. The losers could quite easily be the emigrants on the southern trails being killed by the white man's weapons being traded at the fort so that pretty pale eastern women could enjoy the last expensive hurrah of a waning fur trade.

To Bill, the delicately maintained peace was easy to see. But so was the great hypocrisy in it all. He felt no safer knowing some of the new weapons he saw leave the fort would be heading eastward, in the very direction he would soon be going. And it was not made the slightest bit easier to accept when he saw bottles of cheap rotgut whiskey accompanying those weapons from the fort, also eastward.

He vowed to stay only as long as necessary. To take care of his horse, replenish his supplies, keep his Henry rifle under wraps, and leave soonest. But without haste that might alert others to his real intentions. Either way, he knew he had arrived to a different world than the one just left. The Rocky slope was quickly changing; a few tribes were becoming desperate and were willing to fight that final struggle. Yet in their sorrowful hearts they knew it to be futile, except for the honor earned along the way before seeking a resting place alongside ancestors on a high wooden scaffold. To them it was a fight that needed to be fought. It was as simple as that.

It was also a fight for revenge against a white man's army that could never, or was never inclined to, discern the subtle differences between the tribes, often eagerly attacking the wrong tribe for the indiscretions and depredations of another. Sitting Bull saw visions that the peaceful coexistence of his people, since they were not yet involved in the Dakota War, would not last much longer despite his tribe's visits to the white man's Fort Union. His visions, inferred to have been borne to him on the winds of a dream, were not wrong.

The extended eastern Rocky slope would be torn apart by war for years to come, much the same as in the southwest and against the same soldiers and for the same reason; treaties between Indians and Whites were routinely being broken despite promises made by the Great White Chief himself. But it was the errant chastisement, where Indian women and children were slaughtered alongside their warrior braves, that caused the most anger and heartache, and many

innocents on both sides paid the price for that foolhardiness.

Sitting Bull's vision was more likely foresight and imagination, but it was easier explained to the elders and youth of the tribe as a vision. But what really is the difference? Sitting Bull's experienced eyes saw what his mind wanted him to see, and the result was true, bloody and true. The wild northern plains on which he lived would erupt in turmoil as a tidal wave of emigrants moved across them to mine and settle the western lands. The Sioux, just like the Apache, would use the loss of regular troops to the Civil War to vent anger, retake control of their lands, and attempt to halt the white influx, rebelling against a government for its broken treaties and fighting a poorly armed, poorly trained volunteer force incapable of quelling a suppressed people over a vast terrain stretching from the flatlands of Minnesota and Wisconsin to the mountains of Idaho Territory.

LE VOYAGEUR

I COULD CARRY, PADDLE, WALK, CLIMB AND SING WITH ANY MAN I EVER KNEW. NO MOUNTAIN WAS TOO ROUGH OR TOO HIGH. NO RIVER WAS TOO LONG OR TOO RAPID AND NO PACKS TOO HEAVY. FIFTY SONGS COULD I SING. I HAD EIGHT INDIAN WIVES AND SIX SLEDGING DOGS AND SPENT ALL MY MONEY ON PLEASURE ALONE. WERE I YOUNG AGAIN, I WOULD SPEND MY LIFE THE SAME WAY OVER. THERE IS NO LIFE SO FREE AND HAPPY AS A VOYAGEUR'S LIFE.

– Jack Baptiste

MOST OF THOSE ENCAMPED AROUND the fort were in their mid- to late-twenties, experienced mountaineers to a man, having been in the territory for years. Or they were the hardy French voyageurs come down from Canada to trade with the Indians and transport their wares back north up the rivers. But the once booming turn of the century fur business, employing hundreds of trappers, had long since waned with trapped out creeks and rivers. The European desire for fine American fur was brought to an abrupt halt once the middle-England cotton mills started to crank out ready to wear clothes for everyone.

Outside of the West the world was changing. Industrialization had taken hold and Britain was leading the world. Globalization was revitalizing trade, obscene fortunes were being made in cotton, and India, Britain's Jewel in the Crown, was supplying Europe with as much raw cotton as it needed. The beleaguered South, though, was left out of the cotton trade and industry due to the Union blockade. Steamships were now shipping European cotton, both ways: to the burgeoning factories in England and to consumers across the globe. The powerful industrial nations of Europe were gearing up for an explosion in infrastructure engineering. With machine tools and steel improving by the week anything was seen as possible. For those not buried under mounds of cotton in the mills, not breathing to sickness the delicate floating white dust, those not chipping away at walls in the coal mines, not hacking up thick black mucous from their ruined lungs, and those not being butchered or torn asunder on the eastern battlefields, this was an optimistic time. There was much money to be made on the broken backs and arthritic hands of the working poor and destitute.

In the warring eastern states this industrialization was already much in evident thanks to the incentive of a brutal war. Both sides had already made obsolete all the navies of the western world by attacking each other with ironclad ships. New weapons arrived at an ever-increasing rate. So fast that military quartermasters were often blinded by their complexity and flatly refused to purchase them. It was easier to win the war via flesh than metal. But it was a war not only of flesh and blood but of industry and steel, and the North had a preponderant advantage in industry. Flesh was but the cruel fuel.

But still, in the West, the only way to travel was by river or by wagon. There were railways in the east and trains servicing the war effort on both sides for the first time in warfare, but there were no rails laid west of the Mississippi, and certainly none anywhere near the great overland trails of the Great Plains. To those heading west, traveling was like it had been for generations of humans. Indeed, little had changed since Alexander and Xerxes, or when Vikings had first explored the farthest edge of the Atlantic. Traveling was slow, laborious, relentless, and forever filled with

danger. Only the river steamboats brought this great new industrialization west, but they had only arrived on the Missouri in the last year or two.

Traveling, then, was tough, and only the toughest deemed to do it. It was grueling enough even for those with stout bodies well used to hard physical endurance. Men, for it was mostly men who rode on mules and horses, suffered greatly if in the saddle for too many arduous years. The women riding in wagons fared little better when traveling along bone-jarring, rock-strewn dusty trails fraught with danger. A pregnant woman was very likely to lose her unborn child with the rough motion of the iron-rimmed wheels of a wagon thumping and rolling over roadless terrain.

Young people often looked far beyond their years. Especially after spending months on the northern prairie in sweltering heat, under a scorching sun, with little water and the stress of hostiles. Those active trappers might have all been young and spry once, but now they were mostly stove in; knees gone from stumbling down rocky inclines under great weights, backs stooped and crooked, hips slowly fracturing from eating a meat only diet. Those smart enough to know that their bodies were permanently worn down headed to the towns, others died up in the mountains, alone mostly, and often slowly if they could not reach the rifle dropped as their hip broke. Their bodies recycled in the great decay of life, by a hungry bear or mountain lion, then by a coyote before buzzards polished the bones clean. The sun then bleaching them brittle before turning to dust.

But many an old trapper would have preferred that end to one retired in a town, remembering the mountains but unable to reach them or perhaps even to see them. With little money put by for an old age he never envisaged he would have to resort to menial work, begging or stealing or, worse, charity. And no one, not a single soul knowing this hardy man, never knowing of his accomplishments, assuming his stories that of a drunk a braggart and a liar. Being now drunk to dull the pain in hope that the end might arrive quicker. It would certainly help the poor fella forget the misery of his life in town, as compared to the outstanding brilliance of the high range, the excitement, the freedom, the camaraderie, the uncluttered life of a trapper and a mountaineer in the, oh, so very brief peak of life.

BILL SUSPECTED HE SAW SUCH A MAN sleeping off his latest hangover down by the river. Not yet a man wasting away in a town, but surely a man engulfed in his own pain in a time without remedial painkillers. Whenever he stirred, pain was etched across his face; lines where most men never even had cheeks, a forehead like a pre-historic tidal beach with eyes having squinted for so long the ridges looked like battle scars—or perhaps they were.

In half a fetal position, to offset some intestinal discomfort, no doubt, with a long musket tucked between his legs and an overcoat of heavy buffalo hide having slipped from his back, he appeared closer to death than life, and on occasion shivered uncontrollably, likely from water fever. Bill rose from his position, picked up his sheathed rifle and walked over to the shivering form. He stood for a moment to see if the man would stir, but no, and then bent to lift the buffalo hide and replace it fully over the poor fellow.

But despite the man's predicament, Bill sensed something. In amongst all those lines and scars, hidden underneath all that obvious pain, there seemed to endure a peaceful pleasure. The eyes, while closed, appeared to smile when Bill placed the hide around him, and in that subtle weak grin there was the hint of old laughter, from long ago, a decade of more of laughter. It was etched, like ragged old crow's feet, alongside the ridges of pain as he slept.

Bill looked to see if anyone was watching. Maybe someone knew who this man might be. But no one was interested, not even those in close proximity. Perhaps they were all drunk, though more likely just unconcerned for someone else's troubles since they each had enough of their own. Satisfied that he could do little more, Bill walked back to his spot and sat against the log again, placing his rifle across his lap, his hat low, and feigning an uncaring attitude toward anything and everything around him. In a while his head grew heavy and he napped. But it was a light sleep in which he was aware of his surroundings; a movement would stir him, a mule snorting oat dust into a feed sack flung him headlong into a different memory, and footsteps always, always, sent a surge of blood through his veins.

"Z'at was a nice z'ing you did for old Jack," a voice said.

Bill looked up to see the massive form of a voyageur standing over him. Thighs like cedars and shoulders as broad as the Missouri.

"'E 'as been sick a little while, z'ese last few days."

"You know that old boy?" Bill asked.

"Oui. I 'ave known 'im for years… Jack Baptiste. 'E is one of z'e old mountaineers, one of z'e last and one of z'e best. 'E goes back to Jedediah Smi'z, fought on z'e Umpqua River with Jedediah against z'e Rees in '29. Not many survived z'at attack." The man said, looking over at the lump struggling beneath the heavy hide. "Is 'ard sometimes to get your brea'zs under z'e 'eavy buffalo robe."

"Nice to know that old boy has some friends around after all. I was getting a mite worried for him… Looks as if he's been through a few struggles in his long life." Bill said. "But come near the end by the look of him… all feverish."

"Oui, a few z'ings I'd say. 'E is close finished now z'ough. On 'is way back east, to visit 'is sister in Minnesota. Not so sure 'e is going to make it z'ough. 'E caught z'e water fever a few days ago."

"Damn, I thought the chewing tobacco stopped that problem?"

"Normally, oui. But 'e is worn out I z'ink. 'E 'as become, 'ow you say… susceptible? 'E took an arrow for me, a mon'z ago."

"I guess that would do it. Is he eating?" Bill asked.

"Non. 'E 'as not kept anyz'ing inside for days."

"Has he tried to kill it with whiskey?"

"Non, neiz'er z'at, too. But maybe we try, non? Come, we get some. Je m'appelle Claude."

"Bill, Bill Durban." Bill said, getting yanked halfway off his feet by Claude's great hands. "Damn, I want you on my side," Bill said, looking up at the behemoth man and rubbing his arm.

"Oui! Z'ey all say z'at, but I cannot fight. Z'e Americans, z'ey call me 'Lumpy' because I always am getting punched… too slow you see. Big, oui, but slow. Is why Jack got 'urt. 'E saw z'e Indian draw 'is bow on me, and fired at 'im instead of z'e one drawing a bow on 'im. So I carried 'im out. Carrying I can do… fighting not so well. Poor Jack."

"Good to know. So you hold onto 'em, I'll hit 'em." Bill said.

"Bien! But first we get some medicine for old Jack, z'en maybe we fight, eh?"

"Not if I can help it," Bill said. "I was joking. I'm not looking for that kind of fun… or trouble. I'm leaving tomorrow."

"On z'e boat?" Claude asked.

"Nope, sticking to dry land… heading east," Bill said.

"Ah, well, z'e rest of us are going norz', back to Canada. Z'is is why I am worrying about poor Jack. Z'e boat is not good for 'im, not safe for 'im in 'is condition."

"Can't see him managing a trail ride either," Bill said.

"You would be surprised. Z'at old goat is one tough fighter." Claude said, explaining how Jack had managed to get this far on the back of a mule without complaining, all the way from the Flathead.

Returning to Jack with a few bottles of labeled whiskey, but which took more of the appearance of rotgut, the two coaxed a few gulps down the old man's throat before he knew what was about.

"Get off'a me yer great big frog eating bastard!" Jack roared, before choking on the thick liquid's bite. "Jesus wept! What're yer trying to do to me now, poison me or bleeding drown me?"

"I thought he was French, too?" Bill asked, looking at Claude.

"Who? Jack? Non, my friend, 'e is all English… or all Scottish perhaps. 'E is called after a French sailor, z'ough, who poked 'is English… or Scottish, moz'er in Jamaica to get back at z'e English for taking away 'is ship."

"Do I bleeding sound like a frog?" Jack said. "And who the hell are yer anyway… and trying to kill me with rat poison?"

"Z'is is Bill, Jack. 'E 'elped you when you was sleeping."

"While I was bleeding sleeping? He must've been stealing from me then… where's my stash?" Jack said.

"Is 'ere Jack, just where you left it." Claude said, prying the old man's head back again to get another swig out of the bottle.

"Jesus wept! What the hell are yer damn doing to me?" Jack said, trying unsuccessfully to break free of Claude's iron grip.

"Is good for you. Maybe it cures z'e fever, kills z'e bugs inside you." Claude said.

By now, Jack was beginning to feel the warming effects of the liquor and becoming a little more amenable. He had shed the heavy buffalo hide and was rubbing his aching knees. Claude passed him a wad of tobacco to chew on, which seemed to be hard work on his old teeth. But after a while the putrid juices were either getting spat out or dribbling down the inside of his gullet. Bill figured that this evil concoction would either kill him or cure him. Either way, Jack had given up the fight and was resigned to the medicinal approach of his old compatriot.

Without having eaten for a few days the whiskey was taking effect quickly, but they each figured their methodology more viable on an empty stomach. None of it was going to help poor Jack's old wounds, though, nor his normal pains, but it might just help him get back into the saddle and stay there longer than a mile without having to release his rotting bowels. On the miserable journey from the Flathead, Jack had needed to cut a hole in the seat of his pants to ease the flow, for it was taking too long to both undo his britches and rearrange his underwear. In any other circumstance his friends would have ridiculed him, but in this instance they didn't, and because of that he suspected that there must be something a little more seriously wrong with him. He'd had varieties of unstoppable diarrhea before, but never hot sweats and uncontrollable shivering to accompany it. And because his body was so engaged in misery all his older aches and pains emerged to haunt him in turn.

It wasn't the best of times for the old man and he was quietly wondering if he would ever make it back to his sister in Minnesota. She had sent a message to Fort Union a month prior

explaining her predicament, in that she didn't think she had long to live either, and needed to know what to do with their parents little property. It had been twenty years since they'd heard from each other and Jack was still undecided as to whether to go, likely knowing he'd never make it back to the mountains. So this trip would be his last. It would be the end of the journey, the finality of life, finished in a little nothing town far removed from the land, the rivers, and the mountains he loved, and far away from the good friends he had buried all over the West. It was hard to be resigned to finality after a life of adventure on a frontier still not tamed. At times Jack wondered if it might not be better for him to die here, on the green banks of the Missouri in summertime. Then Claude, this big Canadian galoot, came over to disturb him, just as he was getting comfortable with the notion of ending the misery and dying right here.

"Z'is is not 'ow 'e usually is. Jack is one of 'z'e 'ardest men I 'ave ever come across. 'E must really be very sick." Claude said.

"Maybe poor old Jack is just tired. Tired of losing everything he's ever enjoyed in life. I've seen it before. You must have too. It's normal if he's lived a good life; seeing the end coming with a body that can no longer keep up with the demands of a brain." Bill said. "I can help get him home if you like. I'm heading off east tomorrow, for Minnesota. Does he have a horse?"

"A mule. 'E is more 'appy on a mule. We traded 'im one from the Blackfeet. Is a good animal, z'ough. Z'ey probably stole it from another trapper z'ey killed." Claude explained. "If you will 'elp 'im you are a good man. Mais, 'e deserves it z'ough. A good man 'e is aussi. Oui, it would be a good z'ing you do."

It was a kindness that Jack needed and deserved, but it was one hard to accept from a total stranger. Jack had always been the one to help others, rarely needing it himself, except for lately. It was another sign that his life was changing, and not for the better.

Bill, if he was completely honest, did not want the company of anyone, let alone someone who might need attention. But he knew he had to help, knew that he wouldn't be able to live with himself if something happened to the old man because he'd done nothing. But also because he quite liked the cantankerous old bastard. The big Canadian was right: Jack deserved help, from wherever it came, for it was men such as he who had opened the West to everyone else; forging the trails, scouting the high mountains, mapping the rivers, and parlaying with the tribes to give the pioneers leeway when first crossing their western lands. Without these hardy voyageurs and rugged mountaineers, the West would have longer remained a wild and dangerous place. No place for the emigrants now making their way up the Missouri on the big paddle steamers. It would still be a desolate place, rough for anyone not long accustomed to the great outdoors. It was also many of these early mountaineers who turned their expertise to ranching, which inevitably fed the emigrants, and it was largely they who ultimately determined where new towns would be built to best make use of water, forage and timber.

Bill was sure glad he had a horse and Jack his mule. The river was no place for either of them, certainly not paddling upstream for days on end, sometimes through hostile Indian Territory with little protection. It might have been safe once, before the Indians had use of powder and far-reaching lead. But now they could hit a man with relative ease, even while paddling near the far bank. Nope, thought Bill, he'd take his chances on land under a swift horse any day.

"Yup," said Bill. "I'll be happy to take Jack along with me."

"Bien! You 'ave eased my mind. We leave tomorrow aussi… 'eading upstream. Beaucoup paddling before we get 'ome." Claude said, offering his huge hand to Bill.

"Another time maybe." Bill said.

"Oui, another time." Claude said, before walking away to load the rest of his packs onto a great long canoe, big enough for twelve men and all their cargo. When he was finished he rolled his broad shoulders back to say his final goodbyes to Jack. They had known each other for many years off and on. Been through scrapes with Indians and bears that'd make most men turn white and rigid. Seen land that most folks could but dream of. Rode rivers in flood and drought, down swirling rapids filled with boulders large enough to crush a canoe to smithereens. When they parted, both knowing it'd be for the last time, Jack looked hard at Claude and said, "See you in the spring yer big bastard."

"Oui! See you in spring Jack. May you stay warm z'is winter."