

## On Historical Fiction

Martin Ainsley

Rain hisses like swinging snakes and gutters gurgle. Orito watches a vein pulsating in Yayoi's throat. *The belly craves food, she thinks, the tongue craves water, the heart craves love, and the mind craves stories.* It is stories, she believes, that make life in the House of Sisters tolerable, stories in all their forms: the gifts' letters, tittle-tattle, recollections, and tall tales like Hatsune's singing skull. She thinks of myths of gods, of Izanami and Izanagi, of Buddha and Jesus, and perhaps the Goddess of Mount Shiranui, and wonders whether the same principle is not at work. Orito pictures the human mind as a loom that weaves disparate threads of belief, memory, and narrative into an entity whose common name is Self, and which sometimes calls itself Perception.

—David Mitchell, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*

Readers of the excerpt from *Askew* that accompanies this short essay will already know that *Askew* is a historical novel, set in the latter half of the 19th century, about the lives of two English immigrants to British Columbia, Thomas George Askew and Isabel Julia Curtis. What may not be obvious from reading the fiction alone is that these characters are not my original creations but are based on the lives of real people who bore those names. In broad outline, the lives of my characters parallels what can be gleaned from archival sources about the lives of the real George Askew and Isabel Curtis (who eventually married and settled in Chemainus, BC, I should add), but the characters themselves, their motives, voices, and interactions are, properly speaking, fictional. Many years ago, as an undergraduate student of history, I first encountered—and wrote a paper, subsequently published in the *BC Historical News*, about—the English prospector and colonist George Askew. That essay considered Askew as a case study in the application of the rhetoric and ethics of the Victorian ideal of the “self-made man.” At the time, I was both intrigued and frustrated with the way my research kept branching out, as I discovered more and more interesting facts and characters, most of which I could not use to advance my thesis. The necessity of a rigorous focus in this context was also a kind of wilful blindness to other currents. At the same time, I found myself teasing at the gaps in the available evidence—the connections that are implied but not explicit, connections that suggested themselves, but for which I could find no archival support. And finally, there was simply the fact that details of many people's lives are hidden from history; the records that exist are

necessarily incomplete and selective, a problem that historians of women, First Nations, and the lower classes have long struggled with.

For example, the experience of Askew's wife, Isabel, intrigued me, but her story was beyond the scope of my thesis. I was interested in the way Askew's decisions and experiences were informed by, and showed up the faults in, the contemporary myth of the "self-made man." As such, my thesis had no room for much consideration of Mrs. Askew. Moreover, the archival sources privilege George Askew over his wife, as he was the public face of the family; at least until his death, it is his name that appears on government documents; and it is his correspondence—with his mentor, Rev. C.E. Searle, and with the colonial authorities over myriad business and public concerns—that survives. Isabel's voice in the records is weak. Yet she survived his death by nearly twenty years, raising their eight children alone, embarking on many business ventures of her own, and coping with the machinations of her overbearing mother and avaricious stepfather. Like countless other individuals, she left little direct evidence of her life. What was her experience like? I had a strong sense that the particular lives of these people were much more interesting than the generalizations of my thesis—or any academic study—could possibly show.

I nursed the notion of turning the Askews into fiction for a very long time. I had been drawn to history as a way of understanding the lived experience of people in other times and places, but history—and rightly so—moves from the specific to the general. Its subject is people, whereas fiction is about persons. As Aristotle noted, history tells us what has happened, fiction (or poetry<sup>1</sup>) what might happen:

For this reason poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history. Poetry tends to express universals, and history particulars. The *universal* is the kind of speech or action which is consonant with a person of a given kind in accordance with probability or necessity; this is what poetry aims at, even though it applies individual names. The particular is the actions or experiences of (e.g.) Alcibiades. (51a-b)

What is the nature, then, of historical fiction? How does it combine (or confound) the roles of the poet and the historian, and how is it different or similar in intent, focus, and function from academic history? I chose narrative fiction as the way to tell this story, so why is this choice preferable to an academic approach? Work like this—at the interstices between fiction and history—inevitably raises questions of the author's intentions; of the relation between fiction and fact; of the nature and purpose of research itself; and even of the nature and purpose of fictional narrative.

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle would, of course, find no meaningful distinction between our terms for poet, playwright, and novelist; "poetry" here is read to subsume all forms of literary artistry.

Reading and writing fiction is a form of play. Fiction allows its readers to think about the experience of others, but in a self-reflexive manner. Fiction allows empathy and identification. We pretend to read about others (pretend because it is fiction), but we ultimately read (and write) fiction to learn about ourselves. The illusion of fiction—the way it seems real even as we know it is not—allows us to imagine ourselves as others, to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes, to experience and examine (hopefully) our emotional and intellectual response to the characters’ actions. And occasionally, too, fiction succeeds by failing; our lack of comprehension across boundaries of culture, for example, highlights the diversity of human experience. Fiction is also a way to interrogate ideas, to let characters play out in the “real world” (imaginatively conceived) the conflicts and ramifications of different ideas, ideologies, and world-views.

History is much more direct and explicit in its concerns. History seldom concerns itself with counterfactuals—*What might have happened if . . . ?*—except as an occasionally useful thought experiment. Ideas that do not have long-term traction, actions that are not taken, fall away from the essential questions of what happened and why. But for individuals, decisions that are not taken are often of as much importance as those that are. History as lived by its participants is always contingent, never determined. Possibilities are endless. Historical fiction is a way to understand history from the inside out. It is necessarily an imaginative exercise, but it is no less complex or rigorous than academic study for that. Research into the historical reality—the facts of what happened—provides the context; fiction provides the content—the what-might-have-happened.

Colonial British Columbia is a nexus of such possibilities. From the perspective of this time and place, nothing about the future in which we now live could be taken for granted. Geopolitically, the competing claims of imperial Britain and the westward-expanding United States shadowed over the legitimate claims of the region’s First Nations, and European immigrants still comprised a minority of the people living in the colonial territories. Successful colonization (whatever that might mean for the European powers) was far from assured. The U.S. was sliding toward a civil war, the outcome of which was impossible to predict, while the pressures of a massive influx of gold-seeking immigrants—mostly young, mostly male—from eastern Canada and the United States, England, Europe and elsewhere threatened to upend diplomatic equilibrium between the political powers. Economically, European nations and their colonies, present and former, were beginning a massive shift from agrarian to industrial bases, with concomitant shifts in structures of class and social standing. In the domestic sphere, new understandings of masculinity and femininity, and the role of the family, were challenging the old. Yet within the network of all these powerful, overarching, and long-term forces, ordinary men and women lived their lives day to day. It is here that the novelist’s true powers—of observation, description, characterization—come into play to illuminate the ways that these impersonal forces affect the individuals that are the novel’s proper subject.

If history's primary fidelity is to society, fiction's is to the individual. History is the story we tell about ourselves as a group, and often, there are competing versions of this story. Fiction is the story of the individual, but its "factual" equivalent is not memoir. Memoir is about a particular individual. Fiction pretends to be, in order that the reader can imaginatively empathize with the fiction's subject, in a way that is potentially deeper than our identification with the putatively "real" subject of memoir. Each of us, while we read, becomes the characters of fiction.

The serious writer of historical fiction, then, must serve two masters. While writing *Alias Grace*, Atwood (1998) set herself some guidelines:

when there was a solid fact, I could not alter it; . . . every major element in the book had to be suggested by something in the writing about Grace and her times, however dubious such writing might be. (p. 1515)

It is not necessary to be as faithful to extant written records as this (indeed, it is not adherence to the "facts" that distinguishes Atwood's novel, but the way she exploits discrepancies in the records), but there must be fidelity to the historical reality to the extent that history is our common inheritance. The past is like the foundation of a house, long since buried beneath the ground and the bricks of the present's structure. It is undeniably there, but our access to it is indirect and informed by what we know of the structure that has been built upon it. Sometimes this obligation to the past entails overt or covert questioning of the ways history is recorded, preserved, and interpreted—interrogating the relationship between history and the past—just as *Alias Grace* questions the very sources upon which it is based; or as George Bowering in *Burning Water* worries about whose histories are preserved and whose obfuscated by time and circumstance. This fidelity is not to the "facts" themselves, but to the "meta-fact" that the *past* is real, but that *history* is merely a *story about* what "really" happened; we can only know the past through the stories we tell about it.

To the individual, the novelist has the obligation to invent characters that are humanly true—true to their historical context, as the novelist understands it; and true to what we know of ourselves, as humans. A character's actions must be believable and understandable—or, if incomprehensible, plausibly so—even if those actions do not accord with what may be historically "true;" and if they do not accord with historical facts, the writer must justify the divergence by appealing to a higher truth of artistic understanding. To return to the Askews, then, my decision to pursue my concerns through fiction rather than history arises from a line of questioning that moves from the historian's to the novelist's. In the historian's work, the evidence surrounding these individuals is marshalled to answer the question of "What did people do and why?" The Askews are examples of the general case. In my essay, George Askew is a type of the colonist. But this general question changed for me into "What did *these specific people* do and why?" which, as it turned out, was another way of asking "What would I have done?"

And this is the novelist's question; the novelist's task is to make this also the reader's question. I want the reader of my novel to consider not only, or not even primarily, what really happened, but to imagine what it would have been like to have been these characters in this historical context. This enlargement of the reader's imagination, then, is the goal of the novelist. Historical fiction must enlighten and entertain by commanding an understanding of history and historiography and marshalling this understanding with a commensurate grasp of human nature, not to mention style and skill as a storyteller. The novelist must offer a fresh perspective on the historical subject, a new way to consider the past. Without stories to connect us, we become increasingly atomized and isolated, from one another and from our shared pasts. Fiction allows us a way to reconnect to a larger self, to see ourselves in history, and history in ourselves.

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**Askew**  
a novel  
by  
Martin Ainsley

*O how unlike the place from whence they fell!*

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost* I.75

1862—*Town of Victoria, Vancouver's Island Colony*

Having passed yet another dreary night within the steaming, stinking bowels of the *Tynemouth*, anchored in Esquimalt Lagoon, our destination just around the corner, as it were, I reflected with some sympathy upon the plight of Mr. Milton's rebel angels. Early this morning, the good Reverend Scott and his henchwomen roused us out of our narrow berths and the Marines in their blues and whites herded us aboard the Royal Navy gunboat *Forward*. One hundred and six days we had weltered in our tiny cabins on the *Tynemouth*, out from Devon, breathing foul air and eating fouler food. On two occasions, crew members attempted mutiny, and several deserted the ship in San Francisco. One of the girls, Elizabeth Buchanan, died before we reached the Falkland Islands, of a mysterious ailment. Before we had even reached the open sea, a gale on the Channel had killed much of the livestock; the sounds of that storm—the desperate scrabbling of hooves and the terrible slamming of flesh and bone on the deck over our heads, and the uncanny screams of the pigs as they were swept into the ocean—still haunt my sleep.

Now, leaning over the gunwales of this sleek craft, bristling with cannon and crinoline, we hove into view of the little city. The prospect before us promised little better. We passed a channel between two points of land. To the left of us, to my horror and delight, was an Indian Village. A few Indians sat outside their long, low wooden houses wrapped in blankets; and smoke rose from their fires, but I could discern little activity. As the harbour widened before us, we were greeted by the dismal pickets of the Hudson's Bay Company's Fort; which was besieged on either side by a motley assortment of low brick and wood structures, and before and aft by the mirrored forests of ship's masts and living trees. The ships moored in the harbour flew flags of many nations and companies, providing some little colour. Darkly forested ruddy hills rolled away behind the town, and a plain, though substantial, whitewashed church surveyed the scene from a hilltop. Shards of sunlight glinted off the water, but the clear sky was belied by a bitter cold wind which lashed the *Forward* and stung our skin through our clothes. I held my shawl tight at my throat, my palm pressed against the little silver brooch Father had given me. Mother held my other hand in hers.

"It's rather down-at-heel for a *New World*," I muttered; but Mother snapped, "Hush, child!" and when I saw the hard set to her jaw, I bit my cheek to keep from weeping.

Of the three-hundred or so passengers aboard, some sixty of us were unmarried women, most little more than girls—many who had been raised in orphanages. In later years, I would hear the *Tynemouth* referred to as a "bride-ship," which conjures to my mind a festive image: a gangplank

festooned with bunting; debutantes debarking into a phalanx of cravated bachelors—young men of good manners and better prospects, waiting to tender their proposals to the new immigrants with cut flowers; and a brass band playing beside. It is true that some of us entertained such romantic fantasies—not least of whom were both my mother and myself—but if the brutal three months at sea had not properly disabused us of such notions, the present reality finished the job.

Later, Mother would style herself as a “chaperone to the girls” but she was no more chaperone than I was. Since Father had died, leaving us a balance sheet with more debt than assets, she had scraped to make ends meet for us. When she read the advertisement the Female Middle Class Emigration Society had placed to solicit emigrants to the colony, she applied immediately. It was said that there was a surplus of single women in England—half a million—competing for husbands and domestic work. To me, she was categorical that I was not of an age to marry, although in public, she acted as though she sought only to find a suitable husband for her daughter. Perhaps she thought it indecorous for a widow to be seen seeking remarriage, but at thirty-five, she still stood a chance herself, and I believe she hoped to find a member of the colonial gentry, or at least a respectable gold miner, to take us both in. I have never been able to shake the impression that I was, in some way, her bait.

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The afternoon previous, when the ship lay anchored at Esquimalt, several gentlemen had been paddled up in a longboat; our welcoming committee; local dignitaries, including some newspapermen. The other passengers had already disembarked, leaving only those of us who had sailed under the protection of the Columbia Emigration Society (which included also the Female Middle Class Emigration Society women). On this rare occasion, we were allowed on the deck for the benefit of these eminent gentlemen. So we stood, filthy and weakened, under a drizzle of rain. The cold wind stung the salt boils on my skin, the result of having had only seawater with which to bathe and wash our clothes. Despite what I am sure was our lacklustre appearance, the men seemed pleased and talked amiably with Capt. Hellyer and Rev. Scott. Mrs. Robb—deputed to Rev. Scott as the Emigration Society’s matron chaperone—stood gamely in their midst with her mouth gaping, always on the verge of some profundity, but was mostly ignored by the Victoria gentlemen. This offered some amusement to us girls, who had suffered these long weeks under the yoke of Mrs. Robb. Mother, playing the chaperone, also stood near Mrs. Robb and the men.

All of a sudden, there was a commotion behind us. Near the rail, my friend Lydia Pratt called out, “There’s another boat coming alongside!”

Several of the younger girls ran back to see what was going on. Below, on the water, another longboat was being paddled by five more gentlemen: three clergymen and two more journalists, to judge from appearances. When they espied the row of girls leaning across the rail of the ship, the men in the boat grinned and waved to us. One attempted to stand, but unsettled the boat and was thrown onto his backside. We all laughed at that, and a few of the girls waved coquettishly at the men.

Now the gentlemen on the ship began to notice, and came to the rail. One of the newspapermen asked Capt. Hellyer whether he knew any of the men on the boat, and advised him

to warn them off. The captain hailed the boat, but could elicit no clear response from the men, who now kept their heads low under their hats.

“I know at least one of those men,” the newspaperman said. “A thoroughgoing scoundrel and a philanderer, that one, dressed as a preacher. With a wife and children at home.” After some more discussion, the captain came to share the view that the men were imposters and ordered them away from his ship. The boatmen hesitated while several girls and a few of the welcoming party entreated Capt. Hellyer to let them come on board, but the captain roared for silence and repeated the order. To enforce it, he summoned the police officer who had been assigned to guard the mutineers under arrest below decks. The captain had put down two mutinies already, and was not willing to brook a third.

“What a pity,” said Lydia as the crestfallen young men paddled away. Lydia Pratt was a dark-haired waif who said she was sixteen, but she was smaller than I, and more credulous. “They seemed like respectable men.”

“And unmarried,” another girl put in.

“How would you know that?” I said. “Because their wives were not on the boat with them? Were you not listening? That one’s not even a minister. I’m sure they are all in disguise.”

“But why?” said Lydia.

“Perhaps they wanted a private viewing, as it were. Haven’t you noticed the way the men already on the ship are ogling us? We’ll be auctioned off to the highest bidder when they get us ashore.”

“Disgusting!” said Lydia, meaning me, and not the men, but I just laughed at her.

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Before we left the *Tynemouth* this morning, word came that two of the girls had been placed in service in the mainland colony, and they and some of their friends became hysterical, screaming and weeping at the prospect of their imminent separation. Two girls fainted and had to be revived by Dr. Chipp. Now, as we entered the harbour, a paddlewheeler came up alongside the *Forward* and the two bound for New Westminster were helped across, amid a fresh round of tears and clinging embraces.

Meanwhile, hundreds of men lined up along the shores, waving their hats in the air and cheering. The paddlewheeler continued past us and out of the harbour; I waved half-heartedly to the girls, and a horrible feeling of nausea came over me as they were carried away. Lydia stood near me, and her face was ashen beneath her bonnet. “Izzy,” she said. “Let us promise not to lose each other here, come what may.” I held her hand tightly and gave her my word that we would remain friends in our new home. Mother leaned on the rails, waving to the men on the beaches.

Rather than steaming into the city wharves beneath the HBCo. Fort, the gunboat tacked to starboard, where some strange, wooden buildings of Oriental appearance stood apart—later, I discovered these were the Colonial Offices and Legislative Council buildings—and near to them was the Marine Barracks, where we were to be temporarily housed. Here, the mob was thickest; hundreds of men crowded around a short pier. There were a few women and some children here and there, and some China-men, standing back from the crowd, but mostly there were men. Several seemed to have invested in new articles of clothing—shiny cravats and spotless hats—for the

occasion, but taken together they presented an altogether scruffy and uncouth sight. Shouts and cheers went up from the crowd as the *Forward* dropped anchor.

Two sailors paddled a longboat alongside, and several girls were helped to climb down a ladder into the boat, while policemen and marines worked to push the throng back from the pier. The longboat carried the girls to the dock, then returned to the *Forward* and, in this way, we all disembarked within the span of thirty or forty minutes. On the pier, we lined up two by two, unsteady on the solid surface, until the whole cargo stood in neat formation. The officers had cordoned a path up to the largest of the Legislature buildings, and Rev. Scott and Mrs. Robb ushered us through. The mob pressed against the valiant officers, and I heard several coarse remarks directed toward us. In fairly short order, the cordon began to break against the surging crowd. Terrified, I screamed and pulled away from my mother's grip and, with many of the other girls, began to run. Hoots and hard laughter rippled around as some girls tripped, and rough hands grazed my own and tugged at my skirts. I nearly fell over Lydia, who knelt in the mud ahead of me. I grabbed her arm and hoisted her up beside me.

At that moment, the report of a gun-shot from one of the marine's pistols, fired into the air, quelled the ardour of the mob, and the officers, with the assistance of some other gentlemen and less-hardened members of the gathering, managed to restore some order to the procession. As the men were pushed back, one of their number burst through and accosted Sophia Shaw, one of the London orphans of Lydia's group. He was a young man, but unshaven, dirty and shabbily dressed, as though he had walked directly from the diggings to be here. He snatched his cap from his head and on the spot loudly proposed marriage to poor little Sophia. Now the crowd fell silent. Well, filthy and tired-looking as he was, the young man must have stopped *en route*, at least long enough to visit an assayer or to play a hand of cards in a saloon, because the prospector reached into his pocket and pulled out a bundle of bank notes, which he thrust into Sophia's hands. "Here is two thousand dollars," he announced, "and if you accept me, I want you should use it to buy yourself a new dress and things for our wedding." Rev. Scott stood wringing his hands and tears stained his cheeks, though my own eyes remained dry. Sophia smiled at the man and tucked the banknotes into her skirts, while the crowd roared its approval. One of the bluecoats, grinning, gently drew the miner back into the crowd. As he was pulled back, the miner shouted above the din, "What's your name, Miss?" Sophia told him, and he yelled, "My name's Charles Poiner." She seemed well pleased, but I was glad that it hadn't been me to whom he'd tendered his proposal.

This absurd incident had a salutary effect on the mob, for the press slackened, and we were allowed to make our way, yet under its gawking gaze, to an array of washtubs which had been set up on the lawns of the Council Chambers. The welcoming committee had there provided fresh water and clean soap. Steam rolled invitingly from the tubs into the brisk air. Many of the girls availed themselves of it, the poorer ones in particular, who had not any clean changes of clothes in their baggage. I had no clean dress to wear, myself, but held back with Mother, out of modesty. Lydia, though, was covered all down her front with mud; until her fall, this had been her cleanest dress, so she begged me to go with her up to the tubs. Mother, sensing as I did, I'm sure, that we might not soon have another opportunity, nodded her approval, and so we each took some salt-caked garments from our bundles to wash. All together at the tubs, we nearly forgot that we were in the

middle of an arena, and we had a gay time splashing in the warm, soft water. We removed our bonnets and washed our faces and necks and our hair. Salt and dirt streamed from our arms, and the water in the tubs soon turned quite brown, but it was infinitely better than the pails of cold seawater to which we had become accustomed. What a sight we must have been. Daughters of the Empire, giggling like schoolgirls, wet and shivering in the cold September air while a mob of indigent miners looked on. It came to me that yesterday was my birthday. This washing was my first unalloyed pleasure since stepping on board the *Tynemouth* three months and a world away.

1862—*Chemainus District, Vancouver's Island Colony*

“Damn!” Waist-deep in the rushing creek, Askew steadied himself against the fallen log upon which, a moment before, he had been walking. He was in need of a bath, but this dunking was not what he had in mind. He shrugged his shoulders to reposition the knapsack on his back and found a purchase for his walking staff among the slippery rocks underfoot. Gingerly, braced between the log and his staff, he shuffled across the stream and pulled himself up onto the bank. Luckily, the weather was mild for late October, so he wasn’t in any immediate danger of exposure, but he would need to get out of these wet clothes and make camp soon. He must be close to the lake. On the theory that “The better parte of valour is discretion,” Askew decided to change into dry breeches before carrying on.

He had been put ashore by H.M.S. *Forward* at Horse Shoe Bay two days ago, where he was allowed to inspect Mr. Elliot’s new saw-mill. He met Elliot in Victoria a week earlier, and was impressed by Elliot’s claims for his mill and the land in the Chemainus Valley. The mill had recently produced its first shipment of lumber. Elliot had said he hired two Cowichans to operate the mill in his absence, but when the two Marines had put Askew ashore on the beach, no one, Indian or otherwise, was in evidence. The mill was idle and no uncut timber to be seen, except what was still standing, although there were neat booms of cut spars already floating in the bay. Elliot had said nothing about his supply of timber, so Askew supposed that the erstwhile millers were also loggers and that they had roamed off to fall trees for the mill. For what he could see, it was a creditable operation. The building was solid, and housed a simple up-and-down mill powered by a wooden over-shot water wheel. The stream that turned the wheel came out of the forest in a fall of some fifty feet, so the wheel was an immense forty-five feet in diameter. Askew had it in mind to build something of the sort himself, and he’d also heard rumours of mineral wealth in the District, so had arranged to spend a few days exploring the area on his own. He registered a claim in the Cariboo this autumn, and was in Victoria to spend the winter before returning to the goldfields in the spring; he felt certain that he would spend no more than one or two seasons more in the interior. With some cash saved, he’d settle on the coast and set up something with a steadier return than gold prospecting.

For the last two days, Askew had wandered about five miles up the coast from the mill, coming to a small lagoon near the entrance to Oyster Harbour. Elliot had told him—and this was confirmed by some of the Marines on the *Forward*—that the stream that let out at this lagoon had its headwaters at a lake a couple of miles inland, which was where he was now heading. Assuming his informants were correct, he ought to be able to camp at the lake tonight. Tomorrow, he would make

his way back to the coast, where he expected to meet the *Forward* at Oyster Harbour the day following, on its return from patrolling up the Strait.

Askew was pulling his braces over his shoulders when a branch cracked behind him. He turned to face an Indian pointing a rifle at his midsection. He was tall and broad-shouldered and wore leather breeches and a dirty woollen sweater. A fur hat sat atop his head, but his feet were bare. He looked Askew up and down and plainly noted Askew's own rifle on the ground, tied to his knapsack. Askew had learned a few words of Chinook, and attempted a greeting. "*Klahonyya*."

The man didn't respond. Askew had never had any dealings with the Cowichan before. They were reputed a warlike tribe, and had been causing trouble with white settlers in the District of late. "*Kah monitch?*"—Where's the deer?—Askew asked with a smile and a nod to the Indian's rifle. The Indian laughed at this, and made eye contact, but did not lower the gun. "*Mamook kinchauch wawa?*" Askew asked.

"Ah-ha. *Un petit pen*."

"May I speak English?"

"Ah-ha. Speak your name."

"Askew."

"I am Qualkanent. You are going somewhere with this haversack?" He gave Askew's pack a nudge with a big, brown, callused toe.

"I am travelling through this district. I was told I would find a lake at the headwaters of this stream."

Qualkanent squatted down, still pointing at Askew's belly with the gun, and examined a shoot of salal, although Askew did not know any of its names. Qualkanent said, "Yes, there is a small lake upstream, not much farther. Do you intend to camp there?"

"I do."

"Then tomorrow, Askew, you will leave."

"Yes. I have . . . I have made arrangements to be picked up at Oyster Harbour."

Qualkanent frowned at this and waved in the direction of the ocean. "I come from *Sickameen*,"—Askew sensed that he had offended the Indian, somehow—"as you have not. My village is across the 'bay of oysters,' as you say. *Nesika kwanesum*. You understand this, *n'est-ce pas?* Make your camp at the lake tonight. I entreat you to be gone tomorrow. Until then you are under my aegis; after tomorrow—" He lowered the rifle and stalked off into the bush.

Arrogant fellow. Askew sensed that he was lucky to be alive. He reached for his knapsack and felt a little unsteady, so he sat on a mossy rock and filled a pipe. The Indian said the lake wasn't far. He should be able to spare fifteen minutes for a smoke and to gather his nerves. Massive cedars and firs stretched up into an amorphous canopy within which unseen ravens screamed to be heard over the roar of the tumbling creek. He could see by the angle of light through the trees that it was still early afternoon, although here it was perpetual twilight. He was still awed by the superfluency of this forest. These trees were larger still than those in the interior, though those dwarfed anything that had grown in Bedfordshire in living memory; and the undergrowth was dense and often impassable, choked with giant sword ferns and devil's club and salal and nettles and snowberry and blackberry.

He must remember to write to Rev. Searle before he set out for the Cariboo. Indeed, if he posted a letter promptly when he returned to Victoria, by a slim chance he might receive a reply before he started up the Fraser in the spring.

Word in the Colony was that the recent smallpox epidemic had had little impact on the Cowichans—although it ravaged the Songhees and Saanich and the mainland Salishans, as well as many of the northern tribes. This latter fact, in particular, seemed to have emboldened the Cowichans in their resistance to English settlement in their territories, as they needed no longer fear counterpoising forays from their diminished northern rivals. Perhaps the sight of the *Forward* anchored in the harbour would dampen their spirits, Askew thought.

His pipe finished, Askew felt quite refreshed. He heaved his knapsack onto his back, picked up his walking staff, and continued upstream along the rough path. Another hour of hiking brought him to the opening of the forest canopy that signalled the nearness of the lake. When he broke out of the bush, he was nearly in the water; the slopes were fairly steep, for the most part, and the forest grew right down to the water line. He decided to follow the northern bank, as the slope appeared to lessen toward the middle of the lake, and the south aspect would afford him direct sunlight, while it lasted. A few hundred yards from the stream outlet, he found a relatively level and treeless beach. A circle of fire-stones indicated that others had used this campsite before him. He turned out his pack and arranged his supplies before pitching his canvas tent. The tent was well-worn but clean and tight, modelled after Sibley's patent, though smaller; in design it approximated the tee-pee of the Plains Indians, with a telescoping central pole and a smoke-hole at the peak so he could build a small fire within, if need be. He purchased it in San Francisco three years ago, and had been diligent in keeping it well oiled and patched. It served him well.

Askew gathered some armfuls of damp wood and stoked a small, crackling fire to heat a tin of beans and brew some coffee. The silent sun slid behind the mountains.

\* \* \*

He dreams of mountains. He stands on the highest summit and can see clearly in all directions. Forested hills and stony peaks roll away toward the sea. They are in movement, undulating like the ocean waves, mountains and hills rising and falling around him. Heavy black clouds gather, tumbling and shivering with light. He is adrift in this trackless place, tossed in a storm that racks the very land. He falls to his knees, grapples with the bare rock for a grip. The clouds lower, quaking, and he sees they are filled with ravens. The ravens descend, screaming, and begin to devour him, tearing the flesh from his bones.

\* \* \*

He shuddered awake, cold and damp with sweat. A tendril of smoke whispered from the embers of last night's fire. The morning sun glowed dimly through the walls of his tent and voices echoed without. One shouted, "Ho, there! You in the tent, get the fuck out here!"

He pulled on his boots and seized his rifle and went outside in his underwear. Five men stood at the edge of the forest, surveying his campsite. It's crowded as King's Cross in this wood, he thought. To a man, they were dirty and savage-looking fellows. One was Indian; the other four white. All were armed, and three of them aimed rifles at him. By Christ! Twice in as many days. Shaken by his dream and indignant at the intrusion, Askew thundered at them.

“Who are you? What do you want here?”

The men laughed. “We could ask the same of you,” one of them answered. This one did not have a gun pulled on Askew, but stood erect with his arms folded across his chest.

“I am George Askew, and I have every right to camp here. I do not take it well to face the muzzles of three rifles before I have dressed or breakfasted. Kindly put up your guns, or I will not hesitate to shoot my own.”

The white man who had spoken regarded him for a moment, then motioned the others to put up their rifles. “Our business here is none of yours,” he said. “But our business ain’t murder, either. Pack up your camp, here, and make your way back to where you come from, and there won’t be any trouble.”

“This is outrageous! You have no right—” Askew began.

“Out here, we got five rights to your one, Mr. Askew—it’s Askew, is it? Pack it up and move along.”

Askew was relieved to sense that he wouldn’t be murdered in cold blood this morning, but his boiled all the more. “We’ll see about this, gentlemen. However savage this country, there are laws in force. I will be on my way, but you may rest assured the Colonial Office will hear about this bloody effrontery.” He nearly tore the canvas as he stormed into his tent to finish dressing.

When he reemerged, he saw that the men had removed themselves some distance down the trail and were now idling at a point nearer the narrow outlet of the lake. His rage tempered to ironic spite, Askew took his time making and eating his breakfast and only then broke his camp with his usual meticulous routine. A rustle in the brush behind him turned his head, and, for an instant, he thought he saw a dark figure creeping in the gloom under the forest’s canopy, but then the vision was gone. He peered steadily into the woods for a few more seconds, but saw no movement. The Indian, Qualtkanent? He checked his map and compass and determined to head north-east through the forest, north of Stanton Peak and toward Oyster Harbour as the crow flies. Shouldering his pack, he turned his back on the louts’ cat-calls and trudged into the wood.

It was a bright clear morning. The air was cool, but not uncomfortably so. A good day for walking. The undergrowth here was not too heavy, and the grade was more or less level, so Askew made good progress for about a mile before the land sloped down toward the harbour, about another mile away. As he hiked, Askew found time to compose his protest to the Colonial Secretary—who would that be, now? Pearse?—and to wonder what the men had been doing. Prospecting, most likely, but they must have been in someone’s employ. Since Askew had arrived in this country, he had not met five men altogether who could create a mutual bond of trust sufficient to embark on any moneymaking scheme, without there being some prior guarantee of wages; shares meant dilution, and every man here was here on his own account. Be that as it may, none had the right to order Askew’s movements, without legal preemption; and of that, he was certain, neither these rogues nor their putative employer possessed any. Their spokesman had not misspoke when he alluded to the rights immanent in their firearms, but they were still subject, all, to the laws of Crown and country. Even that Indian fellow. Askew spat. He was fed up with the exclusive company of lawless men, with this continuous sabre-rattling. The constant threat of violence was more corrosive than the event. Corrosive of trust and civic feeling. Corrosive of his nerves. He had

seen otherwise sensible and civil men behave like animals, and he himself was frequently forced to negotiate on that level, merely as a matter of survival.

The forest spat him out on the beach, not long after noon, near the mouth of the bay. On Vancouver's map, the harbour was a slender finger of shallow water pointing to the north-west. It was a mile or so across and five long, bounded opposite where Askew stood by a forested peninsula of a few square miles. Thin, inclining columns of smoke flagged the low houses of an Indian village there, bowered beneath the firs, at a place marked as Evening Cove on the map. Askew surmised that this was the "Sickameen" to which the Indian Qualtkanent had referred. The sight of the village vexed him. With the prospectors roaming the bush behind him—not to mention Qualtkanent himself; but was he a protection or a threat?—and the Indians opposite, he had to wait on this beach until tomorrow for the *Forward's* arrival, and that assuming it was on schedule. Between a rock and a hard place. He felt sour and petulant. Nothing for it but to make something of the day. He had lunch and a pipe there on the beach, then set out to explore the harbour and find a campsite for the night.

He found a sheltered spot near Hail Point, where Capt. Lascelles, the *Forward's* commander, had instructed him to rendezvous. He dined on fresh oysters and potatoes. A din of savage revelry carried across the water from the fires of Sickameen most of the night, but it was muted by distance and the prevailing wind, and three years in the gold fields had accustomed him to sleeping through worse; within the tent, his little fire glowing, in the dark he felt invisible and safe from molestation by either Indians or white men. Askew slept well that night. The day dawned cool and damp. A fog drifted over the bay. He passed an idle morning puttering about the shore in the mist.

Just before noon, the ghostly silhouette of the Royal Navy gunboat appeared in the fog about a quarter of a mile offshore. Askew checked his pack and perched on a bone-white driftwood spar to wait. After some thirty minutes, he could make out a longboat paddling toward him. He hailed the boat and it soon nosed onto the beach with the wet rattling grind of wood on gravel. He handed his pack to one of the sailors, pushed the boat off and leapt over the gunwale.

"A satisfactory expedition, Mr. Askew?" the fellow who had taken his pack inquired as he leaned into his oar.

"Very much so, sir. And how fares the progress of law and order elsewhere in Her Majesty's territories?"

"Oh, passing fair, sir. Passing fair. Any grief from the natives?"

"I met one of the gentry," Askew said, "an obstinate mother's son who ordered me off. But no harm done."

"Oh, aye; a blustery lot. Cause no end of trouble for the settlers. And ye best keep your distance when they're in their cups. A trading vessel was captured this summer on one o'these wee islands. Massacred the crew, they did, and made a bonfire of their ship. We ain't found the culprits, yet."

Askew shivered, thinking of Qualtkanent and the roar of the Indian village the previous night. He thought better of mentioning the other crew of knaves he came across, lest they were acquainted with one of these seamen. Intelligence travelled through many and varied channels, and

one little knew the headwaters from the outlet, without close study; and a careless step could find one carried away in a flood.

*1862—Town of Victoria, Vancouver's Island Colony*

Following our very public bath, we were shepherded into a ramshackle fenced compound which lately had been the Marine Barracks. Two long buildings housed the kitchen and sleeping rooms, a store room and a few small private rooms. A small outbuilding was set aside to store the luggage, and a row of water closets stood apart, up against the fence. A gang of Marines was still finishing their renovations of the buildings and fence and roamed about with buckets and mops and carpentry tools. These men were evidently pleased to see us flooding into their recent quarters; martial discipline tempered their ogling and they behaved rather like gentlemen. It was a pleasant contrast to the overzealous attentions of the miners.

Despite our containment within the compound, it took several hours for the chaperones and members of the welcoming committee to impose order on the place, what with the mob outside pressed up against the fence and the girls making the most of their newfound liberty, however constrained. Some girls gravitated to the fence, where they could converse openly with the men opposite; others played games in the yard; still more, myself and Lydia included, went straight into the barracks buildings and staked claims on the bunks therein. Mrs. Robb and Mrs. Scott and a few of the ladies of the Victoria Female Immigration Committee scolded the lot of us as we heedlessly rushed about. All this chaos was compounded by the haphazard and eleventh-hour—in this case, literally, as it was barely noon—preparations for our arrival.

The sleeping hall had bare, wooden walls, recently whitewashed, and a floor of splintery planks that creaked and groaned under the girls' capering boots. Several small, high windows with panes of wavering glass let some light in. Along each long wall were arrayed a dozen wooden cots, with thin straw mattresses and grey woollen blankets. The bedclothes were clean, and the beds expertly made up, but the whole room was redolent with the odours of mildew and sweat and tobacco smoke—the smell of men. The odious Rev. Scott—mutton-chop whiskers with a thin man hanging from them—stood ashen-faced in the middle of the sleeping hall wringing his hands, his accustomed posture, and saying, "This is fine. This will do just fine."—when Mother entered the hall. She wasn't having any of it.

"It most certainly will not, Reverend Scott. I have taken a turn about the premises, and in my judgment these accommodations are wholly unsuitable for young ladies. This is a soldiers' barracks, don't you know? Heaven knows what they do in here. There are beds for scarcely half the girls. Have you seen to the kitchen? There is neither suitable equipment nor provisions. One would think tea and some cake might have been provided for our welcome."

The good Reverend smiled weakly and said, "Mrs. Curtis, please calm yourself. Take me to the kitchen, then, and we'll see about tea. What a splendid idea." And out they went. Mother in her dudgeon was often a source of no slight amusement, particularly if I was not her object, so I grabbed Lydia's hand and we hurried after her, arm in arm.

In the yard, the prospect was not so wild as before; many of the older girls and ladies had begun to line up next to the other barracks hall where two of the local Committee-women could be

seen within, sat behind a table. Mrs. Scott, as thin and officious as her husband, but not quite so timid, stood by the door with a writing-tablet, marking the names of the girls as they queued in. When she spied us, Mrs. Scott bustled over with an imperious pencil pointed at us. “Miss Pratt and Miss Curtis! You draggel-tailed creatures! Lydia! Come here, please. Into this line. These ladies from the Immigration Society are wanting to interview all the marriageable girls.”

Lydia blushed and her arm tightened about mine. “Izzy—” she began.

“Come, now,” Mrs. Scott said. “You’ve not come all this way to traipse about a barracks-yard like little gillies.” She took Lydia firmly by her other arm and tugged her away from me.

“Go on, Lydia,” I said. “I’ll come find you in a bit.”

But Mrs. Scott pointed her pencil toward the luggage room. “And you, Isabel Curtis. Over there with the little ones.” A loose gaggle of girls—my age and younger—had been herded about the shack.

“If you please, Mum, I’m supposed to stay with Mother,” I said, but before Mrs. Scott could answer, a commotion of squeals arose from the girls.

A young woman, whose face I could not see, sat on the ground in their midst, her skirts splayed around her. A shriek of laughter tore from the luggage-room, followed closely by its source: Lucy Cray—a pretty red-haired girl, sixteen or seventeen, I should think—who stumbled into the crowd of girls and fell next to the first. She stood up, tugging her friend’s arm to pull her up as well, and both rose, overbalanced, and fell back into the mud. All the girls howled with laughter, while the Committee-women stood slack-jawed. Mrs. Scott was nearly screaming, still dragging poor Lydia behind her. “Miss Cray! You’re drunk! And who’s your accomplice?” While she was storming, one of the Marines came running from the yard. “—Miss Stannard! I might have known.” She pulled Lucy up by the ear—by this time, she had released both Lydia and her writing-tablet—and slapped her ferociously across the face. She turned to Agnes Stannard, prone in the mud, and grasped a handful of hair that had slipped from Agnes’s bonnet. “You brazen sluts! Where did you get—”

Just then, the Marine intervened, taking hold of Mrs. Scott’s wrist to relieve the tension on Agnes’s hair. “Ma’am. Ma’am. Beg pardon, Ma’am, but these girls’re quite soaked. Scoldin’ will do ‘em no good, now.” Mrs. Scott looked at the man, who bore an expression of solicitous concern. Lucy, on her hands and knees, suddenly vomited into the mud. Mrs. Scott released the hank of hair and the Marine released Mrs. Scott’s wrist. He lifted Agnes into his arms. “Mr. Creighton!” he barked at another Marine, who came running. Jutting his chin toward Lucy Cray, he said, “Give this young lassie your arm, sir, and help her to a cot.”

Mrs. Scott composed herself and bowed slightly. “Thank you, Mr.—”

“Marshall,” he replied. Mr. Marshall was a young man, not yet twenty, I guessed; handsome, clean-shaven and smartly dressed in his white trousers and blue coat, as were all the men assigned to prepare the barracks. His cap bore the name of his vessel—HMS *Grappler*—in gold thread. He and Mr. Creighton escorted the girls—Agnes appeared quite asleep in Mr. Marshall’s arms—into the barracks; and Mrs. Scott, once she had collected her tablet and clapped her hands and ordered everyone else to remain perfectly still, followed them in.

I had long since lost track of Mother, and Lydia had assumed her position in the line; I went over and said I was going to look for Mother. "I'll be all right," she assured me. I glanced into the barracks where Agnes and Lucy had been taken. The outer structure of the building was identical to the other, but the sleeping room was smaller; there were no more than a dozen cots in there. The room where the Committee-women were interviewing girls was apart from the common room. Mr. Marshall was just standing up, having deposited the insensate girl on a bed, and he left by a door opposite the one I stood in. Mrs. Scott was tucking the girls in with an unexpected gentleness of manner. Before she could turn around and see me, I skipped around the end of the barracks, and up the other side where Mr. Marshall had come out. He was going in at another door, up at the far end of the barracks-hall. I followed him and found the kitchen.

Empty wooden shelves lined two walls. There was a counter with a heavy block, a large wash-basin, and a black cook-stove, upon which sat a lonely, dirty, cast-iron skillet. There were no other cooking utensils in evidence. The kitchen was indeed bare, and Rev. Scott was tendering his obsequies to Mother. I couldn't help think of Old Mother Hubbard and her talented dog, but Mother was far from delighted. Mrs. Robb had also found her way here, and she and Mother had evidently been scolding one of the gentlemen of the Committee, when Mr. Marshall had come in. He was attempting to calm the ladies. I sidled into the room and stood between an inner door and the stone-cold stove.

"And who might you be, sir?" Mother asked him.

"Mr. John Marshall, Ma'am. I'm a gunner aboard the *Grappler*, under Commander Verney's authority—"

"Where is this Commander Verney?" Mrs. Robb interjected.

I peered into the darkened doorway beside me, as though the elusive officer might be skulking within. This was a room about as large as the kitchen, lined with more shelves, bare but for a few shovels and crates, several bags of Portland cement, and one mildewed bag of flour.

"I can't say at the moment where the captain is," Mr. Marshall said, "but could I not be of service? I am under clear orders to make the premises comfortable for you all."

"Well, then, at last, someone is clear about something," Mother said, looking daggers at the other gentlemen. "Perhaps you can explain the poor conditions that receive us here?"

"No, Ma'am; I can't make any excuse, but what can I do for you, now?"

Mother stamped her foot and gestured broadly at her surroundings. Mrs. Robb folded her arms across her immense chest. After a silent moment, Rev. Scott stammered, "The ladies, that is, we, well—the kitchen and storeroom are empty of provisions and utensils. The girls are doubtless famished after the excitement of the morning, and none have had tea since breakfast."

Mrs. Robb announced, "But some have not been entirely without libation!"

Mr. Marshall said, "Yes, Ma'am. You have my deepest apologies. I'm sure the young ladies will make a swift recovery. We'll do our utmost to prevent a repetition of this regrettable incident. I assure you, if the bottle came by the hands of any on the *Grappler*, the miscreant will receive a right proper flogging."

Almost imperceptibly, Mrs. Robb started at this last remark. "Very well, then."

“There now,” Mr. Marshall said brightly. “We’ll soon set things aright.” He stepped past me with a sly grin and a wink, through the door into the adjacent storeroom. I returned his wink with a little curtsy and suppressed a giggle, and Mother looked at me darkly. Mr. Marshall rummaged around in the gloom for a moment and emerged with a small writing-tablet and pencil. “Now. Let’s take stock, shall we?” And, with the help of Mrs. Robb and Mother, he set to composing a list of necessities for the kitchen. Rev. Scott and the other gentleman slipped quietly outside, where they might breathe freer.

I was afraid of falling into the hands of Mrs. Scott if I left Mother’s side again, but as handsome as Mr. Marshall was, watching these three make their shopping list seemed an unutterably dull pastime; so I crept out the door again to find Lydia. The sky had darkened, and threatened rain. The melée in the yard had subsided considerably, by now, and I was freshly aware of the mob of men leaning against the fence, all the way around the compound. As a group, they had a less-frantic demeanour now. Many were smoking pipes and cigars, and here and there brown jugs and brass flasks were raised to thirsty lips. Several Marines stood about at intervals, clearly to prevent a breach of the stockade, but a truce was in effect, and the besieged conversed companionably with the besiegers. A curtain of bluish smoke, and much talk of a similar hue, hung about the place. Stepping into the open air, I felt self-conscious and exposed as I hadn’t since this morning, but I stood straight and smoothed the front of my dress and walked smartly around the outside of the barracks-hall. Mrs. Scott was occupied once again with the interview line, and took no notice of me as I strode past. Lydia was no longer there, however, nor could I see her in the yard. I went in to the first barracks, where we had claimed our beds.

A few girls lay sleeping or talking on the cots in the sleeping-room, now, and Lydia was there, too, stretched out with her eyes closed. Seeing her, I felt a wave of fatigue wash over me and I flopped down on the next cot. Her eyes opened and she reached a hand across the space between us; I reached out my own and held hers. A gust of wind rattled the window above us, and a patter of rain streaked the glass. It felt strange to be lying down, so still, without the ceaseless to-and-fro of the *Tynemouth* beneath us. It was as though the world had stopped dead and I waited anxiously for it to start again. The rain got heavier and skittered on the roof and windows. More girls began to come streaming in from outside. The chatter of the girls was subdued; we were all exhausted, and the noise of the rain and wind, and the close quarters, made us feel we were back on the *Tynemouth*, but for the infernal stillness of the earth.

“Izzy,” Lydia said, after awhile. Our hands were still clasped. “I want to go home.”

“I know. Me, too.” My eyes blurred with tears, but I clenched my jaw and pushed back a sob. There was no home for us in England. I reckoned I would never see Father’s grave again, and that was such a lonely thought.

“The littlest ones,” Lydia went on. “They’ve taken ‘em away, now.”

I turned onto my side, wiping my eyes with my sleeve, and leant on an elbow, facing her. “What little ones?”

“The little lassies, Izzy. You’re the youngest one left ‘ere, an’ you’re stayin’ because of your mum.”

“But where did they take them? Who?”

“Mrs. Scott said the Immigration Committee found situations for ‘em. In the homes of the local high-muck-a-mucks.” She let go my hand and turned away from me. “Until they’re old enough to marry.” She paused a moment. “Will you read to me, Izzy? One of your poems? The one about Isabel.”

I smiled. Before Mother had sold all the furniture, I had contrived to claim a few books from my father’s little library; and editions of *Lyrical Ballads*, *Jane Eyre*, and Keats’s *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and other poems* came with me to the Colony as stowaways. The latter volume I had rescued on the merit of my own name’s variant in the title, but its poems had long since charmed me beyond that superficial connection. “Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil” is a long poem, and not my favourite; but it tells a romantic story and I loved to read it to Lydia, as much as she loved to hear it. But I didn’t like to read it just then, and said so to Lydia. “May I read ‘Ode to a Nightingale?’” I asked.

Lydia said, “As you like, Kitten; I just like to hear you read.”

I rummaged in my kit for the battered tome and, finding it, opened to the poem and began to read:

“My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains  
     My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,  
 Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains  
     One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:  
 ’Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,  
     But being too happy in thy happiness, —  
     That thou, light-wingèd Dryad of the trees,  
         In some melodious plot  
 Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,  
     Singest of summer in full-throated ease.”

Lydia interrupted me. “Izzy?” I stopped reading and looked at Lydia. She stared up at the bare rafters. “What’s to become of us?”

“We’ll become what God has planned for us,” I said, but I didn’t believe it. I continued reading, but my mind drifted to the other girls, the ones who had been hired away. They were all, so far as I knew, orphans and foundlings, so I supposed they must have been accustomed to a certain measure of arbitrary justice in their lives; but still: it was strange to have them all vanished at once, after we had survived together three months at sea. I told myself they were not lost, that I must see many of them again in this tiny city, but could not reconcile that thought to the sickness in my heart.

By the time I finished reading the poem, Lydia had drifted off to sleep. I tried to read more to myself, but could not concentrate. My mind was a flurry of inchoate thoughts, and my belly groaned with hunger. I slipped loose the laces of Lydia’s bonnet and pulled her muddy boots off, as gently as I could, then covered her to her breast with the blanket from my cot. I tucked my book safely away and went outside again.

On the *Tynemouth* we had been captive to our small corner in steerage, not even allowed on decks except on rare occasions. I relished this new freedom of movement within and without; the

fresh smells of rain and cedar and pine and the slow decay of the surrounding forests were intoxicating, especially absent the overpowering stench of bodies and chamberpots and vomit to which we had become inured; and yet there was that fence, and Her Majesty's Royal Marines posted to protect us. Both sides of the fence worked equally well. We were prisoners yet, waiting for the ransom of marriage or employment to free us; but what new confinement would that be? And how were they to dispose of the rest of us; by public auction?

I wandered back to the kitchen, where Mrs. Robb and Mother and a couple of girls were busy with the preparation of tea and scones. The hero of the day, Mr. Marshall, had evidently procured some cooking pots, lard, flour, and other staples. The stove was now glowing with burning coal, and wisps of steam were beginning to rise from two brass pots. Mother was kneading dough on the block. When she saw me, she wiped her hands on her apron and proffered me a knife. "Where've you been, Girl? There's work to be done." She gestured to a burlap bag of potatoes on the floor. I found an empty pot and a stool and sat with my back to the stove; its heat settled on me like a blanket. Putting my hands to something, and listening to the companionable kitchen talk of women, alleviated my melancholy. I cut off an end of a potato and slipped it in my mouth to chew while I peeled. It was cool and fresh, its starchy sweetness a welcome balm. I left the peelings on the floor, cut each potato into quarters and dropped them into the pot.

"Your daughter's a pretty one, Mrs. Curtis," Mrs. Robb said. I pretended not to hear. "You would be well advised to put a veil on her when she goes about this town."

"Do you think so?"

"She's only twelve, is she not?"

"Thirteen."

"Thirteen. I shouldn't think you'd like her to begin a courtship so soon."

"No, indeed."

I could feel Mrs. Robb's eyes on me. "Aye. She's one to turn heads. There's many an unwed young man roaming about this town, and few of them's too well-bred, as I hear. Best keep her under lock and key between Sundays, if you don't want her eloping with any old ne'er-do-well miner."

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Robb, but I think I know my own daughter, and if you're suggesting—"

"I'm not suggesting—"

"—that her character or conduct is any ways questionable—"

"Madam. I didn't mean—"

"Didn't you?" My face burned and I wished I were anywhere else, even back on the *Tynemouth*. Mother stood square to Mrs. Robb, her hands on her hips, crusty with dough and flour. "Isabel is not one of your common waifs from the foundling home. She was raised in a proper English home. She knows her Bible as well as her Beeton."

I gasped as a searing pain pierced my thumb and the potato I held rolled to the floor. Everyone looked at me and I looked at my right thumb. It was wet and starchy from the potatoes and, for an instant, I couldn't understand why my thumb hurt so, but then a crimson thread of blood appeared from the nail to the pad. The line thickened and began to drip onto my apron. The knife trembled in my left hand and a grey haze crept into my vision. "Oh, Mother," I tried to say,

but then I was on the floor with an ache in the back of my head and Mrs. Robb's and Mother's solicitous frowns in front. Mrs. Robb was passing a vial of smelling salts under my nose and someone was doing something painful with my right hand. *I cut myself*, I thought.

"There she is," Mrs. Robb said. I tried to sit up, but the awful ache clenched my head and I felt dizzy. "There, there. Rest a moment, dear," said she, tucking a folded linen towel under my head. "You've had a nasty fall, Miss Curtis. I'm so sorry. I upset your mother and you as well, it seems, with my idle chatter. Please accept my apology." I gave her what I hoped was a conciliatory smile and saw that a freckle-faced girl—why couldn't I think of her name?—held my hand, the thumb wrapped in a damp cloth with a touch of pink staining the edge.

"Well, that's all behind us, now," Mother said. "Ada's gone for the surgeon. You cut your thumb near down to the bone, and there's that bump on your scone to see to. Would you like to try standing up, now?"

I nodded my assent, and she and Mrs. Robb helped me up. The sharp tang of ammonia lingered in my sinuses. The room tilted again, and I laughed weakly as they caught my weight. "It's like we're still at sea," I said.