



HUGH Mattson was not a pioneer. He never claimed any of the skills necessary for taming the wilderness. He could not shoot. He spoke no Indian dialect. He blazed no trails. His descendants would fill a moderate-size Idaho town, though, and there are kin today who have cause on occasions like family reunions and Pioneer Day to talk about his exploits and feel momentary sparks of gratitude.

He was born in Kent, somewhere after the beginning of the reign of Victoria. "Folkestone, in Kent," he would always add in his apologetic manner, as if it made any difference to anyone but himself.

While he was a lad, poverty drove his family to London to look for better things. "And we were poor, mind you," he would say later with a chuckle. "Me mam would butter our bread, then scrape it off and save it for the next buttering."

The Mattsons fared no better in the back alleys and warrens of the city, but Hugh got on. He grew to manhood soon enough, not a tall man, not a big man, just a dark Kentish fellow with the look of one always hungry. His education was piecemeal, here and there, and not destined to instill in him a love for the classics. The only oratory he picked up was gleaned from spending his Sundays in Hyde Park, listening to the crazy people and the Mormon elders.

He was lucky enough to fall into a job running cloth for a draper. Like the good son he was, he turned his wages over to his mam and continued to eat the family's hollow bread and watery tea.

His employment was not promising in any way, but he did catch the one good eye of Margaret, the draper's daughter. After that moment, his future was chipped in stone.

Margaret was three years older. She too was small and dark with a decided squint in her left eye. She managed her father's shop, looked after his three motherless children, and figured herself on the shelf at twenty-three.

Hugh never would admit to what he saw in Margaret, but he married her at St. Michael's in Bow Street and promptly got her with child.

They had a son and daughter in quick order. They continued to live in their one room over the draper's shop, and Margaret still managed the store below. Hugh

probably would have gone on running cloth for the old man, but he stayed a bit too long one Sunday afternoon in Hyde Park.

The Mormons were out again, attracting an even more belligerent crowd than the free love followers and the Irish home rule advocates. There were two of them, one young, one older. The old man, name of Kimball, and the young man took turns working the crowds about the Second Coming and Joe Smith's Golden Book.

Hugh stopped to jeer, but he stayed to listen. He came back Sunday after Sunday, bought a copy of the Book of Mormon, and read it on the sly when Margaret was upstairs nursing the baby. After two more weeks of the street preaching, he tossed away his cigar, straightened his coat, and walked home.

Flinging open the door of the shop, he looked his wife square in her good eye, puffed out his skinny chest, and bellowed, "Wife, I have heard the truth." He spoke too loud. His fear of what she would say had engendered in him an unaccustomed boldness.

Hugh Mattson was baptized the following week, dipped with practiced skill in an out-of-the-way slimy pool in London's backwaters by a man with even more fervor than Mattson himself possessed.

The brethren crammed their hands down hard on his head, promised him the gift of the Holy Ghost, then shook his hand. No one had ever shaken Hugh Mattson's hand before. The gesture smacked of American ideals he had hitherto never considered. The handshake brought tears to his eyes, something even the spiritual promises of a moment before had been unable to do.

"And now, Brother Mattson," said the older elder, "I reckon you'll be wanting to gather."

"Beg pardon, sir?" asked Hugh Mattson.

"Gather, lad, gather. Go to Zion. Home of the Saints. Utah Territory," the missionary said.

"Well, no, I hadn't considered it," Hugh replied, suddenly shy again in the presence of these men with their high silk hats and frock coats. "Must I, now?"

"Well, no, no, but you'll be wanting to."

He wasn't so sure. Hugh walked home, his head down. England had never done him any favors, but it was his country. Besides, whatever would Margaret say? She had looked with pointed disfavor on his joining with the Mormons but laid her arguments aside by considering

his foreign background. Everyone knew that Kentish folk still bayed at the moon. But America?

Yet America it was. When his neighbors, and more especially, his father-in-law, learned of Hugh's new religious preference, life lost all serenity. The canon from St. Michael's spent all odd hours in the draper's shop praying for and with Margaret. He succeeded only in grinding her down to the point where she spoke to the missionaries and was dipped in the Thames, too. Never mind a conversion. Any church man who would argue with such vigor against the Mormon religion must know something she didn't know. In her silent, tight-lipped way, Margaret was content to follow her husband.

Late in May they set sail on the *Horizon*, a leaky tub that promised to send the Saints to a quick reward, should a storm of sufficient dimensions arise. The passage money was four pounds, five shillings for each adult, three pounds, five shillings for young James, and ten shillings for baby Emma. Margaret had dunned her father unmercifully until he paid half the fare, and Hugh had sold his share in a piece of Kentish marsh to a cent percenter named Bloom for the rest. They bundled up their bedding and cooking utensils, Margaret sewed the rest of their coins into her drawers, and they set sail for Boston.

As became a Kentishman with ancestors who smuggled rum from France to England in tiny boats, Hugh Mattson fared well at sea. The only leaning over the rail he did on the whole five weeks' passage was to watch the dolphins at play in the water. Margaret spent the first two weeks turning her face away when he offered her salt pork and oatmeal. She ate just enough to keep her milk flowing and shook her head over the rest. She lay with her good eye hidden in the pillow. James ate, but with a disinterest on his face that assured the father that the son was not a seafarer.

The *Horizon* with its cargo of Saints arrived in Boston at the beginning of June and promptly joined with a cluster of newly minted Mormons from Sweden. They had nothing in common with the English Saints except religion, and Hugh soon grew tired of smiling at them.

The returning missionaries who had accompanied their group of five hundred co-religionists from England herded their charges onto railroad cars before any children were lost or any Swedes gulled. They got off the train at Rock Island, Illinois, spent a sleepless night in a public house listening to some drunk veterans below refight the Mexican War from Buena Vista to Chapultepec, then left the next day for Iowa City.

Hugh concluded early in the journey from Boston that he would never be an American, not a real one. He had never seen such a race of giants. Even the women were tall. Everyone spoke in loud voices and moved with an energy that Hugh couldn't fathom.

There was something about these people who drank too much, ate overcooked meat swimming in grease, hollered to each other, and ran when Englishmen would have walked. He almost shrank back from their vivacity, their brashness. He knew that he, Hugh Mattson, late of Folkestone, Kent, did not possess the background that made these people Americans. Indeed, he did not want it for himself, not really. But after only a week in that new,

raw land, he knew that he would die if he had to, just so his children could have what would never be his.

Nothing was ready for them in Iowa City. The unexpectedly large numbers of Mormons from Europe had overwhelmed the handcart carpenters, and they were weeks behind. Unseasoned wood was all they had to build with. In their encampment by the river, Hugh laid his head down at night to the sound of hammers and saws and awoke in the morning to the same noise. He found himself humming tunes to fit the cadence of the carpenters' pounding, little songs sung over and over in his head that dug their own ruts in his brain.

The carts were ready by the end of August. Hugh spent some time in the carpenters yard, running his hands over the wood, hefting the shaft that pulled the cart. "She'll hold five hundred pounds," one of the carpenters shouted over to him.

Five hundred pounds, indeed, Hugh wondered. And who's to pull it? Maybe one of those monster Yankees but not a Kentishman, surely.

As he lingered, ankle-deep in sawdust, Hugh wondered about the lateness of the season. During the few weeks they had camped in Iowa City, he noted how darkness fell a little sooner each evening. The days were still blistering hot and muggy, unlike anything he had ever experienced before, but the nights were cool. He watched the sky for birds flying south, but as yet there were none. Still, he wondered about the wisdom of starting out so late.

Edward Martin, returning missionary and company leader, gathered the Saints together one night after supper. The Willie Company had left two weeks before, and the Martin Company was the last camp preparing to leave that season.

Martin spoke slowly, allowing his Scandinavian Saints time to translate his words. He asked them what they thought about leaving. The general opinion filtered back to him that the Lord would provide.

They would leave on the morrow for Zion. "And that was what they agreed, Margaret," Hugh told his wife as they sat together that night on their pile of bedding.

She snorted. "And what did you say?"

"I didn't say anything," he replied, his voice muffled as he lay down and turned his face to the tent wall.

Margaret was silent for a moment. "I think all of you are crazy," she said from her side of the bedding.

They set out early the next morning, six hundred people with one hundred fifty carts, seven wagons to haul the rest of the food supply, and fifty cows and cattle. A short time saw them traveling along the Platte, that great river road that seemed to go in one direction only.

A handcart was allotted to every five persons, so Hugh and Margaret Mattson and their two young ones found themselves assigned to Ole Sorenson. A single man in his forties, Ole spoke no English other than "Please" and "Thank you," which he said with a smile and a duck of his head whenever anyone spoke English to him. He and Hugh took turns pushing and pulling the handcart. Margaret walked alongside, carrying Emma on her hip. James rode in the cart, playing with the wooden horses

Hugh had carved from leftover wood during their wait in Iowa City.

They soon learned not to look back down the trail. There was something almost painful about glancing back along the road they had traveled, as if it constituted a betrayal to face east ever again. The men would joke among themselves, "For heaven's sake, Brother, if you have to fall down, make sure you fall west."

The August sun was hot on their backs in the morning. It shone in their eyes in the afternoon. They plodded on, pausing only for Sundays and lost children and childbirth.

The traveling exhausted Hugh at first. Left to himself, he would have turned back after the first day. As it was, he kept his feet moving. By the end of the week, when his blisters were turning into callouses, he declared to Margaret that he would make it. She made no reply, only set her lips more firmly in a straight line.

Everyone was assigned a task for the journey. The leaders in the group were appointed captains of hundreds, fifties, and tens by Brother Martin. The wheelwrights, coopers, and carpenters were busy with their trades. As there was no need for a cloth runner, Hugh was assigned to collect buffalo chips. It was employment for women and youths, but Hugh took the calling seriously, picking up odds and ends of buffalo leavings and tossing them into his cart.

They gathered in group prayer each evening, praying about weather, Indians, blisters, lost cows, fretful children, diaper rash, all the mighty and trivial details that confronted them.

The Martin Company soon encountered Pawnees. With the practiced skill of big-city Irish toughs, the Indians slipped away with a couple of cows and any piece of finery that wasn't anchored down. The Mattsons suffered a bad moment when one brave approached Margaret as she was carrying Emma, reached out a brown hand and stroked Emma's blond hair.

By a strange quirk that sometimes affects homely people, the Mattsons' offspring were uncommonly fine-looking. The brave trailed Margaret for most of the afternoon, watching the baby. Hugh slept that night with Emma breathing peacefully on his chest, his arms tight around her. The Indian was gone the next morning, and they did not see him again.

The Martin Company traveled the Great Platte River Road alone through September and into October. The season of travel had ended back in August, even before they set out. Although everyone was aware that night came earlier and that a skim of ice had to be knocked off the water barrels each morning, no one said anything about it. As the days grew shorter, the evening prayers grew longer.

By the time they reached Fort Laramie in October, the birds were winging south, weaving the sky with v-shaped patterns. The fort was a dot on the horizon, a couple of buildings huddled together under a slate-grey sky and presided over by an oversized American flag that snapped in the wind like a pistol shot.

Hugh would have bartered there for some food, but he had little to barter with. Margaret still had some coins brought from London in her drawers, but that was their stake in the future, to be used when they reached the Salt Lake Valley.

Knowing the condition of their finances, Hugh was

startled when Margaret returned to their camp on the other side of the Platte with a small bag of flour. She had told him to tend Emma, and he thought she had gone down to the river to wash.

"Whatever did you trade for that, Wife?" he asked as he sat dangling Emma on his knee.

"Nothing any of us will ever miss," was all she would say, but he noticed while she was stirring cornmeal mush over the fire that evening that her wedding ring was gone.

For several days after Brother Martin's Camp of Israel left Fort Laramie, they trailed a party of Cheyenne headed for winter camps. One brave dogged the pretty young Swede who pushed the cart in front of Hugh's. Hugh had watched her himself for many a mile, enjoying the way her hips moved, and appreciating the curving column of her spine that stood out in relief when the sweat soaked through her dress. Margaret was scandalized by the Indian's attentions, but Hugh silently admired the man's good taste in women.

The Cheyenne strolled into camp one evening when the handcarts had been circled, trailing eight ponies after him. He offered them to the girl's father, who shook his head and then burst into tears. The Cheyenne backed off, but he was there again in the morning. He pulled the Swede's cart three or four miles that day, looking back now and then at the young woman who pushed behind him.

He finally stopped in mid-afternoon, put his hands on his hips, and took one last look at the girl. With a bone-chilling yell that sent James leaping from the cart onto his father's shoulders, the Indian jumped on his horse and raced off after his own people, who by now were a half-day's ride ahead.

Hugh watched the girl's face as she stood there behind her handcart, looking after the Indian. She opened her mouth as if to call to the horseman and raised her hand, but the Cheyenne never looked back.

They followed the Platte in its northwesterly course. By now, even the birds had all flown south. They were alone on the high plains.

The deaths that had begun as they inched across Nebraska became more frequent. The sound of the carpenter's hammer was still the last thing Hugh heard each night. The unseasoned handcarts made in such haste in Iowa City began to warp and fall apart in Wyoming. When the boards couldn't be repaired any longer, the wood was fashioned into coffins.

As the days grew shorter, the rations got smaller and smaller. Some of the very old and the very young just sat down and died. Babies shivered and shook themselves to death in the cold. A week back, the loads had been lightened because the Saints were growing too weak to pull the carts. Bedding and blankets were tossed out, and now the people died of exposure.

The carpenters gave up. By the time they left the Platte and traveled to the Sweetwater, there wasn't time in one night to build coffins for the morning's funerals. The bodies were lowered in shallow holes. All useful outer clothing was kept aboveground to warm still-living family members, and the Saints were sent off to their next estate in shifts and long johns.

The Swedish girl who pushed the cart in front of Hugh was found stiff and white one morning after the first snowfall. Hugh helped dig the hole for her, wishing

with all his heart as he shoveled away that her father had accepted those eight horses a couple weeks back.

The burial took longer than usual. The mother carried on at length about leaving her daughter like that with nothing to protect her face from the dirt that was soon to fill the hole.

Margaret turned back to their handcart, rummaged around under James, and came back to the grave with a sieve. She knelt down by the hole and put the sieve over the dead girl's face. The mother stopped wailing, the brethren tossed the dirt back in the grave, said a few words in English that the family couldn't understand, and walked away.

It came to Hugh Mattson that evening as he scavenged for buffalo chips that the Lord will not necessarily provide. He sat down on a rock and thought about it for a minute, then went back to gathering chips. The children no longer teased him as he walked hunched over, eyes to the ground, looking for dung. Now they sat still where the family carts had rolled to a stop, only their eyes moving.

Snow fell steadily all the next day. By later afternoon, the handcart pioneers were walking in snow up to their knees, tugging and prodding at carts that were empty now, except for the silent children.

As the shadows deepened, one old woman lay down to the side of the trail, folded her arms across her chest, shouted "Alleluia," and died while Hugh watched. As he still stood there, Edward Martin picked up the woman. He started to brush past Hugh with the corpse.

Hugh couldn't have explained why he spoke up then. For weeks he had been content to let others speak. He placed no value on his own opinions, but he had something to say finally. He cleared his throat.

"Brother Martin," he said, stepping in front of the leader.

"Yes, Mattson, what is it?" Martin snapped as he stood there holding the dead woman.

"It has come to me, Brother Martin," Hugh said, in the overloud voice he reserved for special occasions, "It has come to me, Brother Martin, that the Lord doesn't bless you when you're stupid."

That was all he had to say. He turned back to his cart, let Ole pull, and pushed past Martin and his corpse.

The snow continued the next day. With the innate wisdom of rats deserting a foundering ship, the livestock that hadn't died weeks ago began to wander away that afternoon. No one did anything to stop the cattle.

Hugh watched the animals drift away. A plan was working its way around in his brain. He thought it through the rest of the afternoon, mulled over it while he brushed aside snow to gather the chips, and cogitated in silence while Margaret fed a handful of mush to James. Hugh shook his head when she offered him some, and she didn't object.

He pantomimed his plan to Ole, who shook his head over the scheme but offered his rifle anyway. The gun had only one charge in it.

Margaret bedded the children down in the tent, sang Emma to sleep, and joined her husband by the handcart. She looked at the gun in his hand and without a word dug around in their belongings until she unearthed an

old case knife.

The handle was missing, and the blade was nicked in several places, but he took it from her with a smile. Hugh found a little hatchet in the cart that he had picked up a couple weeks back on the Platte, the remnant of some previous pioneer discard. He stuck it in his belt.

They waited until after evening prayers. When the camp quieted down, Hugh and Margaret Mattson set out across the plains, heading east again.

It was too cold to speak, but Hugh had to say something. "I watched one cow. Four miles back or so. In a ravine."

Margaret carried the case knife and a burlap sack. Both her eyes were squinting against the wind that blew snow back in their faces. Hugh looked at her. He could see no reproach in her face, no anger at his folly that had driven them to this place.

It was approaching midnight when they reached the ravine. Margaret sank down in the snow, and Hugh lurched off to search for the cow.

He found her leaning against a rock, looking like a bag of ghostly bones in the moonlight. He went right up to her and stroked her nose. "Well and well, old girl," he said softly.

Hugh had no illusions about his marksmanship. He had fired a gun once at an exciseman in Folkestone, but that had been at a great distance and on a dare. He backed away from the cow and raised the gun to his shoulder.

The Englishman in him compelled him to step back to fire. Any Yank in similar circumstance would have put the muzzle in the cow's ear and pulled the trigger, but Hugh Mattson did not think that would be a sporting gesture.

As his finger squeezed the trigger, the cow leaned away from the rock. The bullet pinged against the stone.

Hugh turned away. Margaret had joined him in the ravine by then. She put her hands on his shoulders and gave him a little shake. "Oh, Hugh," was all she said.

There was nothing left but to cut the cow's throat. Hugh pulled the case knife out of his belt and started toward the animal, which by now seemed to sense, even in its misery, that something was up.

They surrounded the cow. Margaret grabbed the animal by the horns, and Hugh plunged the knife into the throat.

Nothing happened. The knife was so dull, and the cow's hide so loose and leathery that Hugh felt like he was poking a cone of butter at a brick. Again and again he jabbed at the cow. The animal finally wrenched away from Margaret and clattered further down the ravine.

They shambled after the animal, falling and rising in the snow. Margaret grabbed the cow's horns again, and Hugh started sawing on the throat.

For an hour they sawed at the cow, changing places as they grew tired. When its throat began to hurt, the cow would shake them off like deer flies and stagger away. They took turns with the knife and finally gave up when the blade broke.

Hugh stumbled back to the rock where he had left the hatchet. Panic twisted his empty stomach into a Turk's knot when he didn't see the hatchet at once. He threw himself down in the snow and pawed around in the dark until he found the handle. The blade was nicked on both

corners and as dull as the archbishop of Canterbury, but they had nothing else.

Margaret managed to catch the cow again. She wrapped her arms around the animal as her husband stood in front and brought the hatchet down hard between the horns. They pounded away at the cow's head, changing places and battering away as the sky lightened around the edges. By switching places, they managed to hack a fist-sized hole through the bone.

Hugh was cradling the cow in his arms when Margaret slammed down a blow that finally sent the animal to the ground. The cow collapsed on top of Hugh. Margaret shrieked and tugged on the carcass until Hugh squeezed out from under.

"Cease to paddy, woman," Hugh growled, as he crouched panting on his hands and knees by the moribund cow. "Come now, help me shift this old bovril."

The two of them tugged the cow onto its side. The snow started falling again, and Margaret shivered in the cold. She had a warm cloak, but she had left it covering James and Emma back in camp.

Hugh grasped the knife by the end of its broken blade and lunged at the cow's gut. As he expected, nothing happened. He sat down in the snow and stared at Margaret. She stared back at him until her lips started to twitch. "Hugh, what are we to do, you silly man?" she said and then burst out laughing. Hugh laughed along with her, enjoying, even in his total misery, the sound of her laughter. Margaret Mattson was not one to engage in frivolities, but she laughed until she cried then wiped her eyes on her frozen dress.

They took turns sawing away at the cowhide. By the time they had poked a sizeable hole in the animal, the sun was struggling up through the clouds and snow. Working with the knife blade and tugging with their hands, they pulled back the hide. Hugh split open the carcass. The entrails poured out in a greasy slide, still warm and steaming. Margaret put her hands inside the carcass, rubbing her fingers and uttering little cries of pleasure. When her hands were warm, she took the knife from Hugh and he put his hands inside.

When she hacked some of the flesh away from the bones, Margaret floundered back to the edge of the ravine where she had left the sack. After hunting around in the snow, she found it and trailed it behind her, back to where Hugh was jabbing away. They put the chunks of meat into the bag. Hugh scooped in half of the meat, then stopped.

"You know what will happen when we show up with this."

Margaret nodded, a faint smile on her face. She was flecked with blood from her hair to her hem, but even with that squinty eye, she looked pretty in the sunrise.

"Well, old Martin can't have all of it, Maggie." He had never called her anything but Margaret before, and he glanced at her quickly, almost shyly.

They wrapped the remainder of the meat in Margaret's shawl, lifted up her skirts, and tied the messy bundle around her waist. With her skirts smoothed down, and Hugh's blanket-robe over her shoulders, she looked just the same.

Hugh shouldered the burlap sack, and they started back toward camp. After a quarter hour's travel, they realized they were going in the wrong direction. They

turned around, passed the cow's head, hooves and tail again, and after a couple more hours, topped the rise where the camp was.

They stood there, looking down on the sprawl below them. The sun was well up, but no one was stirring about much. Few of the Saints had bothered with tents, but they could see Ole Sorenson squatting in front of their tent holding Emma, who was howling with surprising vigor.

Margaret smiled and nudged her husband. "She takes after your side, Hugh Mattson." It was her first attempt ever at a joke. Hugh smiled back at her. He was too tired to laugh, but he winked and she blushed, a faint pink tinging the raw white of her face.

"Well, let's go down there and face the wrath, Maggie," Hugh said and heaved himself up off the rock he had rested on. The burlap bag pulled him backwards, and he fell down. Margaret hauled him to his feet.

They slid down the slope. Before they even reached their tent, Edward Martin was there to meet them. Hugh held out the burlap sack. Martin took it and peered inside. He didn't say anything, but Hugh could see his Adam's apple moving up and down as he swallowed over and over.

Hugh cleared his throat. "Since the Lord wasn't about to provide, Brother Martin, I figured someone had to," he said.

Martin snorted and looked up at Hugh and Margaret. "Do I recall something in the good book about lilies and sparrows? Or maybe it was loaves and fishes. I forget."

Hugh shrugged. He'd heard it somewhere too but like Edward Martin, he was too tired to work the phrases around in his head.

All he really wanted to do was get inside the tent and hide the rest of the meat. If they really stinted, it might last a week. Surely by then Brother Brigham would have sent some help from Salt Lake. If not, well, they would manage. Hugh Mattson had spent his whole life living tight, and he knew how.

Margaret went inside the tent and closed the flap. Hugh followed her in and helped her take the meat from around her waist. He wrapped it in Margaret's one good dress and stashed it in the bottom of her satchel. He sank down next to his sleeping son just as the camp bugler played what passed for reveille. Margaret reached outside for Emma, brought her in, and started to nurse the baby. She looked over at her husband.

"Best shift yourself, Hugh. A calling's a calling, and folks need those chips."

Hugh sat up. Margaret was cuddling Emma and leaning against the tent. He smiled at the two of them, his wife and daughter, and went back outside. He poked his head back in the tent.

"When we get to the valley, woman," he roared in his overloud voice saved for special occasions, "no more chips, do you hear?"

Satisfied with himself, he began to root around in the snow, humming and thinking about breakfast.

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