

CHAPTER 1

BIG NEWS

The wagon wheel greeted the next rut in the road like a besotted girl flinging herself into the arms of her beau. Hector's stomach lurched along with the creaky wooden seat beneath him. Apparently the rubes in these parts had neither heard of springs nor discovered the art of rudimentary upholstery. The battering his body suffered as the mule-drawn vehicle crawled along the dirt road made him nostalgic for the unbearable stone benches on the campus green at Oberlin. As the driver gee-hawed the team up a hill and remained cheerfully oblivious to his passenger's discomfort, Hector Alistair Browning reassured himself that the trip was well worth the misery. His first solo newspapering job would be the editorial equivalent of a shot over the bow of the journalistic world. H.A. Browning was about to make his mark. Soon, special features bearing his byline would draw the civilized world's attention to the barbarity of these neglected hills. Help would come, and progress would do its good work. H. Alistair Browning would make that happen through his persuasive prose and earnest rhetoric. 'Conquering Hector,' they'd call him, back in his collegiate halls. Thinking of honors to come and weighing which version of his name would look the best in print allowed Hector to ignore, for a few moments, the agony of travel. It returned in full force, unfortunately, as the wagon drew near a pond and disturbed several of its denizens. A trio of dragonflies buzzed Hector and his driver.

"*Anisoptera*," Hector muttered, the Latin classification for the insects falling like a curse from his lips. He grabbed his half-bowler hat and took a swing at the tiny swarm.

"You leave them snake doctors be," the youthful driver chided, " 'less you want your mouth stitched up." When his

charitable warning was met with a blank stare, Jim French shrugged. Giving the reins a flick he turned his eyes back to the road. “Well, I don’t suppose nobody’d notice. You don’t talk much.”

Jim adjusted his left suspender with a soft snap while he reminded himself of the twenty-five cent fare he carried in his pocket. The things it could buy were worth the hour it was taking to get this unfriendly sack from the rail spur at the mine to Utopea. Glancing sidelong at the clean-shaven, pudgy man seated next to him, Jim wondered how his kin and the other folk on the hill would take to him. The fellow had best find his tongue. A bit of chatter would go a long way toward dispelling the uppity impression given by his fancy plaid coat. Jim blinked at the pattern, which swirled for a moment in his mind to reform into the squares of a quilt. He chewed over that omen as the mules crested the hill and the community of Utopea came into sight.

“Here we are,” Jim said. “That building there with the porch is Doc Wiseman’s place. Last paper man set up a press in the old surgery when the Doc moved his seein’ parlor down to the mine camp. My sister Launy’s got the key for you up at the Hamilton place.”

Hector eyed the tiny village sharply, noting from journalistic practice the few details. Aside from the clapboard building that would soon become his place of business, he noted a grocery store, a wheelwright’s, a lumber yard, a small shed marked Utopea Post Office, and very little else. The wagon rolled to a stop by a large empty lot fenced by rough-cut pickets. A few old hay bales and a dozen sawhorses were penned inside, as if they were inanimate zoo curiosities.

“What’s the purpose of this enclosure?” Hector asked. Jim stared back at him for a moment as he figured out the gist of the question.

“That’s for market days,” he explained. “We have ‘em on every other Friday, give or take the weather. But weather’s generally good unless someone’s riled up the clouds. Next one’s tomorrow.”

Hector smirked at the second ridiculous folk superstition this man had shared in the last five minutes, but let it pass by unchallenged. Instead of scoffing at cloudy meddlers, he focused on information that might actually prove useful. “And what kind of wares might I buy on one of your market days?”

Jim grinned at the formal way his passenger spoke. “You can get yourself a horse, or a mule. Mules are better,” Jim added, glancing at his own with approval. “The women bring up sewin’ and sweets. Sometimes old man Kincaid has knives and irons, but he only fires his forge in the winter so you won’t see them things til next spring. My pa’s new wife’s a bee queen. You’ll buy her honey. Everyone does. Miz Howard – ”

“I see,” Hector interrupted. Utopea’s economy was clearly based around the mundane. He decided to change the subject before he was forced to hear about moonshine, poultices and chicken feed. “How far is Hamilton’s boarding house from here?”

“Quarter mile or so down that trace,” Jim said. “Just follow the lilac trees.”

Jim hopped limberly from the driver’s seat and moved immediately to the ear of the near mule. Hector watched incredulously as the skinny young man with thin, jet-black hair proceeded to converse by means of a long string of gibberish with the animal. When he moved to repeat the odd ritual with the second mule, Hector clambered down with far less grace from his own seat. He waited a moment to see if the driver would make any move toward retrieving the large leather case that contained all of his things from the back of the wagon. It soon became apparent that Judgment Day might come first, so Hector reached over the low side of the bed to drag it out himself.

As soon as Hector's bag landed with a scrape on the patchy gravel expanse pretending to be a street, Jim began to walk toward the lumberyard. The mules followed him placidly, the wagon trailing at the end of the strange parade. Evidently Hector had been conveyed as far as his two bits would stretch. He grasped the stiff, hard handle of his new suitcase and hefted its heavy weight. Rather than raising regrets, the burden created by the numerous books it held consoled him. Those volumes might well be the only culture available to him here. Hefting his case, he managed only a few steps toward the shady path to his new home before being stopped short by a heavenly aroma and a child's voice.

"Hey, Mister. Maw's got biscuits."

The purveyor of this news was a tiny brown-haired girl so slight her limbs seemed filled with twigs rather than bones. She stood, barefoot, in the doorway of the grocery, her hands supporting something alive and squirming in the large pocket on the front of her indigo-dyed apron. That garment covered an underlying primitive dress of faded yellow cotton. She smiled at Hector, revealing that several of her baby teeth had departed Utopea for some other promised land.

"Mary Maud, you get away from that door."

The little girl dodged immediately back inside the store to be replaced by a middle-aged woman of substantially heavier build. Hector politely focused his eyes on the maternal figure's face rather than the seams that were valiantly striving to contain the girth of her hips within the confines of her dark day dress.

"Good afternoon, Madam. I am Hector Alistair Browning, here to publish your town's next newspaper." Hector tipped his hat with a mild flourish as the woman quickly brushed some flour from her hands onto a blue striped towel she carried.

"How do, Mr. Browning," she responded, stepping clear of the doorway and gesturing him inside. "We much miss *The*

Weekly Arrow. Mary Maud, get the jelly and a plate. Mr. Browning should have a biscuit while they're still hot."

"Why not?" Hector smiled. The woman was clearly eager about his new endeavor and it would cost him nothing but time to gain her goodwill. And, the promise of a delicious biscuit was welcome. As he stepped into the dim interior of the store, the only seat he could see was a tall stool fronting a flat counter dominated by an archaic cash register. Setting his case down beside the stool, he canted one hip upward to settle himself on it as his hostess introduced herself.

"My name's Martha Howard. But Mr. Howard died last winter so I may be Martha-something-else any time now." The widow Howard smiled confidently and tucked a graying strand of black hair back up under the braided bun which contained the rest of her crowning glory. "Are you married, Mr. Browning?"

"Heavens, no," Hector said. Noting a faint glimmer of disapproval in Mrs. Howard's eyes over his relief at his single state, he amended. "That is, Heaven has yet to bless me with matrimony."

"Well, time will tell. There are pretty girls in Utopea who ain't spoken for. If you need any hints you just come see me."

Mrs. Howard was looking him over in an appraising way as Mary Maud returned with a chipped white china plate and a half-full pint jar of golden gel. "Here, Maw. I brung the crab apple spread."

"Thank you Mary Maud. Now go see if there's any mail for Mr. Browning while he eats his biscuit. I told Mr. Ginch you'd be needing a postal box when we heard you were coming," she said, proud of her foresight, and before Hector could object to the savage waif rifling through his important correspondence she was out the door like a shot. He consoled himself by running his index finger and thumb around the immense golden puff of layered

dough that Mrs. Howard slid upon his plate. It smelled even finer at close range.

Save a fat spoon for the apple preserves, no cutlery was at hand. Hector had to tear the biscuit asunder with his fingers and his mouth watered as its heated flavor stormed its way up his nostrils. A dollop of sweet crab apple jelly doused the biscuit's innate buttery temper, then the first bite greeted Hector's mouth. He chewed enthusiastically. If the matron desired conversation, she'd have to wait until he was finished addressing her cooking.

"Let me see," she was saying as she rummaged behind the cash counter. "I'm sure I saved a copy of the *Arrow* . . . ah, there it is." She placed the December 3, 1907 issue before Hector, opening it flat and smoothing the crease that bisected the front page with a pride bordering on reverence. "This was the last paper Big Andrew printed before he died. We had terrible croup that year," she confided. "I always thought it was such a shame that he never had another paper man to print the story of his funeral. It was a day to remember, it truly was."

Hector, plied into a receptive mode by the delicious biscuit, decided that a delayed obituary honoring Utopea's previous publisher might go a long way toward his own paper being accepted. After all, he'd be changing the *Arrow's* name, and with it the antiquated typeface that was assaulting his eyes from page one. Sizing up the publication, Hector noted that it was an eight sheet affair dedicated almost exclusively to local trivia. The lead article was a gossipy examination of the circumstances around an outhouse fire. The prank must have been the crime of the century in these parts, judging by the column space it commanded.

"My sympathies on the loss of Mr. Andrew," Hector said. *And the outhouse*, he thought silently.

"Mr. MacDonald," Martha Howard corrected. "His name was Andrew MacDonald. Would you like to know why we called him 'Big' Andrew?" she asked with a twinkle in her eye.

Hector honestly didn't care and was a little bit afraid of what earthy revelation lay behind the widow's hinting. "Before you tell me, madam, be apprised that any information you give might be used in the tribute I plan to write." He popped the last chunk of biscuit into his mouth as the proprietress of Utopea's only grocery laughed heartily.

"Well, then you just get yourself down to the east hollow and ask any of the MacDonaldds there to tell you something nice about Big Andrew. If you find Katie Pearl, she'll show you where her daddy's buried. It's out by Spruce Knob where Big and his brother Charlie shot a white turkey once't. Ain't that something rare?" Mrs. Howard paused in proud recollection of what had probably been another headline-worthy event as Hector, his base gastronomical appetite satisfied, quickly mustered the will to be on his way.

As he maneuvered his feet back onto the floor, Mary Maud returned with a half sheet of paper in one hand. The other was still occupied with whatever she held captive in her apron pocket.

"He got a telegram, Maw," she announced.

"Give it over, then," her mother ordered. Hector scissored the paper from the little urchin with two fingers, as if it might have some infestation of provincial fleas. Glancing at the type, he could see it was from Endicott and Taylor.

"Ah, this is from the head office," he said, knowing the woman would be impressed. "I'm afraid I must attend to business now. Thank you sincerely for the society." Unsure if Mrs. Howard would expect or even want payment for her baked good, Hector fished a nickel from his vest pocket and offered it to the daughter instead. "And this is for delivering my message, miss."

The offer of the coin set Mary Maud's gapped grin in motion and brought both her hands into view as she formed a cup to receive it. As Hector dropped the nickel into her palms, a black-furred creature escaped from her pocket. Hector reared back,

startled, as whatever it was bounced off his shoe and skittered in a blur toward the shelter of a stack of small crates. The little girl gasped, and threw the nickel into her vacated pocket before scrambling after the animal.

“Essie! Come back!” she squealed, as on hands and knees she sought the thing among the grocery’s barrels and boxes. Mrs. Howard grabbed a broom and joined in.

“That’s it, Mary Maud! She has to stay in the cage. I told you last time I wouldn’t have this happening no more!”

Hector tipped his hat with a muttered ‘ladies’ which went entirely unnoticed as mother and daughter proceeded with their hunt. He wasn’t sure what Mary Maud’s pet had been. Perhaps it was a small weasel, or even a rat, although why anyone sane would allow vermin in a place of business was beyond him. Whatever it had been, it certainly could move with speed. Tucking the telegram into his outer coat pocket, Hector decided to put a similar spring in his own step as he started toward the lilac-lined lane. Once he was settled in his quarters at the boarding house he could turn his mind toward pleasing his new masters at Endicott and Taylor. He dearly hoped the accommodations would be free of strange pets.

The vigor of his step gave way to a more languid pace as the heat of the summer afternoon and the dead weight of his luggage sapped his energy. The warm, heavy comfort of the biscuit in his stomach was likewise no asset to speed. His march became a trudge, and as he reached the end of it his hope to avoid domestic animals was crushed as a white beagle with brown ears ambled out of the lilac grove across from the boarding house. Tail wagging and tongue lolling from a panting mouth, the dog momentarily blocked his way. The beagle greeted him with a rheumy snort before taking point in front of him. It marched on ahead as if Hector needed its expert guidance to find the rooming house’s front door.

Hector was heartened both by the dog keeping a respectable distance and his first look at the establishment in which he'd be living. It was newer than other buildings he'd so far seen and its premises were neatly maintained. The grass of the front yard was trimmed low and the front door was flanked by long beds of petunias enclosed by small red bricks. The house itself was painted a creamy tan color. Black wrought iron accents including porch railings, decorative swirls under the windows, and some utilitarian hooks above doors and under the portico provided tasteful contrasts. Hector mounted the four steps that led to the front door and gratefully set down his heavy suitcase as he pulled the thin chain attached to a brass bell three times. Nothing happened until the dog barked.

"Coming, Jonas." This faint voice from behind the door was matched a moment later to a young woman. Opening the door, she bent down to pat the beagle on the head as she looked up at Hector. "You must be Mr. Browning. My brother told me he'd be fetching you." Jonas snuffled again and loped over toward the right side of the porch where he lay down on a rag rug next to two milk cans.

"Yes, you must be –"

Hector was at a loss to remember the name of the girl the driver had mentioned and he chided himself for his inattention.

"I'm Launy," she supplied. "I help Aunt Lucinda with the cooking and laundry. Come through here and you can pick a room."

Hector voiced his gratitude and examined the girl as she pointed out the parlor and kitchen. She did bear a strong resemblance to her brother the teamster, although where his dark hair was hinting at a future recession hers was thick and lush. She had a similar short-but-slender build and a matching fair complexion. He gauged her age to be about twenty, guessing she

trailed her brother by only a year or two. As they climbed the stairs to the second floor, he noticed she favored her left foot.

“We have two vacant bedrooms,” she was saying as they reached the second floor landing. “Both have windows. The blue room has a real English wardrobe and the green room has a table that Grandpa Hamilton used when he was paymaster in the war.” Hector paused in the hallway by the two rooms which were directly across from each other. From this viewpoint he could see into both of them. The large table dominated the green room. While it would be a good place to spread out his books, Hector felt the wardrobe would be a better convenience. He did not relish living out of his suitcase or hanging his clothes on pegs like a peasant.

“I’ll take this blue one,” he told Launy. He stepped inside, setting his suitcase at the foot of a small bed with a crocheted coverlet and a single pillow with a narrow band of cramped tatted lace around the opening of its case. On a bedside table sat a large pitcher and basin for washing. Above it, a slightly tarnished but functional mirror would allow him to shave without cutting his throat.

“This is a good room,” Launy said, following him in. “You can get into the attic through this closet if you have anything you want to store out of the way.” She opened a narrow door in the middle of the wall opposite the bed and pointed to the access trap in its ceiling. “You can reach it if you climb up on that chair. It’ll hold you. It’s stronger than it looks.”

Hector eyed the spindly seat with brute skepticism. No matter what Launy said, he would not trust his weight to it. He couldn’t imagine needing the attic space anyway. Anything bulky he came to own could be kept at his newspaper office. “It will do very well,” he assured her. He reached for an envelope he had been carrying in his inner coat pocket. “I have three months’ rent

in advance as agreed. And I was told you were holding the key to Dr. Wiseman's building for me."

"I'll go get it. But you keep that money until dinner. Aunt Lucinda doesn't let me touch the rents," Launy deferred, backing out of the room. "I ring the bell when meals are sit down ready."

Hector tossed the unwanted envelope on the bed for the time being. "Thank you. Might I ask about your other boarders?" He hoped they would be quiet ones. The house seemed deserted, but that was to be expected in the middle of the afternoon. Boarding house tenants were usually working men and women.

"Oh, you'll meet them all at dinner," Launy brushed off. "They never miss a meal." She made to leave but returned with an afterthought. "Just don't say anything about the law to Amos Arnold," she confided. "He gets terribly tetchéd." Hector was left to consider this cryptic warning as Launy's uneven footsteps faded away down the stairs in pursuit of the key.

Blessedly alone for the first time in close to three days, Hector shirked out of his coat and vest, loosening his collar so that he could stretch the kinks out of his back. His body was stiff and sore from uncomfortable transits on trains and various horse-drawn torture devices. He missed the college gymnasium's steam room dearly. Sweating in the brute outdoors hardly provided the same benefit. Hector recalled some of the calisthenics required of him in physical education class. They had seemed of little value at the time, but perhaps they would be a comfort to him now.

After wind-milling his arms for a good fifty counts, he continued with a series of deep knee bends. Each time he squatted, he felt his trouser buttons bite into his belly fat. Inhaling deeply, he strove to suck his stomach in a little further. Clearly, he should stay away from Mrs. Howard's biscuits in the future. The evidence of what they'd done to her physique should have been a warning. When his knees started to complain, he ceased folding and unfolding his legs in favor of stationary

cycling. Perched on the edge of the bed, gripping the mattress for support, he leaned back and raised his legs. He then proceeded to churn them as if invisible pedals were underfoot. Launy found him in this ridiculous position, huffing and wobbling, as she returned with the key.

“Mr. Browning?” she asked, a giggle running over her words. “Whatever are you doing?”

Hector had frozen in mid-peddle like an upended turtle. “Physical exercise. American school calisthenics, to be precise.” Having explained himself, he rocked forward so that his feet were once again on the floor. “Fitness is important. Is that my key?”

Looking down at the odd, and now sweaty man sitting on the bed, Launy grew more curious about him. Mr. Browning was nothing like the other people in Utopea. She’d never seen anyone ‘cizing,’ or whatever he had called it. The closest thing she’d seen to that was Freddie Boone having one of his fits. She looked forward to telling her brother Jim about Mr. Browning’s peculiarities.

Launy approached him holding out two metal sticks. “Two keys, actually. This one is for Doc Wiseman’s, and this one is for this house. Aunt Lucinda locks the front door every night at sunset.”

Taking the keys, Hector noted that the one for his new office was older and heavier than the one for the boarding house lock. There would be no chance of getting them mixed up. “What time exactly?”

Launy shrugged. “When it gets dark,” she repeated. “Don’t make no difference what o’clock. We go by the sun.”

Hector found this primitive and irregular to say the least. Since he had a key, however, the sun’s comings and goings wouldn’t matter.

“When you have laundry, just put your soiled things in the basket out here in the hall,” Launy continued, the wet marks under his arms reminding her of domestic duties. “I wash on Tuesdays and Fridays. Saturdays I mend. You’ll have to black your own shoes, or have the boy in town do it for you.” Launy watched as Hector walked across the room to his discarded jacket and threaded the keys onto the fob chain of his pocket watch for safekeeping.

“You have a well, or pump, I presume?” Hector asked. Having performed the penance of exercise he was now eager to erase its perspiratory evidence from the back of his neck.

“There’s a pump in the kitchen and rain barrels out back where you can fetch water. There’s wash rags in the wardrobe.” Launy walked further into the room and pointed out the window. “Johnny’s house is over there,” she said, indicating the outhouse a good distance from the back of the house. Hector joined her at the window pane and took note of the boxy white clapboard structure. A tin sheet was its crown. A jaunty chimney pipe with a conical rain guard protruded from this backward sloping roof. Both its door and the one side Hector could see sported a diamond-shaped cutout to let in the light. “Dump your own pot out there,” Launy added. “There’s one in the back of the closet.”

The sanitary arrangements were no worse than those on other rural adventures Hector had experienced. In fact, compared to that boys’ camp in the Adirondacks his parents had forced on him, the Hamilton’s amenities were comparatively luxurious. He reminded himself it would serve him well to keep such a positive outlook while building his career here in the backwoods. His latest readings in psychology had convinced him that affected optimism had its benefits.

Launy had turned away from the window and was gazing at Hector’s reflection in the old mirror on the other side of the room. He parted his slickly oiled blond hair on the right, and it flipped

up a bit in the back. His ears were small. Either would fit with room to spare inside any head flaps of the Moates family. Cissy Moates could never put her auburn hair up without her head looking like a two-handled jug. Launy smiled at the thought of her friend's unfortunately funny features. Then the notion struck her to introduce Cissy to Mr. Browning. Brother Jim would thank her for it. Even though everyone in Utopea knew that Jim and Winnie Daniel were sweet and soon to marry, that didn't keep Cissy from trying to snare him. She was a determined girl, and Launy sensed the town's new paper man had a similar stubborn streak.

"I'll be going now," she announced, thoughts of matchmaking foremost in her mind. Next time she was in town, she'd chatter with Mrs. Howard about her scheme. The widow would know what to do. "I'll be in the kitchen if you need anything."

Hector thanked her, moving immediately to retrieve the pitcher from its mismatched basin. As soon as Launy had mentioned the outhouse, he'd felt nature's urge, and efficiency dictated that he obtain new water as he passed the old. Firmly grasping the porcelain handle, he carried the pitcher into the hallway. Hector noted that the walls were decorated by inexpensive prints of riverboats, trains and racing horses. No two frames matched, and the best that Hector could say about what passed for art in the boarding house was that it helped to hide the overly bright wallpaper. Something squeaked under his left shoe, and he almost jumped, fearing another furry creature like the one at the grocery store. He soon realized the sound came innocently from a loose floorboard, but he nonetheless glanced along the hallway baseboards just to make doubly sure that no mouse holes were part of the floor plan.

Hector's fingers danced over the handrail as he made his way back downstairs. Upon reaching the first floor, he made a hairpin turn toward the back of the house. He walked by the passage to the kitchen, wherefrom he could hear the sound of water

vigorously boiling. An alcove to his right was stacked with extra straight-backed chairs and bolts of fabric, most of it dark. Pleated strips of patriotic red, white and blue bunting spilled from the top of a cardboard box which was just a tad too small for the job of containing it. Then Hector reached a screen door which opened onto a summer room. An addition to the boarding house, the chamber shared one common wall with the main structure. Its other three were made of masonry which reached about to Hector's hips, topped with wood-framed screening that stretched up to the ceiling. Above his head, Hector could see the roof joists that supported wooden sheeting, and the ends of numerous nails that secured unseen shingles. A long strip of flypaper stirred lazily in the breeze moving through the screens, displaying several of its victims as it spun on a long string that was looped over a rafter hook. Hector took stock of the two well-used rocking chairs dominating the room and several old copies of *The Century* magazine abandoned in the seat of one of them.

A flick of the metal hook which tethered the screened door to an eyebolt gave Hector access to the yard. Nature was more assertive here. Wildflowers and determined weeds encroached on the well-trodden route to the outhouse. A sheet on a clothesline flapped as if to hurry him along, distracting him for an instant and causing him to stumble over a raised flat stone in the middle of the path.

He regained his balance after several ungainly hops. As the flash of instinctive alarm faded, he found himself clutching his water pitcher protectively to his chest. Not wanting to juggle the crockery while in the privy, he set it down atop the offending stone with a mildly irritated *humph* and continued on, failing to notice that the stone bore a faint inscription. A few more measured steps brought him to the outhouse. He cautiously swung open the door to inspect the interior. It was as satisfactorily maintained as such things could be, if a bit cramped. He pulled the door shut behind him, made a tight turn, and took

the necessary steps to lighten his bladder. Buttoning his trousers, he saw little in the way of cleansing amenities to assist him when he needed to perform man's other regrettable function. It suddenly occurred to him that those magazines in the summer room might not just be for reading.

The outside air seemed even fresher as he emerged from the odious little shack. He chose not to explore the tangled berry patch taking over the side of a small hill or the vegetable garden sporting the last of the summer's beans and tomatoes. He retrieved his vessel and went back toward the house, approaching the kitchen side where he expected there'd be a door. His assumption proved to be correct and he gained entry by means of a decently milled solid wooden door with a delicate brass knob. Hector swung the door inward slowly, a good decision for he encountered Launy just beyond it.

"You want the pump?" she asked, noticing his pitcher and stepping away from the small sink. It was half-filled with spirals of potato skin feeding from a cranked device.

"If I may," Hector said. He placed the pitcher under the spout and worked the handle up and down several times until a stream of water began to flow. He waited for the vessel to fill, feeling awkward in the meantime. What did country folk talk about in their homey kitchens? Eventually, Launy turned toward the stove and tumbled a bowl of naked potatoes into a big pot of boiling water.

"We're eating Irish tonight," she announced. "Do you like beef and cabbage?"

Hector managed a positive response, but fully intended to reserve his judgment until he'd tasted the meal. Launy offered no further conversation, for which he was grateful. He lifted his full pitcher from the sink and carefully toted it into the hallway and back up the stairs to his room. Closing his door and pulling the barely-opaque window curtains together to gain his privacy,

Hector shucked his shirt. He frowned at its current state. The sleeves were stained with sweat at one end and indeterminate cuff dirt at the other. One of the front tails had an unraveling seam and a button midway down the breast was threatening to escape. He set the shirt aside with intent to pen a note detailing its deficiencies for the housekeeper to correct after it had been laundered. Cleaning himself came first.

Ten minutes of washing and a partial change of clothing made Hector feel civilized once more. He hung his outer coat temporarily on the bedpost while he fished his watch and the telegram from its pockets. As soon as he unpacked his case, the coat would find more suitable support from the folding traveler's hanger he had purchased in Cleveland. He considered undertaking the task of sorting out his belongings right away, but the telegram in his hand and the office key dangling from his watch chain tempted him to forego domesticity. Walking over to the window and pulling the curtain aside, he judged the sun was still high enough in the sky to give him enough time to walk back to town, explore Doc Wiseman's building, and return before dinner. He slipped out the front door and successfully eluded any additional conversation about cabbages or keys.

Thankfully, the dog had wandered off and did not follow him. Hector's journey was uninterrupted by other pedestrians and would have been the perfect opportunity to appreciate the bittersweet beauty of summer's end that was reflected in the natural world surrounding Utopea. But priding himself on eschewing needless sentimentality in favor of sturdy facts, the value of the birds and trees and adaptive architecture the hill people had erected in their midst was completely ignored by the newspaper man.

Hector arrived at the building and checked his watch. The speed at which he'd arrived was all the satisfaction he required.