

Word count: 1762

# **JACOBS JOURNAL**

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I awoke to the sound of scattering feet; the rats beneath the floorboards making their way out to the streets below. Sitting up on my mattress of cold, damp straw, I wiped the sleep from blood-shot eyes. The reek of stale sweat rose strongly from my torn shirt that had stuck to my skin like glue. My body was riddled with lice, and the mattress infested by fleas and mites. Even the rats at times, tried taking bites out of me whilst I slept.

I stood up stretching my arms outwards, sliding the chamber pot across the wooden floor with my foot. I released the night's bladder into the white enamel bowl, watching steam rise; into the icy air, dark smelly urine splashed around my feet. I glanced at the fireplace, only an orange glow peered out from the ashes. The broth pot from last night's meal still hung from a grease-caked hook above the fire.

I stumbled over to the window, knocking over the pisspot and stood staring out the filthy glass. Darkness still reigned across the town. Lopsided roofs of other buildings, tumbling together, the gaps between them; narrow and crooked. Thick, yellow pall of smoke clung like phlegm to the rooftops. I considered lighting the fire but the idea of begging neighbours for tinder wood put me off. Pulling off my shirt, I inspected my feeble frame; thin and skeletal, my ribcage sticking out through thin ashen skin. I scratched at my pubis area; the fleas nesting happily amongst my thin growth. My toenails and fingers were black; partly due to handling coal and firewood but also because I had frostbite. I was in a sad state of health. I ate when I could, and if I was able to get enough tinder to light the fire.

Poverty was rife in the Old Town, as I would expect in other parts of the city. Crime was at its highest rate for decades. Criminals often committed their acts here in the slums and one would regularly see assaults on others; including rape and murder, down the Wynds and back alleyways. I've lost count how many corpses I've come across just walking down the narrow

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streets to the Mile. Picking up a dirty rag on the floor, I spat on it and began rubbing down my chest and face. It was an effort to find clean water around here.

As I dressed, I took notice of my surroundings. A disgusting fireplace that produced more smoke than heat. A cold and draughty room that stole any evidence of warmth. Uneven walls from excessive dampness and a sticky, black soot that covered every surface of my small confines. The odours alone were revolting. My own bodily smells mixed with the decomposed rats in the walls and the ever-rising stench of public defecation from outside.

What choice did I have? Both my parents died from Typhoid Fever less than a year ago, leaving me orphaned to my own devices; and just at the age of thirteen. I managed to pay the five shillings a week rent by earning a small wage working as an apprentice for Bartholomew mapmaking firm based on Pard Road, Edinburgh. Mr John George Bartholomew ran the company when I first saw the advert for the job. John George had ambition and vision, particularly regarding geography. Hoping to create a site for the promotion of national geographic knowledge, he renamed both firm and building ‘The Edinburgh Geographical Institute’. Bartholomew helped to establish the Royal Scottish Geographical Society. It was a hard and physically demanding job, running errands all over the city. Today, however, I was starting a new job as an engine cleaner down at the rail yards.

Dressed and ready, I headed down the three flights of crumbling stairs, stepping over sleeping bodies and avoiding human excrement. I stopped outside taking care not to step on the sewage sludging past the doorstep. It was still dark; a dank, perpetual smoke clogged the morning air. Tall black buildings swooned above me and the cobbled pavements were slippery with filth and rotten food.

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The 'Mile', as us locals call it, is just a nickname for the 'Royal Mile', a very long stretch of road packed with tenements and street traders, not to mention the whore houses and taverns; not that I would know anything about them. As I made my way down the street, an icy wind weaved its way through my thin shirt making me wrap my arms around myself for heat.

Shadows scuttled over the poorly lit roads, whilst stall holders began unpacking their goods early. I crossed over the uneven cobbles quickly, trying to avoid being struck by a passing carriage. One 'Brougham' nearly flattened me the other day as I was crossing. The coffin-black carriage appeared out of nowhere and just as quickly disappeared into thick fog.

I halted outside the Black Bear tavern to catch my breath. The stench of stale ale and urine escaped through large seams in the oak door. Puffs of silent, grey smoke popped from the chimney like little balls of wool. Only the odd cry from a stray cat scrummaging amongst the waste heaps broke the deathly nothingness. A crisp and bitter breeze passed by my nostrils making them flare with the distinctive scent of burning metal from the nearby smithy; mixed with a sweeter, toasted smoke from the local brewery. The old town was full of smells and aromas and not all were pleasant. Usually when I passed through 'Surgeons Square', if the back doors to the anatomy rooms were opened, you would get a sniff of rotten cadavers and unusual chemicals. Sometimes I would see the surgeon himself standing outside smoking on his pipe whilst two or three younger men would be transporting a body from the back of a cart and into the theatre. Wrapped in white linen, you could obviously see it was a human corpse. Horrible stuff!

I continued my trek downhill; the winding paths that led from the castle to the fish market. Here, I was welcomed by the wonderful delights of the shop windows and the items that embellished their window displays. 'Rose Water' perfumes and 'Lavender Petal' drops were

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the highlights for the season right now. To be frank, my favourite place was the Apothecary which had on display little glass vials of cocaine tooth drops, and opium tinctures. When my mother took me to get ointments for my itchy skin, I would inhale that distinct scent of Laudanum and iodine.

In this section of town, the new and the old, the rich and the poor, it was all greatly mixed together. Yes, some parts of the town retained a character of elegance and wealth. The proximity of great riches and profound squalor also impressed newcomers; particularly since the slums were refuges and breeding places for the criminal class. There were parts of the town where a thief might rob a mansion and literally cross a street to disappear into a tangled maze of alleyways and dilapidated buildings, crammed with humanity. Slums existed in part because they were profitable for landlords. Its always been like that since I can remember.

By the time I had reached the railway yard the first glimpse of dawn peered through scattered grey clouds. The shimmers of ray lit up the yard enough for me to continue without needing an oil lamp to see. I checked in with the supervisor and was directed to bay three. The short march through thick mud, engine grease and burnt embers left me filthy from the knees down.

Right in front of me sat the ‘Crimson Maid’, the world’s fastest steam locomotive who was due to begin her maiden run that morning. I looked up at the footplate and saw an elderly gentleman shovelling spades of coal into a burner. Deposits of unburnt coal, exhaled as carbon, sulphur and nitrogen particles, would settle gently on my head and clothes. I introduced myself to the man and he greeted me with utmost sincerity. He told me that coal burnt in the furnace, surrounded by water. Steam was created and built up pressure within

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the boiler cylinders. The pressure was then released and the pistons linked to the giant wheels by rods, turned; generating a forward motion.

The Maid was unique however, she had superheated steam giving her extra pressure using a network of copper fire tubes inside her massive boiler. The body of the locomotive was painted a crimson red, her front in a glossy black; all resting upon twenty foot iron frames. The driving wheels towered a good six feet, and above the wheels were the pipes, flues and stanchions, all polished brass and copper. The array of cogs and levers bewildered me to say the least. A combination of hot oil and smoke filled the back of my throat. Smoke billowed from the squat shunting engine as little feathers of steam drifted back. Crashing of straining metal as the couplings took the weight and tension. I loved it! So fascinating.

I've always been a quick learner; a talent I learned from my father who was a building engineer before he died. Dad would be proud of me if he saw what I was doing now.

The fireman, known as Archie, and myself, were joined by two other fellows who would be taking the Maid out on her first run. The guys told me it would make British rail history, although it wouldn't be as spectacular an event as George Stephenson's 1825 'Rocket' which shot along the first railway line from Stockton to Darlington. The 'Maid's' epic journey would only be between Edinburgh and Berwick. It was Time that was important and not the look of the locomotive. Time costs money.

My father once told me that he remembered his father telling him stories of Scotland's first railway being completed back in 1826 which ran from Monkland to Kirkintilloch. By the 1840's, the majority of goods transported by rail was coal to be used by ironmasters to build more steamships and locomotives. Now it was my turn to add a bit of history to my family name. I would be the Crimson Maid's first apprentice engine cleaner.

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My name is Jacob McPherson, and it's my birthday today! I am fourteen years old. I don't know if I'll see twenty, but I can only but pray. It is December 5<sup>th</sup>, the year 1873.

Old Town, Edinburgh.

Scotland.