CHAPTER 1

At the Flood

High up in his floating tower, Captain Grant Marsh guided the riverboat Far West toward Fort Lincoln, the home of Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer and the U.S. Army’s Seventh Cavalry. This was Marsh’s first trip up the Missouri since the ice and snow had closed the river the previous fall, and like any good pilot he was carefully studying how the waterway had changed.

Every year, the Missouri—at almost three thousand miles the longest river in the United States—reinvented itself. Swollen by spring rain and snowmelt, the Missouri wriggled and squirmed like an overloaded fire hose, blasting away tons of bottomland and, with it, grove after grove of cottonwood trees. By May, the river was studded with partially sunken cottonwoods, their sodden root-balls planted firmly in the mud, their water-laved trunks angled downriver like spears.

Nothing could punch a hole in the bottom of a wooden steamboat like the submerged tip of a cottonwood tree. Whereas the average life span of a seagoing vessel was twenty years, a Missouri riverboat was lucky to last five.

Rivers were the arteries, veins, and capillaries of the northern plains, the lifelines upon which all living things depended. Rivers determined
the annual migration route of the buffalo herds, and it was the buffalo that governed the seasonal movements of the Indians. For the U.S. military, rivers were the point of entry into some of the country’s most inaccessible areas. In May of 1876, before railroads extended across Montana, rivers provided Custer’s Seventh Cavalry with provisions and equipment via Grant Marsh and the *Far West.*

The boiling, tree-laden rivers of spring were full of hazards, but the most difficult challenge to negotiating the Missouri came in the summer and fall, when the water level dropped. A maddening network of sandbars emerged from the shallows, transforming the river into a series of slack-water lakes. If a boat was to make its way past these naturally occurring dams of silt and mud, it must not only possess minimal draft but also be able to *crawl* across the river bottom. By the late 1860s, what came to be known as the Missouri riverboat had been perfected: an amphibious watercraft that ranks with the Bowie knife, barbed wire, and the Colt revolver as one of the quintessential innovations of the American West.

Grant Marsh’s *Far West* was fairly typical. Built in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, by an owner who believed that names with seven letters were lucky, she was 190 feet long with three decks, a cupola-like pilothouse, and two towering smokestacks. Unloaded, the *Far West* drew only twenty inches; when carrying two hundred tons of freight, she sank down just ten additional inches for a total draft of two and a half feet. She was also extremely powerful. Sheltered between her first and second decks were three boilers, which consumed as many as thirty cords of wood a day, along with two engines linked to a single, thirty-foot-wide stern wheel. When driven against a stiff current, every inch of the *Far West* trembled and shook as the percussive exhaust of the high-pressure engines boomed like cannon fire and the smokestacks, known as “iron chimneys,” poured out twin trails of soot and ash.

It was the tangle of ropes and wooden poles on the bow that truly distinguished the Missouri riverboat from her less adaptable counterparts on the Mississippi. When the *Far West* grounded on a bar, two spars the size of telegraph poles were swung out ahead of the bow and driven down into the mud. Block-and-tackle systems attached to the tops of the spars were then led to a pair of steam-powered capstans. As
the capstans winched the bow into the air on the crutchlike spars, the stern wheel drove the boat up and over the bar. Instead of a watercraft, a Missouri riverboat looked so much like a giant, smoke-belching insect as it lurched over the mud on two spindly legs that this technique of going where no riverboat had ever gone before became known as “grasshoppering.” It might take hours, sometimes days, to make it over a particularly nasty stretch of river bottom, but grasshoppering meant that a riverboat was now something more than a means of transportation. It was an invasive species of empire.

In the beginning, furs lured the boats up the Missouri; by the 1860s, it was gold that drew them as far north and west as Fort Benton, twenty-three hundred miles above the mouth of the Missouri and almost in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains. In 1866, Grant Marsh, soon to become known as “the king of the pilots,” left Fort Benton with $1.25 million worth of gold, said to be the most valuable cargo ever sent down the Missouri.

By that spring day in 1876, Marsh was no longer shipping gold out of the mountains of the West, but he was still working at the precious metal’s behest. Two years before, George Custer had led an expedition into the fabled Black Hills, an oval-shaped territory about the size of Connecticut in the southwest corner of modern South Dakota. Part Garden of Eden, part El Dorado, the Black Hills were a verdant and mountainous land of streams and lakes contained within a forbidding four-thousand-foot-high ridge of ancient rock covered in ponderosa pine. When seen from a distance, these steep, tree-shaded battlements appeared as dark as night, hence the hills’ name. Mysterious and remote (they were separated from the nearest American settlement by a hundred miles of desolate badlands), the Black Hills were sacred to the Sioux and—until Custer’s expedition—almost unknown to the whites, save for rumors of gold.

In 1873, a financial panic gripped the country. With the national debt over $2 billion, the Grant administration was in desperate need of a way to replenish a cash-starved economy. And as had been proven in California back in 1849 and more recently in the Rockies, there was no quicker way to invigorate the country’s financial system than to discover gold. Despite the fact that it required them to trespass on what was
legally Sioux land, General Philip Sheridan, commander of the Military Division of the Missouri, which extended all the way west to the Rockies, ordered Custer and the Seventh Cavalry to escort an exploring expedition from Fort Lincoln, just down the Missouri River from Bismarck, in modern North Dakota, to the Black Hills.

The supposed aim of the Black Hills Expedition of 1874 was to find a suitable site for a fort. However, the makeup of the column suggested that another, far more exciting goal was being considered. Included in Custer’s thousand-man expedition were President Grant’s eldest son, Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Dent Grant; three newspaper reporters; a photographer; and two experienced gold miners.

Much to Custer’s surprise, the Indians proved few and far between once the regiment entered the Black Hills. On August 2, after several delightful weeks among the flower-laden mountains and valleys, the expedition discovered gold “right from the grass roots.” Over the next hundred years, more gold would be extracted from a single mine in the Black Hills (an estimated $1 billion) than from any other mine in the continental United States.

In the beginning, the government made only nominal efforts to prevent miners from intruding on the Black Hills. But by the summer of 1875 there were so many U.S. citizens in the region that the Grant administration decided it must purchase the hills from the Sioux. When the Sioux refused to sell, the administration felt it had no choice but to instigate a war. Once again, George Custer was called upon to lend his air of gallantry and panache to the dirty work of American imperialism.

The Sioux were told that they must report to a reservation by the end of January 1876 or be considered at war with the United States. When Sitting Bull and his people did not respond to the summons, it then became the army’s responsibility to bring in the “hostiles,” as the Indians who refused to submit to government demands were called in official correspondence. What was to have been a winter campaign sputtered and died in March without much result. General Sheridan then made preparations for a three-pronged spring campaign. The plan was for Custer’s Seventh Cavalry to march west from Fort Lincoln in the Dakota Territory as troops led by Colonel John Gibbon marched east from Fort Ellis in the Montana Territory and troops under General George
Crook marched north from Fort Fetterman in the Wyoming Territory. Each of these converging groups of soldiers was referred to as a column—as in Custer’s Dakota Column—and with luck at least one of the columns would find the Indians.

But as Custer prepared to lead his regiment against the Sioux in the spring of 1876, he was suddenly ordered to Washington, D.C. A Democrat-controlled congressional committee wanted him to testify about corruption within the War Department of Grant’s Republican administration. Even though he had a campaign to prepare for, Custer decided he had best head east.

As it turned out, most of his testimony was based on hearsay and speculation. This did not prevent him from eagerly implicating Grant’s secretary of war, William Belknap, who had already resigned to escape impeachment, and President Grant’s brother Orville. The president was outraged, and despite the impending campaign, he blocked Custer’s return to his regiment. Grant finally relented, but not without insisting that Custer’s superior, Brigadier General Alfred Terry, stationed at department headquarters in St. Paul, Minnesota, be named leader of the campaign to capture Sitting Bull, and in early May the two officers boarded the train for Bismarck.

As Grant Marsh steamed up the Missouri toward Fort Lincoln, he wasn’t particularly concerned about whether Custer or Terry was leading the regiment. No matter who was in charge, Marsh and his riverboat were still being paid $360 a day to provide the Seventh Cavalry with forage and ammunition and whatever transportation assistance they might require. But for George Custer, who considered the regiment his, the presence of General Terry made all the difference in the world.

On May 10, 1876, as Terry and Custer traveled together by train from St. Paul to Bismarck, President Ulysses S. Grant opened the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Like just about everything else associated with the final year of Grant’s two-term administration, the ceremony did not go well.

There were more than 186,000 people at the exhibition that day. The fairgrounds, surrounded by three miles of fence, contained two hundred buildings, including the two largest structures in the world: the
Custer in the Black Hills

1874

0 Miles 10 20
0 Kilometers 20

Montana Territory

Wyoming Territory

Colorado Territory

Fort Benton

Fort Buford

Fort Ellis

Musselshell River

Missouri River

Yellowstone River

Bighorn River

Mistabah River

Tongue River

Red Cloud Agency

Spotted Tail Agency

Camp Robinson

Fort Fetterman

Custer Peak

Terry Peak

Harney Peak

Sylvan Lake

French Creek

South Fork Cheyenne River

Custer's Route Out

Custer's Route In

Discovery of Gold

Montana Column

Wyoming Column

Bozeman

Fort Laramie

Fort Benton

Fort Fetterman

Bozeman

Montana Column

Wyoming Column

Area of detail

Black Hills

Montana Territory

Wyoming Territory

Colorado Territory

1874
*Counterintuitively for many of us, the rivers that figure so prominently in this story—the Powder, Tongue, Rosebud, Bighorn, and Little Bighorn (all of them tributaries to the mighty Yellowstone)—flow north.
twenty-one-acre Main Building, housing exhibits related to mining, metallurgy, manufacturing, and science, and Machinery Hall, containing the exhibition’s centerpiece, the giant Corliss Steam Engine. Products displayed for the first time at the exhibition included Hires root beer, Heinz ketchup, the Remington typographic machine (later dubbed the typewriter), and Alexander Graham Bell’s telephone.

By 11:45 a.m., when it came time for President Grant to make his remarks in front of Memorial Hall, there were approximately four thousand notables assembled on the grandstands behind him. Included in that illustrious group were the generals William Tecumseh Sherman and Philip Sheridan. Over the course of the last couple of days, Grant had been badgering these two old friends about George Armstrong Custer.

Eleven years before, at the conclusion of the Civil War, it had been Custer who had spoiled what should have been Grant’s finest hour. Thousands upon thousands of soldiers and spectators had gathered on a beautiful spring day for the Grand Review of the Army of the Potomac in Washington, D.C. The cavalry led the procession through the city, and as the troopers marched down Pennsylvania Avenue toward Grant and the other dignitaries gathered in front of the White House, Custer’s horse suddenly bolted from the ranks. It was later said that a bouquet of flowers thrown to Custer from an admiring young lady had startled his horse, but Grant must have had his doubts as he watched Custer gallop to the head of the parade. The only cadet at West Point to match his own record in riding and jumping a horse had been Custer, and there he was, alone in the middle of Pennsylvania Avenue, ostentatiously struggling to subdue his bucking steed. Whether intentionally or not, Custer had managed to make himself the center of attention.

Now, more than a decade later, in the final year of his second term as president, Grant watched in baffled rage as his administration collapsed around him amid charges of corruption and incompetence. At this dark and dismal hour, it was annoying in the extreme to have one of his own—an army officer (and Custer at that!)—contribute to the onslaught. Testifying against the secretary of war was bad enough, but to pull his brother Orville into the morass was unforgivable, and Grant had resolved to make the blond-haired prima donna pay.

He’d ordered Sheridan to detain Custer, then on his way back to Fort
Lincoln, in Chicago. When word of Custer’s arrest became public, the press had erupted in outrage, branding Grant the “modern Caesar.” “Are officers . . . to be dragged from railroad trains and ignominiously ordered to stand aside,” the New York Herald howled, “until the whims of the Chief magistrate . . . are satisfied?” Grant had relented, but not without putting Custer under the command of Terry, who was as modest and serene as Custer was pompous and frenetic. Indeed, Terry, a courtly former lawyer from New Haven, Connecticut, and the only non–West Point general in the post–Civil War army, was so excruciatingly nice that it would more than likely drive Custer to distraction. At least that was the hope.

At almost precisely noon on May 10, 1876, at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, Grant stepped up to the podium in front of Memorial Hall and began to read from several legal-sized sheets of paper. The acoustics outside this modern-day coliseum were atrocious, and no one beyond the second row could hear a word he said. When he finished his ten-minute speech, the few isolated cheers only underscored what the writer William Dean Howells later described in the pages of the Atlantic as “the silent indifference” of the crowd’s reception.

It was astonishing how far Grant had plummeted. After winning the war for Lincoln, he seemed on the brink of even greater accomplishments as president of the United States. With input from the Quakers, he’d adopted what he described as “an Indian policy founded on peace and Christianity rather than force of arms.” He even appointed his friend Ely Parker, a full-blooded Seneca, as commissioner of Indian affairs. But as it turned out, Parker lasted only a few years before a toxic mixture of greed and politics poisoned every one of Grant’s best intentions.

It was more than a little ironic. Despite all he’d hoped to do for the Indians, his administration now found itself in the midst of a squalid little war against the embattled Sioux and Cheyenne of the northern plains. In the end, he had been powerless to stop the American push for more. Not that he had tried very hard or refused to let his own administration participate in the pillage, but it must have been sad and infuriating to see America’s celebration of its centennial come down to this: the rude, derisive silence of several thousand people withholding their applause.
On May 10, 1876, the same day that President Grant spoke in Philadelphia, Custer and General Terry arrived at Bismarck. From there they took the ferry across the Missouri River to Fort Lincoln: a ramshackle collection of wooden buildings surrounding a muddy parade ground with the wide brown ditch of the river flowing beside it.

There was room at Fort Lincoln for only a portion of the regiment, so a small city of tents had sprung up beside it. In addition to the twelve companies of the Seventh Cavalry, there were several companies of infantry housed in nearby Fort McKeen. Sixty-five Arikara Indian scouts, who lived with their families at Fort Lincoln in a hamlet of log huts, were also participating in the campaign, along with 114 teamsters and their large canvas-topped wagons, each pulled by six mules and containing between three thousand and five thousand pounds of forage. General Terry, who had gained fame near the close of the Civil War by leading an impeccably organized assault on the supposedly impregnable Confederate stronghold at Fort Fisher, estimated that the column’s sixteen hundred horses and mules required a staggering twelve thousand pounds of grain a day. By his calculations, they might need every one of these wagons before reaching the Yellowstone River, where they would be replenished by the Far West.

There were hopes, however, that this might be a short campaign. One hundred and fifty miles to the west, approximately halfway between Fort Lincoln and their rendezvous point on the Yellowstone, was the Little Missouri River. According to a recent scouting report, Sitting Bull was encamped somewhere along this river with fifteen hundred lodges and three thousand warriors. A force that size would have outnumbered the Seventh Cavalry’s approximately 750 officers and enlisted men by about four to one. But Custer did not appear concerned. As he’d bragged to a group of businessmen in New York City that spring, the Seventh Cavalry “could whip and defeat all the Indians on the plains.”

By most accounts, Custer was bubbling with even more than the usual enthusiasm when he arrived at Fort Lincoln with his niece and nephew from Monroe, Michigan, and with two canaries for his wife, Libbie. One soldier described him as “happy as a boy with a new red sled.” General Grant had done his best to ruin him, but thanks to the
intercession of what he called “Custer luck,” he was back at Fort Lincoln and on the cusp of yet another one of his spectacular comebacks. The presence of General Terry was certainly a bother, but he had surmounted worse obstacles in the past.

In the nine years since Custer chased his first buffalo across the plains of Kansas, his career had zigged and zagged like the Missouri River. His first summer in the West in 1867 had been filled with frustration. The Cheyenne had made a mockery of his attempts to pursue them. When his men began to desert wholesale for the goldfields to the west, Custer overreacted and ordered some of them shot. But it was the long absence from his wife that finally undid him. At least at night, Libbie had spent much of the Civil War by her husband’s side, but this wasn’t possible when chasing Indians across the plains. At one point, Custer abandoned his regiment and dashed to Libbie, covering more than 150 miles on horseback in just sixty hours. From Libbie’s standpoint, it was all wonderfully romantic and resulted in what she later remembered as “one long perfect day,” but it almost ruined Custer’s career. He was court-martialed and sentenced to a year’s unpaid leave.

Outwardly, Custer remained unrepentant, claiming he’d been made a scapegoat for the failings of his superiors. Still, for a former major general who was now, under the diminished circumstances of the peacetime army, a mere lieutenant colonel (although, for courtesy’s sake, he was still addressed as General Custer), this was a potentially disastrous development. Then, as happened time and again throughout his career, came the intervention of the miraculous bolt from the blue called Custer luck. On September 24, 1868, while killing time back home in Monroe, Michigan, Custer received a telegram from his old mentor, General Philip Sheridan.

Sheridan wanted to try a new strategy against the Cheyenne. Instead of chasing them around the plains in summer, why not strike them in winter, when they were confined to their tepees? Even after the legendary scout Jim Bridger attempted to convince him that it was madness to send a regiment of cavalry into temperatures of forty below zero and howling snow, Sheridan remained convinced it would work—especially if the operation was led by Custer, one of the most indefatigable and courageous officers he’d ever known. “Generals Sherman, Sully, and
myself, and nearly all the officers of your regiment, have asked for you . . .,” Sheridan’s telegram read. “Can you come at once?”

On November 27, 1868, after battling bitter cold and blinding, snow-reflected sun, Custer and the Seventh Cavalry decimated an Indian village beside the Washita River. They then came close to being wiped out by a much larger village farther down the river, which they hadn’t detected prior to the attack, but Custer succeeded in extracting most of his men and fifty or so Cheyenne hostages before scurrying back to safety.

Both Custer and Sheridan heralded the Battle of the Washita as a great victory, claiming that Custer had killed more than a hundred warriors and almost eight hundred ponies, and destroyed large quantities of food and clothing. But as a local Indian agent pointed out, the leader of the village had been Black Kettle, a noted “peace chief” who had moved his people away from the larger village so as not to be associated with the depredations of the village’s warriors. Instead of striking a blow against the hostiles, Custer had unwittingly killed one of the few Cheyenne leaders who were for peace.

Custer dismissed such charges by claiming that it had been the hostile warriors’ trail that had led him to Black Kettle’s village. In addition, his officers had found plenty of evidence while burning the tepees that Black Kettle’s warriors had participated in the recent attacks on the Kansas frontier. More troubling, as far as Custer was concerned, was the publication of an anonymous letter in a St. Louis newspaper that accused him of abandoning one of the regiment’s most popular officers, Major Joel Elliott, to an unspeakable death at the hands of the Cheyenne. It was true that the naked and brutally mutilated bodies of Elliott and his men were found several weeks later, but Custer maintained that he had no way of knowing in the midst of the battle what had happened to the missing men.

When Custer learned of the letter’s publication, he immediately called a meeting of his officers. Slapping his boot tops with his rawhide riding whip, he threatened to “cowhide” whoever had written the letter. At that point, one of his senior commanders, Frederick Benteen, made a great show of inspecting his pistol and then, after returning the weapon to its holster, stepped forward and admitted to being the author. Up
until then, Benteen had proven to be a capable and reliable officer, and Custer appeared to be caught completely by surprise. He stammered out, “Colonel Benteen, I'll see you again, sir!” and dismissed the meeting. Thus began one of the most fascinating, diabolically twisted antagonisms ever to haunt the hate-torn West.

Custer responded to his detractors, both within and without the regiment, by turning himself into a peacemaker. Instead of torching Indian villages, he pursued a nervy, verging on suicidal, policy of diplomacy. With several of his Cheyenne hostages providing interpretive help (including the beautiful Cheyenne woman Monahsetah), he managed to find the supposedly unfindable hostile leaders, meet with them, and eventually convince them to come into the agencies. There were several times when tensions rose to the point that his own officers pleaded with him to attack instead of negotiate, but Custer was intent on proving that he wasn’t the heartless Indian killer that some had made him out to be. Custer’s efforts were crowned by the dramatic release of two white women hostages, both of whom had suffered, in the parlance of the plains, “a fate worse than death” during their captivity. By the end of the year, peace had come to the plains of Kansas, concluding one of the most remarkable and, if such a thing is possible when it comes to Custer, little-known periods in his career.

Custer was confident that a promotion was immediately forthcoming. From the field he wrote to Libbie back at regimental headquarters, “[I]f everything works favorably, Custer luck is going to surpass all former experience.” But the promotion never came.

During the next two years Custer settled into his new role as a celebrity of the West. He and Libbie hosted a series of recreational buffalo hunts, entertaining a dazzling assortment of politicians, businesspeople, entertainers, and even, on one notable occasion, the grand duke of Russia. But all was not well. As a lieutenant colonel, Custer did not technically command the Seventh Cavalry; that was reserved to a full colonel, who during the Battle of the Washita had been conveniently assigned to detached service, making Custer the senior officer. In 1869, however, a new colonel, the ruggedly handsome Samuel Sturgis, became commander, and Custer was left, he complained to Sheridan, with nothing to do. In a photograph of a Seventh Cavalry picnic, Sturgis and several
other officers and their wives look pleasantly toward the camera while Custer lies on the grass with his face buried in a newspaper.

In the early 1870s, the twelve companies of the Seventh Cavalry were recalled from the West and scattered throughout the Reconstruction South, where they assisted federal marshals in combating the rise of white supremacist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan. During this period, as the noted warrior Sitting Bull emerged as leader of the Sioux in the northern plains, Custer spent several humdrum years stationed in Kentucky. The “aimlessness” of these days, Libbie wrote, “seemed insupportable to my husband.” Finally, in the winter of 1873, he received word that the Seventh was to be brought back together for duty in the Dakota Territory; best of all, Sheridan had arranged it so Colonel Sturgis was to remain on detached service in St. Louis. Custer was so elated by the news that he took up a chair and smashed it to pieces.

The Northern Pacific Railway had plans to continue west from its current terminus at Bismarck, into the Montana Territory. In anticipation of possible Native resistance, the Seventh Cavalry was to escort the surveying expedition, led by General David Stanley, as it made its way west along the north bank of the Yellowstone River. Almost immediately, Custer reverted to the erratic, petulant behavior of his early days in Kansas. “He is making himself utterly detested,” one of his officers claimed, “by his selfish, capricious, arbitrary and unjust conduct.” Custer floundered when presented with too many choices and not enough stimulation. To no one’s surprise, he soon ran afoul of General Stanley.

Custer, a teetotaler, blamed their differences on Stanley’s drinking, but much of their squabbling had to do with Custer’s need to go his own way. Eventually, however, the two officers reached an understanding. Stanley gave Custer the independence he required, and in two skirmishes with the Sioux, he proved that he was still a brave and skillful cavalry officer. By the time the Seventh arrived at the newly constructed Fort Lincoln in September, newspaper accounts of what came to be known as the Yellowstone campaign had already circulated throughout the country, and Custer was once again a hero.

The following year, Custer’s expedition to the Black Hills only added to his fame. But by May 1876, with his ill-advised testimony in Washington threatening to turn even General Sheridan against him, he was in desperate need of yet another miraculous stroke of Custer luck.
Upon his arrival at Fort Lincoln on May 10, Custer immediately decided to divide the Seventh into two wings: one led by his second-in-command, Major Marcus Reno, the other by the regiment’s senior captain, forty-two-year-old Frederick Benteen, the same officer who had, eight years before, dared to criticize his conduct at the Washita.

It was an unusual move. Benteen had made no secret of his continued contempt for Custer, and an appointment to wing commander was the last thing he had expected. The next day, Custer called him to his tent, where Custer was attending to regimental business with his wife, Libbie, by his side. It quickly became clear, at least to Benteen, what his commander was up to.

Custer explained that while he was in Washington, D.C., he’d run into one of the most powerful newspapermen in the country, Lawrence Gobright, cofounder of the Associated Press. During the Civil War Gobright had worked directly with the Lincoln administration in controlling the flow of war news to the American people. This was just the kind of man any ambitious military officer needed to have on his side.

Much to Custer’s surprise, Gobright had proven to be “wonderfully interested” in Frederick Benteen. It turned out that the two were cousins. “Yes,” Benteen replied, “we’ve been very dear friends always.” Suddenly Benteen understood the reason behind his elevation to wing commander. “Custer perhaps feared,” he wrote, “that I might possibly bring influence to bear at some time.” After almost a decade, Custer, who enjoyed being the perennial darling of the press, now had a reason to cultivate the friendship of his nemesis.

Benteen had blue eyes, a round cherubic face, and a thatch of boyishly cropped hair that had, over the course of his tenure with the Seventh Cavalry, turned almost preternaturally white. Unlike Custer, who spoke with such nervous rapidity that it was sometimes hard to understand what he was saying, Benteen had an easy, southern volubility about him. Lurking beneath his chubby-cheeked cordiality was a brooding, utterly cynical intelligence. His icy blue eyes saw at a glance a person’s darkest insecurities and inevitably found him or her wanting. Custer was, by no means, the only commander he had belittled and despised. Virtually every officer he served under in the years ahead—from Colonel Samuel Sturgis to General Crook—was judged unworthy by Benteen.
“I’ve always known that I had the happy facility of making enemies of any one I ever knew,” he admitted late in life, “but what then? . . . I couldn’t go otherwise—’twould be against the grain of myself.”

Even before this conversation about Lawrence Gobright, Custer had made overtures to Benteen. “I always surmised . . . ,” Benteen wrote, “that he wanted me badly as a friend.” Benteen dismissed these gestures as part of a calculated attempt by Custer to elevate his own standing, both within the regiment and, ultimately, with the American public, and he would have none of it. Custer’s co-conspirator in this constant quest for acclaim was Libbie, whom Benteen regarded as “about as cold-blooded a woman as I ever knew, in which respect the pair were admirably mated.”

Benteen relished the fact that Custer and Libbie had been put on notice that there were “wheels within wheels,” and that he, the reviled white-haired underling, was the ultimate insider when it came to the workings of the press. He had used the papers once before to set Custer straight, and as was now clearer than ever, he could do it again.

On May 16, 1876, with the regiment due to leave Fort Lincoln the next day, Custer requested that General Terry meet him at the two-story house he shared with Libbie and their servants. Of all the rooms in this newly built Victorian home, Custer’s favorite was his study. During the winters he often spent almost the entire day holed up in the little room, poring over Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy* or a biography of Napoleon. To make sure he remained undisturbed, he placed a printed card on the door that read, “THIS IS MY BUSY DAY.”

During the Yellowstone campaign, Custer had learned the art of taxidermy, and the walls of his study contained the heads of a buffalo, an antelope, a black-tailed deer, and the grizzly bear he’d bagged in the Black Hills. At dusk Custer and Libbie, who had long since resigned themselves to their childlessness, liked to lounge within this crowded self-made world, with only the glowing embers of the fire to illuminate the unblinking glass eyes of the animals Custer had killed and stuffed. Libbie later admitted that the study was a somewhat bizarre place for a husband and wife to linger lovingly in each other’s presence. “I used to think that a man on the brink of mania, thrust suddenly into such a
place in the dim flickering light, would be hurried to his doom by fright,” she wrote. “We loved the place dearly.”

On the opposite side of the hall was the much larger living room, with a piano and harp. On Tuesday, May 16, Custer called out for Libbie, and asked her to come into the living room, where she found her husband and General Terry.

Once Libbie had taken her seat, Custer shut the door and turned to his commanding officer. “General Terry,” he said, “a man usually means what he says when he brings his wife to listen to his statements. I want to say that reports are circulating that I do not want to go out to the campaign under you. But I want you to know that I do want to go and serve under you, not only that I value you as a soldier, but as a friend and a man.”

What Custer declined to mention was that eight days earlier, while still in St. Paul, he had bragged to another army officer that once the regiment headed west from Fort Lincoln, he planned “to swing clear of Terry,” just as he’d done with Stanley back in 1873. It was a foolish and appallingly ungrateful thing to say, especially since Terry had drafted the telegram that enabled Custer to rejoin his regiment. Even worse, the officer to whom Custer was speaking was one of Terry’s close friends.

Custer did not drink; he didn’t have to. His emotional effusions unhinged his judgment in ways that went far beyond alcohol’s ability to interfere with clear thinking. Soon after making his claims about breaking free of Terry, Custer must have realized how stupid he’d been. It turned out that Terry did not hear about Custer’s boast until later that fall, but Custer didn’t know that. Before they departed from Fort Lincoln, he knew he must assure General Terry that his loyalty was unwavering.

Terry was known for his congenial manner, but he was no fool. Ever since the Seventh Cavalry had come under his jurisdiction back in 1873, Custer had refused to go through proper channels. While testifying before Congress that spring he’d claimed that his regiment had received a shipment of grain from the War Department that had undoubtedly been stolen from the Indian agencies. Custer, of course, had neglected to check with Terry before making the claim, and as Terry knew from the start, there was nothing improper about the grain. Custer had sub-
sequently recanted in writing what had been one of the centerpieces of his testimony in Washington.

He might attempt to cast himself as the noble truthsayer victimized by an implacable tyrant, but as was now obvious to Terry, no one had done more to undermine Custer’s career than Custer himself. He was an impulsive blabbermouth, but he was also the most experienced Indian fighter in the Dakota Territory, and Terry, fifty years old and very content with his office job in St. Paul, needed him. It remained to be seen whether Custer’s endearingly earnest declaration of fealty was for real.

On the morning of May 17, a thick gray mist blanketed Fort Lincoln. It had been raining for several days, and the water-soaked parade ground had been chopped and churned into a slippery alkaline gumbo. When the Seventh Cavalry assembled for its final circuit of the garrison in the foggy early-dawn twilight, it was about as dour and depressing a scene as could be imagined.

All spring the wives of the officers and enlisted men had been haunted by a strange, seemingly unaccountable sense of doom. A month earlier, when the wife of Lieutenant Francis Gibson learned that her husband had been offered a transfer from Benteen’s company to one under Custer’s immediate command, she had felt a “weird something” grip her soul. Even though she knew it was the best thing for both her husband’s career and her own living situation, she insisted that her husband refuse the transfer.

Another officer’s wife, Annie Yates, dreamed that Custer had been shot in the head by an Indian. When she told Custer of her dream, he responded, “I cannot die before my time comes, and . . . if by a bullet in the head—Why not?”

Even Libbie, who had married Custer at the height of the Civil War, when a deadly battle was an almost daily occurrence, could not maintain her usual composure during those last days before the regiment’s departure. Custer’s striker (the military equivalent of a servant), John Burkman, had been in the kitchen of the general’s residence when he overheard Custer attempting to comfort his weeping wife. “I can’t help it,” she cried out. “I just can’t help it. I wish Grant hadn’t let you go.”

On the day of their departure, both Terry and Custer were determined to lay to rest these fears with a rousing display of the Seventh’s
unparalleled military might. As the regiment splashed triumphantly into the garrison, the band, conducted by five-foot two-inch Felix Viantieri, a graduate of the Naples Conservatory of Music, struck up “Garry Owen,” a rousing Irish tune made popular in the Civil War and the regiment’s particular song.

Unfortunately, the music did little to ease the fears of the soldiers’ families. Custer and Libbie were at the head of the column, and as they passed the quarters of the Arikara scouts, they could see the wives crouched on the ground, their heads bowed in sorrow. Next, they passed the residences of the enlisted men’s families, known as Laundress Row. It was here, recalled Libbie, that

my heart entirely failed me. . . . Mothers, with streaming eyes, held their little ones out at arm’s length for one last look at the departing father. The toddlers among the children, unnoticed by their elders, had made a mimic column of their own. With their handkerchiefs tied to sticks in lieu of flags, and beating old tin pans for drums, they strode lustily back and forth in imitation of the advancing soldiers. They were fortunately too young to realize why the mothers wailed out their farewells.

By the time they reached the officers’ quarters, the band had moved on to “The Girl I Left Behind Me.” The wives, who had been standing bravely at their doors to wave good-bye, immediately melted in despair and retreated inside their homes. It was not the glorious departure Terry and Custer had been hoping for. But for Libbie, the most eerie and unnerving part of the regiment’s leave-taking was yet to come.

Custer had made arrangements for both Libbie and his younger sister, Maggie, who was married to Lieutenant James Calhoun, to accompany the regiment to the first campsite on the Heart River, about fifteen miles away, and then return to Fort Lincoln the following day. Soon after leaving the garrison, as they mounted a steep hillside that led to a wide rolling plain to the west, Libbie looked back on the column of twelve hundred men, spread out for almost two miles, and saw an astonishing sight.

By that time, the sun had risen far enough above the Missouri River to the east that its rays had begun to dispel the thick mist in the valley
below. As white tendrils of dissipating fog rose up into the warm blue sky above, a mirage appeared. A reflection of about half the line of cavalry became visible in the brightening, mist-swirled air above them, making it seem as if the troopers of the Seventh Cavalry were marching both on the earth and in the sky. From a scientific point of view, the phenomenon, known as a superior image, is easily accounted for: Light rays from the warm upper air had caromed off the colder air in the valley below to create a duplicate image above the heads of the troopers. But for Libbie, whose fears for her husband and his regiment had been building all spring, “the future of the heroic band seemed to be revealed.”

They camped beside the beautiful cottonwood-lined Heart River, in a flat, grassy area surrounded by rounded, sheltering hills. Before the tents were set up, the soldiers combed the area for rattlesnakes, some of which proved to be as thick as a child’s arm. Custer had several members of his family accompanying him on the expedition. In addition to his younger brother Tom, recently promoted to captain, there was his brother-in-law, Lieutenant James Calhoun, and Custer’s twenty-eight-year-old brother, Boston, who was entered into the regimental rolls as a civilian guide. Accompanying Custer for the first time and serving as a herder was his eighteen-year-old nephew, Harry Reed. Reed and his uncle shared the same nickname of “Autie,” which dated back to Custer’s first attempts to pronounce his middle name of Armstrong.

At some point Libbie and Custer retired to their tent, where Custer’s striker had placed some boards across two sawhorses and topped them with a mattress. From the first, Custer and Libbie had enjoyed a passionate physical relationship. When the two were courting during the Civil War, Libbie kept a diary in which she recorded their first extended kiss. “I never was kissed so much before,” she wrote. “I thought he would eat me. My forehead and my eyelids and cheeks and lips bear testimony—and his star scratched my face.”

After their marriage, she began to learn that her new husband had his quirks. Despite being a wild-eyed warrior, he seemed to be always washing his hands. He also brushed his teeth after every meal, and even carried his toothbrush with him into battle. He had a sensitive stomach;
she later recalled how “the heartiest appetite would desert him if an allu-
sion to anything unpleasant . . . was made at table.” Although he and his
brothers liked to roughhouse and play practical jokes with one another,
and Libbie’s and Custer’s letters are full of ardor and romance, Custer
was also a man of long, seemingly impenetrable silences. Once, after the
two had sat side by side for close to an hour, Libbie attempted to nudge
him into conversation by claiming, “I know just what you have been
thinking.” But instead of revealing his thoughts, Custer merely chuck-
led and lapsed once again into silence.

Custer had a winning, if unrealistic, belief in his own perfectability.
Just as he had once stopped swearing and drinking alcohol, he would put
an end to his gambling, he assured her, but the poker and horse racing
debts continued to pile up, and they were always broke. And then there
was the issue of women.

From the start, Libbie had known there were others. Even during
their courtship, Custer had also been trading letters with an acquain-
tance of hers from Monroe. If Frederick Benteen is to be believed, Custer
had frequent sex with his African American cook, Eliza, during the Civil
War, with the Cheyenne captive Monahsetah during and after the
Washita campaign, with at least one officer’s wife, and with a host of
prostitutes. There is a suspicious letter written by Custer to the young
and beautiful sculptress Vinnie Ream, who is known to have had pas-
sionate affairs with General Sherman and Franz Liszt, among others. In
the fall of 1870, Libbie and Custer reached some sort of crisis, and in a
fragment of a letter Custer expresses his hope that “however erratic,
wild, or unseemly my conduct with others may have been,” he had not
lost forever Libbie’s love.

The two seem to have put this incident behind them, perhaps in part
because Libbie could give just as well as she received. Benteen claimed
that Custer’s wild ride to Libbie back in 1867 had been prompted by an
anonymous letter warning that one of his officers, the charming, well-
educated, and alcoholic Lieutenant Thomas Weir, was paying too much
attention to his wife. Custer later complained about Libbie’s correspon-
dence with two of the regiment’s more handsome officers: the strapping
Canadian Lieutenant William Cooke and the dark and moody Irishman
Captain Myles Keogh.
In the end, it was their mutual belief in destiny—specifically Custer’s—that saved their marriage. Soon after the Washita campaign, Custer had melodramatically written Libbie, “In years long numbered with the past when I was verging upon manhood, my every thought was ambitious—not to be wealthy, not to be learned, but to be great. I desired to link my name with acts and men and in such a manner as to be a mark of honor, not only to the present but to future generations.” Libbie could not have agreed more. As she told the future wife of one of Custer’s officers, “[W]e army women feel that we are especially privileged, because we are making history.”

The move to the Dakota Territory seems to have reinvigorated their marriage. During the Yellowstone campaign in 1873, Libbie spent the summer in Michigan awaiting the completion of Fort Lincoln. Her time at home gave her a glimpse into the life she might have led (“so monotonous, so commonplace”) had she married someone besides Custer and raised a family. “I am perfectly overwhelmed with gratitude,” she wrote. “Autie, your career is something wonderful. Swept along as I am on the current of your eventful life . . . [e]verything seems to fit into every other event like the blocks in a child’s puzzle. Does it not seem so strange to you?”

Even more exciting, his long, well-written letters about his adventures along the Yellowstone showed her where their future lay. “My ambition for you in the world of letters almost takes my heart out of my body,” she wrote. “I get so excited about it. . . . [T]he public shall not lose sight of you. . . . [D]o not fail to keep notes of everything that happened.” The following year Custer published My Life on the Plains to great acclaim (although Benteen later called it My Lie on the Plains), and he was even then, in the spring of 1876, preparing a memoir of the Civil War. That winter he’d been contacted by the country’s leading speakers bureau, the Redpath Agency, and plans were already in place for him to begin a lucrative speaking tour when he returned from the West in the fall.

The only problem with this plan was that Custer had so far proved to be a dismal public speaker. Despite his natural charisma on the battlefield, he twisted and turned before an assembled audience, speaking in rapid-fire bursts that were almost impossible to understand. Fortu-
nately, Custer’s best male friend was the noted Shakespearean actor Lawrence Barrett, and Barrett had agreed to help Custer prepare for the tour.

Indeed, as Libbie was well aware, her true rival for Autie’s love (at least the kind of love she cared about) was not a woman, but Barrett, whom Custer had first met in St. Louis almost a decade ago. “They joyed in each other as women do,” she wrote, “and I tried not to look when they met or parted, while they gazed with tears into each other’s eyes and held hands like exuberant girls.” The prior winter, when Libbie and Custer had been in New York City, Barrett had been starring as Cassius in a lavish production of *Julius Caesar*, a politically themed play that had special relevance during the last days of the Grant administration. By the end of their stay in New York, Custer had seen his friend perform in the play at least forty times.

Despite the play’s title, *Julius Caesar* is really about the relationship between Cassius and his friend Marcus Brutus, and if Barrett’s edgy personality was perfectly suited to Cassius, Custer must have seen much of himself in Brutus. After assassinating the increasingly power-hungry emperor for the future good of Rome, Cassius and Brutus learn that Caesar loyalist Marc Antony is rallying his soldiers against them. Cassius, whose motivations from the start have been less than pure, is for letting Marc Antony attack first, but Brutus, ever the forthright idealist, will have none of it. They must act and act quickly.

There is a tide in the affairs of men [Brutus insists]
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the Current when it serves
Or lose our ventures.

Forty times Custer watched Brutus deliver that speech. Forty times he watched as Brutus and Cassius led their forces into war. Forty times he watched them struggle with the realization that all was lost and that they must fall on their own swords, but not before Brutus, whom Marc
Antony later dubs “the noblest Roman of them all,” predicts, “I shall have glory by this losing day.”

On May 27, nine days after saying good-bye to their husbands, Libbie Custer and a group of officers’ wives made their way down to the Fort Lincoln landing on the Missouri River. The steamboat *Far West* had arrived that morning, and her captain, Grant Marsh, was supervising his thirty-man crew in the transfer of tons of forage, ammunition, and other supplies onto the boat’s lower deck. By the end of the day, the *Far West* would be headed up the Missouri for her eventual rendezvous with the Seventh Cavalry on the Yellowstone.

When a riverboat came to the fort, it was customary for the master to host the officers’ wives in the boat’s dining room, and Marsh made sure that Libbie and her entourage were provided with “as dainty a luncheon as the larder of the boat would afford.” As the women took their seats at the table in the narrow, nicely outfitted dining room, Libbie requested that Captain Marsh come and join them. This was a duty Marsh had hoped to avoid. He’d chosen the *Far West* because it was the most spartan of his boats. She had plenty of room for freight but minimal accommodations for passengers. As he later told his biographer, he “did not wish to be burdened with many passengers for whose safety and comfort he would be responsible.” Since Mrs. Custer had a reputation for following her husband wherever he went, Marsh had a pretty good idea why she wanted him to join her for lunch.

He soon found himself sitting between Libbie and the wife of Lieutenant Algernon Smith. The two of them were, he noticed, “at particular pains to treat him cordially.” And just as he’d suspected, once the meal had come to an end, they requested that he talk to them privately.

When Libbie and Custer had parted on the morning of May 18, it had been a heart-wrenching scene. Custer’s striker, John Burkman, remembered “how she clung to Custer at the last, her arms tight around his neck and how she cried.” From the hill overlooking the campsite along the Heart River, Burkman and Custer watched her ride back to Fort Lincoln. “She looked so little and so young,” Burkman remembered, “and she was leaning way over with her head bent and we knew she was crying. We watched till she was just a speck way off on the plains.”
Libbie’s only consolation since her husband’s departure was the hope that Marsh would take both her and her good friend Nettie Smith on the *Far West*. She soon discovered that the riverboat’s captain had other ideas.

Grant Marsh was not one to be trifled with. Over the course of his long life, he earned the respect of such luminaries as Mark Twain, General Ulysses S. Grant, and Sitting Bull. Late in life, he picked up a scruffy young writer named John Neihardt, who was working on a book about the Missouri River. When Neihardt, who was destined to write the classic *Black Elk Speaks*, met Marsh in 1908, the seventy-four-year-old river pilot impressed him as “a born commander.” “It struck me,” Neihardt wrote, “that I should like to have [his face] cast in bronze to look at whenever a vacillating mood might seize me.”

That afternoon in 1876, Marsh explained that he anticipated the voyage to the Yellowstone to be “both dangerous and uncomfortable,” and then showed Mrs. Custer and Mrs. Smith the crude nature of the *Far West*’s accommodations. But Libbie and Nettie still wanted to go.

Marsh was reduced to what he called “a feeble subterfuge.” Perhaps when the more comfortable steamboat *Josephine* stopped at Fort Lincoln, her master would take the ladies to their husbands. Until then, they’d have to wait.

Deeply disappointed, Libbie and Nettie Smith returned to their homes in the garrison. “It is infinitely worse to be left behind,” Libbie wrote, “a prey to all the horrors of imagining what may be happening to the one you love. You slowly eat your heart out with anxiety and to endure such suspense is simply the hardest of all trials that come to the soldier’s wife.”

By the next morning, Marsh and the *Far West* were headed up the Missouri for the Yellowstone, the magnificent east-flowing river that cut directly across the territory occupied by Sitting Bull’s band of Indians. Geographically speaking, the Yellowstone was one of the least known rivers in the United States. Terry and Custer’s map of the region dated back to before the Civil War and was full of inaccuracies. What current information the army possessed had been gathered just a year before by an exploring expedition also transported by Grant Marsh.
During that expedition in 1875, Marsh took careful note of the Yellowstone’s many north-flowing tributaries, including the Powder, Tongue, Rosebud, and Bighorn rivers. Marsh even ventured twelve miles up the Bighorn, where the channel became so clogged with mud that it was generally assumed he could go no farther. But as Marsh would prove almost exactly a month after leaving Fort Lincoln to rendezvous with Custer, it was in fact possible, given proper motivation, to take a steamboat another thirty miles to the Bighorn’s confluence with a river called the Little Bighorn.