

ST. ANN'S



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BIG BOY



ILLUSTRATED BY JOSEPH A. FARREN

HIS WIFE was through with the birthing. The old midwife crooned the blessing of St. Brigid on the new-born. And Duncan MacAskill looked down on his twelfth bairn. Then he rammed his woolspun cap down over his unbelieving eyes and stalked through the door. An angry wind blew his kilts angrily around his big knees that cold, gray day of 1825. For three whole days, he shunned the other shepherds and crofters of Lewis Isle to lament his disgrace.

It was a shame before inferiors that the biggest man on the island had sired the runtiest son anybody could recall in the Hebrides. Duncan loved the heft of a fine babe as he loved the heft of a fresh-born lamb. But this puny sprout of a noble tree had no more weight or no more strength than a gull feather. Now Duncan and the royal MacAskills were gossip talk on the buzzing tongues of the squat, dark clans stemming from the dwarfish Picts.

Everybody in Scotland knew that the MacAskills were the lineal descendants of the noble giant race that had once ruled the isles of the Hebrides. Which, of course, had been before the Picts swarmed in like industrious wild bees from God knows where. Duncan MacAskill was cursing himself in fluent Gaelic and sparse English for marrying one of the squat, dark women, even if his other bairns had come up to regulation size for MacAskills.

A thousand years before, the MacAskills would have made short shrift of a puny babe. They'd have simply left it on the rocky beach for the lapping waters to carry to Mannan MacLir, the god of the sea. But Duncan was a good Scotch Presbyterian and an elder in the kirk. Scotch piety and Scotch respectability required that the babe be proper-baptized and proper-raised.

The christening was a strictly private affair in Duncan's stone house.

No pipers skirled the mighty music of the

MacAskills before the parson sprinkled the baptismal water. No flowing bowls of slow-brewed heather ale welcomed any boisterous guests toasting the new MacAskill bonnie. Only a hungry dog whined under the house. Only the baby's mother smiled as the parson pronounced its name of Angus. The name had been the choice of its sire. Determined to save a crumb of his pride, he'd called it Angus, after the fiercest and tallest of all the giant kings.



FOR six years, the sickly bairn tagged his mother's skirts while his strong-limbed brothers and sisters scaled slippery cliffs to steal seabird's eggs. Duncan MacAskill's face soured like stale porridge. More often, he listened to the back-handed laughter of his neighbors than to the swelling of the pipes. In 1831, he sold his flocks, loaded his family on a ship, and started farming in the Canadian Scotch settlement of St. Ann on Nova Scotia's Cape Breton.

Then that which floored half the doctors and granny women in Canada happened. The puny babe began shooting up like a fir tree and filling out like an ale barrel. By the time Angus MacAskill was twelve, he stood six feet, lacking two inches. He'd wrestled six grown men in a row, pinning each of them to the ground as they'd challenged him. When he was fourteen, he carried a hundred pound cask of Scotch whiskey two miles without once stopping to rest or once shifting shoulders. When a blacksmith moved his shop to St. Ann's from a neighboring village, accommodating Angus picked up the anvil and carried it the whole five miles.

Often, Angus went hunting but never carried a gun. He strangled deer with his bare fists, then lugged the big bucks home on one shoulder as handily as if they'd been cottontails.

By the time he was fifteen, he was six feet

six inches tall and weighed three hundred pounds. He was the baby of the MacAskill family, but he towered above every other member of it, topping his father by two inches in height and a hundred pounds in weight. He ate five of his mother's grown roosters at a sitting, and topped off big breakfasts with a dozen hard-boiled eggs. He was more of a celebrity than Nova Scotia's governor, and the greatest boon to St. Ann's storekeepers since the heyday of the whalers.

From far and wide, from St. John to Ottawa, ogle-eyed travelers flocked to glimpse St. Ann's Big Boy. They swigged down all the whiskey in town. They ate up most of the groceries, and the pockets of the storekeepers sang with gold.

They swarmed across Duncan MacAskill's fields and tramped down his growing wheat. They threw used-up tobacco plugs into Mrs. MacAskill's duck pond and scattered mud on her clean cobblestone walks. But that good woman didn't mind if it let her talk about her last-born who'd been her least-born.

"What makes him look so spanking when he started so spindly?" somebody would ask her.

"'Twas just that my laddie started growing when he had enough room to grow in," the doting mother would answer. "Canada is a mighty big country where a boy can stretch. But you can spit over your shoulder in the Hebrides and feel rain blowing back in your face."

Angus, a little bored because his size kept him from rousting with other kids, sometimes told it different: "Wasn't knee-high to a thistle till I was eight years old. Then I started eating a big bowl of crowdie after every meal. Now, look at me." And he would flex his mighty biceps.

And, presently, hundreds of helpless Canadian brats were being forcibly gorged on mountainous bowls of crowdie - that

gooey mess of thick oatmeal and thick cream. Those days, there were no box tops, good for trinkets, to make it go down better. Duncan MacAskill was a proud Scot when the boy first started shooting up like Samson. But after he'd planted his wheat seven times in one season, he wished he'd stopped at number eleven and never been a giant's daddy. He feared the boy might be spoiled for honest work with all the easy money Angus was bringing home.

Like the time Angus was helping a neighboring farmer plow his field. It was late afternoon. The canny farmer figured he'd make the most of the boy's strength by an indirect dare.

"Laddie," he said, "bet you ten dollars you won't finish the field by sundown."

The boy sized up the two-horse plow.

"One horse looks sick," he answered. "Take it out. Hitch me up."

Then Angus MacAskill stepped into the harness while the sick horse went to rest. He started pulling hard with the remaining horse. In an hour's time, the animal was breathing hard from the pace set by his new teammate. But Angus was as chipper as if he'd been dragging a toy.

An hour before sundown, the big field was plowed and ready for planting. Angus unhitched the tired horse and walked in great strides to the farmhouse. There he demanded his winnings.

"Betting with a boy is a fun bet," the farmer laughed. "Where'd you have got ten dollars if I'd won?"

"From here," roared Angus MacAskill. He pulled out a bulging billfold. He opened it, and his big hand played over the banknotes. The farmer blinked hard. Then he handed over a ten-spot. "Go on home, Angus," he ordered. "Go on home before I go crazy." When Angus reached his own house, he dutifully handed his mother the whole roll. It figured up to three hundred dollars—"dare money" and bet money.

Till he was twenty-one and a man legally, he'd never spend a dime without her permission. But on his twenty-first birthday, he walked into the village pub. He threw down a big bill on the bar.

"Come on up, laddies," he called to the barflies. "Come up and drink up on Angus MacAskill. Today's my man day. Angus MacAskill's left off being a bairn." He picked up a cask of Scotch and smashed it open with one blow of his fist. He set the cask in the middle of the floor.

"When your glass gets empty, men, come on over and fill her up. Fill her up on Angus MacAskill who's a man grown."



OLD-TIMERS in Nova Scotia swear that Angus celebrated his manhood by putting away three gallons in his own barrel of a chest. But he walked home straight as a board. And St. Ann's wondered how big he'd have been with one more year to grow.

He now stood seven feet and three-quarters in his sock feet, and tipped the scales at a round five hundred. His front span measured three feet eight from shoulder to shoulder. His palm was six inches wide and twelve inches long. He hadn't a sign of a beard, and never a whisker sprouted on his plump, kindly face. His voice was a cross between a foghorn and a calliope, so that nervous strangers often thought a ship was signalling distress when they heard him from a distance.

He bought one of the finest farms on Cape Breton, paying spot cash out of a roll that would have choked one of his mules. If his plow failed to break a heavy clod, he simply touched it with the toe of his eighteen-inch high boot. Then it crumbled like glass. Sometimes to relieve his horses, he pulled his farm wagon into town, loaded it with supplies, afterwards drawing it back home at a brisk jog.

But he raised more shiners than cabbage,

and got in more haymakers than hay pitching. He, himself, got more blows to his feelings than on his torso. For if anybody on Cape Breton loved peace, it was St. Ann's Big Boy.

The good-natured giant, who loved a bottle better than a battle, never started a fight. He was always having to finish one. For not a week passed but that some traveling toughie showed up and started blowing he could lick Angus MacAskill.

Some of them simply hoofed down the road without looking back after they'd seen the Big Boy. Others shuffled off uneasily when his mild, baby-blue eyes gazed at them wonderingly from his big carcass. Only when they kept asking for it did he let 'em have it.

He was sawing wood one day, when a celebrated hell-bully pushed through his gate.

"I've whupped ever' mother's son this side o' St. Ann's," roared the visitor. "One man I got left 'fore I move on to the United States and start whammin' the Yanks. That bloody blighter's Angus MacAskill."

Angus pulled his pipe out of his pocket and poured tobacco into the huge bowl. Then he stared at the guest.

"Chilly day, lad," he boomed. "Come on inside, and I'll pour ye a noggin' o' rum."

"Can't beg off with a drink, damn ye!" shouted the toughie. He doubled his fists spat on them, and advanced toward Angus.

"Watch your language, lad," Angus replied patiently. "I wouldn't want to hurt a little fellow who don't weigh a drop over three hundred."

The challenger hit Angus a low one on the belly. It would have knocked the wind out of anybody else in St. Ann.

The giant just sighed regretfully. He puffed hard on his pipe once. Then without removing it, he picked up the toughie by the scruff of his pants. The bully sailed over the woodpile with a loud crash. The pastor of

the kirk afterward wrote that the guest "described a curve like a projectile flown from a mortar."

"Shouldn't go around picking on people who're not your size," Angus said reproachfully as the toughie limped off.

Afterwards, the bully's brother showed up to avenge the family honor. "Well, man," said Angus MacAskill. "I never fight except it's a friendly fight. Now, let's shake hands first to keep it friendly." The stranger grudgingly put out his hand. Angus squeezed it till the man yelled like a woods cat. Blood was flowing from his palm when Angus finally let go.

"Now be off with ye," he ordered. "I'd sure hate to hurt anybody."

A few weeks later, Angus heard a commotion in his pasture. His sheep were braying and his cattle bawling. Human voices were swearing and shouting. He hurried toward the noise. When he saw what was happening, he quickly concealed himself behind an oak tree.

Six men in sailors' dungarees were carrying every blessed rock out of the pasture, then loading them in a boat anchored at the beach. A man in a gold braid cap, whom Angus guessed to be a captain, was bossing the job. Adding insult to injury, the sailors pelted his prize animals with stones.

For an hour, with Angus keeping mum, the sailors puffed and carried. Then when they stepped in the boat to pull out, he lit his pipe and strode down to the beach.

"Hey, Captain!" he shouted to Gold Braid. "Get back here with my rocks!" The sailors looked up, saw the giant, and nearly dropped their oars. They sat petrified, their eyes popping, as he moved closer.

"Can't be a real man standin' up there," one muttered. "Can't be nothin' but that grog I swigged this mornin'."

"Never was a man that big," another spoke uneasily, "unless I'm seein' him double."

"It's one o' them giant critters come to life

outa olden times,” said another. “Just don't make him mad so we can git outa here.”

Two Portuguese sailors started crossing themselves. A sober Yankee from Salem Town was getting ready to dive overboard when the captain caught him by the shoulder.

“What do you want the rocks for?” the captain bawled to Angus. “We need 'em for ballast.”

“Matters naught what I need 'em for,” yelled Angus. “'Twasn't fair to take 'em without pay.”

Gold Braid gave a signal. The sailors began rowing for dear life.

Then Angus leaned down and grabbed an armful of boulders from a heap on the beach.

He started heaving.

The first big rock knocked off the skipper's cap and sent it skimming into the water. The second smashed three oars. The third cracked the boat's side, and sailors started bailing with their bare hands under the shower of stones. The heavy rocks in the boat made the stern dip dangerously into the water.

“It's Goliath!” groaned the Yankee. “That's who it is. And this time it's him, not David, slingin' the rocks.”

The captain stood up in the boat. A big rock missed his cheek by an inch and smashed the carved dolphin's figure on the stern. Frantically, Gold Braid dug into his pocket and pulled out a white silk handkerchief. He started waving it as a flag of truce.

“Don't kill us, man,” he yelled. “Stop it and we'll pull in!”

Angus made them put back every rock in its exact place. He determined where every stone belonged by making the seamen measure it against its corresponding dent in the earth.

After the job was over, the ship that had brought the seamen pulled out full steam, full blast, and was never seen around Cape

Breton again.



THE giant hated to be imposed on by strangers; he loved to help neighbors. He'd travel fifty miles to help throw up a house or barn and do the work of three ordinary men when he got there. At one raising, he ate half a lamb and washed it down with two gallons of steaming coffee. Fighting went with feasting at these chummy affairs. But the only time Angus ever lost his temper was once when he got slighted on refreshments.

He was working with a big auger at a barn raising. Near him, lay his special drinking “tub”—a huge glass mug that held almost a pint.

As the sweat poured down his back, he began smelling the odor of whiskey on his mates. Then he realized that the jug was missing him when it made the rounds.

He said nothing. But when the woman of the house blew the conch shell for dinner, he stayed behind. Then he climbed up the frame and unloosed a side plait sixty feet high and eight inches wide. He shouldered the plait and dumped it in the Atlantic Ocean, four hundred yards away.

The ungracious host and his other guests heard the huge splash. They dashed out, found the barn frame a heap of sticks, and Angus stalking majestically toward his own house. The plait was floating out to mid-ocean.

He needed some tea to brace him after that trick. So on the way home, he stopped in at a store.

“Take a handful of that box over there, Mr. MacAskill,” said the storekeeper.

Angus reached in the barrel and scooped up a handful. When the merchant weighed it, the tea figured exactly a pound.

“Might as well take along some meat while I'm here,” said the giant. He picked up two big barrels of salt pork, hoisted one on each shoulder and went down the road whistling

“Bonnie Doon.”

Another storekeeper once refused credit to a poor man for a barrel of flour. Finally the merchant said tauntingly, “I have a vessel in the harbor. There’s flour in the hold. If you can throw a barrel twelve feet to the deck, you can have it.”

The poor man came in desperation to Angus. “Never mind,” the giant soothed him. “Your bairns’ll have bread.” He stalked to the vessel and went below. Presently barrels of flour began tumbling on the deck. When he had tossed out six, he climbed up on deck. Then he put a barrel under each arm and said to the poor man, “All right, laddie. Which way to your house?”

When Angus wasn’t farming, he was fishing. Usually, he operated his boat without a crew and his catch surpassed that of any crew in St. Ann’s. A huge ballast of rocks, placed before the mast, kept the boat from capsizing under his tremendous weight.

Once, some pranksters lugged his boat over a hill and dumped it into a large pool. It made him so angry that he waded into the pool, grabbed the boat, and tore it apart from stem to stern. When he turned around, the crowd saw he was mad and started running. He overtook one and threw him with all his might into the air. The smart aleck landed twenty feet away, thanking the Lord he’d hit a patch of broomweed and not a pile of the sharp rocks lining the ocean.

MacAskill was planning to head for the California goldfields in 1849 when another stranger came to St. Ann’s inquiring for him. Except that the man didn’t want to hand him a haymaker but a pile of cash He was an agent of the famous American showman, P. T. Barnum. He signed up the twenty-four-year-old giant for five years, and took him to the States.

Presently, Angus MacAskill became known to the Yanks as the Canadian Colossus, and he didn’t have to swing a pick for the gold

that came rolling in his big palm. All he had to do was to show himself.

He became the bosom friend of Barnum’s star performer, the three-foot midget, Tom Thumb. Together, they painted red Scollay Square in Boston and Times Square in Manhattan. When Angus figured that the dwarf had swigged enough, he’d put Tom under his shoulder, carry him home, and bed him down in his cradle. Occasionally, in the show, the three-footer would double his fists and challenge the eight-footer. They always brought down the house.

Barnum took his Congress of Wonders to Havana. The canny Scot was careful not to loiter on the streets and forewent any tours of the famous Cuban bars. “If people see me on the streets,” he told Barnum, “they won’t let loose with a peso to see me in the show.” Which tickled P. T. Barnum so much he raised the giant’s salary.

When Angus got back to New York, a crony began taunting him to show his strength. “It’s not what Barnum’s press agents say about you,” he taunted the giant. “It’s what you can do yourself. And you look like a muscle-bound whale to me.”

MacAskill grabbed his friend’s arm angrily. “Come with me!” he shouted. They stepped into a saloon where Angus ordered a drink for everybody. Then the giant walked over to a hundred and forty gallon puncheon of Scotch whiskey. He heaved it aloft as if it had been a feather pillow, then tapped it lightly with his knuckles. The bung sailed toward the ceiling. Then lifting the puncheon to his lips, he saluted the crowd: “Your health, gentlemen.”

He took a deep swig that lasted five full minutes by somebody’s timing. After which, he settled for the drinks and walked out.

Queen Victoria commanded him to call when he was on tour in London. She greeted him as “my loyal subject” and handed him a couple of rings, the largest that had ever been made by her own special jeweler.

His kinsmen around Cape Breton swore that Her Majesty offered Angus a colonel's commission in her Cameron Highlanders where the runtiest buck private tops six feet.



Then came the giant's Waterloo. He got it from an anchor and not from a man.

HE WAS strolling along the piers of New York Harbor when he noticed a French ship with a twenty-seven hundred pound anchor. The French sailors, recognizing him, told him of a giant in their country who could shoulder the anchor. "But, m'sieu," they said, "nobody outside France can match that feat."

MacAskill was rumbling inside like a sea storm as they jibed him. He stepped over to the anchor, heaved it on his shoulder, and strutted up and down with it. Then he threw it contemptuously back to the ship side.

There was the sound of tearing flesh and the big fellow was roaring like a wounded bull. His whole side had been laid open and blood was gushing down his expensive Paris trousers. The fluke of the anchor had caught him. For the first time in his life, he fell in a faint.

Ever after, one of his shoulders was lower than the other. Ever afterwards, he walked in a perpendicular bent.

Angus came home to his sorrowing pals in St. Ann. He invested his money in two gristmills in two different towns. And he never worried about the mill brook running dry. When that happened, he'd put his big shoulder to the wheel and keep it turning for hours by his own muscle power.

The giant had left Barnum with a big stake. He nursed it, along with the profits from his mills. He sunk his money into fine farms and a couple of fishing schooners. Then he opened one of the first cut-rate cash stores in Canada.

"Credit to none, charity to all," was the way he ran his grocery business. "I don't want to

owe any man, and I don't want any man owing me. But no bairn's going hungry while Angus MacAskill's got anything on his shelf. That goes for friend or stranger."

The door of his store was nine feet high. His stool was an empty puncheon that had once held a hundred and eighty gallons of molasses. Right in the center of the store, a big barrel of whiskey stood open. Tin cups were hung invitingly on nails driven around the barrel. Every man was welcome to a drink after he'd bought around his groceries. Before long, his store was doing more business than any other place on Cape Breton. Christmas-time, he had a gift for every kid in St. Ann.

The year he was thirty-eight, he took sick from an old trouble that had hit him while he was touring Spain. Medicos hurried from every part of Canada to tend him. They said it was "brain fever," which covered just about everything that doctors couldn't figure out, back there in 1863. More likely, it was some tropical illness which struck again when Angus stopped living by his muscles and settled down to the sedentary life of storekeeping.

He died in a week—on August 8. For miles around, village merchants shut up shop and hung crepe on their doors. It was the busy season for the fishermen. But every vessel, big and little, put into harbor and hoisted the Union Jack at half-mast. Scotland joined Canada and the States in mourning, with papers in all three countries lamenting the passing of the Big Boy.

"He was the biggest man ever seen in Canada, one of the biggest ever seen in this world," wrote a Yankee paper. "But the biggest thing about him was his heart."

His friends in Boston wanted something to remember him by. So his mother sent them one of his vests. It could have been wrapped easily around the bellies of three ordinary men. It was kept on display at a tavern just off Scollay Square till Prohibition came and

closed the place.

But to this day, the fisher folk of St. Ann's still talk about the funeral of Angus MacAskill. They buried him with the honors befitting one of the giant kings: he who topped by a good six inches any of the mammoth chieftains remembered in the chronicles of the old Scots.

Six carpenters worked around the clock to build Angus MacAskill a coffin.

It was three-quarters stout native pine and one-fourth imported glass, the whole dyked out with gold and silver ornaments brought all the way from Quebec. It would have easily floated three men across St. Ann's Bay.

A boatload of pipers, skirling the ancient tunes of the MacAskills, headed his funeral cortege. A fishing schooner carried the flag-draped coffin that would be Angus' last bed, to the burial place a mile and a half across

the bay.

Hundreds of other boats, bearing fishermen and their families, followed behind. In a huge grave, where the mighty roaring of the breakers would soothe the long rest of a mighty man, they laid Angus MacAskill.

His requiem was the weird funeral chants, sung in Gaelic, that were old when St. Brigid brought the Cross to Scotland. Old women keened and wailed as the gravediggers shoveled the clods on the coffin. And all that was said in the Sassenach tongue of the English was the brief funeral sermon of the preacher.

"He was a Samson who never let any vain Delilah sap him out," said the preacher, looking sourly over the pretty young girls.

The girls didn't hear. Already their eyes were roaming from Angus MacAskill in his coffin to lesser men who had the breath of life.

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