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by Ivan Doig

## Part One

## THE SHERIFF

1938

Self-made men always do a lopsided job of it, and the sheriff had come out conspicuously short on the capacity to sympathize with anyone but himself. No doubt ears still were burning at the Fort Peck end of the telephone connection; he'd had to tell that overgrown sap of an undersheriff he didn't give a good goddamn what the night foreman said about dangerous, get the thing fished out of the river if it meant using every last piece of equipment at the dam site. This was what he was up against all the time, the sheriff commiserated with himself during the drive from Glasgow now, toward dawn. People never behaving

one bit better than they could get away with.

Die of eyelids, you could on this monotonous stretch of highway down to the dam, he reminded himself and cranked open the ~~driver's-side~~ window for night air to help keep him awake. He'd been up until all hours, sheriffing the town of Glasgow through the boisterous end of another week, and had barely hit bed when the telephone jangled. Catch up on sleep, the stupid saying went, but in five years as sheriff he had yet to see any evidence that the world worked that way, ever made it up to you for postponement of shuteye and all the other--

The cat-yellow shapes of bulldozers sprang huge into his headlights, causing him to blink and brake hard as he steered onto the approach to the dam. Past the bulks of earthmoving equipment parked for the night, on the rail spur stood a waiting parade of even more mammoth silhouettes, flatcars loaded high with boulders to be tumbled into place on the dam face. Then, like a dike as told by a massive liar, Fort Peck Dam itself. # The sheriff hated the sight of ~~the machinery and~~ the ungodly pyramid of raw dirt that the dam builders were piling across the throat of the Missouri River. He hated Franklin Delano Roosevelt for this project

and its ~~dozen~~ <sup>swarm of</sup> construction towns, if that's what you wanted to call such collections of shacks, and the whole shovelhead bunch down here who had to cut loose like rangutangs every Saturday night. Damn ~~the~~ <sup>this</sup> New Deal ~~gravy train~~ <sup>crap</sup> ~~stuff~~. Wasn't there any better way to run a country than to make jobs out of thin air, handing out wage money like it was cigarette papers? The sheriff hated having to call himself a Democrat, though he knew that a person couldn't even get elected to town idiot these days without that tag.

By now he was nearing the floodlights, could see the workbarge with its crane arm poised and the cluster of men at the truck ramp where it <sup>must have</sup> happened. He crept the patrol car along the crest of the dam and when he parked made it a point not only to leave the car in gear but set the emergency brake, hard as he could yank it. Before heading down to the group at the water's edge, though, the sheriff stopped and took a long look east across the river, past last month's trouble here, to promontories of bluffs and badlands ravines the bankside ~~bluffs~~ emerging in dawn outline like scissored shadows.

One thing Sheriff Carl Kinnick loved was his jurisdiction, his piece of the earth to tend justice on. The upper Missouri River country,

or anyway the seventy-five-mile series of bends of the river that Valley County extended north from, like a castle footed into a seacoast. Kinnick's own climb up through life began beside this river, familyless boy mucking out barns and calcimining chickenhouses, working up to the haying jobs, the alfalfa-seed harvest jobs, up and up, squirreling every loose cent away until he had enough to make his start in Glasgow, the county seat. After that there was no stopping him, of course, but he'd always felt--still did feel--somehow that first lift into career, into politics (or as he preferred to think of it, law enforcement) had come from the spell of the river. As far as Carl Kinnick was concerned, the Missouri with its broad fast flow and its royal-green cottonwood groves and the <sup>deep</sup> ~~X~~ bottomland that <sup>made</sup> ~~X~~ was the best farming in eastern Montana, the Missouri had been next thing to perfect the way it was. Until this Fort Peck project. Until <sup>this</sup> ~~they~~ started ~~this world's biggest dam in 1933.~~

~~Four miles of~~ giant federal dike to put people to work with the excuse (benefit, the Roosevelters were always calling it) of stopping floods in the states downriver all the way to St. Louis. The sheriff believed it would be fitting justice if everything and everybody downriver dried up and blew away.

Duty. He picked his way from boulder to boulder down the riprap face of the dam to the cluster of men waiting for him. He nodded only to the night foreman. The owl shift workers had all turned to watch him arrive, the bibs of their overalls fencing him in. The sheriff was the shortest by half a head in any group, and how he felt about that can be guessed.

Singling out <sup>his</sup> ~~the big~~ undersheriff, without preamble he asked ~~him~~ what was delaying matters.

"We've about got it up, Carl, honest. The diver had a hell of a time with it in the dark down there."

The sheriff bit back an impulse to tell the big scissorbill that excuses are like buttoholes, everybody's got one. Instead he folded his arms and rocked back and forth on the small heels of his boots while watching the <sup>crane</sup> ~~derrick~~ at work. Its cable into the <sup>water</sup> ~~river~~ was being reeled in by the operator on the barge, the steel strand making a steady low hum through the intricate pulleys of the <sup>boom</sup> ~~derrick~~ arm, until suddenly--a lot quicker than the sheriff expected, actually--a wallowing sound came and then the splash of water falling away as the surface ~~of the river~~ was

broken upward by <sup>a</sup> ~~the~~ Ford truck.

I've seen some lulus since I got myself elected to this badge,

Kinnick thought as the vehicle dangled from the cable hooked around its front axle, water pouring from the <sup>wide</sup> ~~truck's~~ cab and box as if a metal trough had been yanked straight up by one end. But I never had to put up with them wrecking themselves on the bottom of the river before.

For a moment he hoped the <sup>Ford's</sup> ~~truck's~~ cab would be empty, then canceled lake, whatever this stretch of the Missouri amounted to any more, that at the prospect of having to drag this river for a body. True, maybe <sup>51</sup> just maybe <sup>51</sup> down the ramp and plunged there hadn't even been anybody in the truck when the thing rolled into <sup>section</sup> water about an ~~the Missouri a couple of hours~~ after midnight. The watchman swore he hadn't heard a motor running, only the splash; then when he raced over <sup>51</sup> he'd seen only ~~to see,~~ what appeared to him in the lack of light to be the cab and boxboards of a truck going under. Maybe this was only a case of a poorly rig that coasted loose somehow. parked vehicle jumping out of gear and coasting down a slope. But if a truck visiting the bottom of the Missouri so, if there wasn't some brand of human misbehavior involved in this on a Saturday night at Fort Peck, Sheriff Kinnick was going to be plentifully surprised.

The ton-and-a-half Ford twisted slowly in the air like cargo coming

ashore. When the ~~derrick~~<sup>crane</sup> operator lowered the load as far up the face of the dam as the boom arm would reach, the men clambered to it and the undersheriff, at Kinnick's impatient nod, wrenched the driver's-side door open.

The body question was settled instantly. Plural.

The woman lay stretched behind the steering wheel but turned sideways, facing down toward where the man had slid lengthwise off the seat, headfirst under the dashboard. Both were naked.

Without taking his eyes off the dead pair, the sheriff put out an arm and waved back the gawking damworkers behind him, even though he knew the gesture was useless. This was the moment he always searched for in a case. The instant of discovery. Any witness's first view of what had happened, right there was where you wanted to start. Now that he himself was essentially the first onto the scene of whatever this was, though, the sheriff was more than a bit uncomfortable at the lack of exactitude here. An entire circus of circumstance, here before his eyes, yet somehow not as substantial as he would have liked. As if the bunch behind him with their necks out like ~~cranes~~<sup>an ostrich farm</sup> were sopping up, siphoning

away, ~~diluting~~ what ought to be clearer to him than it was proving to be.

Kinnick got a grip <sup>on</sup> ~~of~~ himself and tried to fix in mind every detail of how the couple lay in the truck cab, although the woman's bare white hip ~~right there~~, the whole <sup>pale</sup> line of her body and the <sup>half-hidden</sup> side of her face kept dominating his attention. No blood, no wounds, at least. He forced himself to balance on the runningboard and <sup>stick</sup> ~~put~~ his head and shoulders <sup>just enough</sup> ~~all the way~~ into the cab to reach across the woman to the gearshift. It proved to be in neutral, which made him uneasy; with these two people occupied with each other as they'd been, how the hell had something like that happened? He knew what he was going to find next, when he tried the emergency brake lever and it of course didn't hold at all; there wasn't a truck in Montana with any wear on it that didn't have the emergency brake burned out. Which made the damned gearshift situation even more--

A cloud of colors at the corner of his right eye startled him, making him jerk his head that direction. The wet wads of their clothing, plastered to the truck's rear window. The lighter wads must be their underwear.

"You know them or don't you?" the sheriff demanded over his shoulder, annoyed that he had to drag it out of the undersheriff.

Even then the undersheriff didn't say the names of the drowned two .  
until Kinnick backed out of the cab and wheeled on him with a hot stare.  
The last name, Duff, the sheriff recognized from some trouble report or  
another--quite a family of them on the dam crew, a tribe of brothers  
and their wives, and a father, was it, into the bargain?--but the  
first names meant nothing to him. That was what an undersheriff was



for.

Thankful isn't the word in circumstances such as this, but Kinnick at least ~~was feeling~~ <sup>felt</sup> relieved that the undersheriff had named them off as a couple and that these river deaths shaped up as an accident, pure and plain. Terrible thing, but people were asking for it with behavior of the kind these two were up to out here in the middle of the--

The undersheriff still was staring into the ~~pickup~~ <sup>truck</sup>, rubbing a corner of his mouth with a fist the size of a sledgehammer head, as if trying to make up his mind about something. The damworkers were overly quiet, too.

"What's the matter now?" Kinnick burst out. The little sheriff prided himself on always staying a few steps ahead in the mental department, but somehow he wasn't up with the expressions on all the rest of the men around the truck. What's got them spooked? It wasn't as if this dam had never killed anybody before. Naked and dead out in public wasn't good, nobody could say that. But you'd think it would take more than that to scandalize damworkers. Funny for a husband and wife to be out here going at it in a truck when they had a home of any kind, that was true. But

Saturday night and all, who knew what these Fort Peckers were apt to get up to? So what could be out of kilter, if this couple was-- "They're married people, right? You said their names are both Duff."

The undersheriff hesitated. He hated dealing with this fierce doll of a man his job depended on.

"That's the thing about this, Carl," the undersheriff said at last.

"Married, you bet. Only not to each other."

## Part Two

## THE MISSOURI

1933-1934

Siderius always kept to the same spiel, had it down slick by now:

"Here on official business...kind of a hard thing, I know, but there's no getting around it...at least make you a fair offer." Saying it the same helped him ~~with this,~~ whether or not it did any good for these bottomland honyoekers. But he hadn't come up against one like this before. The skinny man in worst work clothes was traipsing out of his riverside field of alfalfa toward Siderius's car in a zigzag route, taking his ~~sweet~~ <sup>stet</sup> time about it. With each step he put his foot down in firm aim, the way a kid playing hopscotch does. Then plotch down the other foot some other

direction. As he crazy-gaited closer, it dawned on Siderius that the man was being sure to step on a grasshopper with every stride. The unmitigated gall of the guy in figuring that he could stomp on enough grasshoppers to make any difference made Siderius mad as hell, and when the ~~skin-and-bones~~ <sup>tall</sup> hay farmer didn't so much as offer a handshake, just stood off at the fenceline to his precious field and looked him up and down, that did it: caused Siderius to jab the nasty part right out.

"Don't know if you'd've heard yet, but they're going to be putting up a big dam over by Glasgow."

"What's that to you and me and this fencepost?"

"This, this'll be under the lake."

"That's daft," the <sup>lofty</sup> man by the fence dismissed Siderius's assertion.

"The Glasgow country," Hugh Duff <sup>spoke</sup> said it a way Siderius had never heard, Glazgeh, "is a full hundred miles from here."

"More like a hundred and <sup>a quarter</sup> ~~fifty~~," Siderius let him know. "I just drove it."

"There you are, then." Still wearing his stand-off expression, thin-faced, thin in every part of him, Hugh draped an arm on the

fencepost, glanced back at his field of alfalfa and said as if in private amusement, "The blessed damn nature of farming is that we can always do with a dab more moisture than what we ~~have~~<sup>get</sup>. But we don't need it over our heads."

Siderius imitated Hugh Duff's measuring gaze across the field, pulled to the sight in spite of himself. <sup>The month of</sup> June was proving <sup>hard</sup> ~~the hardest~~ in this job, the early green height of summer and the work that went into these farms, the river-rich fields at their most promising: this time of year's habitual feel of crop and reward impended all along the bottomland. ~~valley of the Missouri.~~ <sup>brisk</sup> Add on that this ~~section~~ of the river, so far upstream here where the Missouri forgot its wandering and fed through timbered bluffs in a ~~brisk~~ <sup>course</sup> straightforward ~~channel~~, this tucked-away cleft stretch of the river was an undeniable beauty, olive in hue and jeweled with sparkles from the sun at every ripple. Here and there stood pale attendant cliffs, the foundations of rock and time showing through, while the river trailed fertile sleeves along its steady channel. And put on top of the natural basis here that although this farmer was a ~~skin-and-bones.~~ lank specimen, his farm was not ~~skinny~~. You could practically count like tree rings the year-by-year progress since this piece of land was

homesteaded by these Duffs. That fence was taut as piano wire, the house and outbuildings which Siderius had driven down past to reach this bottomslope field showed every sign of decent care, and the field itself, a quarter-mile-long porch of luscious soil cupped right up against the sunny side of the river, was contour-sown in a way that ought to yield a junior fortune in seed alfalfa. Ought to. By now Siderius was staring with dread, past the fenceline figure, on across the green baize field to the rattletrap <sup>Model A</sup> ~~Ford~~ pickup there and the trio of people at <sup>the job</sup> ~~it~~, the--

Siderius made himself not think any further in that direction and go back to work on the snippy farmer instead.

"Mister, I'm here to tell you, the dam is going to back up water this goddamn far. And it's my job to make you a price for your land."

Hugh went up and down Siderius with his eyes again, his expression saying he didn't care for any of what he saw. He cocked his head ever so slightly to the left. "That's a refrain we haven't heard, recent years. What, now that the banks have been on holiday, they can sneak you the backing to buy us out?"

"If you'd had your ears on, you'd know I already told you--" Siderius

halfway into his hot retort <sup>Siderius</sup> remembered he hadn't started this off as usual:

Backtrack, Chick, he warned himself. Sometimes to get ahead in this

you need to. Resorting to the recitation, he started in: "First off,

I'm here on ~~official--~~ <sup>official--"</sup> ~~official--"~~ # The dreaded smell was coming up strong from

the field now on a shift of the wind: Siderius had to stop and gulp.

The gulp was not a good idea. He had wondered how long his stomach

could hold out, and the banana-oil odor, sweetly rotten, of what the

people at the pickup were ~~doing~~ <sup>working at</sup> was finally too much. As he went sick

he saw that the farmer was regarding him with more of that private

amusement. Siderius put up the palm of his right hand toward the man,

as if in a halt motion or the taking of an oath, ~~and~~ <sup>and</sup> marched behind his

car and threw up. When he was thoroughly done retching and then spitting

out as much of the taste as he could, ~~Siderius~~ <sup>he</sup> stayed hunched there with

his hands on his knees, the only sound now the hail-like ping of grasshoppers

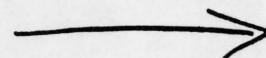
hitting against all sides of the car. This is your last one, Chick,

he had to rally himself, The farthest up on their damn map of everything

they're going to drown. Finish this one and you're done with these

poor eaten-out bastards. He straightened, mopped his mouth with his handkerchief, then went back to the waiting business at the fenceline.

"I'm not out here landhawking," Siderius this time told Hugh Duff<sup>3</sup> as if deathly tired of it all. "The government, the U.S. of A. government hired me on to do this."



# ———  
From the far end of the field, the other three Duffs watched.

The two of them who were mixing the next fifty-gallon batch of grasshopper poison wondered out loud ~~as well.~~

"That's a government Chevy," Neil pronounced, and Bruce nodded as if he'd known so. They were brothers, you could practically see that in the crimp of their hats. "Must be quite the job, whatever it is," Neil pondered. "Suppose they actually pay that guy to drive around in that?"

"Who it is," came Bruce's rendition, "is Herbert Heifer Hoover, out selling the cure for grasshoppers, and the Old Man's trying to jimmy the price down a little." Inch-long 'hoppers batted against the pantlegs of both young men as Bruce bucketed riverwater into the mixture of sawdust, poison, and attractant while Neil stirred with a long-handled shovel.

"And he better hurry up," Bruce concluded.

"Whoa, the stuff feels ready," Neil called off Bruce's bucket-trips to the river. "Careful how we pour, okay?"

Bruce asked with a bit of a smirk: "Speaking of careful, how's your love bite?"

"Smarts a little, is all," Neil replied shortly. A burn the size of a dime was eating at his shin where the top of his sock would normally reach. Yesterday the grasshopper bait somehow had splashed once and soaked through his pantleg, the poison inflicting itself there overnight. Nothing serious, Neil figured, although you probably would not want to make a habit of spilling arsenic on yourself.

"You want to know what I really like about this?" Bruce provided as they poured the mushlike mix into the spreading machine. "All this free banana-oil cologne. Women'll be able to smell us a mile off."

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, <sup>he</sup> ~~Bruce~~ knew he'd laid himself open. All Neil would have to put in on him was something like In your case, what's new about that much <sup>stinkum?</sup> ~~smell?~~

Nothing came, though. Bruce checked across the barrel of mix, saw the little grin on Neil, and realized with a flush that the silence had been the retort. It was as good as said, and that was good enough for Neil.

## There. This is what it takes, the woman waiting behind the steering wheel of the pickup, watching the fenceline tableau of Hugh and <sup>the government man</sup> Siderius,

told herself fixedly. There were times, and this was one, when Hugh had to be absolutely hit between the eyes with a fact. For a minute, seeing the car come, she had wished the news could deliver itself some more gentle way; then decided no, she didn't either. Let it get over with all at once, bango.

For waging war against grasshoppers, Meg Duff wore one of Hugh's old workshirts, bib overalls, and a scarf tightly tied, despite the heat in the pickup cab, to keep stray hoppers from flying into her hair. Under each edge of the bib of her overalls a neat roundness showed, as if she had an apple in each shirt pocket; with her hair tucked up under the scarf, only the little vee of origin at the back of her neck showed that the interesting color of honeyed brunette. Her skin was not the sort that sun and wind are kind to. Her eyes, though, were the memorable blue of a Wedgwood piece (the sons produced by her and Hugh were copies of his tall spare Duff build, but their eyes and hair color fetchingly took after her side) and she had a little nock in her chin, a tiny divided place like a mark of character.

Long years of practice at holding herself together, otherwise known as marriage to Hugh, had made Meg her own best judge, and ~~that~~<sup>this</sup> minute of

back and forth in herself bothered her, even scared her some. Don't be afraid of being scared, she bolstered herself. This is a family that can use some sense scared into it just now.

"Ready again, Mother," Neil came up to the cab of the pickup and told her. "Let's murder some more bugs."

"We're becoming all too practiced at it," she took the moment to tell him, "but still, Neil, be careful how you go." Her edge-of-the-bed voice, more deep and dramatic than a woman's generally reached, had the assumption that it could steer these sons of hers past casual poison as handily as it had carried them through every childhood ailment.

She put the pickup in low gear and began driving at as much speed as possible along the outside edge of the alfalfa. As she did, Bruce piled into the back of the pickup to mind the five-gallon cans of extra water, and Neil stood virtually beside her on the running-board of the driver's side, an arm up inside the cab to hold him in place, and watched ~~backward~~ <sup>behind</sup> to see that the spreader was working. In sporadic sweeps, the bait spewed out the way grain falls when scattered by the panful: the watered sawdust mush, the amyl acetate "banana oil" mixed in to act

as attractant, the adhering arsenic.

In the field of alfalfa beside the swath of poison, the grasshoppers amounted to a creeping acid. When the pickup wasn't running, they could be heard making a meal of everything that grew; that undersound of millions of miniscule mouths each biting through a leaf, a stem, a stalk.

Every year the same surprise, Meg silently cried the thought across

the infested field to Hugh. ~~The cycle of grasshoppers depended on the~~

~~weather everything did--and~~ this had been a wet year <sup>until spring</sup> ~~on through the~~ seemed fully launched, <sup>turns of weather</sup> ~~arrival of spring,~~ no hint of the hot dry previous ~~summers~~ that made

grasshopper eggs hatch in profusion. But then came rainless days for

~~the last~~ <sup>then</sup> ~~most of April and~~ <sup>then</sup> ~~May and~~ on into June, and the clouds of grasshoppers

rose from the ground one more time. Stubborn against the evidence as usual,

Hugh still maintained that the grasshoppers could not keep on being annual,

could not continue going down and down. just as he'd kept saying the price for a coveted seed crop such as alfalfa

Out we climbed, and found ourselves in deeper. The ragged chant of riddle

from their schooldays in Inverley pertained exactly to this situation

of them and the place, Meg was convinced, although Hugh would never admit

so. Nor let himself



see ahead in the family, for that matter. Of these two sons of theirs here working themselves blue in the face against grasshoppers, Neil might have stayed with the place, but Bruce already was as good as gone. What seemed to be coming over him were runaway impulses, in more ways than one. Men never pay attention to how their voices carry, so Meg had heard the news through her open kitchen window one haul day. Bruce had taken a pickup load all the way over to the seed warehouse in Glasgow--the offer price was pennies better there--and when he drove back into the yard just before supper, there came the slam of the pickup door, Neil's offhand asking of "How was town?" and Bruce's proud report, "Got laid and everything."

In certain circumstances you would just as soon not know the behavior of your offspring, Meg reflected at the time, if for no other reason than it sets up unwelcome comparisons. For all her surge of motherly shock at Bruce, part of her already could not help but be amused by that everything. It played in her mind, stayed with her like a teasing tune as she contemplated Hugh and herself and their long tug-of-war over what was love and what was lure and where lay the confusing ground between. . . Did the everything of her and Hugh have to forever include the portion

she would sometimes like to bat out of him with a broom, as well as the share of him that she would not have traded <sup>for</sup> all the silk in China? for? o

By now not only was the afternoon <sup>boiling</sup> ~~hot~~, so was the engine of the pickup. Roaring along in low gear was necessary for spreading the grasshopper bait as thoroughly as possible, but it meant she had to stop often for Bruce and Neil to hop down and put water in the radiator. This was everybody's least favorite chore, unscrewing the cap of a <sup>hot</sup> ~~boiling~~ radiator. All they could do, though, was for one or the other to wrap his right arm in a coat and with a gloved hand cautiously loosen that cap a little at a time until the pressure, and the chance of being scalded, went down. Watching, Meg always held her breath a little.

Not today. She never even looked as Bruce fought the radiator cap and compared it to the temperature of the doorknob of Hell. Across the field, she saw Hugh drop his arm from that affectionate rest on the fencepost, saw him stand differently.

# —————

p. 23 follows 

"Let me get my feet under me, a minute," Hugh was saying slowly, there at the fenceline. "Land like this, taken for a dam halfway across Montana from here? You're sure you're on the reach of the river that you think you are, are you?"

Siderius compressed his lips and simply nodded yes.

"I can't believe you," Hugh spoke as if telling him the time of day. "A dam that'd--why would they do such a thing?"

"It's kind of beyond me," Siderius was forced to admit, "but they're about gonna do it." In spite of himself he shook his head at what was even harder to swallow. "With dirt, no less."

Hugh Duff's face changed radically.

Watching the man warily, Siderius got back to the part he knew by heart, "appraisal involved...so-much per acre...fair deal as possible but..." But none of it made a dent in the stricken look that had come over the farmer. The low-gear growl of the pickup from the far side of the field, the yelps of the two young men whenever the spreader clogged or the radiator spewed, all seemed as lost on this man Duff as Siderius's spiel.

Perplexed, Siderius decided to jump ahead of himself again and offer:

"You'll get preference."

"What's that supposed to mean, preference."

"In getting hired. At the dam project."

Hugh let out an alarming chuckle, a sound of mirth gone dry and bitter. "Man, do I look anything like a skilled hand at that sort of work?"

You look about like any other sad sonofabitch of a honyocker who needs a job, of whatever the hell kind, Siderius thought. About like me.

"Listen," he told the other. "I don't know if this helps any at all, but I been through this myself. The dam's going in right on top of me. I had 160 acres of the best seed alfalfa you ever saw, <sup>right</sup> ~~just~~ this side of Fort Peck." Duff didn't even blink at him. Siderius shrugged. "At least there's jobs with the dam, we anyway ought to be thankful for that."

Hugh studied him bleakly. "And you're right there at the head of the sugar-tit line. No wonder you puke, at the sight of yourself."

"I'm at least doing something besides the grasshopper quickstep,"

Siderius shot back. "How many summers now you been walking that way?

Three? Four?"

"I'm stepping on my own ground," Hugh said in the coldest tone Siderius had ever heard, "not on the necks of my neighbors."

Afterward, in the years of the Fort Peck dam project, Chick Siderius stayed leery of the Duffs. By then he couldn't see that they had any gripe coming, they'd been paid the exact damn same for their land as everybody else. And they did end up with jobs, the whole slew of them, didn't they? But even when Siderius spotted one of their women--good God, their women--he would cross the street to stay out of their way. He never forgot how treacherous the exchange with ~~the~~ <sup>that</sup> old bearcat Hugh suddenly turned, there at the fenceline, and the final flub he'd made in trying to calm things down. All Siderius had said was:

"At least you and the wife aren't up against this alone. If I know family resemblance when I see it, you've got a couple of sons <sup>helping you out</sup> ~~there,~~ right?"

~~"We've~~  
~~"We have~~ three," Hugh Duff had given the government hiree that terrible corroded chuckle again, then swung around as if to hurl the

next sentence across the field. Haven't we, Meg. When it came, the words practically spat from him. "But one's a dirt dam engineer."

# ———

The sheriff later dug up the fact that, back there in '33 when the alfalfa farmers were being cleared out of the Missouri River bottomland and in turn hired to clear the damsite of brush and cottonwoods, the name Duff was already part of the Fort Peck vocabulary. It gave Sheriff Kinnick something more to think about, that this dogfight bunch amounted to, what would you have to say, the first family of the dam? As well as being the authors of that truck in the river. Where the Duff record was concerned, the sheriff spent immense time trying to get his mind around the size of all the contradiction. But then, he would remind himself bitterly, that was always the thing about the cockeyed dam. From day one, everything about Fort Peck was going to set a record.

# ———

W. abutment: layer cake--

glac'l till

on

alluv'l silt etc.

on

Bearpaw shale

The Eversharp pencil paused on the pocket notebook, then rapidly jotted ~~dashed~~ down:

E. abutment: badlands--

B'paw shale up the gigi

"So what do you think of her, Duff? You ready to make mudpies with Miz Missouri?"

Day one at Fort Peck for Owen Duff had come in early May of 1933, in company with a handful of other first hires specked across a bald knob on the bluff overlooking one particular crimp of the river. <sup>#</sup> The wind was up, naturally, and Owen could have kicked himself for not wearing his wool-collared short mackinaw instead of trying to appear climateproof for the Army Corps of Engineers big shots. The other civilian engineers looked equally chilblained, but Owen alone had grown up in this northern Montana wind, was so habited to it that even ~~indoors~~ <sup>High Line</sup> in the <sup>in Glasgow</sup> Glasgow hotel he would catch himself slanting ahead into a braced position when he felt the start of a breeze through an opened window. <sup>#</sup> Never mind with the weather, he instructed himself. This is the damnedest chance anybody ever dreamed of. Charlene will see. This is something we'll be able to

hang our hats on for the rest of our lives. Tucking his notebook and mechanical pencil into their accustomed pocket of his gabardine jacket, turned and he answered Sangster:

"I'm ready for any sonofabitching thing that constitutes construction."

"Uh huh," the shorter man agreed. "If the railroad cut back any more, I'd have had to figure out how to teach trains to jump creeks."

From Owen's own line of engineering there was a similar ~~gang~~<sup>stock</sup> of standard wisecracks he could have chosen from, about trying to underbid gophers on tunnelwork, <sup>or</sup> ~~and~~ the difficulty Montana dogs were having in burying their bones with so many unemployed dirt engineers eager to do it for them, and so on; but he didn't trouble to. Not now, not here, not worth interrupting this chance at absolutely kicking aside the Depression and its lame jokes. Instead, arms crossed and hands tucked in his armpits for warmth's sake, he walked the same few strides back and forth as he kept studying the course of the Missouri below.

Owen was an even six feet tall, and thin except in the head. There, a strong forehead and ~~dark~~ <sup>china-blue</sup> brunette eyebrows and ~~ice-blue~~ eyes oversaw a surprisingly widecut mouth where the usual expression was partly

quizzical, partly provocative. When that mouth was set seriously, as now, he looked a lot like a bothered Will Rogers.

"Enjoying the sights of Fort Peck?" he abstractedly asked Sangster.

There was no fort to Fort Peck any more, or for that matter, anything <sup>matching</sup> except the ~~benches~~ of land and <sup>the</sup> flat floor of the river valley that had

beckoned up from the Corps of Engineers map as a dam site. A stockaded

trading post briefly propped up by sternwheel steamboat traffic, the

last of Fort Peck had been swept off its ledge at the base of this bluff

by high water <sup>of</sup> sometime in the 1890's; the name, though, had <sup>the</sup> ~~more~~ lives

~~than~~ a cat, attaching itself to the nearby Indian reservation and now

to the dam notion that had these engineers by the eyes. In this first

hundred days of the New Deal, <sup>as</sup> ~~with~~ the Roosevelt administration wheeled

laws, <sup>funds</sup> ~~money~~, and projects into being, the senior senator from Montana--

fortuitously named Wheeler--had been right at the head of the line for

a dam and ten thousand jobs here.

Owen and Sangster and the other fresh civvie engineers had been briefed half to death about this project already, but a good long stare at this <sup>remote</sup> stretch of the Missouri had things to tell them, too. The first of which was,

on this river that scrawled from west to east for hundreds of miles across upper Montana, the axis of the dam was not going to be crosswise to that, north-south as every fiber of logic said it had to be.

The river hadn't heard the logic, and as if bored with the oxbow bends it had been scrolling all the way across Valley County, here it shot out of its series of <sup>ings</sup> ~~writes~~ with ~~an abrupt notion to go~~ a notion to keep going north. It was the midpoint of this northward veer, the Fort Peck speck of geography, that presented the dam site, a narrower and higher set of benchlands than where the ~~wandering~~ <sup>lazy</sup> curves were. # A west-east dam on a west-east river; you just had to adjust. Owen Duff thought ahead to more than a thousand days of sunrise at one end of the dam, sunset at the other, sun in the eyes of ~~the~~ <sup>his</sup> dredgeline crews; it would make a difference in where he laid those lines.

"Bastardish big open country out here, isn't it," Sangster said.

"Anything between here and the North Pole, come winter?"

"What," Owen now grinned fully and joined the formula of weather

complaint, "you want the wind cut with something besides a barbwire fence?"

"Any more of a breeze than this," Sangster squinted against the  
~~blast of air,~~  
 persistent ~~wind,~~ "and this is one sissybritches engineer you'll find  
 hunkered down ~~there~~ behind those ~~big~~ cottonwoods."

"That's all going to go, first thing."

"The whole works?" Sangster glanced at ~~Owen,~~ <sup>him,</sup> then back to the  
 winding thicket ~~miles and miles~~ of cottonwood trees and diamond willows ~~which~~ <sup>that</sup> hedged  
~~west~~  
 the ~~riverbank, a winding thicket accompanying this west shore~~ of the  
 Missouri as far as could be seen.

"Mnhmm. Clearing out the bottomland will help with the dredging,  
~~Besides causing gobs of jobs."~~  
 the idea is. Owen was thinking out loud now. "If I was you, I'd make  
 sure that cottonwood doesn't get consigned toward your bridging. These  
 Corps guys--they know how to push a project until it squeals, but we  
 don't want them doing it through shortcuts in procurement."

"Jesus no," said Sangster, realizing that Owen was seeing around  
 bends besides the river's. "I'll goose up my specifications on all  
 bridge timbering."

"Wouldn't hurt," Owen approved, but was already back ~~into his gaze~~ <sup>to gazing</sup>

at the bluff across the river, the distant shoulder that his dam would rest against. His own tall order of engineering, so big that it needed imagining in segments.

Think of a mile, and pile its entire length with a pyramid of earth as high as a twenty-five-story building.

Think of another mile, do the fill again.

Think of a third such distance, same.

A fourth and final mile, equally level.

The mountainous amount of gravel needed for the downstream toe of a dam <sup>that</sup> ~~this~~ size? Bring it in from the big pit at Cole, 80 miles. That

wasn't so hot, Owen thought. The glacier-size quantity of rock for the upstream face? Bring it in from the Snake Butte quarry, ~~52~~ <sup>one hundred and fifty</sup> miles. That

definitely

~~wasn't so hot either.~~ But hauling the staggering tonnages of gravel

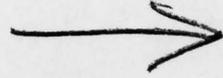
and stone into here from Hell and gone was not Owen Duff's given job.

Heaping those materials correctly once they got here, along with more

than a hundred million cubic yards of material dredged from these river

banks down there, into a firm gentle berm across those four miles, pervious

edges married onto impervious core; handling the Fort Peck earthfill,  
the biggest earthen dam ever tried: that was going to be his.



Soon came a shout from the top of the knob, ~~that it was time to~~  
 be briefed by the Colonel. ~~gather for a briefing.~~ The Corps seemed to be big on briefing, <sup>all right.</sup> "Guess  
 we better get used to it," Sangster said, "or marry money."

He stopped, embarrassed. He had let that out before remembering  
 that Owen Duff was a married man.

Owen threw him a look, ~~all right,~~ but with it a fleeting expression  
 that ~~which~~ Sangster didn't know how to construe.

"Sometimes ~~it's almost~~ <sup>it can be</sup> worth it," Owen told him, "even if only  
 small change is involved."

#

Charlene Duff wondered how it had come to this, that she all of a  
 sudden was jealous of a mound of dirt.

The Fort Peck Dam ~~project~~ occupied Owen from the minute he heard  
 the rumor of it, ~~and~~ the next thing Charlene knew, the job there had  
 plucked him away and left her rattling around the apartment in Bozeman,  
~~by herself.~~ Housing would be flung up at Fort Peck as <sup>soon</sup> quick as possible,  
 Owen kept telling her, but meanwhile he and the other engineering whizzes

were hoteling it in Glasgow and she had to make do <sup>here</sup> ~~alone~~ ~~in Bozeman.~~

She no longer liked the notion of alone. Not that she liked the sound of Fort Peck much better.

"My dearest," she began <sup>this</sup> ~~last~~ night's letter to him, and thought, I should probably quit right there. Just write that over and over fifty or a hundred times, like a kid who has to stay after school.

"So glad to recv yours of last wk," she jotted in store hand, and hurried the ink on through disposal of the weather and Bozeman's onslaught of collegians again, now that September was here. Then she and the fountain pen took their time, careful with the next:

"It is just about more than I can stand, being apart from you

this way, sweet one. You know the song--the <sup>"</sup>miss<sup>"</sup> in <sup>"</sup>Missouri<sup>"</sup>,

that's me missing you. Oh Owen, I wish you were here right now and--

well, you know. But next to that, what I wanted to tell you is that

I met up with Prof Z downtown today, and he told me there is going to be

a <sup>"</sup>Bozeman bunch<sup>"</sup> hired for the 2 Columbia River dams, Grand Coulee and

I forget the other one. I wonder, darling? If you could latch on at one

of those, maybe we wouldn't have to wait and wait for Fort Peck to ever

put a roof over our heads...."

The Missouri River had maundered through enough of Charlene's life already. Her father had been the barber in the little riverside town of Toston, a place with none too many male heads to start with, and those ~~that~~ <sup>g</sup> there were, in the habit of a haircut only about every sixth Saturday night. Her mother ~~spent~~ <sup>passed</sup> her days trying to pretend there was enough clientele among Toston's females, even fewer and more set in their hairdo habits, to justify her beauty parlor in a partitioned-off area of the barber shop. Both of these scissor merchants ~~had~~ <sup>devoted</sup> spent their spare time, a nearly unlimited amount, <sup>to</sup> in trying to catch every fish in the Missouri River. In short, with these parents who had about as much enterprise as pigeons, Charlene Tebbet spent her Missouri River girlhood <sup>(sweeping up hair and)</sup> raising herself and her younger sister, Rosellen. # The Missouri was only twenty miles old at Toston but already five hundred feet wide and so implacably smooth you knew it had to be deep, drownable deep. When the Tebbet sisters played along the riverbank, beneath the flight paths of fish-hawks and just above the swim zones of muskrats, Charlene simply assumed that the responsibility for not falling in was totally hers, for both of them. Not that Rosellen was a careless or reckless child, but she could be mischievous enough that Charlene felt obliged to order her around for



her own good. Rosellen took the bossing without ~~too much~~ open warfare over it, but by the time Charlene ~~was~~ <sup>g</sup> ~~packing~~ <sup>ed</sup> up for ~~the~~ <sup>a</sup> store job in Bozeman and Rosellen was about to start high school, they both knew that the older-sister superintendence had run its course.

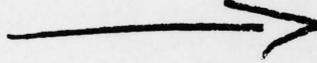
"...I haven't had a line from Rosellen since Christmas, the little rip. Will write her anyway as soon as I finish this to you...."

~~From then on for Charlene,~~ Bozeman put Toston so far into the shade as to constitute total eclipse. The stimulation of city traffic, two movie houses, the Big Dipper ice cream parlor, a room to herself at the ~~Riverview~~ <sup>Riverview</sup> ~~Riverside~~ boarding house, the freshness of working as a counter clerk in Cunningham's Department Store, the other young women ~~on the~~ <sup>full of</sup> ~~of the store staff with their~~ jokes and pranks and sass and gossip, all this and an actual salary, too--Charlene giggled more her first month in Bozeman than <sup>she had</sup> in all her previous life.

And all of a sudden, Owen.

Always after, Owen maintained that if he had been content to count on his fingers instead of replacing the slide rule he had lost, he would still be a free man. He was on his way across town from campus to another

of his odd jobs, night minder in a chick hatchery, when he swerved  
by Cunningham's for a new slide rule. He found the one he wanted and  
kept fiddling with it, to get used to how the middle tabular part slid,  
on his way to the counter. When



he looked up, he saw that the clerk had coal-black hair <sup>and dark, dark eyes</sup> and carried herself like one of those hieroglyphic princesses, head tautly up, shoulders just so. Charlene in turn saw a strong-featured face with an engaging quizzical underline to it in the wide cut of the ~~man's~~ mouth.

While she wrote up a sales slip for the slide rule, ~~he~~ <sup>Owen</sup> dug a couple of silver dollars out of his pocket. Charlene took the dollars and dropped them clinking into the canister. She yanked the dispatch cord and the canister whizzed up to the balcony office where Priscilla or Janie would make change.

This was the part that gave her the fidgets, the waiting. She always saved to now to ask, "Would you like that wrapped?"

Owen considered. "No sense to. I'll be using it right away."

"Oh." <sup>Charlene</sup> She fussed with the sales ~~receipt~~ <sup>slip</sup> pad. What was keeping the change canister? She managed to glance over the customer's shoulder to the balcony. Pandemonium up there in honor of the <sup>tall</sup> goodlooking man. Priscilla was out from behind her desk and doing a little Charleston shimmy while biting her lip suggestively. Janie, worse, was not even counting out the change yet but just leaning over the rail lapping him

up with her eyes. If the customer turned around...

"What does a slide rule do?" ~~Charlene~~ asked.

He looked at her in surprise. "Just about anything. Multiplication. Long division. Logarithms."

"You're at the college, then."

"You bet.  
~~Minimum~~ Engineering."

"That sounds ambitious," Charlene said ~~while~~ trying to stare the pair on the balcony into civil behavior. "I can't imagine what's holding up your change."

Owen laughed, an interesting grin staying on after. <sup>Could #</sup> "Maybe they're testing the silver in those dollars."

<sup>Could #</sup> Maybe they're going to get their hair roots pulled out when I get  
hold of ~~those two~~, <sup>them, too</sup> Charlene <sup>thought</sup> ~~was thinking~~ <sup>just as she heard</sup> to herself, "A descending zing  
~~toward her.~~  
~~traveled their way.~~" "Oh, here it comes. At last."

When Charlene opened the canister she saw ~~there was a second piece~~ <sup>scrap</sup>  
~~memo.~~  
of paper along with the sales slip and the change. Shielding it with her body, she peeked down and read:

He's a dish! Don't let him get away!

Charlene crumpled the note, turned and placed the change in the man's broad palm. Then she took a breath, uncrumpled the note and pushed it across the counter to him.

# —————  
What compels love?

Cross-examine the Charlene of 1933 and she would never tell you that Owen's blue blaze of drive, there in his eyes and on inward to his brain and gut and backbone, had singly been enough to make him compulsory for her, back there five years earlier; wasn't that the likelihood, though?

Try the question on the Owen of then and he would swallow his tongue rather than count off such small attractions as the way Charlene's hair topped out perfectly for his cheekbone to rest against ~~excitingly~~ when they danced and so on; but add up enough of those and don't they become compulsion?

Sharing a close call can clinch the matter, too, as on the long-since night when the pair of them were in the college's hydraulic<sup>s</sup>/laboratory where sometimes Owen worked late on his thesis research and sometimes they necked. The night watchman could be heard on his way, so Charlene, her dress mildly askew, hid down behind the nozzle cupboard. Flinging open

the lab door, an aroma of moonshine brew emanating in with him, the watchman appraised Owen at his flow-sink and recited:

"The heights by great men reached and kept  
were not attained by sudden flight;  
but they while their companions slept  
were toiling upward in the night."

Then slammed the door and went away.

Charlene and Owen laughed into their hands until they were sure the watchman ~~was~~ would be out of range, then really broke loose. They stayed in this silly spasm to the point of hiccups, until Owen ~~at last~~ managed to catch his breath, straighten up soberly, and say to her:

"What if?"

Her heart dropped. What if they'd been caught, he could only mean; what if he'd faced expulsion for--what did they even call something like this, violating college premises by...

But she saw he was smiling, not at all resembling someone about to announce that they must never neck in the hydraulic lab again.

<sup>(ca)</sup> "Charlene, what if that guy is right, hmm?" Owen said urgently as

he reached both arms around her waist and a little below; reached and kept. "That this beats sleeping."

# —————

They stayed a steady couple on through Owen's years of college, each of his weeks dizzy with classwork and the desperate odd jobs and the details of Charlene, hers crammed with him and the ever longer hours at Cunningham's (but for gradually less pay, a personal impingement by the Depression which started her thinking about the order of things).

1928, 1929, 1930; those years sped and yet seemed endless, the waiting, waiting, waiting until Owen graduated and <sup>latched onto</sup> ~~landed~~ a job and they could get married.

Making love helped. It scared the daylights out of them too, every time. Whenever the kissing and embracing and fondling led to more, separately and mutually they would vow afterward that they had better quit this. (Charlene did not know so, but Owen had been keeping a diary ever since he came to college, one of those five-year ones with a quintet of spaces down each page, and it was when he found himself jotting Ch. & I again below the previous year's identical entry that he gave up the diary.) Bleary watchman aside, there was really no one to catch them sinning away like burglars of each other's bodies, yet everything

→

teetered when they did: if Owen made Charlene pregnant, here came premature marriage and there went her paycheck, his college trajectory, and their chance of climbing, any at all, up life's <sup>splintery</sup> ~~steep~~ rungs. They (mostly Charlene) learned just enough precaution so they could keep scaring themselves that delicious way.

She wondered even yet, pen to the page, at the risk built in to love. She could remember how daring she felt when she shed Toston and tried on Bozeman, seven years ago. New to herself. Once before, some spring and early summer of her girlhood, rain for once came to Montana at perfect times and amounts, and the ranchers from the Big Belt Mountains when they swung into <sup>town</sup> ~~Toston~~ for groceries and haircuts kept saying of the unbelievable grass, "It's like Africa." That's the sort of thing she first thought about herself in Bozeman, how much taller and more lush and rare and therefore chancy her life suddenly was. Then she met Owen, and learned what a dare really meant. ~~Africa, S. Africa.~~ The geography of another person, that was where you went blindfolded and raw and in over your head. The magnitude of being apart had come into it now, too. Out the window of the ~~Bozeman~~ <sup>g</sup> apartment, down the Gallatin <sup>River</sup> ~~to~~ the Missouri's

headwaters at Three Forks, on past Toston, the distance to Fort Peck was 625 miles. ~~River miles.~~

Resentfully she eyed the hour on the clock, which somehow seemed both too early and too late to suit her. Nights now, she hated to go to bed, with no future there except sleep. She supposed bed blues like these were no more than right a first time apart in three married years, but knowing so didn't take any of the edge off the feeling. Of course, according to his hurried letters Owen had his own rankles, but of a different sort. Dispatches from a stampede, his account of life in Glasgow sounded like. Glasgow woke up at 2:30 one morning and realized that its fortune was piling into town. What unfolded first was a hotelier's dream: so many men of the Fort Peck project suddenly coming and going that ~~hotel~~ rooms could be rented out twice in the same night, first to those who wanted to catch some sleep until time for the "through train" at half past two, and then to those who tumbled off the pullman cars. When either shift climbed out of bed they <sup>wanted a meal,</sup> ~~had to have meals,~~ and so the cafe owners hit it rich five and six times a day. Reasonably often the food was washed down with a few drinks, and the bars along the south side of the railroad tracks lit up. Among the swarm of Fort Peck comers and goers were quantity buyers, either for the government or the construction contractors, who would snap up all the axes in Glasgow one day and, the next, hire every fry cook and washerwoman. Amid 

this frenzy, Owen and the other engineers had to contrive the dam plans, which ~~Owen's~~ <sup>his</sup> most recent letter had likened to trying to sort pie tins in a hailstorm.

So, Owen had his own load, Charlene didn't deny that in the least. But there still was this of hers; with Owen gone these months on the Fort Peck job, this was like being married to herself.

"Dear one, about the other dams," she finished off the night's letter to him. "I hope you don't mind what I had to say. I only want the world to really see how Goin' Owen can go."

#  
DROP CAP

The next-to-last Monday in October, ordinarily when not much is underway in northern Montana ~~when nothing is underway~~ except the weather's ~~increasing~~ sharpening its teeth ~~nastiness~~, the money began at Fort Peck.

The hiring in Glasgow that morning had a ~~circus~~ <sup>carnival</sup> spirit to it. Men milled into lines, expectant, not wanting to hope too much but buoyant with the prospect of a paying job, a steady half-dollar-an-hour after the cashless bafflement the Depression had brought. Preference, Hugh Duff noted, seemed to be wholesale. From the talk of them, here were other bottomland farmers and backpocket ranchers from along the river, yes,

but the streets of Glasgow had been swept to come up with some of these other specimens. He and Neil and Bruce stayed together in the crowd, for what that was worth. They had filled out employment forms, been given a brass button with an employment number (9 for Hugh, Neil 10, and Bruce inexplicably 57) to pin on a shirt pocket, and stood around waiting for the transportation which the government men told them every five minutes would be here in five minutes; the first day of anything has some wobble to it. At last they climbed up into one of the crew trucks for the jouncing ride of seventeen miles to the river. So far, Hugh thoroughly despised everything about government relief work.

The Duffs ~~at least~~ <sup>g</sup> knew enough about riding in the back of a truck on rutted section-line roads to stand up behind the cab, hanging on to the boxboards, and so while the Glasgow street denizens tried to sit and were getting their spines pounded from the base up, Hugh, Neil, and Bruce met the Fort Peck country face-on.

When their truck, in the lead, topped into the view of sprawling river plain, Neil's and Bruce's first thought was the same: that the makeshift little convoy of trucks and pickups and a couple of touring cars

would turn one way or the other from this overlook and head off toward tighter terrain where the dam site must be. But there was nothing to head off toward.

Upstream and down, across and beyond, the valley of the Missouri boomed away to horizons of its own making, wide-open country split down its middle by a muscular tan channel--no, on closer inspection, two channels; the river here divided around a massive wedge of silt called Cow Island--where century in and century out these twin flows--no, honestly three flows; the third a river of timber and brush, in and of itself substantial, miles of diamond willows and stark stands of <sup>leafless</sup> cottonwoods along the near bank--had ebbed and swelled with the methodical might of the seasons.

Everyone aboard the truck ~~was now standing~~ <sup>stood</sup> and ~~peering~~ <sup>ed</sup>, calculating madly on how many man-years of wagework it was going to take to throw a dam across this, and a voice from the back put all their incredulity into:

"Keep a light in the window, Mother, I'm coming home to die!"

As their truck lurched down the bluff, Neil pointed.

There where the river plain met the base of the benchlands, perhaps a mile yet below the truck route, sat a farm with a stepped-roof barn, so much like the one on the Duff place that Hugh felt stabbed by the sight.

Neil's gesture, though, pinpointed the helpers working behind a survey party, spreading sacks of lime in a white line across the ground from stake to stake. The straight streak of white narrowly missed the back of the barn, and it could be extended with the eye across the middle of Cow Island, and then across the stubble of the alfalfa fields on the opposite side of the river, and at last up out of the bottomland to where the axis of the dam would meet the far bluff.

Downstream from the white line, the trucks cut their engines and the men piled out and stood looking around skeptically at the underbrush and ~~the~~ <sup>big uninked</sup> cottonwoods ~~which~~ <sup>that</sup> cloaked the river. During the hiring sign-up in Glasgow, the war veterans among them had been freely saying this was reminiscent of army life, all right, much commotion but little motion, so ~~everyone~~ <sup>now</sup> ~~was~~ <sup>became</sup> impressed at how ~~quickly~~ <sup>briskly</sup> an Army Engineer lieutenant ~~appeared and~~ dealt them into three groups, one crew to saw down cottonwoods, another to clear brush, and the third to build a toolhouse. When the lieutenant strode by the Duffs, he designated Bruce to the sawyers, Neil to brushwhacking, and Hugh for the toolhouse crew, which infuriated Hugh. Who was this Army shavetail anyway, to decree that Hugh Duff was

too old to do axework? He stepped out after the lieutenant and said in a stung tone, "I've fought brush all my blessed damn life and can fight it some more."

"If you'd really rather," the lieutenant said brusquely. He darted his attention back to Bruce and Neil. "One of you to the toolhouse detail, then."

Neil spoke up. "I wouldn't mind."

# — Owen didn't strictly have to be there, this first day of the manual labor force descending on Fort Peck, but only death or disablement could have kept him away.

That morning, he stuck his head in the temporary Corps office in Glasgow only long enough to make the excuse of needing to run another porosity test on weathered shale, then caught a ride to the river on the tool truck. There he went through the motions of sending the rock docs across to auger out more samples from what would be the dam's shaley east abutment, but mainly he wanted to view this next ~~Day One~~.

His brothers, ~~but deliberately not his father,~~ had already crossed while his father deliberately did the opposite, paths with him at the community hall breakfast thrown by the Glasgow

Chamber of Commerce a few hours ago. He had only seen them, what, half a dozen times in the years since he took himself to Bozeman, pair of unfolding kids, they'd been then, and while in a sense he knew each of them from the ground up--Neil who always watched his way as if he were on stilts, Bruce built on springs--Owen worried a bit that they were not ready for Glasgow and Fort Peck. In the community hall's thronged atmosphere, wild with passed plateloads of breakfast, they especially looked short of adjusted. Young men who knew plenty, but maybe not this particular verse. But who's to say who is out of place at a time like this, Owen told himself as he went over to instigate handshakes and the quizzical grins that were a Duff trademark.

Bruce couldn't help but be first into brother-talk:

"Got yourself a dam to build, Ownie, huh?"

"Not quite by myself. There'll be stuff that needs some main strength and ignorance, Bruce."

That hadn't come out as lightly as Owen ~~now~~ wanted, but Bruce seemed to take it as teasing. "You're the expert. We're just here to fill in around the edges, aren't we, Neil?"

"Four bits an hour, up from nothing." Neil smiled around his words.

"That'll be different."

"Yeah, helluva deal," Bruce backed that with an even bigger smile.

"When did somebody come up with this wage idea, anyway? The Old Man never told us it existed."

"Uncle Sam is here now. You're going to see a lot that didn't exist before five minutes ago." Owen checked his wristwatch as if that had reminded him. "Speaking of which. I better say hello to Mother, then go try make something happen." He looked dubiously at Bruce, then Neil, then Bruce again. He felt oddly responsible, and half perturbed along with it, that these yearling brothers of his were going to be at the tail of his eye here, from now on. "You guys--" What, though, advicewise. Keep your pecker in your pocket, lest the new horde of whores on Glasgow's south side of the tracks flirt you into something stupid? Save your pennies for a rainy day, the Depression isn't over just because a federal paper-shuffler is handing you a job? Don't kiss a bear when you have honey on your lips? What could be said that would stay heard, when they were at that age? Nothing much, Owen decided. "You guys let me know what

you're up to, once in a while."

Before Owen could turn to go, Neil with a sweep of his head and his eyes open mock wide indicated out beyond the jampacked breakfast function to the dam project that had brought it all here, and expressed in wonder:

"As the Old Man would say, how does this thing do?"

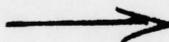
Well might he ask, Owen thought now, traipsing in exhilaration along the base of the west bluff, past where ~~drillers were driving~~ the makeshift truck convoy had spilled out its little army of brushwhackers. ~~another test hole into the sidehill shale.~~ Look at it ~~casually,~~ <sup>over</sup>

or even several degrees closer than that, and Fort Peck appeared to be taking place all ways simultaneously. Here they were, starting clearance of the biggest dam site in the world, and test holes still were being drilled. ~~Right now in the Corps office in Glasgow, somebody was~~

yelling at somebody else about where best to put the diversion tunnels which would have to carry the entire flow of the Missouri River; like a lot else about this project, they didn't know how yet, they just ~~knew they could do it.~~ People--well, like the Duffs--were barely out

of these bottomland houses, and the white lime outline of the dam was cutting across their tracks. Even Owen had to keep systematically bringing to mind the overlaps of how it all fit together. That the thicket off ahead of him along the riverbank where the first brush and trees were being whacked down was precisely where the <sup>fleet of</sup> dredges and barges and pontoons for his ~~earthfill~~ <sup>dredging</sup> setup would be built. That a twelve-mile trellis of railroad track would emerge, straight on in from the vee of the valley ahead of him, soon next spring, Sangster already had worked out a way, girder bridgespans daringly laid on timber pilings sheathed with steel, to hop the Milk River and reach here to the Missouri in fastest fashion. That on the apron of the bluff up to Owen's left, after the spring thaw the Corps would <sup>unroll</sup> ~~install~~ an entire <sup>townplan</sup> ~~planned townsite~~, a mock Kansas City suburb ~~unrolled~~ onto the prairie, where he and Charlene would ~~finally~~ be able to set up housekeeping.

Thinking about it all--hell, seeing it, on the flip-pages of his mind--<sup>he</sup> ~~Owen~~ didn't quite slap his sides in enthusiasm but could have. ~~complicated~~ didn't even begin to say it about this showcase project of the New Deal, this fevertime of history. And he absolutely damn loved it, the jigsaw excitement



that had ~~some~~<sup>swept</sup> in with Roosevelt's inauguration. The alphabet agencies, the economic pump-priming--it was already legend that the Chief Engineer of the Corps had not even signed off on the Fort Peck Dam plan before the Public Works Administration had started funding it. ~~Well, then, Yay for the~~

~~Pee Double You Ay, Owen considered; the Depression's kind of costs went beyond any money. National paralysis, the past four sonofabitching years. That picklepuss Hoover for a President. Scaredy-cat old maid bastard. So, how to put the country on the go? All around this starting site of the dam was the immediate answer, the Fort Peck answer. Everything that could be highballed was being.~~

Owen hadn't yet gained sight of his father and Bruce, somewhere in the bottomland thicket at their work of clearing-away, but he could easily make out Neil ~~across~~ there in the open where the toolhouse was being constructed, and threw him an exultant armwave. Then Owen stayed still a minute, listening, savoring. He knew the Fort Peck plan in its every inch and angle, yet even he almost could not believe that the dam was now underway, this way, with the echoes of axes and the timber yells of men who yesterday were farmers or worse. Blueprints showed none of this.

#

Meg had presented herself at the kitchen in the community hall at five minutes to five that morning. Through the serving window, she saw that the volunteers were coming along nicely at setting the tables, and soon would be ready to be fed before everybody else descended. ~~Tim Jaarala~~, the cook, had a baggy face of red, ruined skin. With bachelor indirectness, he spoke toward the vicinity of Meg:

"This first day you better just watch, lady. See how I need things set up for the cookin'."

His pronunciation of it as if it were the German word for cake, Kuchen, ~~küken~~, momentarily threw her. But then the just-watch part sank in.

Owen had seen to it that, with this breakfast shindig and a Great Northern railroad delegation to be fed at noon and then the facilities becoming an emergency cookhouse for the swelling Fort Peck workforce, she could start right in earning her own paycheck as cookhouse help, but she hadn't come here to be insulted. Meg's maiden name was Margaret Milne; Milnes had died in Prince Charlie's kilted ranks when English cannon raked the battlefield of Culloden in 1746, and Meg held the attitude that 187 years was about enough of superior forces walking over her and hers. She drew

p. 54A follows →

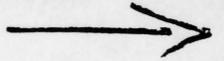
this name is to be changed to Jaarala throughout →

herself up and told the cook's turned back:

"I have seen a kitchen before, Mr. Jaraala, I'll have you know.  
am someone who has  
I have cooked for harvest crews."

"That ain't cookin'," Jaraala said forlornly in her direction and  
set to work.

He started hand over hand on a flat of eggs, ambidexterously breaking



each one with a soft tap on the bowl edge, seeming to squeeze the contents out and consign the eggshell halves into the garbage in the same motion. When he ~~almost instantly~~ <sup>immediately</sup> had a few dozen yolks and whites in the bowl, he whisked them together, poured them on the grill in six identical amounts, and with quick pokes of a spatula created rectangles of omelet. Without looking he reached to his left to gather a pile of cheese and flipped the slices into the frying omelets as if dealing cards. He watched the fleet of omelets briefly, whistling to himself almost soundlessly-- the stately tramp of O Tannenbaum, it ~~sounded~~ <sup>seemed like</sup> to Meg ~~like~~ <sup>like</sup>--then flicked his spatula to crimp a seam into each end of each frying egg-cheese mass, folded those tabs over to create the completely enclosed omelets, then flipped them all, luscious packets of golden texture. Somewhere amid this, Jaraala had babied a mound of hashbrowns into perfect ~~simmer~~ <sup>sizzle</sup> at the edge of the grill, and now he was manipulating another flat of eggs into his mixing bowl.

Meg felt slightly faint. The one thing she knew to do was to stay out of the way of this virtuoso, until she could figure out how to be any dab of help.

When Owen poked around the corner of the kitchen on his way out, she manufactured a frantically pleased smile and rattled a few plates as if in extreme industry.

After municipal quantities of omelets and hashbrown potatoes and summer sausage had been dished and dispatched to the dining tables and the hall was clearing out, the cook moved some more air around with that barely hearable set of whistling, and seemed to be thinking. At length, Jaraala provided over his shoulder:

"You could open some cans of vegetables for me if you want."

Meg glanced around trying to recognize canned goods and finally realized they were the gallon cans stacked like kegs beneath the serving shelf. "What kind?" she asked eagerly.

"Mixed."

"But what with what?"

In what seemed vast surprise, Jaraala looked over his shoulder almost at her. "Carrots go with peas, corn goes with lima beans, string beans don't go with anything. That's what 'mixed' means," he said in an injured tone.

~~##~~ —————→

Neil could hear, even over the loudest of the toolhouse carpentry, the nearby commotion of men tearing at clumps of willows, hoeing out the lesser brush with the half-ax half-pick implements called pulaskis, <sup>After the crash</sup> sawing down cottonwood trees bigger around than themselves, ~~dragging~~ of a tree, the next minutes would fill with the stillness of anticipation, until the ba-BOOM of a dynamite stick splitting the stump, and soon the roar of a D-6 Caterpillar dragging away the big rootball.

~~He~~ Neil waited until noon to ask the point of it all.

The ~~walking~~ foreman recited that the engineers wanted the river basin cleared, it would make the eventual dredging easier, less debris and so on.

Neil still didn't get it. "The alfalfa fields on the other side of the river are already clear--why don't they just dredge those?"

The foreman grinned and didn't answer.

"Kid, what we're doing here is making frogskins," one of the Glasgow street bunch told Neil after the foreman left. "Money. Have you ever heard of it?" The Glasgow man jerked his head toward the stands of willows and groves of cottonwoods. "Bucking this stuff out of here--who the Christ knows if they really need it done or not? But

Don't jinx us by asking half-assed questions about it. it gives them a way to get us some pay.

# \_\_\_\_\_

hand out some moolah somehow,  
And if they don't, the sheriff was mulling with a hot towel over his face, reclining in the barber chair in Glasgow as on every Monday noon since he had been elected, if Roosevelt and his brainbust bunch don't put people on these so-called public work jobs--well, that was moot, they surely to Christ were signing every man who could stagger to a crew truck onto the Fort Peck payroll. How to make wages flow: pump them out of the Government treasury. The idea on high was from some fruitcake Englishman professor named John Maynard Keynes, compensatory-spending-by-the-government-to-set-the-economy-in-motion, by way of Roosevelt's alphabet-soup agencies. Make the American eagle lay dollars into hands that had forgotten the feel of a nickel. The sheriff uneasily crossed his feet, one neat little boot of handtooled leather atop the other. He couldn't argue with the need to do something about the economic side of things, although he sorely would have liked to. Out there in the street this morning while the hiring was going on, the sheriff had kept an obvious eye on the crowd and even contributed a couple of minor offenders to it, telling them he'd bounce their butts right back into jail if they didn't hang onto these jobs <sup>l l l</sup> ~~on-a-platter~~, and he'd managed to stay impassive at the

p. 57B follows →

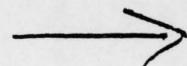
sight of Corps officers and civvie bureaucrats busy as bees; but the Fort Peck project rankled him. Some New Dealer's finger had come down on Valley County, Montana, on a place where the Missouri River seemed a little skinnier than elsewhere, and now there was going to be five years of dam-building ~~ruckus~~ <sup>commotion</sup>. Yet the sheriff had to look only a ~~few~~ <sup>couple of</sup> counties away, over by the North Dakota line, for the example of how things could go if something wasn't done about the Depression. When there was enough rain, the soil of the northeastern corner of Montana grew hard red wheat. When drought came, politics of that same coloration sprouted instead. In '28, Sheridan County had elected as its sheriff Calling himself a Fusion candidate but amounting to a Bolshevik, no less. ~~Outright and proclaimed~~ Communist and proud of it, Lawrence Mott had lost office in the Roosevelt sweep of '32 but pretty damned narrowly. (As someone who prided himself on enough gray matter to run as a Democrat if that's what it took to reach office, Sheriff Kinnick could not savvy why Mott hadn't at least called himself a Roosevelt Communist.) Mott and his <sup>what</sup> do you call a nest of Reds, <sup>TM</sup> cadre still had a Communist newspaper going, over there in the Sheridan County seat of Plentywood. The Producers News; you bet, they knew how

to produce trouble, whenever they had half a chance. At least<sup>t</sup> he, Carl Kimmick, did not have to put<sup>up</sup> with that kind of Red ruckus in his county, nor would he, not even if it took--

"Ready to get skinned, Carl?" Shorty the barber asked as he always did while he stropped his straight razor ~~into shaving readiness~~. Sheriff Carl Kimmick didn't strictly need a haircut every Monday and even less a barber shave, but somehow it got the week off to a decent start for him, marked a change from his heavy weekend duties. Besides, how often did a person get a chance to put his feet up and contemplate the state of things?

As Shorty's steel scraped away at the sheriff's cheeks and neck, and Shorty jabbered about the haircut heaven ahead when all the Fort Peck hirees were going to need a trimming up at once, some soon Saturday night, the sheriff only ~~hardly~~<sup>barely</sup> listened, his mind still stuck on the question of this Fort Peck Dam. Depression, drought, grasshoppers, you name it, the past several years had dumped them all on northern Montana. So the sheriff had to admit that this part of the country could stand something done for it. But to it?

#



Hugh was clobbering away at a jungle of diamond willows. Beating ~~away~~ with his axe at each thumb-thick willow as if it were his personal enemy. He had gone off on his own, a little away from the rest of the brushwhacking crew, as there didn't seem to be any boundaries on the amount of brush along the Missouri River. He was already tired; he had started tired, dragged down with a feeling which he had only been able to describe to Meg, when she kept urging him to snap out of it, as the weight of circumstances. She, of all people, ought to understand the load of everything he'd been hit with. Not simply the news of the dam, the day of Siderius. The silence that said something, too. He <sup>had</sup> tangled with ~~her~~ <sup>Meg</sup> about it as soon as he could get her alone, that day when the farm went from them.

"You knew about this, did you."

"Owen wrote, yes. That there might be a dam, but there was no telling when. It was up to politics, he said."

"And you couldn't have said anything to me?"

"A time ago," she had reminded him, "you went deaf where Owen is concerned."

"I said," a voice came in on him again between axe strokes,  
"what're you now, mute?"

"Eh?" Hugh, startled, realized that Owen had come up behind him in the brush patch. Hugh barely glanced around at him and threw aside the willow strands he had just cut.

This never goes right, Owen thought impatiently. But we've got to sort ourselves out somehow, now that he's here. In genuine curiosity, he asked:

"How's it feel to be on a regular payroll?"

Hugh looked at him <sup>full-bore</sup> now.

"Putrid," he said, and turned and gave the next willow a savage hack.

"Hey, give it a quit," Owen said with command sharpness.

~~Confused that he had missed hearing an order from the walking foreman~~

~~or had strayed into undergrowth that Owen was telling him shouldn't be~~

~~bothered with,~~ Hugh held up with his axe and checked <sup>the particular clump</sup> around in bewilderment, intended to attack next, then the prodigious thicket of brush to the right

~~"What?"~~

and left of him, ~~bewildered,~~ "What'm I to leave off doing?"

"This happy horseshit, of pretending each other doesn't exist."

Hugh took the chance to catch his breath. Panting a little, he said:

"Engineers talk that way, do they. Wouldn't you think all those books between their ears would make a bigger difference."

"I figure the sooner we get this over with, the better," Owen went right on. "You're going to have to, you know. Put up with the fact that I'm here, and that I have some say in this project."

"Owen, I know you're next thing to almighty, but I wasn't told you're the one who signs my famous paycheck."

"I don't personally, but I tell Eleanor and she tells Franklin Delano, and he's liable to dock you for being snotty, if you don't watch out."

The whippet mind of Owen. Once again Hugh Duff was amazed at his quick son, and immediately peeved at being caught amazed, just as much as when

the boy was eight, at his side from daybreak to dark those summer days, the younger sons little yet and Meg forever <sup>needing</sup> ~~having~~ to be on hand for them at the house. But Hugh couldn't have asked for better help than bladesteel Owen, who could go from one waiting chore to the next without waning. Whenever a characteristic cloud to the west warned them to head inside to wait for the rain to make its way down the canyon, father and son retreated to harness work in the barn, Hugh hammering in the gleaming new copper rivets in as Owen held the leather straps steady

onto the anvil. This day, as the first heavy drops drummed on the roof,  
a flock of chickadees went into feeding acrobatics in the serviceberry bush  
outside the barn window.

Hugh kept at the rivetwork, but his son's holding of the harness  
hame-strap was drifty, the window successfully competing for the attention  
of the boy.

"What're you doing, Owen lad," Hugh finally said, more sharply than  
he'd intended. "Counting the raindrops?"

"Dad, why doesn't the rain hurt the birds?"

"Eh?" Hugh's look shot not toward the chickadees in question but  
to his son. "Whyever should it? A <sup>dab</sup> bit of moisture?"

"No, the size of it compared to them, I mean. When it hits them."

In a flash he saw what the boy meant. The globular raindrops, the  
thumb-sized birds cavorting unbothered by such barrage. Christ on a  
crutch. Here I've been seeing that all my life and never thought  
anything of it.

"Don't know, Ownie," he admitted. And much more: "Wish I did."

The grown Owen he studied now wore sharply creased tan khaki pants,

short sheepskin coat with a thick wool collar, sand-colored Stetson with a divvy crimp the same as on Bruce and on Neil. Hugh himself had taught them that; train the brim in at the front to show that you have enough sense to let the rain run off you, and let it go at that. Sweatstains of that hat aside, Owen now was quite the picture of dam engineer swank, Hugh thought, and felt more tired than ever.

"Ownie, surely you have engineering things to go be at. What is it you want with me?"

"Just about anything short of civil war, while we're all on this project, will do nicely."

"Then let's try something like smoke signals. At a good distance. I know your mother will want you to be on hand to her, and I can't stop that. Your brothers, either--they can consort with you or not, it doesn't matter a brown-colored whit to me. But what's between us is still between us. And this drowner of yours"--Hugh indicated the dam site--"doesn't help matters any, does it."

"It's not just mine," Owen said tightly. To hell with this noise.

"I'll take you up on that idea of smoke signals."

# \_\_\_\_\_

After the first hour or so, when the ~~the~~ <sup>teams of</sup> sawyers <sup>and powder monkeys</sup> were starting to make a dent in the cottonwood grove, Bruce gravitated at once to where the ~~D-1~~<sup>6</sup> Caterpillar was ~~going to skid out the big stumps.~~ <sup>about to start skidding out the split</sup> Each time, a cable with a logchain hook had to be noosed around the protruding trunk remnant-- called setting the choker--and then the <sup>would</sup> Cat ~~clanked~~ away with the stump uprooted and dragging behind. The foreman here, Grimwade, was also



brushcutting  
 keeping an eye on the ~~brush~~ gang and so was on horseback to commute  
 between the two. Bruce brazened right up beside Grimwade's stirrups and  
 asked if he could have a crack at choker setting; helping the Old Man  
 yank out brush year after year to make way for more alfalfa finally might  
 pay off, he figured. Skeptical of him at first, Grimwade made Bruce show  
 he knew his stuff as choker setter on several stumps, then nodded and rode  
 off.

This fast vote of confidence made Bruce strut a little, acting as  
 if it was mostly his own doing when the ~~hundred-year-old~~ <sup>hefty</sup> stumps erupted  
 from the ground. The only drawback to the job, ~~he found,~~ was trudging  
 after the stump to the burn pile, *then, though, inspiration came again:* in order to unhitch the choker. He  
 began catching hold of ~~each upended stump's~~ <sup>the</sup> roots and jumping on to ride  
 the upended stump  
~~it~~ like a bucking plough as it was being towed. The ride was rough,  
 as each crooked comet of wood bounced across the ground, but that was  
 the major part of the fun. Hopping off when the stump reached the pile  
 to be burned, Bruce would undo the choker and ~~ride the drawbar of the~~ <sup>climb up behind the catskinner</sup>  
~~Caterpillar~~ <sup>for a lift</sup> back to the next stump. The other guys on the crew were  
 laughing and calling out about Bruce not even needing a saddle, <sup>busting those stumps bareback,</sup> which  
 confirmed to him that he had a pretty slick system going.

Until he bounded down from a stump-ride and there was Grimwade

frowning from his horse perch.

"What's your button number?"

"A-1," joked Bruce, still jaunty.

Grimwade leaned down in his saddle and inspected Bruce numerically.

"The point of this whole shitaree is to give you guys jobs, not for you to figure out ways to break your neck. Any more antics like riding stumps, Little Mister 57 Different Varieties of Flavors, and you're going to draw your walking papers instead."

Off rode Grimwade, and now the rest of the crew razzed Bruce unmercifully, offering to lay bets with him on how quick he was going to make history as the first man fired from Fort Peck. Bruce's face burned as he marched behind the skidding stumps. He watched his chance. At noon, when Grimwade tied the reins of his horse to the bumper of a crew truck and ducked into the cook tent for lunch, Bruce slipped over, took the lariat off the saddle and slung it on his shoulder, then quickly uncinched the saddle and lifted it off the horse. He had singled out an especially tall young sapling, poking out of a thick tangle of willows, and ploughed his way through the brush carrying the saddle. When he

reached ~~the sapling~~<sup>it</sup>, he formed a dab loop in the lariat and on his fifth upward toss caught the top of the sapling. Drawing the ~~limber~~<sup>tree</sup> over in a bowlike bend as far as he could, Bruce knelt on the saddle while he knotted the taut lariat in through the hole beneath the saddlehorn.

Then he carefully got off the saddle while holding down the rope and tree. Then jumped back and let them all fly, the sapling springing back into place and catapulting the saddle up with it, like a fish on a line. Grimwade's saddle swayed there a satisfying twenty feet in the air amid the jungle of brush.

# — After being fired, Bruce barely had his half-day's wages in his pocket before Owen collared him.

"I hear you treed Grimwade's saddle for him."

Bruce couldn't help grinning, but changed his face when he saw Owen's.

"He had it coming, Ownie. He jumped on me for no real reason at all, so I--"

Owen hit him above his left ear, an open-handed swat but enough of a clout to rattle Bruce's brainbox.

"Hey! What!--" Bruce's impulse to hit back wrinkled away under

Owen's forthright grab and twist of the throat of his shirt. In theory Bruce knew he was too grown-up to be cuffed around like an errant bear cub, but Owen was doing just that.

"This isn't tiddlywinks," Owen ground out. "What the hell do you think you're going to do if you can't hang onto a job here? Hmmh?" He tightened the twist atop ~~Bruce's~~ <sup>his kid brother's</sup> Adam's apple in reiteration. "What?"

"I--" Bruce realized he had not thought quite that far ahead yet.

"That's right, duckbutt, you don't have any least idea, do you.

Yet you figure you can toss away a paying job for the sake of some joke?

There's unemployed guys every damn inch of this country right now, and

it's about five minutes until winter will be here--what'd you think

you'd do then, hunt with the snow snakes? You better get yourself going

here, kid."

Owen abruptly released the shirtfront and Bruce coughed for air.

"This once," Owen told him, "I'm going to save your hide. I had to talk like a good fellow to do it, but I landed you on the ~~brush~~ <sup>hammer</sup> gang with ~~the Old Man.~~ <sup>Neil</sup> If you mess that up--"

Owen left the if dangling, which he hoped would leave Bruce at the

mercy of his own imagination.

# ———  
At the end of that day, Hugh stiffly eased himself down the cellar steps in Glasgow. He sat down heavily. Next, Meg knew, he was going to sigh like a punctured philosopher, and he did.

"My hip pockets are dragging out my tracks. By God, Meg, if I never meet up with an axe again in my life, that'll be soon enough."

"You'll toughen in," she said, although she had started wondering whether he would. No, never mind whether. <sup>Hugh</sup> ~~he~~ had to.

He stared around the basement, the coal bin and furnace at one end and the shelves of garden canning at the other. The muddle of sagging bed and rickety chairs, in between, which amounted to their <sup>rented</sup> room. <sup>rented</sup>

"I almost can't believe--" he murmured, then blinked as if coming to. He turned toward Meg. "Enough about my day at the races. Did you show that cook how to cook?"

# ———  
DROP CAP

Suggest tell him POGOP, Owen scrawled in the margin of a contractor's letter which cited innumerable reasons why a delay was <sup>unavoidable</sup> ~~needed~~ in that particular contracted-for portion of the dam project, and routed it back

to ~~the~~ Major ~~Santee's~~ glass-paneled corner office, <sup>they</sup> called <sup>the</sup> the cage. <sup>the</sup>

Owen did not really expect ~~the~~ squishy little Major, <sup>Santee</sup> also known as <sup>the</sup> the marshmallow in the cage, <sup>the</sup> to tell the contractor, Piss Or Get Off the Pot. But as chief of operations under ~~the~~ Colonel <sup>argument</sup> Pemberton, <sup>the</sup> who had never seen a schedule that was not sacred, the Major was sooner or later going to have to tell the foot-dragging contractor something along that line, Owen figured.

Or was that, as the Major periodically accused Owen and Sangster and the other non-Corps engineers of, <sup>the</sup> civilian logic. <sup>the</sup>

Owen stretched at his desk. Atop his heaped IN box the next sheet of paper began:

From: Division Engineer, Missouri River Division, Kansas City,

Missouri.

Subject: Construction of Fort Peck Dam on the Missouri River.

1. Under separate cover are being forwarded ten copies of  
operation plans pursuant to this topic.

Owen puffed out his cheeks and tried to uncross his eyes from the Corps-ese.

small caps

2. Dredging operations will be executed with a view of making  
the closure of the dam beginning 1 August, 1937.

Am.  
caps

Yeah, well. No kidding. Here we thought we were supposed to drop

ital

FDR'S hundred million dollars directly into the river.

3. Dredging operations in the interim will entail a gross  
yardage of suitable material in the upstream borrow pits  
totaling 84,900,000 cu. yards and in the downstream borrow pits  
38,800,000 yards; or a grand total of 123,700,000 cu. yards.

Am.  
caps

Jesus fiddling Christ. Look at that! Actual numbers! What's got

ital

into them back there in Kay Cee? They aren't just woofing, now.

Owen did some rapid figuring, working out the monthly average of dredging it would take to add up to that total, allowing for 20% shrinkage of the fill material, winter shutdown, and so on. He looked for a while at his result. It was a lot. It was more than plenty. But he let himself dream ahead to his dredges and their output of fill, flying through the air like mucky magic.

First, though, Duff, back to the heavy lifting.

ital

He picked up the next piece of paperwork.

#

Hugh had waited as long as he could stand to ~~on this~~<sup>g</sup>, a total week.

By now he utterly had to drop by the cookhouse and make sure this Jareala was as much of an old maid as Meg advertised him to be.

*eliminate  
itals*

The cook (big bruiser; damn near an axhandle across, there in back of those shoulders, Hugh uneasily estimated) ~~was~~<sup>loomed</sup> at a kitchen counter fussing with whatever cooks fuss with, meanwhile semi-whistling a set of sounds which registered on Hugh as yoo hoo hoo hoo...YOOHOO HOO HOO. Meg, though, was nowhere in sight.

"Hello then," Hugh announced in through the doorway. He went as if to put a foot in the kitchen. Jareala stared down at it, and Hugh withdrew the foot.

"Help you?" Jareala husked.

"I'm, eh--Margaret Duff's my better half. Came by to, uhm, walk her home."

"The mister, are you." Jareala gave ~~Hugh~~<sup>him</sup> an inch of nod, as if he had been expecting this misfortune, then reached behind himself to the counter and with a lightning move was thrusting something at Hugh's midsection.

Hugh was glad he had stood his ground when he realized what was aimed at his middle was a platter of deviled eggs. He reached and took one between his thumb and forefinger, Jaraala's baggy flaming face hanging over him.

"Gooñb," Hugh mumbled as he ate the filled egg. It was actually leagues better than good, it was mouth-wateringly delectable, it was supreme art in deviled-egg form.

Jaraala nodded two inches this time.

Hugh ~~gazed~~<sup>gawked</sup> around the kitchen as if Meg might be on top of one of the cupboards. "Guess I missed her?"

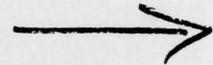
"That's what you did," Jaraala concluded, presenting that expanse of back and shoulders again.

# —————  
 The Fort Peck Dam project kept growing so fast that its myths couldn't keep up with it. The original seventy-five men, the Octoberists who had set to work with axes and pulaskis and saws, peeked around in the brush at the end of two weeks and thought, holy Pete, there must be three or four times as many of us in here whaling away at this stuff; there actually were five hundred in the bottomland workforce by then.

By the end of November when they went around boasting that several hundred of them were letting daylight into the Fort Peck thicket, the thousandth man was being handed a job brass.

By then, the farms were being burned.

On each of the brush-clearing crews you could pick out the bottomland honyockers, the alfalfa-seed farmers and those who had held small riverbank ranches, by their stance--a petrified minute of staring upward as the black geyser of smoke rose from the kerosene-soaked houses, barns, and sheds. Each time, Hugh hoped that it was the farm of that hired-out mouthpiece Siderius.



The forenoon when the stepped-roof barn next to the white line of the dam axis went up in crisp flames, Bruce poked into sight at Hugh's patch of brush and gave him a single rueful shake of the head. A moment later, Neil appeared and did the same.

Hugh attacked his work again as the boys each went back to theirs. "If we keep at it, the wages will pile up," Meg had maintained to him in their latest go-round. "It's a chance."

"So was the damned farm," Hugh had retorted. And he'd had it on the tip of his tongue to add: So was English Creek before that. So was Inverley ~~Grail~~, back before that. Anciently fought and lost, by all concerned. Wouldn't you think, Hugh brooded, that a man and a woman could at least agree on the ground under their feet?

"Margaret, I'll do this. I'd paint the private parts of monkeys if it meant a wage. But don't ask me to blind myself to what we're at, here. This piddly work-by-the-hour, this coal bin we have to live in, this is all forced on us by--"

"--the weight of circumstances," Meg clipped in. "Hugh, I don't even care what is to blame, any more. I only want something promising

for us from here on. If that has to start with an axe and a spoon,  
then let's."

Disgusted that he had let her have that last word, Hugh kept to  
 himself and smashed away at the ~~brush thicket~~ <sup>brush thicket</sup> which might keep him chopping for eternity.

A new man, scrawny everywhere except for a notable hawk ~~nose~~ <sup>nose</sup>,  
 and whose clothes didn't look even warm enough to work in, sidled over  
 to him. "Don't take this wrong, but it ~~makes me tired~~ <sup>tuckers me out</sup> to watch you."

"Eh?" Hugh needed a moment to fathom the first Oklahoma accent  
 he had ever heard. He stood up as erect as his complaining back would  
 allow him, his axe still in hand. "We're being paid to work. Consequently,  
 I'm working."

"You go at it the long way around," the other man ~~said~~ <sup>maintained</sup> in that  
 high drawl.

"Mister, I have chopped more ungodly damn wood than you have  
 ever laid eyes on, so don't be giving me--"

The scrawny visitor reached over to the sapling next to Hugh and  
 with one hand bent the small tree ~~over~~ <sup>until it was taut</sup> and with a lazy swipe of the axe  
 in his other hand, severed the trunk. He gave Hugh a glance, shrugged,